



# Salvaged By the Alien Pirate

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

**Description:** I'll die without her, but convincing her to stay might kill me faster

NeonValkyrie

I'm an analyst... and sometimes hacker, not a babysitter for lovesick aliens. But uncovering a galaxy-shattering conspiracy means hitching a ride on a Kyvernian ship with a captain who swears I'm his fated mate and he'll die without me. But I have bigger problems. I stumbled onto a secret, now rival hacker IonSpecter is out for my blood. I don't do relationships, but with Cirdox's time running out—and the pull between us impossible to ignore—we might solve both our problems... if we survive.

Cirdox:

She was mine the second she stepped on my ship—fate or not. NeonValkyrie's a complication I didn't need, but now I can't get her off my ship—or out of my head. I'm smuggling luminore, not for profit, but to keep the Black Eclipse from tightening their grip on the people who need it most. My time's running out. I'm fighting a losing battle with my body, and she's the only one who can help me, whether she admits it or not. She doesn't trust me, but without her, I'm dead—and if I fall, everything I've fought for will fall with me.

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## Chapter 1

### Neon Valkyrie

Another thrilling day analyzing trade data for the Stellar Together Initiative. I suppress a yawn as streams of information scroll past my terminal interface, each value representing cargo catalogs, shipping routes, and resource allocations across the Orion Galaxy. The office around me hums with the quiet efficiency of other analysts, all of us packed into identical cubicles like specimens in a corporate terrarium, where instead of feeding time, we get quarterly performance reviews.

“Arden!” My supervisor’s bark makes me flinch. “Those Morcrest luminore reports were due an hour ago.”

I flash my best corporate-drone smile. “Just wrapping up those riveting manifests, sir.” Meanwhile, my neural implants hum with the hundred things I’d rather be doing—decrypting, data-skimming, slipping through firewalls like smoke. If he saw how fast the information scrolled across my screen, his eye would twitch, his jaw tightening like a vice. But admitting I could process it in seconds—not hours—would mean revealing the illegal upgrades wired into my skull. And that’s a conversation I don’t plan on having.

Though I try to concentrate on the tedious shipping manifests before me, the adrenaline of last night’s near-capture still courses through my veins. The files I discovered about the Black Eclipse are still encrypted in my cranial cache, burning like a secret sun. I should delete it. Forget what I saw. That would be the smart play...

But I've never been good at walking away from the truth. Not since I lost my parents to "accidental" engine failure on their research vessel—a tragedy which conveniently occurred right after they began investigating corporate corruption in the outer colonies. I was twelve. The official report called it a malfunction. My illegal dig into sealed records suggested otherwise.

So that's what started it all—my first hack. Stealing those restricted files taught me two things. First lesson: information is power. Second: the galaxy runs on secrets. Now I spend my nights as Neon Valkyrie, breaking into secure networks and selling the juiciest bits to the highest bidders. And if I can dish out some justice along the way... well, that's a bonus. It's not quite the career my parents dreamed for their daughter, but at least I'm exposing corruption instead of enabling it.

The familiar anger rises, hot and sharp. I channel it into my work, scanning manifests with renewed focus. My fingers dance across the haptic interface, but my mind is elsewhere—in the shadowy corners of the dataverse where I excel. The hack from the night before revealed something bigger than my usual corporate espionage. The encrypted data suggests a connection between the Black Eclipse syndicate and high-ranking STI officials. The kind of revelation that gets people killed.

My throat tightens as I recall the last person who trusted me with their secrets—Kai, a brilliant, reckless hacker. We'd worked together, watched each other's backs. Until the day I convinced him to help me expose a weapons-smuggling ring. The job went sideways. He didn't make it out. Sometimes I still wake up hearing his screams over our neural link as they caught him.

That's why I work alone. Why I keep everyone at arm's length. Caring is a weakness. Trust gets people killed. The STI may be the galaxy's great unifier, but someone has to watch the watchers. If I can unveil what I've found—

Better me than someone who still has something to lose.

A priority alert flashes across my vision. New data packet, flagged urgent. I open it, expecting another tedious trade dispute.

Instead, my blood freezes as my neural implant flags unauthorized access to my personnel file. The information streams through my upgrades—someone with top-level clearance is combing through every detail of my life. But there's something wrong with their gateway signature. My implants highlight anomalies in the encryption which shouldn't be possible, patterns that don't match any known STI security protocols. Whoever this is, they don't just have clearance—they've somehow spliced themselves into the system's root architecture. They shouldn't exist.

My fingers hover over the holographic interface as another voice cuts through my concentration.

“Lyra, don't forget the department meeting in five.” Daia, my well-meaning but chatty colleague, leans over my cubicle wall. Her iridescent Juntarian skin catches the harsh fluorescent lighting, sending blue-green ripples dancing across my display screen. The effect would be beautiful if it wasn't giving me a headache. “They're discussing the new security protocols so we can't miss it.”

Perfect. Just perfect.

I resist the urge to run my fingers through my black hair, now pulled back in a severe bun that's giving me a tension headache. The electric blue streaks I refuse to dye over are hidden beneath layers of corporate-approved styling. Just like everything else about me in this place—contained, controlled, crushed into an acceptable box.

“Thanks,” I manage, though my heart is hammering against my ribs hard enough I'm surprised Daia can't hear it. As someone sifts through every detail of my life—education records, employment history, medical data—I'm stuck pretending to care about proper documentation procedures.

The meeting room is a steel-and-glass cage perched thirty floors above Orion Outpost, overlooking its gleaming spaceport. The view should be breathtaking, but my life is coming apart at the seams. I spend two excruciating hours perched on an ergonomically incorrect chair, surrounded by the gentle hum of environmental systems and the less gentle droning of middle management. Colleagues of various species fidget in their seats—several Juntarians’ shimmering blue-green skin particularly eye-catching against the room’s muted greys, while a pair of Rhilnars efficiently process reports with all six arms moving in perfect synchronization.

I sit through mind-numbing presentations about standardized reporting formats, my neural interface tracking the intrusion into my files. Whoever they are, they’re good. The access signatures keep shifting, bouncing through proxy servers across three different star systems. Each new trace sends a fresh wave of anxiety through me. It’s a truly sophisticated attack—one I might appreciate if I weren’t the one being hunted.

“Ms. Arden, perhaps you’d like to share your thoughts on the new verification protocols?”

I snap back to reality to find Director Voss’s beady eyes fixed on me. The Folmodian’s facial tentacles twitch with concealed satisfaction at catching me off guard. She’s had it in for me since I corrected her coding error during my first week—a rookie mistake I’m still paying for two years later.

“I believe the protocols are...” I start, but Daia’s subtle hand signal catches my eye. She’s miming something about dual authentication. “...the dual authentication system will create unnecessary delays in processing time-sensitive data.”

Voss’s tentacles curl inward—a sign of displeasure. “Interesting that you find basic security measures unnecessary, Ms. Arden. Perhaps that explains your consistently late reports.”

A few of my colleagues shift uncomfortably in their seats. No one makes eye contact. Except for Daia, they've all learned to keep their distance—the weird human who keeps to herself isn't worth the risk of getting on Voss's bad side.

"I meant no disrespect," I say, ignoring her jab, keeping my voice even, though my jaw aches from clenching it. "I'm simply concerned about efficiency."

"Then I'm sure you'll find an efficient way to implement these protocols in your department by next week," Voss says. "You'll be giving a demonstration to the entire floor."

Perfect. Another chance for public humiliation. I force a polite nod while my neural interface flags another breach attempt. Whoever's trying to get into my files isn't giving up, and now I have this corporate power play to deal with too.

Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, most of my colleagues rush for the transit pods like escaped prisoners, eager to start their weekend. Daia hovers near my desk, her blue-green skin catching the last rays of sunset painting the sky in fierce purples and blazing oranges. She's the only one who still tries to breach my constructed walls, despite my best efforts to keep her at a safe distance.

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“You’re not heading out?” she asks, adjusting her bag. Her concerned expression makes my chest tight with unwanted guilt. “A bunch of us are hitting up Nova’s. Even Kex is coming.” She gestures toward the Exoscarab whose yellow engineering jumpsuit makes him look like a walking caution sign.

I don’t look up from my screen, maintaining the emotional distance that’s kept me alive since Kai. Getting close to people is a luxury I can’t afford, not after what happened last time. “Too much work,” I say, my tone dry, hoping she’ll take the hint.

“The work will still be here Monday,” Daia persists, her iridescent skin rippling with concern. “You spend too many late nights here alone. It’s not healthy.”

If she only knew what I really did during those late nights. The thought of her finding out—of seeing the horror in her eyes when she realizes what I am—makes my throat tight. Better to keep her at arm’s length. Better for everyone. Besides, whoever’s hunting through my files chose this timing for a reason. The only way to trace them is through the STI’s secure network, and I can’t risk accessing that from anywhere else.

“Rain check,” I say, straightening papers I don’t need. “Got to finish these manifests.”

“Your loss.” She shrugs, joining the last stragglers at the lift. “Don’t stay too late. Place gets creepy after hours.”

You have no idea.

I make a show of gathering my things, adjusting the simple black blazer that helps me

blend into this corporate hive. A cleaning drone whirs past, its optical sensors scanning me with mechanical suspicion.

“Forgot to file something,” I tell it, forcing a tired smile. The drone’s lights flash yellow-green, accepting my presence as authorized. “Just need another hour.”

It beeps an acknowledgment and continues its rounds, leaving me alone in the growing shadows. Just another dedicated employee, nothing to see here. Perfect.

But my fingers twitch, eager for my own setup, where I can unleash my skills without restraint. My hunter will soon learn why they call me the Neon Valkyrie.

The office grows quiet. Emergency lights cast long shadows between the cubicles, their dim glow struggling to penetrate the spaces between workstations. Perfect hunting conditions. I’m about to dive deeper into the system when the lights flicker once, twice—then plunge us into total darkness.

I drop into my true system—the one I crafted in dark rooms with black market neural chips and caffeine-fueled determination. Code streams past like rivers of starlight, each line a glowing thread I can pluck and follow. My enhanced senses light up as I sink deeper, tracing the intruder’s digital footprints through layers of encryption. The familiar thrill of the hunt courses through me as patterns emerge in the data flow, subtle disturbances that most would miss but my augmented perception catches like ripples in still water.

“Got you,” I whisper, following their digital breadcrumbs. They’re skilled, but I’m better. Each false trail leads me closer to their true location, until—

A message flashes across my vision, text burning like white fire:

I SEE YOU, NEON VALKYRIE.



My heart races as the implications hit me like a punch to the gut. Someone knows me—the real me, not the constructed corporate façade I wear during daylight hours. They know Neon Valkyrie, the phantom who’s made a career of exposing secrets powerful people would kill to keep buried. The kind of secrets that got Kai murdered when we dug too deep.

Ice slides down my spine as memories of his final moments flash through my neural interface—his screams, the way his consciousness fragmented across our shared connection as they caught him. I scan the message desperately looking for any trace of its origin, but the masking is flawless, professional-grade stuff that makes even my enhanced systems struggle to get a read. This isn’t some amateur trying to make a name for themselves. This is someone with resources, with reach—the kind of opponent who doesn’t leave loose ends alive to testify.

Another message appears:

HOW LONG BEFORE THEY FIND YOU TOO?

I ignore their taunts. I’m already purging my system, severing connections, but they’re faster. Data starts downloading straight into my neural cache—images, coordinates, timestamps. Evidence of things I was never meant to see. The office falls silent, shadows stretching between the cubicles. Perfect hunting conditions—if only my hands weren’t shaking. I clench my fingers, willing them steady. One wrong move and I’m done. Prison would be the best outcome. Dissection in some corporate black site would be worse.

The office grows quiet, the hum of the environmental systems fading into the background as the last of my colleagues disappear into the transit pods. Emergency lights flicker on, casting long, skeletal shadows between the cubicles. Perfect hunting conditions. I drop my public interface, letting the bland corporate façade dissolve as I sink into the familiar embrace of my true system. This is where I thrive, where lines

of code flow around me like liquid starlight, a universe I built myself with black market tech and countless sleepless nights.

My fingers move across the haptic keyboard with practiced precision, following the digital breadcrumbs this intruder thinks they've hidden so well. Amateurs leave obvious trails—this one's different. Each false lead is meticulously crafted, designed to waste time and resources. Not ZeroDay's style—they prefer brute force attacks that leave systems in smoking ruins. WhisperWind maybe? But even their theatrical flair has a certain... signature. This is something else. Every move feels calculated, personal. Like they've studied me, learned my patterns. Like they know just who they're dealing with.

“Still here, Arden?”

I flinch before I can stop myself, my fingers freezing over the console. Bruxor, the senior analyst, looms in the doorway, his massive Bravorian form blotting out what little emergency light remains. I force my shoulders to relax, fighting against the instinct to shrink away from his presence. I can't read his sharp, angular face, but the predatory gleam reflecting off his red scales sends a chill down my spine.

If he catches even a whiff of what I'm doing... The STI doesn't mess around with unauthorized network access. Best case? I'm out on my ass, stripped of clearance, and blacklisted from every half-decent tech job in the galaxy. Worst case? Let's just say I've heard rumors about STI black sites that make me want to bleach my brain.

I force myself to breathe, to look casual. It's not like I make a habit of cozying up to my colleagues, but now I'm grateful for the distance. Bruxor doesn't know me well enough to spot the tension thrumming through my body, the way my fingers twitch, itching to slam my holo-screen closed.

Focus, Neon. You've got this. One wrong move and it's game over.

“Just finishing up some reports,” I manage, forcing a casual tone while my mind races. I need to cover my tracks, fast. But closing the system now would be suspicious. It’s a delicate dance, maintaining the façade of a diligent employee while simultaneously battling a ghost in the machine.

“Make sure you log out properly,” Bruxor says, his voice a rumble that vibrates through the floor. “Wouldn’t want to trigger any security alerts.” His words hang in the air, heavy with unspoken threat.

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He lingers for a moment longer, his massive, taloned hand gripping the doorframe. I can practically feel the weight of his stare pressing into my back. My pulse thunders in my ears, a relentless drumbeat. This is madness. I'm treading on dangerous ground, and Bruxor is the spark that could set it all ablaze.

The tension in the air is palpable, thick enough to choke on. I resist the urge to turn and meet his gaze, knowing any show of weakness will be pounced upon. Instead, I keep my focus trained on the flickering console, my fingers poised to continue my work.

A low, rumbling growl emanates from his direction, a clear warning. I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. He's testing me, seeing how far he can push before I break. But I can't afford to back down, not when I'm this close to uncovering the truth.

Slowly, deliberately, he withdraws, his hulking form disappearing from the doorway. The moment he's gone, I exhale a shaky breath, realizing I'd been holding it the entire time. I've bought myself a little more time, but I know it's only a matter of seconds before he returns.

Back to the hunt. The intruder's digital breadcrumbs lead me through encrypted channels, bouncing through proxy servers across multiple star systems. They're a force to be reckoned with, no doubt. But my skills are honed to a finer point. Each false trail is a puzzle piece, revealing a glimpse of their strategy, their skillset... their identity.

A blinding white message flashes across my vision, the text searing into my retinas against the dark backdrop of scrolling code:

HE ISN'T THE ONLY ONE WATCHING YOU.

My heart pounds as I read the words, realizing whoever is on the other end of this connection is framing me. They're making it look like I'm the one who's been digging into the luminore trafficking.

Another message appears, equally chilling:

THEY'RE HERE.

Rapid keystrokes as I purge my system, severing connections, scrambling my digital signature. But they're faster, always one step ahead. Fragments of data start downloading into my neural cache—flashing images, coordinates, timestamps. Pieces of evidence I was never meant to uncover. Incriminating data that could get me killed if discovered.

My heart races, palms sweating as I try to move the process along faster. The download is painfully slow, each second feeling like an eternity. Every alert ping makes me flinch, certain they've found me. I have to get this information out before they catch on. Before they silence me for good.

The final message burns itself into my vision, a stark warning:

RUN.

The office goes dark. The emergency lights die, plunging me into absolute darkness. Then, the klaxons begin to wail, a deafening shriek that echoes through the empty office. It's a trap.

I'm out of time.

## Chapter 2

### Cirdox

I prowl the edge of the docking bay, my wings twitching with a restlessness that goes deeper than mere impatience. The emptiness inside me grows with each passing day—an ache that even the freedom of deep space can't ease anymore. Orion Outpost's sterile atmosphere burns my senses. The bay churns with its usual chaos—cargo loaders whining their protests, crew members from a dozen species barking orders in competing languages, and beneath it all, the suffocating weight of regulations that makes my wings itch for open space.

This sanitized hellhole is the last place I want to be, but necessity drives us here. We need supplies, information—and most importantly, a safe route for our cargo. Still, every moment spent in this bureaucratic prison sets my teeth on edge. I flex my talons, fighting the urge to tear through something. The sooner we finish our business here, the better.

The lower level repair bay's a far cry from Kyor's top-tier Engineering Dock facilities. I watch a Croakan mechanic struggle with an outdated plasma torch, the tool sputtering and dying in his webbed hands. The sight brings back memories of that human engineer, Tasha, whom Kyor helped frame for attempting to murder the Morcrestian High Chieftain. Look where that got him—rotting in a prison cell when his political games finally caught up to him. Now I'm stuck balancing his responsibilities, trying to keep the Brotherhood intact while maintaining our legitimate courier contracts with the STI. This is what we're reduced to—unreliable parts and second-rate equipment that could leave us stranded in deep space. The thought sends another wave of restless energy through my wings. We can't afford weakness, not with the Black Eclipse circling like vultures, waiting for any sign of vulnerability.

My talons click against the grimy floor as I survey our options. The Croakan working on our shield couplings at least seems to know what he's doing, his methodical approach suggesting experience despite the subpar tools. Still, beggars can't be choosers when you're flying with the wrong side of the law.

"Void Reaver's ready for departure, Captain," Zara announces, materializing at my side. Her russet fur bristles with barely contained energy, tail twitching in a way that betrays her own unease. My first officer's been with me long enough to read my moods, and lately, she's been watching me more closely than usual. "Cargo's secured, systems check out. We can leave this glorified tin can whenever you give the word."

I straighten from the engineering console. "Good. The sooner we're back in open space, the better." I pause, studying the subtle signs of wear in her usually immaculate fur. She's been pushing herself hard since Kyor's arrest, trying to compensate for our dwindling resources. "But first, get down and verify those shield coupling repairs. That Croakan seems competent enough, but I want your eyes on the final check. Last thing we need is another burnout mid-jump."

The familiar hum of the ship's systems washes over me as I make my way to the command deck, my wings flexing instinctively as I pass through the doorway. The vibrations should be soothing—they usually are—but lately even this comfort feels hollow. The emptiness inside grows stronger each day, a primal warning I can't afford to heed. As I settle into the captain's chair, my hand brushes over the worn armrest, tracing grooves etched by years of command decisions—some I'm proud of, others that still haunt my dreams.

But lately that freedom feels more like a burden. Our last three shipments were intercepted by Black Eclipse fighters who seemed to know exactly where to find us. Routes that should have been secure, known only to Brotherhood captains, suddenly crawling with hostiles. The pattern is too precise to be coincidence. Someone is feeding them information—someone on the inside. I run a hand along my jaw, feeling

the tension building there. With Kyor imprisoned and the Brotherhood already fracturing, a traitor in our ranks could destroy everything we've built. The thought sends a spike of discomfort through my blood. I need to gather the other captains, find out who's been compromised.

Ten minutes later, Zara's voice rasps through the comm, carrying an edge of static that sets my teeth on edge. "Captain, repairs are complete, but..." She pauses, and I can picture her running a hand through her hair—a nervous habit she's never managed to break. "Ren here says the power fluctuations in the aft section are still... unpredictable."

I rake my fingers across the worn arm of my command chair, the familiar texture grounding me as I push aside the weight of uncertainty. "Get it stable enough for jump. We're not staying in this cesspit any longer than necessary." A few months ago, we had access to the finest repair facilities in the quadrant. Now we're patching systems together with salvaged parts and sheer will. My gaze flicks to the empty co-pilot's seat, the hollow ache in my chest deepening. Every Kyvernian knows the stories—the mate-bond that either completes us or destroys us. I've seen warriors fade into nothing, consumed by bond-sickness when fate denied them. The thought sends a shiver down my spine. Shaking it off, I focus on the present. "Plot a course for the Nebula Nexus when you return—and Zara," I add, my voice softer, "double-check those shield harmonics yourself. I trust your eyes more than these dock rats."

I shake off the dark thoughts, though the emptiness inside seems to mock my attempts at denial. Out here in the lawless expanse, I'm safer than most. Pirates don't have the luxury of fate or destiny. We take what we need to survive, and leave the rest to the void. The Brotherhood needs my focus, especially now with Kyor imprisoned and the Black Eclipse circling like vultures. I can't afford the distraction of what I might be missing, what the growing emptiness in my chest might mean.

The bridge doors hiss open as Zara returns to her station. Her eyes meet mine,



holding a note of concern she doesn't quite manage to hide. My first officer's known me long enough to recognize when something's off, and loyal enough to always mention it. "Sir? Are you alright?"

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I force a smile, though the gesture feels stiff. "Just thinking, Lieutenant. Carry on." The lie tastes bitter on my tongue, but it's better than admitting to the strange emptiness that's been haunting me lately, the feeling that something's missing—something I can't quite name.

The ship lurches as we prepare to move to the open hatch. My wings rustle with restless energy. Lucky for me, being a pirate means I'm far from the civilized worlds where I might catch that fatal scent—the one that would start a biological countdown in my veins. A Kyvernian's fated mate might be poetic in the old stories, but in my line of work, that kind of vulnerability would be a death sentence.

Still, the need whispers sometimes, but I've learned to embrace the solitude and find strength in independence. No mate means no weakness. No ticking clock to drive me to abandon everything I've built here. Each successful heist, each clean getaway—proves I made the right choice leaving House Thar'Kal's suffocating protocols behind. The emptiness is a fair trade for freedom.

An alert chimes, drawing my attention to the cargo manifest. The luminore we're smuggling—worth enough to keep half Outer Orion's medical facilities running for a month. That's what matters now: the mission, the crew, the freedom to chart our own course through the stars. Not some biological imperative that would only end in disaster. The thought steadies me, gives me something concrete to focus on beyond the constant ache in my blood.

I allow myself a grim smile as we edge toward the launch zone. Better to be alone than chained to fate. Besides, what are the chances I'd find my mate out here among the star-scattered void? Nil. And that's exactly how I like it. The lie feels hollow even

as I think it, but I've gotten good at ignoring uncomfortable truths.

The ship's console beeps another warning about proper departure protocols. I suppress a growl of frustration at Orion Outpost's endless bureaucracy. Even leaving this sterile hellhole requires jumping through hoops. I force my attention to the nav charts, fighting against both my instinctive disdain for their regulations and an unsettling restlessness that's been growing stronger lately. Something feels off, but I can't afford to dwell on it now. There's work to be done.

"Status report, Grig," I bark, my voice gruffer than intended as I address my first helmsman. The strange tension coursing through me makes it harder to maintain my usual control, but I refuse to let it affect my command.

The wiry Muspel looks up from his console, his fine features pinched with concern. His pale blue skin seems to shimmer under the bridge lights as his long fingers dance across the controls. "Captain, got a ping from our Driftspire contacts." He hesitates, mandibles clicking softly. "Black Eclipse ships have been spotted in Kyor's old territories. They're not even trying to be subtle about it anymore."

Through the viewport, the metallic walls of Orion's docking bay loom close, maintenance drones scuttling across their scarred surface like mechanical insects. "Any specifics on their plans?" I growl, gripping the back of his chair. The burning in my blood makes it harder to focus, but I force myself to concentrate on the immediate threat.

"Not yet, but—" A warning light flashes across his screen. "Power fluctuation in the port engine. Compensating." His fingers move with practiced precision, mandibles clicking in concentration as he adjusts our approach vectors.

"What's our current standing with the other captains?"

He hesitates, multi-jointed fingers dancing across the controls. "Shaky at best. Two supply routes gone dark since yesterday. Word is some of the smaller crews are talking protection deals with the Eclipse." His mandibles twitch. "Makes sense, way things are going. Eclipse has the numbers now."

The ship shudders as we clear the dock's magnetic field. I slam my fist against the nearest console, earning a startled look from my helmsman. "Dammit! We can't let those vultures destroy everything we've built. The Brotherhood isn't just about profit—we're the only ones standing between the Black Eclipse and total control of the luminore trade."

Zara's voice cuts through the tension. "Final systems check complete," my first mate reports, her fingers flying across the controls with practiced efficiency. "Ready for departure on your mark, Captain."

I'm about to give the order when a station-wide alert cuts through our comm system. The harsh buzz makes my wings twitch with irritation, the sound grating against my already frayed nerves.

"ATTENTION ALL VESSELS. THIS IS ORION OUTPOST SECURITY. ALL DEPARTURES ARE TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED. REPEAT: ALL DEPARTURES ARE SUSPENDED. WE ARE CONDUCTING A SEARCH FOR A CLASS-A FUGITIVE. MAINTAIN YOUR CURRENT POSITIONS AND STAND BY FOR INSPECTION."

"Well, that's inconvenient," Zara mutters from her station, ears flattening against her skull. Her russet fur bristles with barely contained tension. "This would never happen on Kyor's watch."

She's right, and the knowledge burns like acid in my gut. With Kyor imprisoned, our entire network is unraveling. The Brotherhood was meant to protect independent

smugglers from the Black Eclipse's stranglehold. Now those same captains are running scared, signing away their autonomy for the Eclipse's false promises of protection. As if the syndicate won't bleed them dry with "protection fees" before forcing them to run illegal weapons or worse, trafficking alongside the luminore meant for those in need.

Through the viewport, I watch security drones swarm across the docking bay, their scanning beams cutting through the artificial twilight like predatory eyes. Armed Orion Security officers and Planetary Police prowl between the ships in their pristine white uniforms, methodically violating each vessel with their "routine" inspections. My wings flare instinctively, membrane stretched taut with ancient warnings of danger that even generations of civilization can't breed out. No matter how many times I visit legitimate ports, some part of me will always be the hunted, not the hunter.

"How long until they reach our section?" I ask, keeping my voice level despite the tension coiling in my gut.

Grig checks his display, long fingers moving with precise grace. "At their current pace... fifteen minutes, maybe less." His pale blue skin seems to shimmer with anxiety despite his controlled tone.

I drum my fingers against the armrest, talons leaving fresh marks in the worn material. The STI would love nothing more than to find our cargo hold full of unregistered luminore. Officially, they claim the strict control is to "prevent abuse"—but tell that to the desperate clinics in Outer Orion dying for supplies. The STI's chokehold on medical resources is just as cruel as the Black Eclipse's protection rackets. Both of them creating dependants—one through policy, one through force.

But making a break for it now would only paint a target on our backs. My talons dig deeper into the armrest. One wrong move and we'll have both the STI's corporate

death squads and the Eclipse's hunters on our tail. Sometimes the hardest part of being a predator is knowing when to play prey.

"Sir," Zara's voice drops to barely above a whisper. Her tail has gone completely still—a sure sign she's spotted trouble. "Someone's in the Void Reaver's maintenance tunnels. They're heading for cargo bay three."

Grig reaches for his stunner, but I wave him down. "No." My voice comes out rougher than intended, hackles already rising at the thought of an intruder on my ship. "I'll handle this myself. We're running a skeleton crew, and I won't risk anyone else getting caught in Orion's security net. Besides, none of our contacts here know your faces—let's keep it that way."

The emptiness in my chest pulses with renewed intensity, making it harder to think clearly. "Zara, keep me updated on those security sweeps. Grig, warm up the engines—quietly. We might need a quick exit."

The corridor to the cargo bay seems longer than usual, emergency lights painting everything in shades of blood and shadow. My boots ghost silent against the deck plates, years of military training taking over despite the growing discomfort in my blood. Could be a Black Eclipse assassin, finally making their move. Or an STI agent, here to finish what they started with Kyor. Might even be one of those augmented hunters from the Rim worlds. Whatever the threat, picking this moment is the last thing I need.

"Security teams have cleared Bay 17," Zara whispers through my comm. "They're moving faster than expected."

The maintenance shaft access panel shows subtle signs of tampering—professional work, the kind that speaks of experience and technical skill. My finger tightens on the trigger of my blaster as I track the shadow of movement ahead. A refugee wouldn't

have these skills. Neither would most bounty hunters.

"Bay 16 clear. Captain, they've doubled their sweep teams."

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A whisper of movement catches my eye—there, in the shadows where the maintenance shaft curves. At first it's nothing, just a shift in the recycled air, but then—

The scent hits me like a plasma blast to the chest.

Sweet. Wild. Dangerous. My senses explode into overdrive, every molecule of that intoxicating fragrance searing through my bloodstream like liquid fire. The world around me crystallizes, shadows peeling back as my pupils blow wide, revealing details I shouldn't be able to see. That scent... it's impossibly complex, layers of information my brain can barely process, each breath drawing me deeper into a predatory focus I've never experienced before.

"Bay 15 clear. They're deploying scan drones now."

Tactical awareness shatters like glass in my mind. Think. Focus. Analyze. The words scatter like debris in a solar wind. This is older than thought, deeper than strategy—this is pure instinct crackling through my nervous system like lightning. My fangs extend with an audible click, filling my mouth with the taste of metal and need. The hollow ache that's been carved into my chest for so long suddenly blazes with terrible purpose.

Hunt. Chase. Claim.

The commands pulse through my blood like a war drum, each beat driving rational thought further into darkness. My muscles coil tight enough to snap, every fiber of my being oriented toward that scent like a compass finding true north.



"Captain," Zara's urgent whisper barely registers through the roaring in my ears. "They're entering Bay 14. Three minutes at most."

The scent slams into me again—a lethal cocktail of danger and sweetness that sets every enhanced nerve ending on fire. Female. Hunter. Each breath tells a story of predatory grace and deadly competence. But there's something else, something that makes my wings snap wide with a crack that echoes through the corridor, shredding years of careful control like paper.

The truth hits harder than a gravitational surge.

Mate.

The word detonates in my mind like a thermal charge, reducing decades of discipline to ash. My muscles lock, combat training warring with an instinct older than stars. This isn't happening. Can't be happening. Not when the Brotherhood balances on a knife's edge. Not when one wrong move means death.

But biology doesn't care about timing or tactics. The burning in my veins transforms into a supernova of completion, threatening to bring me to my knees. I grab the nearest support beam, talons carving trenches in metal as if it were flesh. Themate-bond pulses with each heartbeat, each breath, a siren song I can't silence.

Focus. The tactician in me still functions, barely, cataloging threats through the haze of need. Unknown intruder. Potential hostile. Security breach. The facts line up like targets, but each one dissolves under the assault of primal recognition. Deal with the danger first. Process the cosmic joke later.

If I survive that long.

"Bay 13 clear! Captain, they're bringing in bio-scanners!"

My hands shake as I holster my blaster. A soft scrape of metal, followed by an intake of breath that bypasses all reason and strikes straight at my core. Mine. The thought should terrify me. Instead, it feels like the first true thing I've ever known.

"Captain!" Zara's whisper turns desperate. "They're starting Bay 12. Orders?"

The imperatives clash like warships: The Brotherhood's survival. Our luminore cargo—medicine for thousands. Security forces closing in. And her presence, pulling at me with the force of a collapsing star.

The scent of her threatens to override strategy, but centuries of discipline hold—barely. She moves like a predator, even in hiding. The security response is too aggressive for a simple trespasser—bio-scanners, doubled sweep teams. They're hunting someone valuable, someone with information worth killing for.

With the Black Eclipse making power plays across the sector... this could be the advantage we need. Protection for her, intelligence for us. The thought helps cage the raging instincts, barely.

"Grig, maintain standard approach. Zara, prepare for inspection protocols." My wings flex as I force myself to think. "Have the Driftspire backup route ready."

"But Captain, the security teams—"

"NOW!" The word emerges as pure growl. "Vent atmosphere in cargo bay three and seal it. Anyone down there stays trapped until we land."

I sprint for the bridge as engines roar to life. Warning klaxons mean nothing compared to the pull toward cargo bay. My mystery passenger—my mate— isn't going anywhere. Not now. Not ever.

"Break dock! Get us out of here!"

The Void Reaver lurches free, warning lights flooding every console. Let them try to stop us. I've claimed countless prizes from space over the years, but this... this transcends possession. The bond pulses between us like a living thing, even through sealed bulkheads.

For now, I have a ship to command, a crew to protect, and a mate to claim—whether she knows she's mine yet or not.

## Chapter 3

Neon Valkyrie

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:09 am*

MylungsburnlikeI've been running for miles through toxic air, each desperate breath scraping against my ribs like sandpaper. I crouch behind a stack of cargo containers, the cold metal biting through my synth-leather pants like ice against bare skin. The distinctive throb of the engines tells me we're already in space, their vibrations humming through the deck plates in a frequency that makes my implants buzz. Perfect. Just perfect. File that under "escape plans that definitely need a patch."

The cargo bay is dimly lit, recycled air heavy with the musty scent of metal and machine oil—that universal spacecraft perfume no amount of filtration ever quite eliminates. Emergency lights pulse in slow, crimson waves that remind me of failing system diagnostics, casting shadows between towering stacks of crates that my enhanced vision struggles to penetrate. At least the artificial gravity is working—small mercies in a universe that seems bent on crashing my entire existence.

I pull my knees to my chest, muscles trembling from an adrenaline spike that's making my upgrades glitch like cheap bootleg tech. What a day. Wake up, run standard analytics, discover someone's trying to frame me for corporate espionage, get chased by security, and end up a stowaway on some random ship. Just another Tuesday in the life of Neon Valkyrie. Though right now, I feel a lot more like Lyra Arden—tired, scared, and running dangerously low on both options and processing power.

My training bag reveals a sorry collection of emergency resources that wouldn't pass even the most basic survival protocols: datapad with its cracked screen (thanks, security drone), commlink that's probably being traced, spare clothes that smell like yesterday's synthcoffee, and one sad-looking protein bar that's seen better

development cycles. Not exactly the emergency kit I'd want for running from... whoever it is. The encrypted data still burns in my neural cache like a virus I can't quarantine, along with that final warning that flashed across my vision:RUN.

Well, mission accomplished on that front. Though I might have been more selective about my escape vehicle if I hadn't been busy dodging security drones and their trigger-happy operators, their plasma bolts still leaving ghost-images in my enhanced retinal display like corrupted pixels I can't clear.

Heavy footsteps echo through the hold, each step sending vibrations through the metal floor that registers on my internal sensors like seismic activity. They're accompanied by the soft whisper of... wings? The sound like silk over steel in my audio processors, alien and dangerous in ways my database can't categorize. Great. My mysterious ride comes with an equally mysterious captain. I press deeper into the shadows, though something in my code tells me it's already too late for stealth protocols.

The footsteps stop.

I can feel eyes on me, predatory and intense, making my threat assessment subroutines spike into the red. Slowly, I raise my head, my heart attempting an unauthorized override of my ribcage's structural integrity.

Oh.

OH.

He towers over me, easily over six feet of lean muscle and dangerous grace that makes my usually reliable threat assessment protocols stutter and freeze. His skin has a bronze tone I've never seen on any species in my extensive database, marked with strange glowing patterns that pulse with a crimson light like living circuit traces. But

it's his wings that short-circuit my thought processes—huge, bat-like appendages that spread behind him like living shadows, filling the space between cargo containers with deadly elegance.

I run a system diagnostic, scrambling for anything in my memory banks that can identify him, but I come up blank. My neural interface has cataloged thousands of alien species, yet none match the towering, winged predator in front of me. My enhanced vision drinks in every detail with ruthless precision—the way his glowing, crimson markings pulse in sync with my own hammering heartbeat, the liquid grace of his movements, as if every step is calculated for maximum lethality.

Mental note: hack into the xenobiology archives the first chance I get. Because right now, my ignorance isn't just embarrassing—it's dangerous.

The worn leather and battle-scarred console behind him scream pirate ship louder than a siren blaring "security breach detected." Because of course. Apparently, today hadn't fried my nerves enough—I had to go and stow away on some cutthroat's death trap.

I rerun my search, hoping for a delayed match, but my data banks remain frustratingly void of answers. As an analyst, I've documented countless alien races drifting through Orion Outpost, but this one? He's a glitch in my system, an outlier my algorithms can't classify. And that sets off more internal alarms than an unpatched vulnerability in a high-security network.

Dangerous. Unquantifiable. And staring at me like he already owns me.

"Found you." His voice is a low growl that sends cascading errors through my neural network, triggering responses I definitely didn't program. Not entirely unpleasant ones either, which sets off a whole new set of warnings in my threat assessment protocols.

I force myself to stand, squaring my shoulders despite every instinct screaming to run. "This isn't what you think. I can explain everything if you'll just—"

"No." The word carries the weight of absolute authority, like gravity itself has bent to his will. He steps closer, nostrils flaring, and suddenly my enhanced senses betray me completely—drinking in his scent like stolen information: metal and starlight, something darker and wilder that reminds me of deep space, and an underlying note that bypasses all my careful defenses and strikes straight at something primitive inside me. "You're not going anywhere."

"Excuse me?" I back up until I hit metal, my spine registering the cold contact like a system shock. "You can't just—"

"You're my mate." He says it like it's hardcoded into the universe's base programming. Like it explains everything.

I laugh, the sound as brittle as corrupted code. I can't help it. The absurdity of this situation hits like a failed system reboot—here I am, carrying enough stolen data to get me dissected in some corporate black site, and this walking security breach thinks we're destined mates. "I'm really not."

His wings flex, stirring the air and carrying more of that intoxicating scent that keeps crashing my usually reliable sensory filters. The bat-like membranes absorb what little light remains, casting living shadows that my enhanced vision can't quite process. "I can smell it. Feel it. The burn in my blood—"

"Is your problem, not mine." I cut him off, forcing my attention away from how my tech keeps glitching around him, spitting out data about his biochemical markers when it should be calculating escape vectors. "We've known each other for exactly zero-point-zero-three cycles. I don't do relationships, and I definitely don't do fated mates. Especially not with pirates who probably want to sell me to the highest

bidder."

A muscle ticks in his jaw, and my vision helpfully zooms in on the movement without my permission. "This isn't a choice, little hacker. For either of us."

Ice floods my processors. "What did you call me?"

His smile shows teeth. Long, sharp ones that my visual enhancement automatically measures and calculates damage potential for. "You think I can't smell the neural upgrades? The illegal tech humming under your skin?" He leans closer, and my body executes a completely unauthorized shiver as his heat signature overwhelms my proximity sensors. "You're running from something. Someone. And now you're on my ship."

"Captain!" A gruff voice calls from above. "Security forces are demanding we return to dock."

His eyes stay locked on mine, the patterns in them shifting like quantum calculations I can't quite solve. "Tell them to go to hell. We're on course for Driftspire." His wings shift, shadows stretching around us with deadly grace—like a firewall I can't hack.

"Sir," another voice joins in—female, concerned. "What about the stowaway? Spacing is standard protocol—"



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:09 am*

Spacing? Seriously? My pulse jumps, sending another wave of alerts through my system. But I keep my expression locked down tight, running the same emotional suppression protocols that have kept me alive this long. Let them think I'm useful. Or dangerous. Preferably both.

A growl rips from his throat, deep and possessive, making the metal deck plates vibrate beneath my feet. The sound bypasses all my security protocols, awakening something primitive in my code that should have been deleted cycles ago. "Anyone who touches her answers to me. She stays."

"I really don't have time for this. Just take me to—" I execute what should be a perfect escape maneuver, ducking under his arm with the kind of precision that's won me countless virtual sparring matches. I make it exactly two steps before his hand closes around my wrist, and every sensor in my body lights up like a system overload.

"Let. Go." I grit out, trying to ignore how my skin burns where he touches me, my neural interface helpfully informing me that my temperature has risen by exactly 2.3 degrees at the point of contact.

"Never." He tugs me closer, until my proximity alerts are screaming and my enhanced senses are drowning in his presence. "You're mine now. The sooner you accept that, the easier this will be."

"I don't even know your name!" My voice bounces off the containers, coming back to me distorted like corrupted audio files.

“Cirdox.” His free hand comes up to brush my cheek, calloused fingers leaving trails of fire that my sensory processors can’t seem to filter out. “Captain of the Void Reaver. And you are?”

“Leaving.” I twist my wrist sharply while pivoting on my back foot—a combat subroutine I’ve run successfully through a thousand simulations. The motion should send him stumbling, should give me the split second I need to execute my escape protocol. My muscles know this dance, have performed it flawlessly even against enhanced security systems.

But his grip holds firm, and before I can counter, my world tilts. He moves with lethal grace, using my own momentum against me. A sharp pivot, a controlled shift, and suddenly I’m pressed against the solid heat of his chest, my breath escaping in a startled gasp.

His wings snap forward, swallowing the dim emergency lights, cocooning us in a living shadow. The darkness isn’t empty—it hums with his presence, thick with heat and the steady, unyielding rhythm of his heartbeat against my spine. It shouldn’t be in sync with mine. It shouldn’t feel like my own pulse is matching his, a silent code running in perfect harmony.

Critical error. No one’s ever countered that move before. No one’s ever turned my own escape tactics against me with such effortless control. The realization sends a sharp jolt through my nervous system, my senses scrambling to recalibrate—even as every alert in my neural interface glitches under the sheer proximity of him. My body wants to fight, but something in my core hesitates, a flicker of hesitation I can’t afford.

I’m trapped. Not just by the strength of his grip or the dark press of his wings—but by something deeper. Something more dangerous. Because for the first time in years, my instincts aren’t screaming at me to run.

“Try again, mate.” His breath stirs my hair, carrying that scent that keeps crashing my systems—metal and ozone and something darker that reminds me of burned circuitry after a too-close hack.

“Not your mate.” But my voice lacks its usual encryption, all my defenses showing critical errors. Something about him bypasses every firewall I’ve ever built, makes me want to trust him despite all my careful programming. Which is exactly why I can’t. “And it’s Neon.”

“Neon.” He says my handle like he’s testing it for vulnerabilities, rolling it around in his mouth like he’s searching for exploits. His lips curl into a knowing smile that says he’s well aware it’s not my root access name, but he lets it slide. “Welcome aboard... for now. We both know you’re hiding more than just your designation, but we’ll get to that.”

A message flashes across my neural interface, burning through all my defensive protocols like a virus:

FOUND YOU, NEON VALKYRIE. NO SHIP CAN HIDE YOU FROM ME.

My blood runs cold, core temperature dropping by 1.7 degrees. The hacker. They’ve traced me here already. I try to respond, to trace the signal, but something’s blocking my connection, leaving static where my usual network access should be.

Cirdox’s arms tighten around me, wings closing in until my world narrows to just us and the darkness. A perfect trap I can’t quite bring myself to fight. “What is it?”

I look up at this dangerous alien who claims I’m his mate, and every alarm in my neural interface screams at me to move, to find an angle, an escape—something. But my tech, my flawless, cutting-edge enhancements, aren’t running threat assessments or exit strategies. No, they’re glitching, locking onto him like he’s the most important

variable in the system.

The emergency lights cast jagged shadows across his face, highlighting the sharp lines of his jaw, the wicked curve of his fangs. His wings flex, shifting the darkness around him like a living thing, their edges catching just enough light to make them gleam. My augmented vision, the same tech that's saved my life more times than I can count, is failing me spectacularly—cataloging every inch of him with ruthless precision instead of mapping my best route off this ship.

The way his tribal markings pulse, glowing like living circuitry beneath bronze skin. The way his muscles shift with every slow, predatory movement. The raw power radiating off him, coiling through the air like a gravitational force I can't break free from.

I force a system diagnostic, fingers twitching as the results scroll across my vision. Data corrupt. Unknown anomaly detected. The errors might as well be written in ancient Earth script for all the sense they make. This is top-tier black-market tech, paid for with three corporate heists and favors that nearly got me killed. It shouldn't be failing. It definitely shouldn't be hyper-fixating on the way his body heat presses against my skin, the way his wings move like they're instinctively attuned to me.

My tech is betraying me. Black market tech. Never again. Though this feels different than that disaster upgrade from the Lower Rings. This isn't just system failure—it's like my entire neural architecture is being rewritten by something more ancient than code. My carefully constructed defenses are crumbling, and I can't stop it.

I need to focus. Find a terminal. Get off this ship before—

My systems crash again, hard enough to make my vision blur. This isn't random malfunction. Either my hardware is compromised, or something about him is wreaking havoc with my tech. Neither option improves my chances of survival.

I built these firewalls around my heart for a reason. The last person who got past them ended up dead, their consciousness scattered across the dataverse like digital ash. Kai's final transmission still haunts my nightmares—the sound of his mind fragmenting as they tore him apart. That's what happens when you trust the wrong access codes. When you let someone past your defenses.

I won't make that mistake again. No matter how my tech glitches around Cirdox. No matter how his presence corrupts every survival protocol I've ever written.

“Take me to the bridge,” I say, fighting to keep my voice steady. “We need to talk.”

His smile is all predator, sharp teeth gleaming in the darkness of his wing-cocoon. “After you, mate.”

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“Still not your mate.”

I scan the narrow corridors with enhanced vision, mapping every vent and access panel. Standard Brotherhood layout—escape pod two decks down. Thirty seconds at a terminal is all I need to crack their security. Simple. Clean. Except...

My neural upgrades stutter like cheap code. The tactical overlay freezes, fragments, rebuilds itself wrong. I force a diagnostic, but it comes back clean—which is impossible given how my systems are fritzing out. This is cutting-edge tech, even if I stole it from a military black site. It shouldn't be failing.

His hand shifts against my spine, and my escape calculations shatter completely. Brilliant. I'm trying to plot coordinates for the nearest safe harbor, and my supposedly elite implants are obsessing over the heat of his touch and the way his wings catch the light like living shadow.

Amateur mistake, letting your guard down. Here I am, attempting a tactical retreat, and my enhanced senses are mapping his pheromone signature instead of scanning for weapons. Maybe spacing myself isn't such a bad option. Has to be better than this maddening awareness of him, this war between logic and whatever primal instinct keeps shorting out my common sense.

Focus. Survival first. Delete everything else—especially how his presence sets off alerts I can't silence. I've spent years coding walls around my heart, perfecting emotional firewalls. I won't let some alien's mate-bond override my core programming, no matter what my glitching implants suggest.

I've survived this long by trusting data, not instincts. The facts are simple: relationships are system vulnerabilities, fated mates are corrupted code, and attraction is just biology hacking reason. Now if only my tech would stop cataloging every detail about him and return to plotting my escape.

I'm screwed. Not because of any mystical bond, but because for the first time since my upgrades, technology isn't giving me the distance I need. And that's more dangerous than any pirate captain could ever be.

## Chapter 4

### Cirdox

The bridge of the Void Reaver thrums with tension as thick as stellar plasma. My crew works their stations with practiced efficiency, but I catch their sideways glances, their unspoken questions. Years of military discipline keep my posture rigid, my wings perfectly still despite the strange heat coursing through my veins. I observe as she takes in her surroundings, those enhanced eyes of hers cataloging every detail with a precision that matches my own. Something about her presence sets my blood on fire, triggers instincts I've never felt before. The sensation is foreign, unsettling—like my body is trying to tell me something my mind can't yet comprehend.

My training tells me to focus on the tactical situation, to push aside these unexpected physical reactions. But for the first time in centuries, discipline alone might not be enough. There's something about this human that calls to me on a level I don't understand, awakening responses I've never experienced. The heat in my blood, the way my wings itch to shelter her—none of it makes sense. And that loss of control is more dangerous than any pursuing ships.

"Three Planetary Police cruisers on our tail," Grig announces from the helm, his pale blue fingers dancing across the controls. "They're charging weapons."

“Evasive maneuvers,” I order, forcing my attention to the tactical situation despite how Neon’s presence pulls at my senses. She’s positioned herself by the display with textbook defensive positioning—my military training catalogs the details automatically. Weight distributed for rapid response, clear sightlines to all exits, back protected. The electric blue in her hair catches the emergency lights, making her too visible, too exposed. My fangs ache with the need to defend, to shield her with my wings, but I crush the instinct. Focus. “Options?”

“The Cassian Nebula,” Zara suggests, her russet fur bristling as she pulls up the nav charts. “The ionic interference might—”

My mate works the console with a fluidity that’s almost hypnotic, her fingers moving over the controls like she’s playing a symphony only she can hear. Every movement is precise and deliberate, no wasted energy—like a soldier executing a battlefield maneuver. The residual charge from the argument moments ago still lingers in the air, thick as ionized plasma. Zara’s tail had lashed with frustration, her distrust written in the rigid set of her shoulders. Grig had been more measured, but the tension in his voice was unmistakable—“We don’t know what she’s capable of.”

They weren’t wrong to be wary. But they didn’t understand what I did: she’s our best chance.

I shut down the debate with a single command. “She works, or we die.” There wasn’t time for anything else.

Resentment still simmers at the edges of the bridge, but Neon ignores it, her focus locked on the ship’s systems with the kind of intensity I’ve only ever seen in seasoned tacticians. She moves through my tech like she’s lived inside code her entire life, and maybe she has. The cold glow of her neural implants casts shifting shadows across her face, making her look like something out of a hacker’s fever dream—dangerous, brilliant, untouchable.



My instincts pull in two directions at once—one screaming to keep my distance, the other demanding I get closer, to anchor her before she slips away like stardust through my fingers. I silence the second impulse with sheer force of will. Now isn't the time.

"Their tracking signatures," she murmurs, tapping out a rapid sequence on the display. "They've adapted to ionic camouflage." She zooms in, highlighting a subtle fluctuation in the data—one my own tactical training had missed. "Try hiding in that nebula, and we'll light up their sensors like a supernova."

Damn. That's impressive.

I step closer, watching as she peels away layers of encrypted signals like she's skimming through an old data journal. "They're running Mark VII systems now," she continues, her voice clipped and efficient. "Quantum-locked. Triple-redundant. The old tricks won't work." She leans closer to the interface, her enhanced eyes narrowing as she tracks the patterns.

A slow smile curves her lips.

"But there might be another way. Something they haven't seen before."

I don't miss the flicker of satisfaction in her expression—the thrill of solving an impossible puzzle. And stars help me, I think I might be getting addicted to watching her work. I arch an eyebrow, watching as she approaches the main console with the confidence of someone who knows exactly what they're doing. "And I suppose you have a suggestion?"

Her fingers hover over the interface, neural implants pulsing an eerie blue beneath her skin as she accesses the ship's systems. "I can get us clear—for a price. Drop me at Driftspire Station and we both walk away from this mess."

The clinical precision in her voice sets my teeth on edge. She's treating this like just another transaction, like we're haggling over stolen credits instead of standing on the edge of survival. My wings flex, a barely restrained urge to shield, to claim. She doesn't understand—this isn't about control. It's about existence. If she walks away, she takes my sanity with her. My breath comes rougher than I'd like, heat pulsing in my blood, the mate-bond clawing through every restraint I've ever built.

Thex's face flashes in my mind, his once-powerful wings reduced to brittle husks, his body devoured by the sickness long before the flames took him. I can still hear his voice, ragged and broken: "The pain isn't in dying, cousin. It's in knowing she's out there and will never be yours."

The memory clenches around my ribs like a vice. I won't end up like him. I can't. I have a crew to lead, a ship to protect, enemies circling like scavengers. If I fall, the Black Eclipse won't just take over my territory—they'll burn everything I've built to ash.

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*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:09 am*

The bond is already sinking its claws into me, my body recognizing what my mind barely has time to process. Each second without her is a brand searing deeper into my bones, a countdown I can't ignore. Days, maybe weeks before the sickness takes hold. And I don't intend to waste them.

I watch her, every instinct screaming at me to act. Her fingers hover over the controls with the practiced ease of someone who's lived inside code, her enhanced eyes scanning for vulnerabilities. There's a sharp intelligence in every movement, a mind built for survival, for escape. But I can't let her run—not when she doesn't understand what's at stake.

“No deal.” My voice comes out rough, edged with something I can't quite leash, something primal and immovable. My wingstwitch, the fire in my blood flaring hot enough to burn. She doesn't look up, but I see the flicker of tension in her shoulders. She felt it—the weight of those words, the warning they carry.

She's not walking away from this.

Not from me.

She turns sharply, but not before I catch it—a slight stiffening of her shoulders, a flicker of tension in her jaw, the kind of reaction that speaks of someone used to losing their options one by one. It's gone as fast as it appeared, replaced by sharp-edged defiance. “Do whatever you want, Captain,” she snaps, voice controlled but clipped, like she's forcing it through locked teeth. “I'm sure the Planetary Police will love adding ‘kidnapping’ to your list of charges when they catch us.”

“Evasive maneuvers!” I bark, gripping the armrest as the ship lurches violently. Grig’s hands fly over the controls, twisting the Void Reaver into a sharp roll that sends the incoming plasma bolts streaking harmlessly past our hull. The inertia presses against my wings, but I barely register it—my focus sharpens on the tactical display, on the enemy’s pattern, on the next move that will keep us alive a little longer.

I flex my wings, shadows dancing across the bridge as I stalk toward Neon. She doesn’t back down—of course she doesn’t. My mate is as stubborn as she is beautiful, and just as dangerous. “You’re not leaving this ship.”

My wings twitch, an involuntary reaction to the sharp, wild scent of her nerve. It sets my blood burning hotter, a primal recognition sparking deep in my bones. She’s nothing like the trembling fugitives I’ve dealt with before—those who beg, who barter, who break under the weight of inevitability. No, this female stands her ground, chin lifted, eyes blazing, every sharp line of her body promising a fight.

And stars help me, I want that fight.

I step closer, slow and deliberate, watching the way her breath hitches—not in fear, but calculation. She’s already running probabilities, mapping escape vectors, weighing risk against reward. My mate is dangerous in a way that has nothing to do with weapons and everything to do with will. And she’d rather die than be caged.

The realization is a punch to the gut.

Kyvernian instincts war with hard-won discipline. Claim. Protect. Anchor. But Neon is no anchor—she’s a solar flare, brilliant and untamed, and if I try to hold too tightly, she’ll burn through my fingers. The mate-bond pulses, the sickness already whispering warnings in my veins, but I shove it aside.

She thinks this is about control. It's not. It's survival—hers and mine. And somehow, I need to make her see that before she destroys us both.

I exhale slowly, adjusting my stance, making sure my wings don't flare in challenge. "You think I would let that happen?" My voice is low, steady, though my hands twitch with the need to touch, to hold—to keep. "You think I would let you throw yourself into the void because you don't trust me yet?"

Her eyes narrow, lips parting like she's ready to fire back another cutting remark, but I push forward, voice rougher now. "You want to fight me? Fine. I'll take that battle any day." My wings flex, but I force them still. "But don't make the mistake of thinking I'll ever let you go."

The ship rocks with a glancing hit. "Shields at eighty percent!" Zara calls out, her russet fur bristling as her claws dig into her console. The impact reverberates through the deck plates, a harsh reminder of our vulnerability. Each hit brings us closer to capture—or worse, to losing my mate before I've even had a chance to show her what we could be together.

I watch Neon's reaction, noting how she automatically adjusts her stance to compensate for the ship's movement, how her enhanced eyes track multiple threat vectors simultaneously. She's beautiful in her competence, deadly in her grace. And she has no idea what she means to me, how the very thought of her leaving makes my blood burn with something far more painful than desire.

Already something burns in my veins, an unfamiliar ache that grows stronger with each passing moment. I've heard whispered stories about bond-sickness all my life—warnings passed down through generations about the price of an unclaimed mate. But experiencing it firsthand... the reality is more terrifying than any tale. Each breath without her nearby feels hollow, incomplete. Something fundamental has shifted inside me, and I don't know how to fix it. Or if it can be fixed.

I grip the arm of my chair, wings mantling with barely contained frustration. Out here in the lawless expanse of space, I thought I was safe from such primal forces. I never expected to find my mate, never prepared for what it might mean. Now every instinct screams that she belongs with me, while my rational mind grapples with an increasingly desperate question: What happens if she continues to reject the bond?

The words burn like acid in my throat. Every instinct in me snarls to refuse, to keep her close, to force her to understand what she is to me. But forcing her will only make her run faster. If I want her to stay, I must let her think she is free.

Even if the thought of it tears me apart.

I exhale sharply, wings twitching with the effort it takes to restrain myself. “Fine. Driftspire Station.” But the promise tastes like a lie. Because no matter where we go, no matter how far she runs, she’s already mine.

A small smile plays at the corners of her mouth as she turns back to the console. “Smart choice. Now, about that creative solution...”

The way she commands my console demands my tactical assessment—each movement precise and lethal, marking her as a fellow predator. My military training catalogs the details automatically: enhanced neural capabilities, advanced infiltration skills, combat-ready positioning. The blue glow of her implants marks her as more dangerous than initially assessed. Yet beneath the analytical observation, something primitive stirs, an awareness that bypasses centuries of discipline.

I maintain a professional distance, though my wings shift restlessly at my back. The mate-bond burns in my blood, urging closer proximity, but I force my attention to remain tactical. Her capabilities could either save or destroy my ship—that’s what matters right now, not the way her presence seems to electrify the recycled air between us.

The slight tension in her shoulders reveals hypervigilance—someone used to watching their back. My enhanced senses pick up traces of adrenaline beneath the sharp scent of her neural tech. She's running from something serious enough to override her obvious aversion to being trapped on my ship. That tactical insight is more valuable than the primal satisfaction of having her in my territory.

I need to focus on the mission, on protecting my crew and cargo. The mate-bond's pull is just another variable to manage, not an excuse to lose the discipline that's kept me alive this long.

“Your cloaking system is decent,” she murmurs, more to herself than to me. “But with a few modifications...” Her voice trails off as lines of code scroll across the screen faster than even my enhanced vision can track.

“What are you doing to my ship?” I demand, my voice rougher than intended as her proximity sends waves of heat through my blood. Her scent fills my lungs—metal and lightning and something uniquely human—making my wings flex unconsciously. I force them still, centuries of military discipline battling against primitive instincts I've never encountered before. The urge to wrap my wings around her, to claim this lethal creature as mine, burns almost as hot as the mate-bond itself. But I can't afford distractions, not with pursuit vessels on our tail. Focus on the tactical situation. Analysis first, primal urges later.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:09 am*

“Giving us a ghost protocol that’ll make us invisible to their tracking systems.” She doesn’t look up, but I catch the slight hitch in her breath when I move closer. The reaction sends a fresh surge of heat through my veins, but I crush it down with iron control. Her enhanced eyes stay fixed on the console, neural implants casting an ethereal blue glow that makes my blood burn hotter. The way she commands technology stirs something in me—here is a hunter as deadly in her domain as I am in mine. “It’s not permanent, but it should buy us enough time to get clear of their sensor range.”

“And raise every red flag in the Brotherhood’s security protocols,” I growl. Only ships aligned with the Black Eclipse use this level of stealth technology. “You’re painting a target on our backs.”

“One problem at a time, Captain.” The way she says my title sends electricity down my spine. “Would you rather deal with the Brotherhood’s suspicions or Planetary Police plasma cannons?”

The Void Reaver lurches violently under another blast, the hull groaning with the impact. The scent of overheating circuits floods the bridge, acrid and sharp, as warning lights flicker like dying stars across the console. Zara’s fingers fly over the controls, her tail bristling with tension. “Shields at sixty percent!”

“Do it,” I order, fighting against decades of hard-earned caution. The Brotherhood’s trust is like luminore—precious, volatile, and impossible to replace once lost. I’ve spent years building my reputation among them, proving that every risk I take serves a greater purpose than profit. One suspicious move could unravel everything.



But watching Neon's fingers dance across the console, I know there's no choice. I've always led with calculated risks, weighing each decision against the cost of failure. Right now, the math is simple: The Brotherhood's suspicion I can handle. Losing my mate—losing the chance to even try to convince her to stay—that's a cost too steep to bear. "But this better work."

Her fingers dance across the holographic interface, each keystroke precise and deliberate. My enhanced vision tracks the cascading lines of code she weaves together—an intricate tapestry of quantum algorithms that would make most hackers weep. The neural implants beneath her skin pulse with an ethereal blue glow, casting shifting patterns across her face as she works.

"See this?" She gestures to a string of variables I barely recognize. "Your cloaking system operates on a basic phase-shift principle. Effective against standard scanners, but predictable." Her fingers fly faster, adding layers of complexity I didn't know our systems could handle. "I'm modifying it to sync with natural quantum fluctuations instead."

The ship's computer protests with a series of warning chirps. She silences them without breaking rhythm, a ghost of a smile playing at her lips. "The universe isn't static—it breathes, ripples, folds in on itself millions of times per second. Most sensors are calibrated to filter out these natural distortions."

Her implants flare brighter as she pushes deeper into the system. "But if we match our signature to those background ripples..." The tactical display flickers, then stabilizes. Where our ship's icon once blazed like a beacon, there's now only the subtle shimmer of space-time itself. "We become part of that background noise. Invisible."

She leans back, satisfaction evident in every line of her body. "Just don't expect me to stick around for the aftermath. Creating holes in space-time tends to attract the

wrong kind of attention.”

The words are like claws in my chest. She doesn’t understand—can’t understand—what she means to me. What losing her would do. The bond-sickness is already starting, a subtle ache in my bones that will grow until it consumes me. Without her, I’m dead. And if I die, everything I’ve built, everyone who depends on me, will fall to the Black Eclipse’s control.

But I can’t tell her that. Not yet. Her body language when discussing staying—the slight tension in her shoulders, the way her fingers twitch toward escape routes—speaks of someone running from more than just Orion security. My enhanced senses pick up subtle stress markers that my military training categorizes as deep-rooted survival responses. Whatever taught her to guard her secrets this fiercely has left scars my tactical assessment can’t fully decode.

“Done!” she announces as the ship’s lights dim momentarily. “We’re gone from their sensors. To them, we just... disappeared.”

The tactical display confirms it—the pursuit vessels are breaking off, their confusion evident in their erratic search patterns. Relief floods the bridge, but I can’t relax. Not when every moment brings me closer to losing her.

“Plot a course for the outer rim,” I tell Grig. “We’ll lay low until the heat dies down.” Until I can make her understand what she means to me, what we could be together.

Neon’s shoulders tense. “That wasn’t the deal.”

“I need to be honest with you,” I say, forcing myself to meet her gaze despite the burning in my blood. “The mate-bond isn’t just about attraction or destiny. For Kyvernians, it’s life or death. Without completing the bond, the sickness will kill me within weeks.”

I watch her freeze, her breath hitching just slightly—a tell most wouldn't notice, but my instincts latch onto it like a predator scenting weakness. Not fear. Something sharper. Denial. The bond pulses between us, raw and undeniable, but she's already raising her defenses, her mind scrambling for an escape route even as her body betrays her.

Her arms cross over her chest, a barrier—one I recognize all too well. A firewall slamming down against something she doesn't want to process. I've seen battle-hardened soldiers use the same tactic, convincing themselves they don't feel pain even as the wound bleeds out beneath their armor. She's shielding herself, but from what? Me? Or the truth she doesn't want to acknowledge?

Her scent shifts—still sharp, still electric with defiance, but underneath it is something new. Unease. Not fear. Not yet. But close enough to set my fangs on edge. Every instinct in me demands that I push forward, bridge the distance between us, make her understand before she twists this into something it's not.

She lifts a brow, voice razor-sharp with suspicion. "That's... convenient timing."

I exhale slowly, wings flexing behind me, the tension in my muscles coiling tighter. "You think I fabricated this? That I would lie about something that could kill me?" My voice comes out rougher than intended, but stars help me, she needs to hear this. "Do you have any idea what it means for my kind to find a mate? What it costs us when we don't?"

Neon's chin tilts up just enough to be defiant, but I see the flicker of something else in her eyes. Doubt.

Good.

I take another step forward, close enough now that her scent—the sharp, electric hum

of her neural implants mixed with something uniquely her—wraps around me like a noose. I should step back. Give her space. But it's too late for that. The bond is already formed. Whether she accepts it or not, my body knows. My blood knows.

“You say convenient timing, but I call it cruel,” I rasp, voice just low enough that only she hears. “I spent my whole life believing I would never find my mate. That I would die before the bond could ever form. And now, when I finally find you, I can feel you running from it.”

She flinches. Almost imperceptible. But I see it.

That small crack in her defenses widens just enough for me to press forward. I don't touch her—I can't. If I do, I might not be able to let go. Instead, I let my voice carry the weight of what I can't say aloud.

“I know you don't trust me. I know you don't want this. But I also know what I feel is real. And whether you stay or go, whether you fight this or not, the bond is already set. It doesn't care what you want.” My voice dips lower, rough with a truth I wish wasn't so damn urgent. “And if you run? It will kill me.”

Her breath catches—just for a fraction of a second.

Another crack.

She shakes her head, her expression twisting into something fierce and desperate. “That’s not my problem.”

A growl rumbles deep in my chest, my wings flaring slightly before I force them back. “No, it’s ours. You think you can just walk away from this? From me?” I lean in, watching the way her throat works around a swallow, the way her hands clench like she’s fighting the urge to reach for something she doesn’t want to name. “I promise you, you’ll feel it too. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But it will come for you, Neon. And when it does, you’ll understand why I can’t let you go.”

Her pupils dilate. A rush of adrenaline spikes her scent, setting my blood on fire. But she doesn’t move away. Not yet.

My words settle over her like an unpatched vulnerability in her system—too big to ignore, too dangerous to acknowledge. It should be infuriating. Instead, it only confirms what I already know. She feels it. She just won’t let herself admit it. But she’s too late. I already caught the half-second lag in her pulse, the way her breath hitched before she forced it back under control.

A lesser male might have missed it.

I don’t.

Her eyes narrow. “This isn’t over, Captain.”

Her words are a blade, meant to cut the moment clean—”This isn’t over, Captain”—but her voice betrays her. A fraction too tight. A single note off-balance. She turns before I can reply, before she can let me see the truth in her eyes.

She turns on her heel and walks away. Each step she takes feels like a blade carving through my ribs. My talons scrape against the console as I clench my fists, forcing myself not to go after her. Not to drag her back and make her listen.

I watch her go, my wings flexing instinctively, aching to close the distance. But I don’t follow. Not yet. My mate is a runner, a creature of firewalls and locked doors, of carefully coded barriers designed to keep everyone out. If I push too hard now, she’ll bolt before she even understands why she wants to stay.

I exhale slowly, the mate-bond tightening inside me like a vice. The sickness is coming. I can already feel it in the hollowness that forms the moment she steps away. Every instinct in me snarls to go after her, to claim her, to anchor her before she slips through my fingers entirely.

But Neon isn’t prey.

She’s the hunt.

And I intend to win.

## Chapter 5

### Neon Valkyrie

The door hisses shut behind me, sealing out the chaos of the bridge, but not the storm

still raging in my head.

Mate-bond.

I scoff under my breath as I pace the cabin, arms crossed tight over my chest. I don't believe in destiny. Not in soulmates, not in fate, and definitely not in some cosmic biological imperative that decides who I belong to. I've spent my whole life running from things that want to own me—corporations, syndicates, security forces—why should this be any different?

Except it is.

Because my body isn't listening to reason.

It's glitching, reacting to him in ways I can't override—like a virus slipping past my firewalls, embedding itself into my system. My neural implants have never malfunctioned like this before. No external interference, no logic to explain away the way my pulse syncs to his, the way my breath hitches every time he gets close.

I slam my hand against the metal table, frustration curling hot in my chest.

I don't have time for this. I don't have time for him.

Because there are bigger problems—like the encrypted data still burning in my neural cache and the hacker who's been tracking me across the system like a predator waiting for me to slip.

I move to the small console, flicking through schematics of the Void Reaper's network architecture. Distraction. That's what I need. I'll crack into the ship's encrypted systems, find a way out, and—

A soft chime cuts through my focus. My muscles tense, hand hovering over the stunner in my boot as the door hisses open.

Zara steps inside, her russet fur sleek, her tail twitching in irritation. She holds a tray laden with steaming food and a carafe of something that smells faintly of spiced berries.



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“Captain’s orders,” she says, setting the tray down. “He said you might appreciate some... sustenance.”

I eye the food suspiciously. “Is it poisoned?”

A flicker of amusement crosses her features. “Only if you consider spiced Huxarian root vegetables poisonous. It’s... an acquired taste.”

“I’ll pass.” I gesture to the datapad. “Busy.”

Zara exhales sharply, her russet ears twitching. “You really don’t see it, do you?”

I pause mid-step, tension coiling in my shoulders. “See what?”

She gestures vaguely, not just at the ship, but at something bigger—something I don’t want to name. “The Captain. He’s holding it together, but not for long.”

A prickle of unease skates down my spine. “If this is another speech about fated mates—”

“It’s not,” she snaps, tail lashing. “You don’t have to believe in destiny. But you should believe in biology. He’s already showing signs.”

A cold weight settles in my stomach. “Signs of what?”

Her expression hardens. “Deterioration.” The word lands like a blow. “The bond-sickness isn’t just a myth, and it’s not some romantic curse. It’s real. And it’s already

taking hold.”

My throat tightens, but I force a scoff. “And what? He’ll just drop dead if I don’t fall into his arms?”

Zara’s ears flick back, her voice razor-sharp. “No. But if he keeps pushing his body past its limits, he’s going to slip. His judgment, his reflexes—everything that makes him Cirdox will start failing. And in a fight like this?” She leans in, eyes locking onto mine. “Mistakes mean death. Not just for him. For all of us.”

I fold my arms, ignoring the sudden pressure in my chest. “That’s not my problem.”

Her lips press into a thin line. “Not yet.”

The clinical detachment of my neural implants feels like a shield against the weight of her words. They’re designed to analyze threats, calculate odds, process data. But they offer no insights into alien biology or the implications of what she’s saying. All they can tell me is that her vital signs indicate she believes every word.

The weight of her words hits me like a plasma blast. This isn’t just some alien trying to claim me—he’s literally dying because of whatever biological imperative makes him think I’m his mate. And I have no idea what to do with that information.

The crew’s hushed voices filter through the ventilation shaft, punctuated by the clink of metal on metal. My illegal neural implants filter out the background hum of the ship’s systems, isolating their conversation.

“...Black Eclipse consolidating power...”

“...Brotherhood fracturing...”

“...Captain Cirdox taking too many risks...”

My blood chills. Whatever Cirdox is involved in, it's bigger than just smuggling. And if his crew is worried, it's serious.

Suddenly, the ship lurches violently, throwing me against the wall. Alarms blare, red lights flashing across the ceiling. Zara grabs the nearest handhold, her fur bristling with alarm. “What was that?”

“Ambush!” a gruff voice barks over the ship's comm. “Three unidentified fighters, closing fast. They're flying Huxarian colors, but their energy signatures don't match any known models. Could be Black Eclipse.”

I shove the plate of nutrient paste aside, my stomach churning with a tension that has nothing to do with the recycled-protein flavor. The buzz from my illegal implants intensifies, a frantic energy that vibrates in unsettling harmony with the alarms screaming around me. The deck vibrates beneath my feet, and the acrid tang of ozone stings my nostrils—a telltale sign the atmospheric regulator is struggling to keep up. If they don't get this under control, we're all going to suffocate before those pirates even get the chance to carry out their charming spacing plan.

My mind races, trying to connect the dots. Eclipse fighters. Here? Now? It can't be a coincidence. That last message—the hacker knew I was onto them, knew about the luminore shipments, knew I'd run. Did they tip off the Eclipse? Orchestrate this whole attack? My luck can't be that bad, can it? One minute I'm dealing with a lovesick alien pirate who thinks I'm his cosmic soulmate, the next we're getting jumped by unknown assailants. This feels... wrong. Too precise.

The data I stole burns in my neural cache—proof of Black Eclipse collusion with STI officials, evidence of their plans to monopolize the luminore trade and cripple Outer Orion. If it falls into the wrong hands, entire systems will suffer. And now someone's

hunting me for it, someone with enough resources to track me across systems and coordinate attacks. This whole pirate drama feels like a calculated move, a way to keep me off balance while they close in. The timing is too perfect, the pursuit too precise. Like they know exactly which buttons to push.

And the biggest, most tempting button of all? Cirdox. The pull toward him feels like a betrayal of every survival instinct I possess, yet I can't deny the way my body thrums with a dangerous energy whenever he's near. Whatever's happening between us is just another vulnerability they can exploit, another way to break down my defenses until they get what they want.

The alarms blare, a deafening symphony of impending doom. My mind races, sifting through the encrypted files burning in my neural cache. Each one a potential motive, each one a possible reason for this targeted attack. CorpSec data breaches, black market weapons deals, stolen STI intel—any of them could be enough to draw this kind of heat. They're after me.

Either way, I'm trapped in the middle of a fight I didn't start, and if I don't act fast, I might not live to regret it. My instincts scream at me to run, to find an escape pod and prioritize my own survival. But years of scraping by in the Orion Outpost's underbelly have taught me a different lesson: when the walls start closing in, find the biggest threat and make yourself indispensable.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:09 am*

Fear twists in my gut—not just for me, but for everyone on this ship. They didn't choose this fight. I grit my teeth and turn to the console, fingers flying. I'm not just escaping now. I'm keeping them alive.

Right now, that threat is asphyxiation. From the vent in my tiny cabin, I can hear the panicked shouts and the distinctive hiss of escaping atmosphere. My internal sensors confirm what my ears already suspect—rapid decompression in sections four and five. These pirates, it seems, are out of their depth. I access the ship's internal network, bypassing their surprisingly weak security protocols. Schematic diagrams flash across my vision, showing me exactly where the damage is and how quickly it's spreading.

Zara's frantic attempts to reroute power are visible on the engineering logs—her efforts are valiant, but ultimately futile. The other crew members' bio-signs show elevated stress levels, their movements clumsy and uncoordinated as they try to contain the damage. They're good in a fight, I note, analyzing their combat training protocols, but this is a technical crisis, and they're flailing. Perfect. Time to turn chaos into an advantage.

“Let me access your systems again,” I tell Zara, my voice calm despite the adrenaline surging through my veins. “I might be able to reroute power to the failing atmospheric regulator—and the shields, while I'm at it.”

Showtime, I mutter, a grim satisfaction settling in as the familiar thrill of a high-stakes hack takes over. Time to remind myself—and these pirates—why they call me the Neon Valkyrie.

Zara's russet fur bristles, her vulpexian ears flattening against her skull as she moves

to block the console. “Access our systems?” Her tail lashes with agitation. “I may not be human, but I wasn’t born yesterday,” Zara says, her sharp eyes narrowing as she leans against the doorframe, arms crossed. Her russet fur bristles slightly, betraying the tension she’s trying to mask. “You already hacked into our systems once. I’m not about to hand you another opportunity to compromise my ship just because the Captain seems to think you belong here.”

“You want to survive this? Then get out of my way.” I match her stare, letting her see the steel in my eyes. “Those aren’t standard pirates out there. They’re targeting your life support systems with military precision. Your engineering team is good—I can see their countermeasures in the system logs—but these attackers are using classified STI override protocols. The kind that can tear through even military-grade defenses. In about three minutes, this section will decompress completely. Your choice—trust the hacker who specializes in breaking exactly these kinds of systems, or watch your perfectly competent crew get overwhelmed by classified tech they were never meant to face.”

Another hit rocks the ship, and Zara’s claws dig into the console’s edge. Her ears twitch as she listens to the failing equipment, weighing her suspicion against the very real possibility of death by asphyxiation. “If you try anything—”

“You’ll space me yourself. I got it.” I edge past her, fingers already moving across the interface. “Now shut up and let me save your ship,” I reply, my fingers already dancing across the console, working through the sophisticated security protocols with practiced focus. “Unless you’d prefer being recycled as space dust by the Black Eclipse?”

My implants highlight the Void Reaver’s systems—a level of sophistication that confirms my earlier analysis. Multi-layered encryption, adaptive firewalls, and a core matrix that seems to anticipate intrusion attempts. Cirdox clearly invests in quality tech. But beneath the elegant architecture, something feels... off. Like the system is

designed to protect against something more than just standard security breaches. There's a hidden layer, a subtle hum beneath the code that my implants can't quite decipher. It's like a whisper in the back of my mind, a warning I can't ignore. This ship is hiding something.

If I push the shield generators past their limit, we might deflect the next barrage. Or we'll fry the system and be sitting ducks. My fingers hover, then slide the output to max. "No other choice," I murmur. The ship groans in protest as I push its systems past their recommended limits, creating a temporary energy surge that will fry any incoming missiles—or melt our own circuitry if I'm not careful. It's a calculated risk, the kind I thrive on.

"He needs you on the bridge. Now." Zara's fur bristles with alarm. Her tail lashes anxiously as another tremor rocks the ship. "The jump drive's failing, and from the sound of those alarms, we don't have much time."

I curse under my breath. Getting involved is a strategic mistake, but staying hidden while they're blown out of the sky is an even bigger one. Every instinct screams at me to stay hidden, to protect myself, to avoid becoming entangled in someone else's fight. Especially when that someone is a dangerously attractive alien pirate who insists I'm his fated mate. The memory of Kai's screams, the final flicker of his neural link before it went dark, still haunts my nightmares. Trusting anyone, even in a crisis, feels like inviting another betrayal.

But the thought of the Black Eclipse fighters tearing through this ship, of Zara and the other crew members being vaporized by plasma fire... I can't stand by and watch. Not again. Not after losing Kai, after watching him die because I trusted him to have my back. This time, I'll be the one watching theirs. Even if it means risking everything.

"Fine," I say, pushing away from the console as the ship shudders under another near miss. "But if this gets me spaced, I'm haunting your captain for the rest of his

ridiculously long lifespan.”

On the bridge, the atmosphere crackles with tension. Cirdox stands at the helm, his wings half-extended, radiating power and barely controlled fury. He glances at me, his eyes burning with an intensity that makes my breath catch.

“Report,” he barks.

“Shields holding, but they’re targeting our engines,” Grig says, his pale blue fingers flying across the controls.

“Neon,” Cirdox says, his voice rough. “Can you scramble their targeting systems?”

I take over the tactical display, my neural implants syncing with the ship’s systems. My pulse hammers, the adrenaline of an incoming attack flooding my senses, but then—Cirdox moves. Just a fraction. A shift so minute it shouldn’t register, yet I feel it like a gravitational pull. He’s close, too close, his heat pressing against my side, a counterpoint to the cold logic of my tech.

I expect him to bark another order, to push forward with the same controlled authority he’s wielded since I first saw him. But he doesn’t. He’s still. Too still. A muscle tics in his jaw, tension coiling through him like a wound wire about to snap. His fangs gleam between parted lips, his breath a hot whisper against my skin. Not steady. Not measured.

Something is wrong.

I glance at him, expecting hard calculation, but his eyes—those burning crimson eyes—aren’t locked on the battle schematics. They’re locked on me. Wide pupils, too much strain in the tight line of his shoulders. His wings twitch, the tips curling inward, like he’s fighting something I can’t see.



An error flashes in my neural overlay. My implants glitch. Or maybe... maybe I'm not the only one short-circuiting.

My fingers dance across the tactical interface, neural implants blazing as I weave through layers of encryption. The enemy's targeting matrix unfolds before me like a deadly constellation, each weapons system a node waiting to be corrupted. Time slows as I sink deeper into the code, the physical world fading until there's nothing but the pure stream of data.

"Come on, you bastards," I mutter, injecting a virus into their guidance systems. It's beautiful in its simplicity—a cascading failure that will spread through their network like wildfire. My enhanced vision highlights each successful breach in brilliant blue, a deadly light show only I can see. "Let's see how well you shoot when you can't tell which way is up."

The effect is immediate and devastating. On the tactical display, their formation breaks apart as my code scrambles their sensors. Plasma bolts that would have torn through our hull now streak harmlessly into the void, their deadly accuracy reduced to wild shots in the dark.

"Targeting systems offline," I announce, allowing myself a small smile of satisfaction as their ships wheel in confusion. "They're firing blind."

Cirdox maintains his predatory stance at the helm, wings half-extended as he watches our countermeasures take effect. "Good work, mate." His voice remains rough with barely contained fury, the intensity in his crimson eyes never wavering.

"Still not your mate," I retort, but the words come out uneven, lacking the sharp edge I intended.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:09 am*

My neural implants flash an alert—anomalous biometric synchronization detected. My pulse is mirroring his. The realization sends a cold spike through me, but my body doesn't seem to care. Every time his voice rumbles through the bridge, my breath stutters in response, my muscles tightening like I'm bracing for something inevitable.

I force a slow inhale, willing my nervous system to comply, to reset. It doesn't help. No. It's just adrenaline. Just heightened stress levels from the fight. Just—

Just another excuse.

We work together, a seamless blend of skill and instinct, dodging their attacks and returning fire with calculated precision. The ship groans under the strain, but we hold our own. I catch Cirdox's gaze again, the burning depths of his eyes making my stomach flip with an intensity that has nothing to do with combat maneuvers.

Sweat beads on my forehead as I bypass the last firewall, my heart pounding fiercely against my chest. The thrill of the hack mixes with a gnawing fear of what happens if I fail. Each command I send feels like a decisive move in a deadly game of chess. "Come on, come on," I urge under my breath, holding my breath as I wait for the system to respond.

The ship lurches violently from another hit, causing Zara to cling to the doorway, her eyes wide with a mix of hope and despair. "Did it work?" she asks, her voice shaky.

I don't look up from the console. "Almost there—I just need to stabilize the input levels." My hands fly over the holographic interface, adjusting parameters with

precise, practiced movements. The ship stabilizes, and a collective exhale of tension sweeps through the bridge. Zara's hand squeezes my shoulder—a quick, firm pressure that feels surprisingly grounding in the chaos. It's a small gesture, but in this moment, surrounded by aliens and flashing lights and the very real possibility of being blown out of the sky, it's enough to make my throat tighten. I shove the emotion down, hard. Sentiment is a luxury I can't afford, not now, not ever. Focus, Neon. One crisis at a time.

“Their attack pattern,” I say, my voice tight as I point to the tactical display. “It's too precise, too focused on disabling our comms. They're not trying to destroy the ship. They want something.” My mind races, piecing together the clues. The encrypted files, the relentless pursuit, the way they've managed to track me across multiple systems. “They're after me. And the data I stole.”

Cirdox's eyes narrow. “What data?”

My heart hammers against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat against the silence of the cabin. A message suddenly sears across my vision, the crimson text burning like fire:

WELL PLAYED, VALKYRIE. BUT YOU'RE STILL MOVING EXACTLY WHERE I WANT YOU.

My throat goes dry. This isn't just someone tracking me.

They're controlling the board.

I freeze, my fingers hovering over the console. The attached coordinates make my stomach drop—Vulpexia. Our destination. My enhanced vision automatically starts calculating distance and arrival time, but my mind is stuck on one terrifying fact: they knew where we were going before I did. Which means either the ship's been compromised, or...

Or they've been three steps ahead this whole time.

The realization hits me like a physical blow. I'm not just being hunted—I'm being herded. Every move I've made, every decision I thought was my own, has been leading us exactly where they want us to go. And now I've dragged Cirdox and his entire crew into what's clearly a trap.

"Neon?" Cirdox's voice cuts through my spiral of panic, rougher than before. I glance at him, expecting only cold calculation—but there's something else. His hands grip the armrests, tension coiling through his muscles, knuckles white against dark bronze. His wings, usually held in perfect control, twitch involuntarily, the tips flexing like they want to stretch toward me, as if instinct demands he reach for me despite himself. Even his breathing is off—too shallow, too uneven, as if speaking costs him something.

It's not just in his head. Whatever this mate-bond is doing to him, it's physical. And it's getting worse.

My mouth goes dry. How do I tell him that I've basically painted a target on his ship? That my presence is probably going to get everyone killed? The weight of it settles in my chest like cold lead. These people didn't ask to be part of my mess. They don't deserve to die because I was stupid enough to think I could outrun whatever's hunting me.

"Change course," I manage, my voice barely a whisper. The words feel inadequate against the magnitude of what we're facing. "We need to get out of here. Now."

Cirdox's gaze intensifies, searching mine with those burning crimson eyes. "What's happening, Neon?"

I look at him, this dangerous alien who claims I'm his mate, and for the first time, I

see not a captor, but a protector. The realization terrifies me more than any threat waiting at Vulpexia. I've spent so long running, so long trusting no one, that the mere thought of having someone to rely on feels like a vulnerability I can't afford. And I hate myself for the flicker of relief that washes through me anyway.

"It's a trap," I say, the words heavy with guilt. "They're waiting for us at Vulpexia."

And then, as if the universe is done playing fair, the ship's lights flicker once—twice—then die, swallowing us in absolute darkness. My implants glitch, a sharp burst of static crackling in my neural interface before everything crashes.

No visuals. No diagnostics. No way to see what's coming.

The air grows heavy, thick with something deeper than silence. My tactical overlay is dead, my enhanced vision nothing but a void of useless code. There's no system warning, no reboot command, just the cold, jarring absence of data.

A cold realization grips my spine.

This isn't just an attack.

This is a forced shutdown. Someone—something—just killed the Void Reaper's power at a level even I can't override. Not a simple EMP, not a random power failure. This is deliberate. A targeted blackout, designed to strip everything away in an instant.

The ship lurches, inertia shifting in a way that makes my gut churn. For a breathless moment, I can't tell if we're still moving or drifting powerless through the void.

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“Report!” Cirdox’s voice cuts through the dark, sharp as a blade.

No response.

Just the sound of my own breath, too loud in the oppressive quiet. The bridge, once alive with the steady hum of machinery, is now eerily still. My pulse spikes—too quiet. Not just systems down. Comms too.

Zara curses somewhere to my left, sharp and low. “We’ve lost everything. Main power, backup grids. It’s like—”

“Like someone cut the heart out of the ship.” My voice is tight, my hands moving instinctively over the dead console. My fingers find nothing but cold, lifeless metal. I don’t need my implants to know the truth. My gut is already screaming it loud enough.

We’re blind.

We’re vulnerable.

And they’re coming.

Chapter 6

Cirdox

Obsidian Haven looms before us, a jagged sprawl of metal and stone wedged into the

heart of an asteroid. Dim maintenance lights flicker like dying stars across its battered surface, barely enough to cut through the surrounding void. The whole place hums with the low, steady thrum of quantum shielding—a vibration that worms its way through the ship's hull and settles in my bones, setting my teeth on edge. It's an old station, older than some of the wars that shaped this quadrant, and the deep groan of ancient machinery echoes through the narrow docking corridor like the place itself is exhaling.

I guide the Void Reaver through the station's throat, wings tucked tight against my back, forcing them still despite the sharp twinge of strain in my shoulders. The passage is too narrow for comfort, the rough metal walls radiating a bone-deep chill even through our environmental shielding. One wrong shift, one twitch of my wings, and I'd scrape the delicate membranes against unforgiving steel. The docking clamps engage with a heavy clang, the impact reverberating through the deck plates beneath my boots, rattling the tension already coiled tight in my muscles.

Obsidian Haven isn't a place you find on any star chart. The Brotherhood keeps it buried deep in classified records, one of many hidden harbors scattered across lawless space. It's a place for ships with no safe port, for captains who can't afford questions. After what happened at Vulpexia, we need every advantage we can get.

I can feel her. Even before I turn, I feel her.

Neon stands at the tactical station, her posture deceptively relaxed, but her eyes—those enhanced, electric-blue eyes—are sharp, scanning the station's infrastructure with that ruthless precision she wields like a blade. My own gaze keeps dragging back to her, no matter how much discipline I throw between us. The bond digs into me like a vice, a slow, deliberate countdown I can't escape. Two weeks. Maybe less.

The bond sickness worsens with every hour—the heat in my blood, the ache in my

wings, the hunger to keep her close. It's getting harder to hide. Harder to fight. The way my body reacts to her is instinct, coded into my DNA, something I can't hack or overwrite. Every time she moves, my wings flex of their own accord, trying to bridge the space between us.

Her neural implants pulse beneath her skin like trapped starlight, casting shifting blue patterns across the console. It's hypnotic. Dangerous. Because no matter how hard she fights it, no matter how much she denies it—I know she feels this too.

And here, in the cold dark of Obsidian Haven, there's nowhere left to run.

"Interesting setup," she murmurs, more to herself than to me. Her fingers dance across the console, neural implants glowing as she analyzes the outpost's defenses. "Quantum shielding, fractal camouflage...whoever built this wasn't messing around."

"The Brotherhood protects its own—but loyalty is conditional. If they suspect a weakness, they'll test it. And if they find me compromised, they won't hesitate to replace me." I keep my voice neutral, though her casual display of technical expertise sends another wave of possessive hunger through me. My mate is brilliant, dangerous, and completely oblivious to what she does to me. "We'll be safe here while we repair and resupply."

She snorts, a distinctly human sound of disbelief. "Safe is relative, Captain. Especially when someone's hunting us across multiple star systems."

Us. Nother. The distinction doesn't escape me, though I doubt she meant it that way. My wings shift with satisfaction as she includes herself in "us," the subtle movement betraying my response before I can control it.

The docking clamps engage with a metallic groan, the vibration rippling through the Void Reaver's battered frame like a sigh of relief. The ship settles into the outpost's



docking bay, its hull scarred from near-misses and desperate maneuvers, the scent of scorched metal still thick in the recycled air. Outside, asteroid walls loom, worn smooth by centuries of solar winds, their jagged shadows shifting under the dim emergency lighting. The place stinks of rust and old mining operations, of forgotten ambitions left to rot in the cold.

I push up from the helm, rolling my shoulders before stretching my wings to their full span, working out the tension that's coiled in them since the first shot was fired at us. The Void Reaver's wounds are painfully evident—charred streaks where plasma fire kissed too close, exposed circuitry sparking in protest, loose panels hanging at sharp angles like broken ribs. The faintly sweet tang of burnt luminore lingers, a bitter reminder of the cargo we had to jettison just to stay alive. A power conduit above lets out a sharp crack, raining golden sparks onto the deck before fizzling into darkness.

We made it. Barely.

I exhale, the tightness in my chest refusing to ease. The damage is bad, but fixable. What's not so easily repaired is the fact that we've been herded here, maneuvered into this outpost like prey funneled into a kill zone. And if experience has taught me anything, it's that when the Black Eclipse goes to this much effort, it's not just about a bounty.

It's about a message.

“Zara, coordinate repairs with the Haven's engineering team.” I watch my first officer's ears flatten against her skull, her russet fur bristling visibly at the order.

“The Exoscarabs? Captain, you know how they are. Last time we docked here, their lead engineer threatened to weld Grig into his quarters for suggesting their repair protocols were ‘inefficient.’”

“I heard that,” Grig mutters from the helm, his pale blue skin flushing darker with remembered indignation. “They may be brilliant with machinery, but their interpersonal skills are worse than a malfunctioning service drone.”

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“Nevertheless,” I say firmly, “we need their expertise. Those hull breaches won’t repair themselves.”

Zara’s tail lashes with agitation. “Fine. But when Chief Engineer K’zzk starts clicking his mandibles about ‘proper maintenance procedures,’ I’m sending him straight to you.”

“Just make sure they understand our situation is...delicate.” I emphasize the last word, knowing Zara will catch my meaning. The less the station’s crew knows about our cargo—or my mate—the better.

“Speaking of delicate matters,” Grig interjects, his long fingers flying across the damage control console with characteristic precision, “preliminary scans show we vented at least thirty percent of our luminore reserves during the attack.” His thin frame tenses as he pulls up the detailed inventory. “Hull breaches in sections three and five were catastrophic. We’re lucky we didn’t lose more.”

The news hits like a physical blow. That luminore was meant for medical facilities in the outer colonies—facilities that depend on our smuggling runs to keep their patients alive. Every crystal lost means someone might not get the treatment they need.

“I’ll have a complete damage report within the hour,” Grig continues, his methodical Muspel nature evident in the way he categorizes each loss with mathematical precision. “But Captain...we’ll need to find a way to replace those supplies. The colonies are counting on us.”

The weight of his words settles heavily on my shoulders. Every crate of luminore we

lost means another medical facility going without, another colony forced to bend to the Black Eclipse's demands. I force down a growl of frustration, my wings mantling with barely contained tension. The bond-sickness isn't helping—each passing hour makes it harder to focus, harder to be the leader my people need.

The hidden outpost looms before us through the viewport, a testament to the Brotherhood's determination to survive. Little more than a series of interconnected caves carved into the heart of a mineral-rich asteroid, but it's one of our best-kept secrets. A sanctuary for those times when staying visible means staying dead. Right now, we need that sanctuary more than ever.

My attention shifts to Neon as she works the tactical station, her enhanced eyes scanning our surroundings with predatory intensity. The bond hums beneath my skin like a live wire, demanding closer proximity. But there's something else in her posture—a tension that goes beyond her usual wariness. Whatever data she stole, whatever storm she's drawn us into, we need to address it before it gets us all killed.

My crew moves with practiced efficiency, but I catch their sideways glances when another wave of fever makes my wings tremble. Zara's concerned look lingers a moment too long as I grip the command chair to steady myself. They've served with me long enough to recognize when something's wrong, even if they don't understand exactly what's happening. I force my wings still through sheer willpower, though the effort makes my muscles burn.

The bond is relentless, a constant thrum beneath my skin, sharpening every time she moves. I catch Grig watching me with worried eyes when I have to pause mid-sentence, the fever making it difficult to focus. Soon, not even my centuries of military discipline will be enough to hide what's happening to me. The thought sends ice through my veins, a stark contrast to the relentless burn of the bond.

"We need to talk," I tell her, gesturing toward the corridor that leads to the outpost's

main hub. “Privately.”

She hesitates, those enhanced eyes narrowing as she studies me. Looking for threats, weaknesses, escape routes—always analyzing, always ready to run. It makes my chest ache, knowing my mate has lived a life that taught her such constant vigilance.

“Fine,” she says finally. “But keep your wings to yourself. Last thing I need is another round of ‘you’re my mate’ drama.”

The words sting, but I force down the growl building in my throat. She doesn’t understand—can’t understand—what she means to me. Not yet.

We walk in tense silence through the outpost’s winding corridors. My enhanced vision automatically catalogs defensive positions and tactical choke points—a habit from centuries of military training. The rough-hewn walls would provide excellent cover in a firefight, while the exposed machinery and cables offer multiple routes for retreat if needed. It’s the kind of environment I understand—raw, uncompromising, demanding respect but offering protection to those who know its secrets. Like Neon, I realize, watching how she moves with predatory grace through the shadows. Both beautiful and lethal, with layers of defense built around a core I’m only beginning to glimpse.

I lead her to a small observation deck, one of the few luxuries this place affords. Through the reinforced viewport, the galaxy stretches endlessly before us, a tapestry of stars and shadows that would take lifetimes to explore. The sight usually brings me peace, but today it only reminds me of how little time I have left.

“Why did you help us?” I ask, turning to face her. The question has burned in my mind since she saved us from those fighters, along with a hundred others I’m afraid to voice. “Back on the ship. You could have let those fighters take us down, found another way to escape. But you didn’t.”

She leans against the viewport, arms crossed defensively. The starlight catches the electric blue streaks in her hair, making them glow like captured lightning. Something in my chest tightens at the sight. Even her defiance is beautiful, a carefully constructed wall I long to breach.

“Maybe I didn’t feel like dying in a vacuum today.” Her voice wavers almost imperceptibly on the word dying. “Been there, done that—watching someone you care about get spaced while you’re helpless to stop it. Not exactly an experience I’m eager to repeat.”

The pain in her words hits me like a physical blow. My wings shift restlessly, instinct urging me to shelter her from memories I can see haunting her enhanced eyes. But comfort, I suspect, would only make her retreat further.

“Try again.” I step closer, drawn by the scent of her—metal and lightning and something uniquely human that makes my blood sing. Every movement feels weighted with possibility, with the electric tension crackling between us. “You’re too smart for simple self-preservation. You knew those fighters were after you, knew they’d track us to Driftspire. Yet you warned us, helped us escape. Why?”

Her jaw tightens, and I watch the internal battle play across her face—trust warring with hard-learned caution. “Does it matter?” The words come out barely above a whisper, heavy with past hurts. “In my experience, knowing why someone helps you just gives them leverage to hurt you later.”

The admission hangs in the air between us, raw and honest in a way that makes my heart ache. Before I can stop myself, I’m moving closer, drawn by some force stronger than gravity. Her breath catches as I reach for her, and time seems to slow.

My hand tangles in her hair, soft strands slipping through my fingers like silk woven with steel. My other arm winds around her waist, pulling her flush against me. The

first contact is electric, a shockwave that rolls through me, setting my blood on fire. She gasps, her body rigid for a split second, a final thread of resistance snapping under my touch.

Then she melts.

Her lips part beneath mine, the kiss igniting between us like a spark catching dry tinder. What starts as a slow, reverent claiming surges into something wilder, untamed. She tastes of starlight and danger, something sharp and addictive that leaves me craving more. The restraint I've clung to fractures, my body moving on instinct, drawn to her like gravity—inevitable and unstoppable.

My wings unfurl to cocoon us, shielding her from everything but me. The world beyond this moment ceases to exist. All that remains is the heat of her, the rapid pulse at her throat, the way her fingers clutch at my shirt as if she can't decide whether to pull me closer or push me away. Her hesitation is a knife's edge, the battle between logic and want playing out in the tense grip of her hands.

I growl, low and primal, the sound vibrating through both of us as I tilt her head, deepening the kiss. She responds with a sharp inhale, her body arching instinctively, pressing closer. The bond flares, a wildfire burning through my veins, demanding more—always more. Every nerve is attuned to her, to the way her breath hitches when my fingers skim the curve of her spine, to the tremor in her muscles as my wings fold around us, blocking out the cold, the void, the past and the future.

For an instant, she hesitates—caught between surrender and escape. A single, shallow breath. A tightening of her grip. Her body telling the truth her mind refuses to accept.

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Then she gives in.

And, stars help me, I am lost.

The kiss turns fierce, desperate. My fangs skim her lower lip—a silent plea, a warning, a promise. She shudders, gripping the front of my shirt as if anchoring herself, as if afraid of the very thing unraveling between us. But I feel the shift in her, the way her body molds to mine, the way the tension in her frame transforms into something equally dangerous—desire.

The bond pulses between us, raw and undeniable. My wings trap our heat, turning the space between us into something molten. Every press of her body, every sharp inhale, every moment she lets me hold her splinters the barriers she's spent years constructing.

And just as suddenly, she rips away.

“No,” she gasps, her voice shaking as she stumbles back, arms wrapping around herself as if she can physically restrain whatever this is between us. “I can't...I can't do this.”

The loss of her contact is a physical wound. My wings flex, aching to pull her back, to shield her from whatever war she's fighting in her own mind. My lungs burn with the effort to hold still, to not chase, to not demand.

“Neon—” My voice is rough, unsteady with everything I don't say.



“Don’t.” Her arms tighten around herself, her breathing uneven. She shakes her head, backing toward the door. “Just...don’t.”

Then she’s gone, vanishing into the shadows before I can stop her.

I let my forehead rest against the viewport, my wings drooping as the cold seeps back into my bones. My bond burns, a relentless ache that no amount of distance will ease.

Time is running out.

For both of us.

## Chapter 7

### Neon Valkyrie

ThephantomtasteofCirdox’s kiss is a ridiculous distraction, even as my implants diligently catalog the lingering spike in my hormones. The recycled air in the maintenance tunnels is stale, faintly acrid, a stark contrast to the lingering warmth of Cirdox’s touch that still ghosts my skin. My upgrades, ever the diligent analysts, register my elevated cortisol, the jump in norepinephrine—the biochemical echoes of intimacy tangled with stress. They quantify the physiological responses, neatly categorize them, but they can’t touch the knot of unease tightening in my gut.

Zara’s knowing smirk catches me off guard as I practically collide with her rounding the corner from Cirdox’s quarters. Her red fur bristles with amusement as she steadies me, those vulpexian eyes gleaming. “Need some space?” she asks, her tail swishing with barely contained mirth.

I feel heat flood my cheeks as I realize what I must look like: hair mussed, clothes rumpled, probably reeking of Cirdox’s distinctive scent to her senses. The fact that

I'm sneaking away from his quarters like some guilty teenager isn't helping my dignity.

"I was just . . ." I gesture vaguely, my usual sharp wit deserting me. "Engineering stuff. Very important."

"Mhmm." Her ears twitch forward. "Engineering. Is that what we're calling it now?"

I resist the urge to check if my clothes are properly fastened. "Don't you have a ship to run?"

"Don't you have a captain to . . ." She pauses deliberately, "engineer?"

I make a strategic retreat before she can comment further, her soft chuckle following me down the corridor. Next time I'm taking the maintenance tunnels; at least the coolant lines don't make innuendos.

This hidden alcove, tucked away in the Obsidian Haven's maintenance arteries, should be a sanctuary—shadowed, shielded from prying eyes and surveillance feeds. But the rhythmic hiss of coolant pipes feels less like white noise and more like a frantic countdown. Every line of code I sift through, every vulnerability I uncover in the Black Eclipse's digital shadow, is a gamble—time bought, maybe, but at what cost?

I'm crouched in a shadowed alcove of the maintenance tunnels, using salvaged parts from a broken console to build a makeshift signal jammer. The gentle hum of quantum circuitry beneath my fingers is almost soothing, a counterpoint to the chaos in my mind. After what happened with Cirdox, I need this: the familiar rhythm of creation, of turning broken things into weapons.

My enhancements pulse steadily as I work, their blue glow reflecting off the scattered

components. Each piece I connect adds another layer of protection, another barrier between us and the Black Eclipse's hunting algorithms. But as I splice neuralinterfaces into crystalline matrices, I can't shake the feeling that I'm missing something obvious, something dangerous.

The data I stole isn't just evidence of corruption; it's a blueprint for systematic control. The Black Eclipse has woven themselves into the very fabric of the STI, using luminore shortages like puppet strings to manipulate entire systems. Each transmission log I decrypt reveals another layer of rot, another thread in their web of influence.

My fingers pause over a particular connection, something in the pattern triggering a warning deep in my enhanced consciousness. There's an elegance to this code that feels hauntingly familiar, like a signature I should recognize but can't quite place. It reminds me of . . .

No. Focus on the task. Build the jammer. Protect the ship. Don't think about the past, about lost partners and broken trust, about the way some wounds never quite heal, just get buried under layers of code and caution.

But as I reach for the next component, my neural interface flashes a pattern recognition alert. The code structure, the way it flows—it's not just similar to what I used to use; it's evolved from it. Like someone took my old encryption algorithms and twisted them into something darker, more lethal.

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Someone who knew exactly how I think, someone who's been dead for three years.

My hands freeze over the half-finished jammer as impossible implications begin to crystallize.

[ACCESSING NEURAL ARCHIVE: DATE STAMP 2.47.3089]

Kai's voice, bright with triumph, crackles through our shared neural space. "This is it, Neon! We've got them." His digital presence, once so vibrant, now echoes like a phantom limb. Through our linked neural network, I feel his surge of adrenaline, the thrill of the chase, the intoxicating scent of victory just within reach. Corporate firewalls crumble before his digital assault, collapsing like sandcastles against a rising tide. The evidence we need to shatter the Black Eclipse's web, to expose the rot . . . it's right there.

I watch, my enhanced vision painting the data streams in vibrant, terrifying clarity. But something's off—a dissonance in the code, a flicker in the flow, subtle anomalies, milliseconds out of sync, packets with signatures that whisper of deception.

"Kai," I cut in, urgency sharpening my voice, even within our silent neural link. "Abort. Now. Something's wrong with the data return—"

"Almost there, Neon, just a little longer." His focus is laser-sharp, tunnel vision gripping him. He's so close, can almost taste the win. Warning klaxons blare in my enhanced vision, digital red alerts screaming across my consciousness. Too late.

Then the scream—raw, visceral, tearing through our neural link like a physical blow. Sophisticated ice, unlike anything I’d ever encountered, ripping through his defenses, shredding his code, his mind. My implants, reacting instinctively, try to sever the connection, to quarantine the digital contamination, but I fight them, desperate to hold on, to understand, to help. His consciousness, that bright, vital spark, flickers, sputters, drowned in a rising tide of digital static.

“Neon . . . run . . .” His final transmission, choked, fragmented, a ghost of sound swallowed by the void. “Don’t let them . . .”

[END ARCHIVE]

I slam back into the present, lungs burning, hands clenched into fists that tremble against the cold metal of the console. The maintenance tunnel swims back into focus, the hiss of coolant lines grounding me in a reality I desperately want to escape. My upgrades, ever the pragmatists, flash their clinical analysis: adrenaline spiking, neural pathways misfiring, severe flashback episode confirmed. No shit, Sherlock.

A soft rap on the alcove door. “Neon?” Cirdox’s voice, rough with sleep, laced with a concern that sends a jolt of something unwelcome through me—warmth, tenderness, danger. “Are you alright?”

Of course, he noticed. The mate-bond thing, or whatever Kyvernian voodoo he wields, probably broadcasts my distress like a beacon. My implants dutifully analyze his vocal patterns, cataloging the subtle tremor in his tone, the heightened tension, always measuring, always quantifying, never letting me forget that even intimacy is just data points to be processed and analyzed.

Before I can form a coherent lie, the memory surges again, relentless, dragging me back into the undertow of the past. The alcove recedes, replaced by the sterile, echoing silence of the aftermath.

[ACCESSING NEURAL ARCHIVE: DATE STAMP 2.47.3089]

The final, chilling message, delivered through the dying embers of our neural link, echoes in the void: “You could have saved him, Neon. Remember that.”

Then, only static. The cold, emotionless pronouncement of my enhanced architecture: Neural link severed. Remote consciousness lost. Recommended action: Initiate emergency shutdown to prevent cascading system failure, as if a system failure could ever compare to the gaping hole Kai’s death tore through me.

[END ARCHIVE]

Silence crashes down, heavy, suffocating. My breath hitches, shallow, ragged. My implants register the rapid pulse, the clammy skin, the fine tremor that runs through me, always watching, always recording, never understanding the difference between data and despair.

“Neon?” Cirdox’s voice, closer now, laced with a deeper urgency. “I’m not waiting for an invitation.”

The door hisses open, and he’s there, wings half-unfurled, filling the narrow space, a stark contrast to the sterile metal. The tribal markings on his bronze skin pulse with a faint, feverish light. He’s still fighting the bond-sickness, still burning from within. My body instantly reacts to his presence, remembering the heat of his touch just hours ago, the way his wings created a shelter around us as we explored this fragile thing growing between us, but old habits die hard, and distrust, honed over years of hard lessons, coils tight in my gut.

I hate this war inside me: between the part that wants to fall into his arms again, to let him chase away the shadows like he did before, and the part that screams this is all temporary comfort that will end in blood and pain. He offered me understanding

tonight, showed me his own vulnerabilities, but is that enough to risk everything, to risk him? The memory of his fevered skin under my fingers, the way he trembled at my touch but still let me set the pace, makes this even harder because now I know exactly what I stand to lose.

“I’m fine,” I say, the automatic lie tasting like ash. “Neural feedback. Routine maintenance. Nothing to be concerned about.” Even to my own ears, the words are thin, brittle, easily shattered.

He moves closer, slowly, deliberately, like approaching a cornered animal. Maybe he’s right; maybe that’s exactly what I am. “You’re trembling, little hacker.”

The endearment, usually laced with playful arrogance, is soft now, edged with something akin to tenderness—a flicker of warmth, unwelcome, dangerous, sparks in my chest. I look down at my hands, watching the tremor in the blue glow of myenhancements. Kai’s hands, shaking just like this in those final moments . . . No. Push it down; control, always control. “Just . . . a data glitch. Memory loop. My neural cache sometimes replays archived events without authorization.” Clinical, detached, easier to dissect the breakdown than acknowledge the raw, gaping wound beneath the surface.

“Tell me.” He settles beside me, not touching, but close enough that his heat radiates against my skin. His wings, folded now, still create a subtle shield, a pocket of privacy in the sterile tunnels. “Tell me more about Kai.”

I flinch. “Why?”

“You called out to him in your sleep.” His voice is low, almost hesitant, but the crimson gaze is unwavering. “When the bond-sickness keeps me awake, I hear you, whispering his name, begging him to run.”

The admission disarms me—not just that he’s been listening to my nightmares, but that he’s been carrying his own pain while sensing mine. My enhanced vision flicks to his wings, noting the almost imperceptible tremor, the heightened pulse of his tribal markings that betray his worsening condition.

“I keep seeing him,” I confess, the words barely a whisper, “not just in nightmares anymore, in the data streams, like his consciousness fragmented instead of dying completely, scattered pieces of code that haunt the networks.” I laugh, the sound bordering on hysteria. “My upgrades say it’s impossible, just trauma manifesting in my neural interface, but sometimes . . . sometimes I swear I feel him watching.”



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“The guilt doesn’t fade,” Cirdox observes, his gaze sharp with understanding, “it just changes shape.”

“Yeah.” The admission catches in my throat. “I keep thinking if I’d noticed the patterns sooner, if I’d forced him to abort the hack . . . but that’s what really haunts me. I saw myself in his recklessness, his need to expose the truth no matter the cost, and now here I am, doing the exact same thing, putting everyone around me in danger.”

His wings shift, the subtle rustle of feathers a counterpoint to the hum of the station. His scent, that heady mix of metal and smoke and something fiercely alien, sharpens my senses, grounding me even as the past threatens to consume me. “What were you digging for?”

“The same thing we’re chasing now.” I gesture to the console, to the shimmering web of data I’ve been unraveling. “Proof, evidence, that the Black Eclipse wasn’t just a rumor, a boogeyman, that they were real and they were everywhere.” My voice drops, bitter. “We thought we could expose them, save lives—naïve, arrogant fools.”

“They were waiting for you.” Not a question, but a statement of grim certainty.

I nod, the weight of it settling heavier still. “Military-grade ice, defenses that shouldn’t have existed outside secure military networks. They tore through Kai like . . . like he was nothing.” My voice cracks. “I felt it through the link, felt them shred his mind, piece by piece.”

Cirdox’s wings shift again, not constricting, but enveloping, creating a warm,

sheltering cocoon. For the first time in years, the instinct to flinch, to pull away, is muted by something . . . else, something that feels dangerously like trust.

“You couldn’t have saved him, Neon,” his voice, rough with empathy, resonates deep in my chest.

“Don’t tell me that.” The words are sharper than I intend, laced with years of guilt and self-recrimination.

“I’m not.” He catches my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. The crimson eyes are dark with understanding, with a pain that mirrors my own. “I’m telling you you’re not alone in carrying this weight.” A pause, a breath drawn deep. “Because I carry my own ghosts, little hacker.”

The confession hangs in the air, heavy, unexpected. I stare at him, really see him, beyond the pirate captain façade, beyond the alien mystique, and for the first time, I glimpse the raw vulnerability beneath.

“My brother,” he says, the words strained, as if dragged from some deep, hidden place. “During the Orion Wars, we were . . . close, commanding a squadron together, ambushed, a Black Eclipse trap.” His wings shift, a restless tremor betraying the depth of his pain. “Quantum disruptors tore through our shields . . . through him.” His voice drops to a whisper. “I heard him scream, Neon, through our comms, and I couldn’t . . . I couldn’t reach him in time.”

The air stills between us, thick with unspoken grief, with shared loss. Understanding dawns, sharp and painful, but also . . . strangely comforting.

“That’s why . . .” I begin, the question hanging unspoken between us.

He nods, a curt, almost painful movement. “Why I fight them, why I risk everything

to smuggle luminore, why I can't stand to see innocents suffer under their thumb." He tightens his grip, his gaze intense, unwavering. "So yes, little hacker, I understand guilt, I understand the weight of survival, but we can't let it break us, we can't let their deaths be for nothing."

Something shifts, cracks, deep within the icy fortress I've built around my heart. My enhanced vision blurs, threat assessment protocols overridden by a surge of . . . something else—empathy, connection, something terrifyingly close to hope.

"I see him too, sometimes," I whisper, the confession raw, vulnerable, "in the data streams, flickers, echoes, like . . . like his consciousness fragmented instead of dying, lost pieces of code haunting the networks." A hollow laugh escapes me. "My implants call it trauma-induced hallucination, neural misfire, but sometimes . . . sometimes I swear I can feel him, watching."

Cirdox pulls me closer until I'm cradled against his chest, wings enveloping me in a cocoon of shadow and warmth. "Then we face them together," he murmurs, his voice rough against my hair, "all of them, your ghosts, mine."

I should pull away, run, protect myself, protect him, but for the first time in years, the instinct feels . . . muted, conflicted, as if a part of me, a buried, long-dormant part, is starting to crave something more than just survival.

"I can't . . . I can't watch someone else die because of me," I whisper, the words thick with unshed tears, "especially not . . ." The name catches in my throat—you.

"Especially not your mate?" His voice drops, a low, resonant rumble that vibrates through me—possessive, tender, terrifyingly tempting.

"Not . . . not yet," I stammer, surprised by the near-admission—not denial, not anymore. "Maybe . . . maybe someday," a fragile hope, whispered into the darkness.

He presses a kiss to my temple, a feather-light touch that sends unexpected warmth through me. “Someday is enough for now, Neon.”

We stay like that, wrapped in the fragile peace of shared grief, shared vulnerability, while my enhanced senses catalog every detail—the steady rhythm of his heart, the faint tremor in his wings, the way his breath warms my skin—data points that are no longer just data, but anchors, tethers, connections.

The old fear still whispers, coiled tight, a cold serpent in my gut, but tonight, another voice answers back, faint, hesitant, but undeniably there, a whisper of . . . courage.

The fragile quiet shatters as a message blazes across my neural interface, searing itself into my enhanced vision, the text burning like ice:

YOU CAN'T PROTECT HIM, VALKYRIE. JUST LIKE YOU COULDN'T PROTECT ME.

The words burn across my neural interface, stark and merciless, but it's the signature beneath them that makes my blood turn to ice:

IonSpecter.

My pulse pounds in my ears, my enhanced vision glitching as I stare at the signature, my upgrades struggle to process what feels impossible. IonSpecter was Kai's hacker handle—his digital ghost, his presence in the networks before the Black Eclipse tore him apart, but this isn't Kai, it can't be, unless . . .

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The data flickers, shifting, and I see it—fractured echoes of old patterns, subtle mutations in the code that shouldn't exist, that wouldn't exist unless someone had access to his framework, his techniques, his mind.

Realization crashes into me with the force of a collapsing star. No. No.

It's not Kai, it's her—Kira.

She took his name, his identity, twisted it into something new, something wrong.

She's not just hunting me; she's wearing his ghost like a second skin.

Ice floods my veins, freezing the nascent warmth, extinguishing the fragile hope. Kira, alive? Impossible, I felt her consciousness shatter, witnessed her neural link flatline, unless . . .

Cirdox shifts, his crimson eyes snapping open, sharp, alert. "Neon? What is it, what's wrong?" He sees the sudden shift in my posture, the rigid tension that has replaced the fragile vulnerability.

I pull back, the protective walls slamming back into place, stronger, higher than ever. The warmth recedes, replaced by a bone-deep chill. "Everything," I say, my voice cold, detached, all emotion banished, "everything is wrong."

Because the pieces click into place, aligning with terrifying precision: the hunter, the ghost in the machine, the one who turned my own code against me, who anticipated every move, who knew me . . . better than anyone.

It wasn't a stranger, it wasn't a ghost; it was something far more insidious, far more dangerous. It was a betrayal I never saw coming.

Kira is alive.

She's hunting me, and she's coming for revenge.

## Chapter 8

### Cirdox

The bridge of the Void Reaver thrums with barely controlled tension, emergency lights casting crimson shadows across battle-scarred control panels. Warning indicators pulse in silent patterns across every station, their urgent messages reflecting off polished metal surfaces like trapped stars. From my command chair, I watch Neon work the tactical station, her implants casting ethereal blue patterns across her skin as she analyzes the enemy vessels. The constant hum of the quantum drive provides a bass note beneath the subtle beeps and chirps of scanning equipment. The sounds of the ship which usually soothe now set my teeth on edge.

The bond-sickness burns through my veins like liquid fire, making my tribal markings pulse erratically against my bronze skin. My wings tremble with the effort of staying still, their membrane-thin edges quivering in the recycled air despite centuries of military discipline. The environmental controls seem to be malfunctioning again, the temperature fluctuating between extremes that do nothing to help the fever raging beneath my skin.

Each breath carries her scent—sweet and dangerous and something uniquely human that makes my blood sing with recognition. The primal part of me, the part consumed by bond-sickness, demands I claim her here and now. But the captain in me, the leader my crew needs, forces that desire down. The dichotomy tears at me—need

versus duty, instinct versus control.

Static crackles across the main viewscreen as another sensor sweep penetrates the asteroid field, the interference creating ghostly patterns that mirror the growing chaos in my blood. The bridge feels smaller somehow, more confined, as if the metal walls themselves are closing in with each spike of fever.

“Three Eclipse scout ships,” Neon announces, her enhanced eyes tracking data streams I can barely follow. “Mark VII targeting systems, quantum-locked engines, and...” She pauses, frowning. “Something new. They’ve modified their cloaking technology using fragments of my own code.”

I lean forward, ignoring how the movement makes my wings tremble. “Explain.”

“Remember that virus I used to scramble their sensors?” Her fingers dance across the holographic interface, neural implants flaring brighter as she digs deeper into the analysis. “They’ve reversed engineered it, turned it into a tracking beacon that follows my neural signature. Clever bastards.”

A growl builds in my throat at the thought of them hunting my mate. The sound makes her glance up, those enhanced eyes catching the way my markings pulse with fever. Concern flickers across her face before she masks it, but the bond between us resonates with her worry.

“I’m fine,” I say before she can comment. The lie tastes bitter on my tongue, but there’s no time for weakness, not with Eclipse scouts closing in.

I activate the secure comm channel, reaching out to the few Brotherhood captains I still trust. The quantum-encrypted signal bounces through a dozen relays before connecting. “This is Cirdox. We have three Eclipse scouts approaching through the asteroid field. Requesting immediate—”

The bond-sickness hits like a supernova, molten agony that makes my wings snap wide with an audible crack. The fever surges, a tidal wave of burning need that threatens to drown me. My vision blurs, the tactical displays swimming before me as another wave of pain tears through my defenses. The familiar scents of the bridge—ozone, recycled air, the metallic tang of machinery—twist into something sharp and bitter that burns my enhanced senses.

“Captain!” Zara rushes to my side as I double over, her concerned face swimming in my blurred vision.

I try to straighten, to maintain some semblance of control, but another surge of fire races along my spine. My wings tremble with the effort to stay upright. “Complete... the transmission,” I manage through gritted teeth.

“Shadow Wing, this is First Officer Zara of the Void Reaver,” she says into the comm, her russet fur bristling as she watches me struggle. “Requesting immediate assistance. We have three Eclipse scouts on approach.”

“Copy that, Void Reaver,” Rhilnar Captain K’vex responds, her six arms moving in perfect synchronization across multiple control panels. “Shadow Wing is already in position. Stalking Mist will join us from the dark side of the asteroid belt.”

I surge to my feet, wings snapping wide with indignation. “I didn’t authorize—”



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The rest of my protest dissolves into a sharp inhale as fire races through my veins. My tribal markings pulse erratically with fever as I grip the nearest console, fighting to stay upright. The bond-sickness tears through my defenses with renewed vigor, as if punishing my attempt at authority.

Zara's tail lashes with determination, her russet fur bristling as she stands tall. "You didn't have to. As First Officer, it's my duty to ensure this ship's safety—including its captain's."

Her voice leaves no room for argument. Even through the haze of fever, I recognize the steel in her tone, the unwavering loyalty that makes her invaluable. She's right, damn her. In this condition, I'm more liability than asset.

"Neon," I say, forcing my voice steady despite the fire in my blood. "The bridge is yours. Work with Zara to coordinate our defense."

Surprise flickers across Neon's face, followed by something deeper, more complex. "You're trusting me with your ship?"

"I'm trusting you with my crew." The distinction is important. Through the bond-sickness, I feel her reaction—a mix of honor and fear, responsibility and doubt. "Unless you'd prefer I collapse here and really give the Eclipse something to talk about?"

A ghost of a smile tugs at her lips. "Can't have that. Your ego's big enough already." But her enhanced eyes soften, scanning my vital signs with obvious concern. "You need to rest. Now. Before I have to hack your neural implants and make you."

I nod, too exhausted to argue. I slump into a nearby chair, my wings drooping as another wave of fever hits. Neon's eyes widen as she watches me struggle to maintain consciousness.

"Zara, take the bridge," Neon commands, her voice sharp with authority. "I'm getting him to his quarters."

Zara nods, her russet fur bristling with determination as she takes the command chair. "Understood. We'll hold things down here."

Neon turns back to me, her expression a mix of concern and resolve. "Come on, Captain. Let's get you rested up so you can kick some Eclipse ass later."

The walk to my quarters is a battle of will versus instinct. Each step brings Neon closer, her proximity both soothing the bond-sickness and intensifying it in ways that make my head spin. Her hand on my arm steadies me, but every point of contact sends electricity through my fevered system. By the time we reach my door, I'm trembling with the effort of maintaining control.

My quarters are spartan, dominated by a large viewport that offers an endless view of stars. The cold void beyond the reinforced glass is a stark contrast to the heat consuming me from within. Neon helps me to the bed, her enhanced eyes cataloging every detail of my condition.

"How bad is it?" she asks, pressing a cool hand to my forehead. The simple touch sends lightning through my nervous system, pleasure and pain intertwined.

"Scale of one to ten?" I catch her wrist before she can pull away, my thumb tracing patterns on her pulse point. "About a thousand."

She tries to withdraw, but I hold her gently, needing her to understand. "The bond-

sickness isn't just fever and pain. It's..." I struggle to find words that can bridge the gap between our species, our experiences. "Imagine your neural implants malfunctioning. Every sensation amplified, every emotion raw and exposed. But instead of data streams, it's... connection. The need to complete something vital to your survival."

"You're dying," she says softly, the words barely a whisper. Not a question this time. Her enhanced eyes catch every detail—the tremor in my wings, the erratic pulse of my tribal markings, the sweat beading on my skin.

"Yes." No point lying now. "But I won't force this on you, Neon. I won't use my condition to manipulate you into something you're not ready for."

She studies me, those brilliant blue eyes processing more than just physical data. "How does it work? The mate-bond. You've never really explained."

I sit up, fighting another wave of dizziness. "It's more than physical union. The bond creates a permanent connection—thoughts, emotions, even life force itself becomes shared. When it's complete, neither can survive without the other." My voice roughens. "It's why my people choose carefully. One mate, one lifetime. No second chances."

"That's..." She swallows hard. "Intense."

"It is." I reach up, cupping her face with a trembling hand. "Which is why it has to be your choice, Neon. Completely yours."

She leans into my touch, almost unconsciously. "And if I say no?"

"Then I die knowing I respected your freedom." The words cost me, but they're true. "Better that than live knowing I trapped you in something you didn't choose."

Something shifts in her expression—surprise, maybe, or recognition. She moves closer, her free hand coming up to trace the tribal markings that pulse beneath my skin. The touch sends fire through my veins, but this time it's not just pain. Pleasure threads through the burning, sweet and sharp and dangerous.

“You're not what I expected,” she murmurs, her fingers exploring the contours of my face with a gentleness that makes my heart ache. “When you first captured me, I thought...” She trails off, shaking her head. “I thought you were just another alpha male alien who wanted to own me.”

“And now?” My voice is rough, strained with the effort of maintaining control as her touch sends sparks through my system.

“Now I think you're something far more dangerous.” Her enhanced eyes meet mine, filled with a mixture of fear and fascination. “You make me want things I can't afford to want.”

“Like what?” I barely breathe the words, afraid to break whatever spell has fallen over us.

Instead of answering, she leans forward and kisses me. The contact is electric, sending a shock through my entire system. The bond-sickness flares, but this time it's different—the pain transmuting into something sweeter, more urgent. My wings snap wide, then curl around us both, creating a private universe where nothing exists but this moment.

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She tastes like starlight and danger, a combination that makes my blood sing. I keep my touch gentle, letting her set the pace, even as every instinct screams at me to claim her completely. Her hands explore my chest, tracing the tribal markings that pulse in time with my racing heart.

“Is this okay?” she whispers against my lips. “I don’t want to make it worse.”

I catch her face between my hands, making her meet my gaze. “You could never make this worse. Just being near you helps more than you know.” The admission costs me, but she deserves the truth. “I never expected to find my mate, Neon. This bond-sickness... it’s a part of who I am, not something you’re responsible for.”

She studies me for a long moment, then nods slowly. “Show me,” she says softly. “Show me what you need.”

The permission in her words nearly undoes me. I kiss her again, deeper this time, pouring all my need and longing into the contact. She responds with equal fervor, her body pressing against mine as if seeking to eliminate any space between us. My wings tighten around us, cocooning us from everyone... and everything.

Her hands find my chest, fingers tracing the tribal markings that pulse with increasing intensity. Each touch sends electricity through my nervous system, pleasure and pain intertwined until I can’t tell where one ends and the other begins. The bond-sickness burns hotter, but now it’s threaded with something sweeter—possibility, hope, connection.

I trail kisses down her neck, tasting the salt of her skin, feeling her pulse race beneath

my lips. She gasps when I find a sensitive spot, her body arching into mine. The sound goes straight to my core, making my wings tremble with barely contained need.

“Wait,” she pants, pulling back slightly. Her enhanced eyes are dark with desire, but there’s still hesitation there. “I need to know... if we do this, if we complete the bond... what happens to my freedom? My identity?”

I force myself to focus through the haze of need. “The bond doesn’t change who you are, Neon. It adds to you, complements you. Like your neural implants—they enhance your natural abilities without erasing your humanity.”

She processes this, her analytical mind working even as her body responds to my touch. “And you’d let me keep working? Keep fighting the Eclipse?”

“I’d fight beside you,” I promise, meaning every word. “Your causes would become mine. Your battles, mine to share.”

Something softens in her expression. She leans forward, pressing her forehead against mine. “I’m not ready,” she whispers. “Not for everything. Not yet. But...” Her hands slide up my chest, making my breath catch. “Maybe we can find a middle ground? Something to help ease the bond-sickness without... without completing it fully?”

Relief and frustration war within me, but I understand. This is Neon—brilliant, cautious, fiercely independent. Taking things slowly is her way of maintaining control, of protecting herself. And despite the bond-sickness burning through me, I respect that.

“Middle ground,” I agree, my voice rough. “But Neon...” I catch her chin, making her meet my gaze. “You should know that anything we do will only intensify the connection between us. There’s no going backward from here.”

She swallows hard, but doesn't look away. "I know. But I can't watch you suffer when there might be something I can do to help." Her hands resume their exploration of my chest, more purposeful now. "Just... tell me if it becomes too much?"

I nod, not trusting my voice as her touch sends fresh waves of heat through my system. She kisses me again, slower this time, with a deliberate intensity that makes my head spin. Her hands slip beneath my shirt, mapping the contours of my chest, learning what makes my breath catch and my wings quiver.

When she brushes against a particularly sensitive spot near my wing joints, I can't suppress a groan. The sound seems to encourage her, and she grows bolder, her touches more confident. I let her explore, fighting the urge to take control, to claim her completely.

Time loses meaning as we trade kisses and careful touches, learning each other's bodies with a mixture of curiosity and growing need. The bond-sickness still burns, but it's different now—less painful, more like a sweet ache that intensifies with each point of contact between us.

Her fingers trace the lines of my markings, each touch sending jolts of electricity through my body. I can feel the heat of her hand, so close to where I need her most, and it takes every ounce of willpower not to grab her wrist and guide her to me. But I resist, letting her explore, even as sweat breaks out on my forehead, my body trembling with the effort of holding back.

She leans down, her lips brushing against my ear, her breath hot and ragged. "Is this okay?" she whispers, her fingers toying with the edge of my pants, driving me mad with anticipation.

I nod, my voice a hoarse croak. "Yes. But... be gentle, Neon. The bond-sickness... it makes this... painful. In the best and worst way."

She pauses, her eyes searching mine, concern etched on her face. “I don’t want to hurt you,” she says, her voice soft, her fingers stilling.

I cup her face in my hands, my thumbs brushing against her cheeks. “You’re not hurting me. It’s just... intense. And I want it, Neon. I want you. Even if it’s bittersweet, even if it’s painful, I want this. I want you.”

She bites her lip, considering, then nods, her eyes never leaving mine. She slides her hand lower, her fingers brushing against my cock, and I hiss, my hips jerking upwards, a shock of pleasure and pain coursing through me. She’s tentative at first, her touch light, almost teasing, as she explores my length, her fingers tracing the outline of me through the fabric of my pants.

“You’re... different,” she murmurs, her enhanced eyes widening with curiosity and a hint of admiration. “Larger than I expected, and... there are these ridges...” Her fingers trace the contours, sending jolts of electricity through me. “They’re... interesting. I can already imagine how they’d feel inside me.”

Her words make my blood surge, the bond-sickness flaring with a mix of pleasure and agonizing need. Each careful touch, each whispered observation, sends waves of heat through my body, making it nearly impossible to hold still.

“Neon,” I growl, my voice rough with desire. “You’re driving me mad.”

She smiles, a sly curve of her lips that makes my heart race. “Good,” she says softly. “Because you drive me just as crazy.”

Her fingers continue their exploration, tracing the sensitive ridges that pulse with need. “And these... they’re almost like they’re designed for pleasure,” she whispers, her voice low and husky. “I bet they’d hit all the right spots.”



The image her words conjure sends another wave of burning need through me. I can feel the pulse of my heart in my groin, each beat sending a wave of pleasure and pain through me. I groan, my hands fisting in the sheets, my body trembling with the effort of holding back.

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But even that light touch is almost too much, the bond-sickness making me hypersensitive, my cock throbbing with a desperate, aching need. I can feel the pulse of my heart in my groin, each beat sending a wave of pleasure and pain through me. I groan, my hands fisting in the sheets, my body trembling with the effort of holding back.

She looks up at me, her eyes dark with desire, her lips parted, her breath coming in quick gasps. She slides her hand into my pants, her fingers wrapping around my cock, and I cry out, my hips bucking upwards, seeking more of her touch, more of her. But still, I let her set the pace, let her explore, even as my body screams for release, screams for her.

Her touch is tentative at first, her fingers exploring, learning, driving me mad with desire. She strokes me slowly, her grip firm but gentle, her eyes never leaving mine, watching, gauging my reaction. I can see the concern in her eyes, the worry that she's hurting me, but I can also see the desire, the need, the hunger.

I reach up, cupping her face in my hands, drawing her down into a deep, passionate kiss. I pour all my need, all my desire, all my love into that kiss, letting her feel what she does to me, how much I want her, how much I need her. And she responds, her body pressing against mine, her hand stroking me faster, her kiss matching my passion, my desperation.

But even as the pleasure builds, even as my body screams for release, I know I can't come, not yet, not until I can claim her, not until the bond is complete. And that knowledge, that bittersweet truth, makes this all the more intense, all the more painful, all the more exquisite. And I wouldn't have it any other way. Because it's

her. Because it's Neon. And because, despite the pain, despite the bittersweet torment, I know that this, right here, right now, is exactly where I'm meant to be.

Her touch is electric, her kisses intoxicating, and I'm lost, completely lost, in the storm of sensation, the whirlwind of desire, the overwhelming, consuming need for her. And I know, with a certainty that shakes me to my core, that I will never get enough of her, that I will always crave more, always need more, always want more. And that knowledge, that certainty, is both exhilarating and terrifying, a heady mix of pleasure and pain, desire and fear, need and want. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

The bond-sickness recedes to a distant ache, overwhelmed by the sharper, more immediate burn of desire. I recognize it's a temporary respite, knowing that the dawn will bring fresh challenges that I must face. But for now, with her safe against my chest and her lips brushing against mine, I allow myself a fleeting moment of belief in something beyond survival. A possibility, a hope for forever.

Eventually, she falls asleep, curled trustingly against me. I remain awake, acutely aware of her steady breathing, the way her warmth seeps into my very being. In this moment, I draw a deep breath, silencing the chaos of my mind, focusing on the comfort of her presence.

As I hold her, I balance the longing in my chest with an awareness of my duty. Each wave of pleasure mingles dangerously with the bond-sickness, urging me to lose myself in the sensations, to claim what I desire. Yet the disciplined piratecaptain in me fights to maintain control, to keep the fever at bay, knowing that giving in completely could compromise both my mission and her safety.

I take a moment to center myself, forcing back the instinctual pull of desire that threatens to overwhelm my rational thought. The vulnerability I feel is disconcerting, yet I feel the weight of my responsibility press down on me. If I cannot manage the

bond-sickness, if I cannot protect her and my crew from the dangers we face, then everything I've fought for will collapse.

She stirs in her sleep, a soft sigh escaping her lips. I feel a surge of protectiveness coursing through me, taut like a bowstring. The bond is powerful, demanding not just desire but an emotional connection that frightens me. The last thing I want is to place this burden onto her—an obligation that could lead to pain and loss.

Yet, as I look down at her trusting form, I can't ignore the bond-sickness. I want her to choose me, to choose this path together, but I also want her to make that choice freely.

I press a gentle kiss to her temple, feeling the warmth of her skin and breathing in the soft scent that envelops us both. It's a moment of clarity amidst the chaos surrounding us. If she decides to embrace the bond, it must be a decision made out of strength and desire, not fear or obligation.

For now, I hold her close, my wings creating a protective barrier around us, shielding her from the uncertainties that loom outside. I will stay awake, watching the soft blue pulse of her implants and listening to her steady breathing. My wings create a protective canopy around us both, and I silently vow to keep her safe—from the Black Eclipse, from the mysterious hacker hunting her, and from my own desperate need to claim her completely.

But as the night wears on, the fever returns, burning hotter than before. My wings tremble, my body shaking with the effort to control the pain, the need. I press a gentle kiss to her temple, my heart aching with a different kind of pain. If she doesn't choose me soon, the bond-sickness will consume me. And even if she does, there's no guarantee she won't resent me for binding her so completely.

I hold her tighter, burying my face in her hair, breathing in her scent like it's the air I

need to survive. Maybe it is. Maybe she is. But the choice is hers, and all I can do is hope she makes it before time runs out. Before the bond-sickness takes away any chance we might have had at a future together. Before my love for her becomes my own undoing.

## Chapter 9

### Neon Valkyrie

The soft whir of cooling systems fills the cramped data hub I've claimed as my temporary sanctuary. Located in an overlooked maintenance corridor of the Obsidian Haven, it's the perfect place to work uninterrupted—and to hide from the implications of what happened between Cirdox and me last night.

My neural implants cast a blue glow across the makeshift workstation while I analyze the Black Eclipse's attack patterns. The encrypted data streams pulse across my enhanced vision, revealing disturbing patterns that even the Brotherhood has missed. Their strikes aren't random—they're methodical, targeted, and far too precise.

Like someone knows exactly where to hit.

I rotate a three-dimensional map of recent Eclipse intercepts, watching as red markers bloom across trade routes. Each point represents a Brotherhood ship lost, a crew captured or killed, precious luminore redirected to Eclipse-controlled territories. The pattern is too perfect to be coincidence or good intelligence. This is the work of someone who has access to the Brotherhood's secure communications.

Someone like me.

Or someone like Kira.

The thought sends ice through my veins. I've avoided confronting this possibility since receiving that first impossible message, but I can't run from it anymore. Not when lives are at stake. Not when Cirdox is getting worse by the hour.

I isolate a secure connection, routing it through seventeen different proxies before initiating contact. My fingers hover over the interface as doubt creeps in. If I'm right—if Kira is truly alive and working for the Eclipse—then reaching out could put everyone on this station at risk.

But if I don't try, we're flying blind against an enemy who knows our every move.

"Time to stop running," I mutter, and send the message:

**YOU CAN'T HIDE FOREVER, KIRA. WE NEED TO TALK.**

I encode it with fragments of our shared past—the night we cracked the Helios banking system, the code phrase we used when we needed emergency extraction, the stupid inside joke about quantum fluctuations that only she would understand. Things only the real Kira would recognize.

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For several minutes, nothing. Just the hollow echo of machinery and my own accelerated heartbeat. Then my neural interface flares with an incoming transmission:

HELLO, LITTLE SISTER. TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH.

My breath catches. It's really her. The encryption signature is unmistakable—a variation of the algorithm we developed together years ago. My fingers find the keys again:

HOW ARE YOU ALIVE? I WATCHED YOU FLATLINE.

The response comes immediately, burning across my vision:

YOU WATCHED WHAT I WANTED YOU TO SEE. JUST LIKE YOU ONLY SAW WHAT YOU WANTED TO SEE WITH KAI.

I swallow hard, memories threatening to surface. But this isn't the time for ghosts. I need answers.

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

A pause. Long enough that I wonder if she's gone. Then:

EVOLUTION, NEON. WHILE YOU WERE RUNNING, I WAS LEARNING. THE BLACK ECLIPSE SHOWED ME WHAT WE COULD BECOME—BEYOND HUMAN, BEYOND THE LIMITATIONS OF FLESH. THEY MADE ME BETTER.

My stomach twists. I've seen Eclipse "improvements"—people turned into weapons, their humanity stripped away in service to something colder, more calculating.

THEY DIDN'T MAKE YOU BETTER. THEY TURNED YOU INTO THEIR ATTACK DOG.

The response flashes instantly, her rage palpable even through code:

SAYS THE WOMAN PLAYING PET TO A KYVERNIAN CAPTAIN. HOW'S THE MATE-BOND TREATING HIM? POORLY, I'D IMAGINE. BOND-SICKNESS IS QUITE DEADLY WHEN LEFT... UNRESOLVED.

I stiffen, fear and anger tangling in my chest. How does she know about Cirdox's condition?

LEAVE HIM OUT OF THIS. THIS IS BETWEEN US.

IS IT? BECAUSE FROM WHERE I'M SITTING, HE'S VERY MUCH IN THE MIDDLE OF IT. YOUR NEW WEAKNESS. YOUR ACHILLES HEEL. YOUR KAI 2.0.

The comparison hits like a physical blow. I push back from the console, trying to steady my breathing while my implants register the spike in my heart rate, the flood of cortisol through my system. She's trying to rattle me, and it's working.

WHAT DO YOU WANT, KIRA?

A longer pause this time. When her answer comes, it's deceptively simple:

I WANT WHAT WAS TAKEN FROM ME. I WANT YOU TO FEEL WHAT I FELT. I WANT YOU TO WATCH EVERYTHING YOU CARE ABOUT BURN,



JUST LIKE I DID.

I'M NOT YOUR ENEMY. THE ECLIPSE KILLED KAI, NOT ME.

NO, YOUR COWARDICE KILLED HIM. YOUR HESITATION. YOUR FEAR. AND NOW YOUR PRECIOUS CAPTAIN WILL PAY THE PRICE. TICK TOCK, VALKYRIE. TICK TOCK.

The transmission cuts abruptly, leaving me alone with the hum of machinery and the weight of her threats. My enhanced vision automatically calculates probable attack vectors, escape routes, defensive positions—cold, tactical analysis that can't begin to address the storm of emotions churning inside me.

I slam my fist against the console, the pain a welcome distraction from the fear clawing at my chest. She's alive. She's with the Eclipse. And she's coming for us—for Cirdox.

Because of me.

"Neon?" Zara's voice makes me flinch. I didn't hear her approach—too focused on Kira's words, on the implications of her threats. "We've got incoming vessels. Three Eclipse cruisers just dropped out of hyperspace at the edge of the system."

Ice floods my veins. "How much time do we have?"

"Two hours, maybe less. Captain's calling us back to the ship." Her russet fur bristles with tension as she studies my face. "You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

More accurate than she knows. "I'm fine. Just... working through some data." I close the console, erasing all traces of my conversation with Kira. "Tell Cirdox I'll meet him on the bridge."

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She nods, but hesitates at the door. “Whatever’s eating at you, Neon—we’ve got your back. All of us. That’s what crew means.”

The simple statement catches me off guard. Crew. When did I start thinking of myself as part of Cirdox’s crew rather than just a temporary passenger? When did these people become something more than just convenient allies?

“Thanks,” I manage, the word feeling strangely inadequate. “I’ll remember that.”

As she leaves, I gather my equipment, mind racing through possibilities. Kira knows where we are. She’s probably the one who sent those Eclipse cruisers. And if she’s as integrated with them as I fear, she’ll have access to their full tactical capabilities. We’re outgunned, outmanned, and running out of time.

But maybe—just maybe—I know something she doesn’t.

I set a course for the Void Reaver’s engineering section, a plan already forming. If Kira wants to play games with our lives, she’s about to learn I’m not the same scared hacker who ran three years ago.

This time, I’m staying to fight.

The Void Reaver thrums with frantic activity as the Zara prepares for emergency departure. The tension is palpable, a living thing that crawls along my skin and sets my implants on high alert.

I make my way to engineering, where damage from our previous encounter with the

Eclipse is still visible in scorched bulkheads and hastily repaired conduits. Grig, looks up from a diagnostic panel as I enter.

"Specialist Neon Valkyrie," he greets me, his amphibian throat-sac pulsing with each word. "Captain said you might need access to the core systems?"

"Direct access," I confirm, noting how even the reduced crew has adopted Cirdox's designation for me. Specialist sounds better than 'fugitive hacker,' I suppose. "I need to implement some defensive protocols before those Eclipse cruisers get here."

He nods, leading me to a secured terminal near the quantum drive housing. "All yours. Authorization Grig-Delta-Three-One."

The system recognizes his credentials, interfaces with my neural implants, and suddenly I'm swimming in the Void Reaver's digital architecture. My enhanced vision maps pathways, identifies vulnerabilities, catalogs defensive capabilities. The ship is impressive—Cirdox has clearly invested heavily in both offensive and defensive technology—but there are weaknesses. Places where a skilled hacker like Kira could slip through.

Places I need to fortify before she tries.

I dive deeper, fingers flying across the interface while my neural implants extend my consciousness into the ship's systems. I begin building defenses, layering encryption protocols and constructing honeypot traps that would catch most hackers.

But Kira isn't most hackers.

For her, I need something special. Something personal.

I pull fragments of code from my neural archive—pieces of old security systems we

built together, snippets of programs we designed to be unbreakable. Then I twist them, corrupt them, transform them into something new. Something that will feel familiar enough to lure her in, but different enough to trap her when she takes the bait.

It's risky. If she recognizes what I'm doing, she could turn it against us. But it's the best chance we have of keeping the Void Reaver's systems secure during our escape.

"That's... impressive," Trill says, watching as complex patterns of code spread across the display. "I've never seen security protocols like these."

"Let's hope the Eclipse hasn't either," I mutter, adding the final layers to my digital fortress. "How long until the Captain wants to depart?"

"Thirty minutes. Most of the crew is back onboard, but we're still waiting on a few stragglers from the Haven." His wings shift nervously. "Those Eclipse cruisers are moving faster than we expected. They'll be in weapons range within an hour."

Not much time. "Tell Cirdox I need ten more minutes, then I'll meet him on the bridge."

As Grig leaves, I add one final component to my security system—a direct neural link that will alert me the moment anyone attempts to breach our defenses. It's dangerous, potentially exposing my own consciousness to attack, but necessary. I need to know immediately if Kira tries to hack us during our escape.

The connection forms, a ribbon of digital awareness that stretches from my implants to the ship's core systems. The sensation is familiar yet alien—like extending a limb I didn't know I had.

With the defenses in place, I make my way to the bridge. Each step feels heavier than

the last as the implications of what's happening settle over me. Kira is alive. She's working with the Eclipse. And she's using everything she knows about me—about my patterns, my weaknesses, the people I care about—to hunt us down.

Because of what happened to Kai.

Because she blames me for his death.

And maybe she's right.

The thought catches me off guard, a sharp pain that has nothing to do with my implants and everything to do with the guilt I've carried for three years. What if she's right? What if I could have saved him? What if everything that's happened since—all the death, all the suffering—is because I hesitated when I should have acted?

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I shake my head, forcing the thoughts away. Now isn't the time for self-recrimination. Now is the time for action, for focus, for keeping everyone on this ship alive long enough to escape the trap closing around us.

The bridge is a hive of controlled chaos when I arrive. Cirdox stands at the center, wings mantled with authority despite the obvious strain of the bond-sickness. His tribal markings pulse with fever, but his voice is steady as he issues commands. Zara moves between stations, coordinating the crew's efforts with efficient precision.

Cirdox spots me immediately, crimson eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my pulse quicken. "Specialist," he acknowledges, voice formal but eyes conveying something deeper. "Report."

"Defensive systems are fortified," I say, matching his professional tone despite the urge to check on his condition. "I've implemented multi-layered encryption protocols and neural-responsive firewalls. If the Eclipse tries to hack our systems during departure, we'll be ready."

He nods, satisfaction briefly overshadowing the pain evident in his features. "Excellent work. Take the tactical station—I want your eyes on their movements when we break orbit."

The assignment surprises me—tactical is a senior position, one that requires both technical skill and the crew's trust. Judging by the lack of protest from the bridge officers, it seems I've earned at least a measure of the latter.

I slide into the seat, interfacing with the ship's sensors through my neural implants.

Immediately, data floods my enhanced vision—the three Eclipse cruisers approaching in tight formation, the scattered Brotherhood vessels preparing for departure, the massive bulk of the Obsidian Haven slowly rotating against the backdrop of space.

"Eclipse vessels maintaining course," I report, analyzing their approach vector. "Current speed suggests intercept in fifty-three minutes if we maintain standard departure protocols."

"Then we won't be standard," Cirdox says, his wings shifting with suppressed pain as he moves to the command chair. "Zara, status of our missing crew?"

"Last shuttle is docking now, Captain. All hands will be aboard in five minutes."

"Good." He settles into the chair, his posture rigid with the effort of appearing stronger than he feels. "Neon, plot us a course through the asteroid field—maximum sensor interference, minimum navigational hazards."

I nod, fingers already dancing across the interface as my implants calculate optimal trajectories. The asteroid field surrounding the Haven is dense, treacherous—a perfect place to lose pursuers, but also a dangerous gamble for a ship the Void Reaver's size.

"Course plotted," I announce, sending the data to the navigation station. "It's tight, but if we time our entry to coincide with the magnetic storm forming in sector seven, their sensors will be effectively blind for at least twenty minutes."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Excellent thinking, neural specialist." He turns to the helm. "Ensign Grig, prepare for emergency departure. All hands, secure for high-G maneuvers."

The crew responds with practiced efficiency, strapping into stations and locking down loose equipment. I feel the subtle vibration through the deck plates as the

quantum drive spoolsup, preparing for the sudden acceleration that will tear us away from the Haven's gravitational influence.

"Eclipse vessels adjusting course," I warn, noting the subtle shift in their approach. "They've detected our power-up sequence. Intercept time revised to forty-one minutes."

"Let them chase us," Cirdox says, a predatory edge entering his voice despite the fever evident in his glowing markings. "Helm, on my mark... execute departure protocol."

The ship lurches as thrusters fire at maximum capacity, pressing us back into our seats with the force of our acceleration. The Obsidian Haven falls away behind us, its obsidian surface reflecting the cold light of distant stars.

Through my neural connection to the ship's systems, I feel the moment the Eclipse cruisers register our departure. Their engines flare as they adjust course to pursue, their weapons systems powering up in anticipation of bringing us within range.

"They're pursuing," I confirm, watching the data stream through my enhanced vision. "Calculating time to weapons range—"

My analysis is cut short as a familiar presence brushes against my neural defenses—subtle, probing, searching for weaknesses in the digital fortress I've built around the ship's systems. The touch is unmistakable, carrying the signature of someone who knows my coding patterns intimately.

Kira.

She's found us faster than I anticipated, her consciousness extending through the Eclipse ships' systems to test our defenses. I feel her presence slide along the outer



layers of encryption, searching for a way in, for any vulnerability she can exploit.

"We've got company," I announce, voice tight as I redirect my consciousness to reinforce our digital shields. "Someone's attempting to breach our security protocols."

Cirdox's gaze sharpens. "Eclipse hackers?"

"Not just any hacker." I meet his eyes, letting him see the gravity of the situation. "It's Kira. She's on one of those ships, and she's trying to get into our systems."

A ripple of unease passes through the bridge crew. Zara's tail bristles, her ears flattening against her skull. "Kira? The one who—"

"Yes." I cut her off before she can finish. Now isn't the time for explanations. "Captain, I need to focus on keeping her out of our systems. She knows my patterns, my weaknesses. This is going to get... complicated."

Cirdox studies me for a moment, his crimson eyes seeing more than I'm comfortable with. "Do what you need to do," he says finally. "We'll handle the physical pursuit."

I nod, grateful for his trust, and turn my attention fully to the digital battlefield where Kira and I are about to face off. Through my neural interface, I dive deeper into the ship's systems, extending my consciousness to meet her probing attacks head-on.

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NICE SETUP, VALKYRIE. I RECOGNIZE THOSE ENCRYPTION LAYERS. REMEMBER WHO TAUGHT YOU HOW TO BUILD THEM?

Her voice—or rather, her digital presence—fills my neural space, familiar yet distorted, like looking at a reflection in broken glass.

YOU TAUGHT ME THE BASICS, KIRA. BUT I'VE LEARNED A FEW NEW TRICKS SINCE THEN.

I reinforce our defenses, adding layers of complexity that even she might struggle to penetrate. But she adapts quickly, her attacks evolving, shifting to target unexpected vulnerabilities.

YOUR KYVERNIAN IS DYING, YOU KNOW. I CAN SEE HIS BIOSIGNATURE FROM HERE. THEBOND-SICKNESS IS QUITE ADVANCED. TICK TOCK, VALKYRIE. HOW MUCH TIME DOES HE HAVE LEFT?

I refuse to let her distract me, focusing instead on tracing her digital signature back to its source. If I can pinpoint which Eclipse ship she's on, we might have a chance to evade them more effectively.

WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS, KIRA? THE ECLIPSE KILLED KAI, NOT ME. THEY'RE USING YOU, JUST LIKE THEY USE EVERYONE.

Her response comes as a vicious digital assault that nearly breaks through my innermost defenses. I gasp, physical pain radiating through my neural pathways as I struggle to contain the attack.

THEY SHOWED ME THE TRUTH. YOU HESITATED. YOU COULD HAVE SAVED HIM, BUT YOU WERE TOO AFRAID. TOO CAUTIOUS. AND NOW YOU'RE DOING THE SAME THING WITH YOUR CAPTAIN. WATCHING WHILE HE BURNS FROM THE INSIDE OUT, TOO SCARED TO COMMIT, TO TAKE THE FINAL STEP.

Her words hit harder than they should, striking at insecurities I've tried to bury. Is she right? Am I letting history repeat itself, watching another person I care about die because I'm too afraid to act?

No. This is different. This is—

"Neon!" Cirdox's voice cuts through my internal struggle. "They're charging weapons. We need those engines at maximum."

I force myself back to the present, splitting my consciousness between defending our systems and assisting with the ship's functions. "Rerouting power from non-essential systems," I report, fingers flying across the interface. "You'll have fifteen percent more thrust in three... two... one..."

The ship lurches as the additional power hits the engines, accelerating us toward the relative safety of the asteroid field. Through the viewports, I can see the first massive chunks of rock looming ahead, their jagged surfaces reflecting the dim light of the system's distant sun.

"Eclipse vessels in weapons range in thirty seconds," Zara announces, her voice tense but controlled.

"Evasive pattern Delta," Cirdox commands, his wings shifting with suppressed pain as he leans forward in the command chair. "Neon, status of our digital defenses?"

"Holding," I manage, though it's taking every ounce of my concentration to keep Kira at bay. Her attacks are becoming more sophisticated, more targeted—she's not just trying to breach our systems now, she's trying to trap me in the digital space, to isolate my consciousness from my physical body.

YOU CAN'T WIN THIS, LITTLE SISTER. SURRENDER NOW, AND MAYBE I'LL LET YOUR PRECIOUS CREW LIVE. KEEP FIGHTING, AND I'LL TEAR THIS SHIP APART FROM THE INSIDE OUT.

I ignore her threats, focusing instead on implementing the trap I've been carefully constructing while she thought she was winning. It's a risky move—if it fails, she'll have direct access to our most critical systems. But if it works...

NICE TRY, KIRA. BUT YOU FORGOT WHO TAUGHT \*YOU\* A FEW THINGS.

I spring the trap, a complex digital snare that uses her own momentum against her. For a brief, glorious moment, I feel her consciousness caught in my web, her digital presence struggling against the constraints I've woven around her.

Then pain—white-hot and all-consuming—lances through my neural pathways as she turns my own trap against me. My vision whites out, my body arching in the tactical chair as electricity seems to course through every nerve ending.

"Neon!" Cirdox's voice seems to come from very far away, distorted as if traveling through water. "What's happening?"

I can't answer, can't even breathe as Kira's counter-attack tears through my neural defenses. She's using my own connection to the ship against me, feeding back corrupted data that my implants interpret as physical pain.

DID YOU REALLY THINK IT WOULD BE THAT EASY? I'VE EVOLVED BEYOND YOUR SIMPLE TRAPS, BEYOND THE LIMITATIONS YOU STILL CLING TO. SURRENDER NOW, OR WATCH YOUR PRECIOUS CAPTAIN DIE IN AGONY.

Through the haze of pain, I become aware of alarms blaring across the bridge. The ship shudders as the first Eclipse energy weapons find their mark, depleting our shields and rattling the hull.

"Direct hit to port shield generator," Zara reports, her voice steady despite the chaos. "Shields at sixty-eight percent and falling."

"Continue evasive maneuvers," Cirdox commands, his voice strained but determined. "Get us into that asteroid field!"

I force myself to focus through the pain, gathering what remains of my strength for one final, desperate counter-attack. Kira thinks she has me trapped, defeated—but she's forgotten the most important lesson we ever learned together.

Never fight fair when lives are on the line.

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I trigger the emergency protocol I embedded deep within the ship's systems, a last-resort measure I hoped I wouldn't need. It severs my neural connection to the ship abruptly, violently—a digital amputation that sends fresh waves of agony through my consciousness as my implants struggle to compensate for the sudden loss.

But it works. Kira's attack, channeled through my connection, finds itself suddenly untethered, her digital presence ejected from our systems as the emergency firewalls slam into place.

I slump in the tactical chair, blood trickling from my nose as my implants struggle to recover from the trauma. My enhanced vision flickers, data streams fragmenting and reforming as my systems attempt to stabilize.

"Neon?" Cirdox is beside me, one hand on my shoulder, his crimson eyes dark with concern despite the obvious pain of the bond-sickness. "What happened?"

"Emergency disconnect," I manage, my voice rough as if I've been screaming. Maybe I have. "Had to cut the neural link to force her out. She was using my connection to attack the ship."

Another impact rocks the bridge as an Eclipse weapon finds its mark. The lights flicker, emergency systems kicking in as damage reports flood the command displays.

"Shields at forty-two percent," Zara announces, her russet fur standing on end. "We can't take much more of this, Captain."

"We won't have to." Cirdox returns to the command chair, his movements fluid despite the fever evident in his glowing markings. "We've reached the asteroid field. Execute navigation pattern Epsilon-Three."

The ship banks sharply, diving between massive chunks of rock and ice that drift in complex patterns through the void. The maneuver puts solid mass between us and our pursuers, temporarily shielding us from their weapons fire.

"They're still following," I report, forcing myself to focus on the tactical display despite the lingering pain in my neural pathways. "But they're being more cautious now. Spreading out to try to box us in."

"Let them try." Cirdox's voice carries a predatory confidence that belies his weakened state. "This is our territory now. Zara, implement shadow protocol on my mark."

She nods, fingers dancing across her console as she prepares whatever 'shadow protocol' entails. I watch, curious despite the gravity of our situation, as she activates a series of commands that seem to alter the ship's energy signature.

"Shadow protocol active, Captain," she confirms, a hint of anticipation in her tone.

"Execute dive maneuver in three... two... one... mark!"

The ship plunges suddenly, thrusters firing in a complex pattern that sends us hurtling toward a particularly dense cluster of asteroids. For a terrifying moment, it seems we're about to collide with the jagged surface of a massive rock—then at the last possible second, the Void Reaver rolls, slipping into a narrow crevice that's barely wider than our hull.

"Kill main power," Cirdox commands as we settle into the shadow of the asteroid. "Auxiliary systems only."

The bridge darkens as non-essential systems power down, leaving only the dim glow of emergency lighting and critical displays. Through my enhanced vision, I watch as our energy signature diminishes, becoming nearly indistinguishable from the background radiation of the asteroid field.

"Eclipse vessels are continuing on our projected course," Zara reports, her voice hushed as if the enemy might hear us through the vacuum of space. "They haven't detected our position change."

"They're hunting a ghost," Cirdox says, satisfaction evident despite the strain in his voice. "Let them chase shadows while we slip away."

I lean back in the tactical chair, allowing myself a moment of relief as the immediate danger passes. My implants are still recovering from the forced disconnect, sending occasional jolts of pain through my neural pathways, but the worst has subsided.

"That was impressive flying," I admit, glancing at Cirdox. "I didn't think a ship this size could navigate those gaps."

A smile touches his lips, though it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "The Void Reaver has many talents, neural specialist. As does her crew." His gaze lingers on me, seeing more than I'm comfortable with. "Including you."

Before I can respond, my neural interface flickers with one final message, faint but unmistakable:

THIS ISN'T OVER, VALKYRIE. NO MATTER WHERE YOU HIDE, NO MATTER HOW FAR YOU RUN, I'LL FIND YOU. AND NEXT TIME, I WON'T BE SO MERCIFUL.

Chapter 10



Cirdox

“You’re burning up, Captain.” Zara’s voice, laced with concern, cuts through the throbbing pressure behind my eyes. I feel her hand hovering near my forehead, hesitating just before contact. I flinch, a wave of hypersensitivity making my skin crawl.

“Just...adjusting to the Haven’s recycled air,” I manage, the lie tasting like ash in my parched throat. The words scrape against the raw edges of my vocal cords, a physical manifestation of the fire consuming me from within. I clench my jaw, fighting the urge to collapse into the command chair and surrender to the bond-sickness entirely.

“Recycled air doesn’t make your markings glow like molten lava.” Zara’s russet fur bristles as she steps closer, her vulpexian senses undoubtedly detecting the subtle chemical changes in my blood, the erratic pulse of bond-sickness raging through my veins. “And it certainly doesn’t make your wings tremble like they’re about to tear themselves apart.”

I force my wings to stillness, folding them tight against my back despite the agonizing pressure building beneath the membrane-thin edges. “A little...atmospheric disturbance. Nothing I can’t handle.”

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“You’re handling it about as well as a Huxarian handles a diplomatic negotiation.” A faint smile flickers across her features but doesn’t reach her eyes. “Meaning, not at all.”

I adjust the clasps of my coat, its familiar weight a small comfort against the growing unease. “K’vex will be watching. Vornak will be posturing. And Ralith will be scheming in the shadows. A display of weakness now would be...unwise.”

Zara sighs, the sound a mixture of exasperation and affection. “Unwise is an understatement, Captain. You’re practically radiating fever. One wrong step, one misplaced word, and they’ll tear you—and the Brotherhood—apart.”

She’s right. Postponing this meeting, revealing any vulnerability to those scavengers, is a risk I can’t afford. The Brotherhood is fracturing. Every lost shipment, every whisper of Eclipse infiltration, widens the cracks. I must maintain control. But there’s more at stake than just the Brotherhood. Neon’s discovery—Kira, alive and hunting her—adds another layer of complexity, another reason I can’t afford to falter. These captains need to understand the gravity of our situation. They need to see why Kyor trusted me, why I’m the one to lead them through this storm. I can’t lose control. Not now, not when so much hangs in the balance.

“I’ll manage,” I say, my voice rougher than intended. “But keep sharp, Zara. Something’s not right here.”

The docking clamps release with a final hiss, and I push myself to my feet, gritting my teeth against the wave of dizziness washing over me. The Obsidian Haven, a jagged scar carved into the heart of a dead asteroid, stretches before us, its surface a

patchwork of reinforced metal and exposed rock. In the dimlight of distant nebulae, the station resembles a skeletal hand reaching out to grasp the void.

As we make our way through the Haven's winding corridors, each step feels like walking on broken glass. The obsidian walls, polished to a mirror sheen, reflect our fractured images—distorted phantoms in a labyrinth of shadows. The air, thick with the metallic tang of recycled oxygen and the ozone of failing circuits, presses against my skin, each inhale a struggle. My Kyvernian senses, usually a source of strength, now torment me, amplifying every subtle scent, every flicker of light, every echoing sound into sensory overload. The bond-sickness claws deeper, turning the recycled air into acid in my lungs, making my skin crawl.

As we approach the central chamber, the low hum of the Haven's life support systems intensifies, a rhythmic pulse that echoes the erratic beat of my heart. I feel Zara's gaze on me, sharp and concerned, but I force my wings to remain folded, my expression carefully neutral. The other captains can't see my weakness. Not yet.

The chamber doors hiss open, revealing a cavernous room that seems to swallow the dim light. A massive table dominates the center, its jagged obsidian surface etched with holographic displays pulsing with data streams—trade routes glowing like arteries, shipment logs scrolling in endless columns, and scattered red markers where Brotherhood vessels have vanished without trace. My vision blurs momentarily, the holographic lights swimming before me, but I blink hard, forcing the world back into focus.

I need clarity.

Control.

The captains are already gathered, their varied forms casting long shadows in the flickering light. Vornak, the Bravorian warlord, towers near the head of the table, his

obsidian scales gleaming like polished night. K'vex, the Rhilnar tactician, stands apart, her six arms arranged in a display of studied casualness that sets my instincts on edge. Ralith, the Vulpexian, leans against a far pillar, his features masked in what I recognize as calculated indifference. Drokmar, the Croakan, sits hunched in his seat, his squat, frog-like form radiating an almost palpable aura of unease. Shen'va, the Seraphim, their expansive ice-feathered wings folded tight, watches the proceedings with an unsettlingly detached gaze. And Zyx'tal, the Muspel, paces restlessly, her lean, pale blue frame a blur of nervous energy.

As I enter, the chamber falls silent, the weight of a dozen gazes settling on me like a physical force. I feel the bond-sickness pulsing through my veins, a relentless rhythm threatening to overwhelm my control. A muscle in my jaw twitches involuntarily, and I clench my teeth, forcing it to stillness.

“You summoned us, Captain Thar’Kal.” K’vex’s voice, smooth as polished steel, slices through the tense atmosphere. Her six hands move in intricate patterns, each digit tapping out a silent rhythm against the obsidian table. “I trust the matter is...sufficiently urgent?”

The subtle emphasis on the last word, the hint of challenge in her tone, raises my hackles. “Urgent enough to interrupt your...ventures, Captain K’vex?” I counter, my voice carefully neutral, though the effort makes my throat burn.

A flicker of something—amusement, perhaps, or something colder—crosses her features. “Profit is a fleeting pleasure, Captain. Survival is a necessity.” One of her hands drifts toward a concealed weapon at her hip, the movement almost too casual to be noticed. Almost.

“A sentiment we all share,” Vornak rumbles, his golden eyes fixed on me with predatory intensity. He slams a scaled fist on the table, the impact reverberating through the chamber, sending fresh waves of agony radiating through my already

strained wings. “So enlighten us, Captain. What threat justifies this...interruption?”

I take a measured breath, forcing my trembling wings to stillness. The simple act sends a fresh wave of fever through me, making my markings burn hotter, brighter against my skin. I feel Zara’s worried gaze on me but ignore it, focusing on the task at hand. Control. Always control.

“The Black Eclipse has infiltrated us.”

The words hang in the air, heavy with implication. The whispers begin, a rising tide of hissed accusations and muttered denials. This time, I don’t let it build. I activate the central display, and a web of crimson lines blooms across the star chart, each line representing a lost vessel, a broken link in the Brotherhood’s chain.

“These are our missing vessels. Twelve in the past month alone. Each one carrying critical supplies—medical equipment, food synthesizers, and most importantly, luminore.” My voice cracks slightly, the dryness making it difficult to speak, but I push through the discomfort.

“Losses are inevitable in our line of work,” Ralith drawls from the shadows, his vulpexian features still carefully neutral, but his tail twitches nervously, betraying his unease. “This proves nothing except the Eclipse’s continued...enthusiasm for disrupting our operations. Just like the STI.”

“Look closer, Captain Ralith.” I enhance the display, highlighting specific routes, zooming in on the points where each vessel vanished. The holographic lights shimmer, and I fight back a wave of dizziness, my grip tightening on the edge of the table. “These weren’t random attacks. Each vessel was hit in a designated safe zone, using classified routes that change weekly. Routes that only Brotherhood captains have access to.”

The implications land like a physical blow. Ralith pushes off from the pillar, his casual stance replaced by sudden, predatory alertness. “You’re suggesting one of us is feeding them information.”

“I’m stating a fact,” I correct, my voice hardening despite the tremor that runs through me. “We have a leak. And until we find it, every ship we send out is at risk. Every crew member’s life hangs in the balance.”

“And what, pray tell, do you propose we do, Captain?” K’vex’s voice, smooth as ever, carries an undercurrent of steel. “Accuse each other blindly? Turn on our own while the Eclipse watches and waits, picking through the scraps of our fractured alliance?”

“We adapt,” I say, my wings shifting restlessly despite my efforts to keep them still. “We evolve. We become something stronger, something more resilient.” I trigger another display, this one showing encrypted communication channels pulsing with complex algorithms. “All sensitive information will be transmitted using quantum-locked frequencies. Face-to-face reporting only for critical updates. And every captain here will submit their ship’s logs for the past three cycles—no exceptions.”

“You’re asking us to surrender our autonomy,” Vornak booms, his scales rippling with barely contained fury. “The Brotherhood wasn’t built on blind obedience. It was built on freedom. On trust.”

“Trust that has been betrayed,” I counter, my voice growing rougher as the bond-sickness flares again, a surge of molten fire that makes my markings burn like brands against my skin. The room seems to tilt momentarily, the lights blurring into streaks of color. I blink hard, forcing the world back into focus, but my grip on the table tightens, claws digging into the obsidian surface as I fight to maintain control.

K’vex’s azure gaze fixes on me, all six hands now perfectly still, each digit poised

like a striking serpent. “You don’t lookwell, Captain. Perhaps we should postpone this discussion until you’ve...recovered.” Her words, laced with feigned concern, are a thinly veiled challenge.

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The other captains shift, their gazes flickering between us, sensing the unspoken power struggle unfolding. I straighten, though the movement sends a fresh wave of dizziness through me, making my vision swim.

“I’m fine,” I lie, the word tasting like poison. “What’s not fine is the rate at which we’re losing ships. Losing people.” I activate another display, this one showing the faces of missing crew members, their images frozen in time, their eyes staring out at us with silent accusation. “These aren’t just statistics. They’re our own. They’re families. Friends. And while we stand here arguing, they’re suffering. Or worse.”

My voice cracks, the dryness in my throat making it difficult to speak, but I push through the discomfort. The bond-sickness surges again, a wave of molten agony that makes my markings flare, their crimson glow visible even in the dim light of the chamber. I feel the other captains watching me, their gazes sharp, assessing, searching for any sign of weakness.

A ripple of unease runs through the assembled captains. Even Ralith’s carefully cultivated indifference seems to crack momentarily, a flicker of genuine sorrow crossing his vulpexian features.

“And if we find this...leak?” he asks, his voice quieter than usual, laced with a new, unsettling edge of uncertainty. “What then?”

“Justice,” I growl, the word raw with barely suppressed fury. “Swift. Public. The Brotherhood needs to see that betrayal has consequences. That loyalty still means something in this fractured galaxy.”



“Assuming we can trust the evidence,” K’vex purrs, her voice smooth as silk but sharp as a vibroblade. “After all, Captain, you yourself could be compromised. Perhaps your...fevered state is clouding your perceptions. Perhaps you’re seeing enemies where there are none.”

The accusation, delivered with such calculated precision, hangs in the air like a drawn weapon. My wings snap open before I can stop them, tribal markings blazing with a mixture of fever and rage. The motion costs me dearly—black spots dance at the edges of my vision, and momentarily, the room seems to tilt sideways. But I hold my ground, meeting K’vex’s emerald gaze with unwavering intensity.

“Question my methods,” I snarl, letting just enough of my pain bleed into my voice to make it dangerous. “Question my decisions. But never question my loyalty to the Brotherhood.” I sweep my gaze across the assembled captains, letting the weight of my words settle on each of them. “Everything I’ve done—everything I’ve sacrificed—has been to protect what we’ve built. What Kyor built before they took him from us.”

The name, spoken aloud, hangs heavy in the air. Kyor, our former leader, now rotting in an STI prison while his legacy crumbles. I see the impact ripple through the room—shoulders tensing, gazes dropping, hands clenching on weapons. Even K’vex’s perfect composure slips for a fraction of a second, a flicker of something crossing her features before she quickly masks it. Regret? Fear? Or perhaps...satisfaction?

“Submit your logs,” I continue, forcing steel into my tone despite the fire raging through me. “Investigate your crews. Vet your communications. If you find anything—anything at all—you report it directly to me. No exceptions.” My voice cracks, my throat burning, but I force the words out, each one a testament to my unwavering resolve.

“And if we...decline?” Vornak rumbles, his massive form shifting, his golden eyes narrowing into predatory slits.

I meet his gaze steadily, refusing to yield even an inch. “Then you’re declaring yourself a suspect. And I’ll treat you accordingly.”

The threat, delivered with quiet menace, lands exactly as intended. One by one, with varying degrees of reluctance, the captains nod their assent. Vornak, after a prolonged stare-down that feels like an eternity, finally grunts his agreement. Ralith, his face unreadable, gives a curt nod. K’vex, her six hands moving in a complex pattern that might be a silent calculation of odds or a coded message to an unseen accomplice, inclines her head slightly.

“Very well, Captain,” she says, her tone clipped. “But I’ll remind you—if this...investigation...fails, if even one more ship goes missing, you’ll have more than the Eclipse to worry about.”

The implied threat hangs heavy in the air as the captains begin to file out, whispered conversations trailing in their wake. I remain at the table, wings trembling with the effort of staying upright, until the last of them has departed. Only then do I allow myself to sag against the obsidian surface, its cool touch a small comfort against my burning skin. The room swims momentarily, the holographic lights blurring into streaks of color, and I close my eyes, fighting back the wave of nausea threatening to overwhelm me.

“Impressive performance, Captain.” Zara’s dry comment makes me open my eyes. She stands guard by the door, her russet fur still bristling with tension. “If by ‘impressive’ you mean ‘barely managing to stay conscious while simultaneously threatening to start a civil war.’”

“They needed to hear it,” I rasp, my voice a croak, my throat raw and burning. “Even

if they didn't want to."

"What they need is their leader at full strength." A new voice—familiar, challenging, tied to my very being by bonds I can't escape—cuts through the chamber's tense silence. "Not half-dead from stubbornness, pride, and a fever hot enough to melt steel."

I turn, though the movement sends a fresh wave of dizziness crashing over me. Neon stands in the shadows of the doorway, her enhanced eyes glowing with a mixture of concern and frustration. Their blue light cuts through the dimness like twin stars, their intensity both comforting and alarming. The sight of her, the mere fact of her presence, sends the bond-sickness into overdrive, need and pain twisting together until I can barely breathe. The air crackles between us, charged with unspoken emotions, with the weight of the bond that pulls us together even as my instincts scream at me to push her away.

"You shouldn't be here," I manage, my voice barely a whisper, the words lacking their usual bite. "This was a closed meeting. Classified information."

She steps closer, her implants casting shifting blue patterns across her skin as they diligently catalog my deteriorating condition. "Classified information that could cost you your life if you don't get some rest. Your core temperature is dangerously elevated. Neural readings are erratic. You're burning yourself out from the inside, Cirdox." Her voice softens on the last word, a hint of something in her tone that makes my heart clench. Fear? Concern? Something dangerously close to affection?

"The Brotherhood needs—" I begin, but she cuts me off, her voice sharp with an urgency that tightens my chest.

"The Brotherhood needs its leader alive, not collapsed in a heap because he was too proud to admit he needs help." She moves closer still, close enough that I feel the

warmth radiating from her skin, smell the faint, intoxicating scent that is uniquely hers. The bond-sickness roars to life, a firestorm in my blood, but beneath it, another sensation stirs—a flicker of warmth, of comfort, of hope.

“I can manage,” I say, the words a lie, a desperate attempt to cling to the last vestiges of my control.

“No, you can’t.” She reaches out, her hand hovering just above my arm, then gently, hesitantly, resting it on my skin. The touch sends a jolt of electricity through my system, a mixture of agony and ecstasy that makes my breath catch in my throat. “You’re shaking, Cirdox. You need rest. Now.”

I want to argue, to push her away, to maintain the distance that might keep us both safe. But the bond—the damn, insistent bond—thrums between us, a living thing that grows stronger with every shared breath, every stolen glance, every touch. And as another wave of fever washes over me, obliterating the last vestiges of my resistance, I find myself leaning into her touch, surrendering to the one person who might understand what it means to carry impossible burdens.

“I...I can’t protect anyone like this,” I admit, the words barely a whisper against her skin, a confession of vulnerability I’ve never allowed myself to utter before. “Can’t even protect myself.”

“Then let someone else do the protecting, just for a little while.” Her voice softens, though her enhanced eyes never stop scanning my vital signs, their blue light a constant reminder of her analytical mind, always measuring, always assessing. But beneath that clinical detachment, I sense something else—a flicker of warmth, of genuine concern, that makes my heart ache with a longing I haven’t felt in centuries.

The offer, simple yet profound, hangs between us, weighted with implications neither of us is ready to fully explore. But as the bond-sickness rages through my system,

consuming my strength and shattering my defenses, I find myself nodding. Just once.  
Just enough.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

She leads me from the chamber, her presence both a balm and a brand against my fevered skin. And as we make our slow, unsteady way through the Haven's shadowed corridors, my mind races, trying to reconcile the urgent need to protect the Brotherhood with the equally urgent, terrifyingly compelling need to protect her. Two conflicting desires, two impossible burdens, both threatening to consume me entirely.

In the quiet solitude of the Haven's oppressive embrace, I can't help but wonder which will destroy me first—the bond-sickness burning through my veins, or the growing certainty that I'm falling for the one person who holds the power to break everything I have fought so hard to protect. Or perhaps...the one person who holds the power to save me.

### Chapter 11

#### Neon Valkyrie

The lower deck of the Void Reaver thrums with a subdued rhythm, even while docked within the Obsidian Haven's cavernous berth. The ship's drive sits idle, but damaged power couplings emit a high-pitched whine that echoes off scarred metal walls. Emergency lights cast rippling patterns across makeshift repairs and exposed circuitry, their red glow a stark contrast to the Haven's cold, obsidian surfaces visible through the hull breaches.

My neural implants automatically catalog the extent of damage from our desperate escape—hull breaches in sections three and five still waiting for proper repairs, shield generators limping along at 67 percent efficiency. The Brotherhood's limited engineering team has done what they can, but some wounds take more than quick

patches to heal. Not great, but we're still here. For now.

I crouch behind a row of power conduits, fingers dancing across a hidden access panel while my enhanced vision maps the complex web of data streams flowing through the ship's systems. Most of the crew is still at the Obsidian Haven, leaving the engineering deck eerily quiet except for the occasional hiss of venting steam or crackle of exposed wiring.

"You always hide in the darkest corners of the ship, or is today special?"

I flinch, instinctively reaching for the blade strapped to my thigh before recognizing Zara's voice. She leans against a nearby bulkhead, russet fur catching the emergency lighting in ways my enhanced vision finds oddly beautiful. Her tail sways gently, betraying her casual posture with its alert movements.

"I'm not hiding," I say, returning to my work. "I'm reconfiguring the shield harmonics to better withstand Eclipse energy weapons."

"Of course." Her ears twitch forward with interest. "And choosing the most isolated maintenance junction to do it is purely practical."

I glance up, ready with a sharp retort, but pause when I catch her expression. There's no mockery there—just understanding, and something that looks uncomfortably like concern.

"I work better alone," I mutter, turning back to the panel.

"Most people do," she agrees, sliding down to sit beside me. "Until they don't."

Her proximity makes my implants twitch with discomfort—not because of any threat assessment, but because I've spent so long keeping people at a careful distance.

Having someone deliberately bridge that gap feels like an invasion, even if it's well-intentioned.

"Did Cirdox send you to check on me?" I ask, my fingers continuing their work even as my attention splits.

"The Captain rarely needs to send me anywhere." Her tail flicks with what I'm learning to recognize as amusement. "I go where I'm needed."

"And you think I need you?" I can't keep the defensive edge from my voice.

"I think you need someone." She shrugs, the movement rippling through her fur. "And right now, I'm available."

Her bluntness catches me off guard. I've grown accustomed to Cirdox's intensity, his direct approach tempered by the mate-bond's complexity. Zara offers something different—straightforward concern without the weight of destiny attached.

"I'm fine," I say automatically.

"You're not." She says it matter-of-factly, without judgment. "And that's okay. None of us are 'fine' right now."

My hands pause over the control panel. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Zara studies me for a moment, her vulpexian features giving little away. "It means I've been watching you run yourself into the ground trying to save everyone else. Fortifying our systems, strengthening our defenses, keeping Kira at bay—all while pretending you don't care about any of us."

"I don't—" I begin, but the lie sticks in my throat. When did that happen? When did



these people stop being just a means of escape and start being something more?

“You do.” Her voice softens. “And it’s terrifying, isn’t it? Starting to care when you’ve spent so long convinced that caring is a death sentence.”

The accuracy of her observation hits like a physical blow. My enhanced vision catches the subtle changes in my own physiology—elevated heart rate, pupil dilation, microscopic muscle tensing. Fight or flight kicking in, not from external danger but from someone seeing too much.

“You don’t know me,” I say, the words sounding hollow even to my own ears.

“I know enough.” She leans back against the bulkhead, giving me space even as her words close the distance between us. “I know you’ve probably lost people. I know you blame yourself. And I know you’re terrified of it happening again.”

“Congratulations on your basic observational skills.” The sarcasm is a shield, thin but necessary.

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“It’s more than observation.” Her tail wraps around her legs as she settles into a more comfortable position. “It’s recognition.”

That gets my attention. I look up from the panel, really seeing her for the first time since she arrived. “What do you mean?”

She meets my gaze steadily. “You think you’re the only one running from ghosts? The only one who’s watched someone they love die and couldn’t stop it?” A bitter smile twists her muzzle. “Welcome to the Brotherhood, Neon. We’re all damaged goods here.”

The revelation shouldn’t surprise me—I’ve seen enough of the galaxy to know trauma isn’t exactly rare—but somehow, coming from Zara, it feels significant. She’s always seemed so composed, so certain of her place in the universe.

“Who did you lose?” I ask before I can think better of it.

Her ears flatten briefly before she consciously relaxes them. “My mate. During the Orion Wars. We were running supplies through the Ceres Blockade when the Eclipse intercepted us.” Her voice remains even, but I see the tension in her shoulders, the way her claws extend slightly into her palms. “They gave us a choice—surrender our cargo or die fighting. My mate chose option three.”

“Which was?”

“She sent me to an escape pod while she piloted our ship into their command vessel.” Zara’s eyes unfocus slightly, seeing something beyond the dimly lit maintenance

corridor. “The explosion took out three Corsairian ships and bought enough time for the refugee transport we were protecting to reach safety.”

“She sounds brave,” I offer, unsure what else to say.

“She was stupid.” The words come sharp and sudden, surprising me. “Brave, yes. But also stupid and reckless and...” Zara’s voice catches. “And I would have done exactly the same thing in her position.”

The admission hangs between us, raw with a vulnerability I hadn’t expected from the composed first officer. My implants register the subtle changes in her breathing, the microscopic tremors in her hands that she’s trying to control.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and mean it.

“Don’t be.” She straightens, composure returning. “My point is, I understand running. I understand building walls. After Nexia died, I spent two years taking the most dangerous missions I could find, hoping each one would be my last.” Her gaze finds mine again, sharp with insight. “Sound familiar?”

Too familiar. I look away, uncomfortable with how easily she’s read me. “What changed?”

“Cirdox found me.” A genuine smile softens her features. “Or rather, I tried to rob him and nearly got myself killed in the process. He offered me a job instead of a funeral. Said if I was so determined to die, I might as well do it while accomplishing something worthwhile.”

Despite everything, a laugh escapes me. “That sounds like him.”

“He has a habit of collecting strays.” Her tail flicks with affection. “Broken people

with useful skills and death wishes. He gives them purpose, a place to belong. A family.”

The word strikes a chord deep inside me, resonating with something I’ve denied myself for so long. Family. Not by blood, but by choice. By shared purpose and mutual protection.

“I never asked for a family,” I say quietly.

“None of us did.” Zara shrugs. “But here we are anyway.”

I return to the panel, needing the distraction of work while I process her words. The silence between us stretches, but it’s no longer uncomfortable. There’s an understanding now, a foundation laid that wasn’t there before.

“He’s getting worse, isn’t he?” I finally ask, the question that’s been weighing on me since I left Cirdox’s quarters. “The bond-sickness.”

Zara doesn’t pretend to misunderstand. “Yes. Faster than he’s letting on.”

“Is he going to die?” The words come out smaller than I intended, vulnerable in ways I haven’t allowed myself to be.

“That depends on you.” Her gaze is steady, non-judgmental. “The mate-bond isn’t something I fully understand—Kyvernian biology is complex—but I know it’s not just physical. It’s a choice. A commitment.”

“A trap,” I mutter, though the word lacks conviction.

“Is it?” She tilts her head. “Or is it just another word for connection? For letting someone matter enough that you’d risk pain for the chance at something real?”

I don't answer, focusing instead on the final adjustments to the shield harmonics. My implants helpfully inform me that my cortisol levels are elevated, that my breathing has become slightly irregular—physical manifestations of the emotional turmoil I'm trying to ignore.

“He wouldn't force this on you,” Zara continues when I remain silent. “Even if it kills him. That's just who he is.”

“I know.” And I do know. That's what makes this so complicated, so terrifying. Cirdox has given me every opportunity to walk away, even as the bond-sickness consumes him. He's placed my freedom above his own survival, a concept so foreign to my experience that I still struggle to fully believe it.

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“So what are you going to do about it?” Zara asks, the question gentle but direct.

I close the access panel, the shield modifications complete. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.” Her certainty is unnerving. “You’re just afraid to admit it.”

Before I can respond, my neural interface pings with an incoming message from the medbay. Cirdox’s vital signs are fluctuating dangerously. The bond-sickness is accelerating.

“He needs you,” Zara says, reading the alert that’s flashing across my enhanced vision. “Now.”

I rise, suddenly decisive despite the fear still coiling in my gut. “Come with me?”

She seems surprised by the request, but nods. “Of course.”

As we make our way through the ship’s corridors, I find myself grateful for her presence. Not because I need protection or guidance, but because for the first time in years, I don’t want to face something alone.

The medbay’s clinical efficiency hits my enhanced senses like a wall—antiseptic compounds at 147 percent above standard environmental levels, atmospheric scrubbers working at maximum capacity to maintain sterility. Cirdox occupies the primary diagnostic bed, wings draped limply over the sides, markings pulsing with an intensity that makes my implants stutter in their analysis. My enhanced vision automatically begins cataloging his condition, but I shut it down. I don’t need data to

tell me what I can see with my own eyes—he's getting worse.

"You look terrible," I say, aiming for lightness but hearing the strain in my voice.

His crimson eyes open, focusing on me with an intensity that makes my pulse jump. "Your bedside manner needs work, little hacker."

"Good thing I'm not a doctor then." I move closer, fighting the urge to run when his wings twitch at my approach. Every step feels like a choice between helping him and protecting him. From Kira. From me. From everything that's coming. "Can you walk?"

He starts to sit up, his movements careful but determined. "I'm not an invalid. I'm just taking precautions for now."

"No, you're just burning up from the inside out because you're too stubborn to admit you need real help." The words come out sharper than intended, edged with the fear lodged in my chest.

His laugh is rough but genuine. "Says the female who'd rather face death than admit she needs anyone."

The accuracy of that observation stings, especially now. While he sees it as simple stubbornness, I know it's the only way to keep people safe. To keep him safe. But maybe pushing people away isn't enough anymore. Maybe it never was.

"Come on, Captain. Let's get you somewhere more comfortable than this sterile hell."

He doesn't argue as I help him up, though I feel the slight tremor in his muscles. His wing brushes against my arm as we walk, the contact sending electricity through my

nerves that has nothing to do with my implants and everything to do with the way my body responds to his proximity.

Zara follows at a discreet distance, her presence a silent support that I find myself unexpectedly grateful for. She catches my eye as we reach the corridor, giving me a small nod before turning to head toward the bridge. Leaving us alone. Trusting me with her captain. Her family.

The walk to his quarters feels endless, each step measured and careful. I'm acutely aware of his heat against my side, the way his breathing catches when the fever spikes. Part of me wants to tell him about Kira, about the threat looming over us both. But the words stick in my throat, tangled with the fear of making him a bigger target than he already is.

When we finally reach his quarters, he sinks onto the bed with barely concealed relief. I hover awkwardly by the door, caught between the instinct to run and the pull that keeps drawing me back to him.

"Stay," he says softly, patting the space beside him. "Unless you have more urgent matters in engineering?"

I stiffen, wondering if he somehow senses my unease. But his expression is open, curious rather than accusatory.

"I should check the shield generators," I hedge, though we both know it's an excuse. "I've been modifying them to better withstand Eclipse weapons."

"They can wait." His voice roughens as another wave of fever hits, but his gaze remains steady on mine. "Tell me something about yourself, Neon. Something real."

I should leave. Should focus on finding a way to stop Kira before she can follow



through on her threats. Every survival instinct I've honed screams at me to run, to protect myself—to protect him—from this dangerous attachment forming between us. My enhanced vision automatically begins calculating escape routes, mapping the fastest path to the nearest airlock.

But as I watch him fight against the bond-sickness, something inside me fractures. The walls I've built so carefully begin to crack, letting in emotions my implants can't quite categorize. Maybe I've been running so long I've forgotten how to stay.

"Don't," I whisper, more to myself than him. "Don't make me feel this. Don't make me want to stay when I know how dangerous that is."

His wings shift, creating patterns of shadow that remind me too much of how safe I felt wrapped in their shelter. "Then run," he says softly, his voice rough with fever. "If that's what you truly want, I won't stop you. There are other Brotherhood ships still at the dock."

The choice he offers—real freedom, not just the illusion of it—makes something in my chest crack open. Because that's the problem, isn't it? I don't want to run. Not from him. But staying means putting him at risk. God, I'm tired of running. Tired of letting the past dictate my future. But I'm terrified of what staying might mean.

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Zara's words echo in my mind: "Is it just another word for connection? For letting someone matter enough that you'd risk pain for the chance at something real?"

So I stay, perching carefully on the edge of his bed. "What do you want to know?"

His smile is gentle despite the pain evident in his eyes. "Everything. But let's start with something simple. What made you choose the name Neon?"

I almost laugh at that. Of all the things he could ask about—my past, my skills, the danger hunting us—he asks about my name. But maybe that's safer than the other truths burning in my throat.

"It's... complicated," I hedge, feeling oddly vulnerable. "And honestly kind of silly."

"We have time." He shifts, making room for me to sit more comfortably. "Unless you're planning to run again?"

I roll my eyes, but can't quite hide my smile. "I chose it because neon is a noble gas—it doesn't react easily with other elements. Stays separate. Safe." I pause, suddenly self-conscious. "Plus, it glows bright enough to cut through darkness. Like my implants."

"That doesn't sound silly at all," he says, his expression thoughtful. "It sounds rather brilliant, actually."

"Oh, just wait." I can feel my cheeks warming. "The full name is Neon Valkyrie—after these ancient warrior women who chose who lived and died in battle."

I thought I was being so deep and mysterious, choosing who lives or dies in the networks.” I cover my face with my hands. “I spent three days practicing my ‘mysterious hacker’ voice in front of a mirror.”

His laugh is warm and genuine, not mocking at all. “Please tell me you still have that voice.”

“Absolutely not.” But I’m grinning now too, the tension easing from my shoulders despite everything. “Though sometimes I wonder if I chose the name or if it chose me. Especially now.”

“Fitting,” he murmurs, his wing brushing against my back in a touch that feels more comforting than possessive. “Though I think you react more than you’d like to admit, mysterious hacker voice and all.”

I should bristle at that, should maintain the walls I’ve built so carefully. Instead, I find myself relaxing slightly, letting his warmth seep into my tired muscles. “Maybe. Sometimes.” A beat passes before I add, softer, “Like now.”

His breath catches, and I feel the bond between us pulse with something that makes my implants stutter. “Tell me more,” he says softly. “Please.”

And maybe it’s the fever making him vulnerable, or maybe it’s Zara’s words still echoing in my mind—about family, about connection, about letting someone matter—but I find myself wanting to share. Wanting to trust. Wanting to believe that maybe, just maybe, we can face what’s coming together.

“I learned to hack because it was the only way to survive in the lower levels,” I say, the words coming easier than I expected. “But Kai and Kira—they showed me it could be more than that. We were going to change things, expose corruption, make a difference.” I swallow hard. “Until everything went wrong.”

His hand finds mine, his touch gentle despite the heat burning beneath his skin. “And now? What do you want to change?”

The question hits harder than he probably intends. Because what I want to change most is the past—want to save Kai, want to stop Kira from joining the Eclipse, want to prevent all of this from happening. But I can’t. All I can do is try to stop her now, before she destroys everything I’ve grown to care about.

“I want...” My voice catches. How do I tell him I want to stay, want to trust this thing growing between us, but I’m terrified that doing so will get him killed? “I want to stop running. But I don’t know how when the thing I’m running from keeps finding new ways to hurt the people I care about.”

His wings curl around us, creating a private sanctuary against the stars. “I’m stronger than you think, little hacker. And I’m not going anywhere.”

“The bond-sickness might have other ideas about that.” And Kira might have even worse ones, I don’t add.

He tugs me closer, until I’m practically in his lap, surrounded by his heat and the protective shelter of his wings. “Then give me a reason to fight it. Give us both a reason to stop running.”

I should pull away. Should tell him about Kira, about her threats, about how being close to me might be a death sentence. But when his lips find mine, soft and questioning, I find myself answering with a hunger that surprises us both. Because maybe this—this connection, this trust, this growing love—is worth fighting for. Worth dying for, even.

I let myself drown in the sensation of his touch, the gentle yet firm pressure of his hands as they explore my body. His fingers trace the curve of my waist, the dip of my

spine, each touch sending shivers of pleasure coursing through me. I can feel the heat radiating from his skin, the fever of the bond-sickness making his touch almost unbearably intense. But there's something more beneath the heat—a tenderness, a reverence that makes my heart ache.

His lips find mine again, the kiss deepening into something urgent and hungry. I can taste the faint metallic tang of his blood, the sweetness of his breath, and something else—a hint of desperation, a need that mirrors my own. His hands slide under my shirt, fingers tracing patterns on my skin that make me gasp and arch into his touch. Each caress is a question, a plea for permission, and I answer with a silent yes, my body pressing against his, seeking more.

He breaks the kiss only to trail his lips down my neck, tasting the salt of my skin, feeling the pulse that races beneath his touch. His breath is hot against my throat, each exhale sending shivers down my spine. “Is this okay?” he murmurs, his voice rough with desire and something deeper—a vulnerability that makes my heart clench. I nod, helping him remove my shirt, baring myself to him in more ways than one. “God, yes,” I whisper, my voice barely a breath.

His hands explore my body with a reverence that makes me shiver, tracing the curves and contours as if memorizing every inch. I can feel the heat radiating from his skin, the barely contained fever of the bond-sickness that makes his touch both a pleasure and a torment. His wings curl around us, creating a cocoon of warmth and privacy, blocking out the rest of the universe until there's only us, only this moment.

His lips find mine again, the kiss deepening with an intensity that leaves me breathless. I can feel his heart pounding against my chest, the rhythm matching my own as we lose ourselves in the sensation. His hands slide lower, tracing the line of my hips, making my breath hitch in anticipation. Every touch, every kiss, feels like a promise—a promise of something more than just physical connection, something deeper and more profound. And for the first time in years, I find myself wanting to

believe in that promise, wanting to trust in the possibility of more.

When we finally break apart, reality crashes back like a wave of ice water. My implants helpfully catalog the physiological responses—elevated heart rate, dilated pupils, increased oxytocin levels—but they can't quantify the war raging inside me. The part that wants to run, to protect both of us from the inevitable pain of attachment, battles against the part that's tired of being alone. Tired of letting fear dictate my choices.

I rest my forehead against his chest, listening to his thundering heartbeat while my enhanced senses register the fever still burning beneath his skin. The bond-sickness hasn't improved—if anything, this intimacy has made it worse. Another thing to feel guilty about. Another way I'm hurting someone I care about.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

“Stop thinking so hard,” he murmurs, his fingers trailing through my hair. “I can practically hear your processors overheating.”

I want to laugh, but the sound sticks in my throat like shattered code. He sees right through me—through all my calculations and risk assessments and desperate attempts to quantify something that can’t be measured. “I don’t know how to do this,” I whisper, my enhanced vision cataloging the way his tribal markings pulse with fever. “Everyone I let close either leaves or dies. I can’t... I don’t know how to trust that you’ll be different.”

His wings curl tighter, creating a sanctuary of shadow and warmth that makes my usual tactical awareness feel irrelevant. The gesture is protective but not confining—offering shelter while leaving the choice to stay mine. “Then we learn together,” he murmurs, his voice rough with emotion that bypasses all my defensive protocols. “No guarantees. No certainties. Just us, figuring it out as we go.”

As I trace the glowing patterns on his chest, feeling his heart thunder beneath bronze skin, my neural interface flashes with an alert—an incoming transmission, encrypted but unmistakable in its origin. Kira. Always watching. Always waiting.

“We need to move,” I say, my voice stronger now. “The Obsidian Haven isn’t safe. They know where we are.”

“Who knows?” he asks, instantly alert despite his condition.

“The Black Eclipse. They’re coming for us.” Not a lie, but not the whole truth either. I can’t bring myself to tell him about Kira yet, about the personal vendetta that’s put

him and his entire crew in danger.

He pushes himself up, wings mantling with determination despite the obvious effort it costs him. “We need to warn the crew. Get the ship ready.”

I help him stand, noting how the bond-sickness seems to have eased slightly. Not gone—nowhere near gone—but maybe changed by what we’ve shared. “I’ll need access to the ship’s core systems. If they try to hack us during departure—”

“Whatever you need,” he says without hesitation. “I trust you, Neon.”

The words hit me harder than I expect, making my throat tight. Trust. Such a simple thing, but so terrifyingly powerful. I’ve spent so long running from it, hiding from it, believing it would get me killed. But maybe it’s what will save us instead.

“We’re probably going to die,” I warn him, only half joking. “The Eclipse won’t stop.”

“Then we fight,” he says simply, his wings mantling with determination despite his weakness. “Together.”

As we head for the bridge, my neural interface catalogs our chances of survival, running probability scenarios and threat assessments. The numbers aren’t good. But for the first time since Kai died, I don’t care about the odds.

Because some things are worth fighting for, no matter the cost. And this fierce, impossible love growing between us? It’s worth living for.

Even if we have to burn the whole galaxy down to protect it.

Chapter 12



Cirdox

“That facility used to house enough luminore to heal half the Orion system,” I tell Neon, my wings shifting restlessly as I study the skeletal structure clinging to the asteroid’s surface like a derelict ship waiting to be stripped. “Now it’s just another abandoned prize, ripe for salvage after Garrox’s greed picked it clean.”

The Brotherhood’s latest intelligence suggested a cache of medical supplies might still be hidden in the lower levels—the kind of score that could fill our holds and save lives in the outer colonies where luminore shortages are hitting hardest. Even a picked-over facility like this could yield enough resources to justify the risk, especially with three of our supply ships recently lost to Eclipse raiders while running medicine to desperate settlements. Pirates we might be, but at least we make sure our plunder reaches those who need it most, not just those who can pay the highest price.

The asteroid field surrounding Morcrest shimmers like a shattered mirror, reflecting the cold light of distant stars. Jagged obsidian shards, remnants of some ancient celestial collision, drift in silent patterns, their edges sharp enough to shred a ship’s hull at a careless touch. The Void Reaver hangs in the shadows of a particularly large fragment, its cloaking systems masking our energy signature from prying sensors.

My wings twitch with tension as I scan the storage facility—a framework of metal and glass that looks more like a forgotten monument than a functioning medical depot. The bond-sickness burns through my veins, making my tribal markings pulse with fever, but I force myself to focus. Something about this place feels wrong. Under High Chieftain Garrox, it was a testament to corruption, hoarding healing while colonies suffered.

The facility’s unnatural stillness mocks everything Droilin promised when he took power. I remember Kyor standing in this same loading bay, his proud features lined with desperate hope as he negotiated with Garrox for a pittance—just enough credits

to keep the Brotherhood's medical supplies flowing to the outer colonies. "Sometimes we have to compromise," he'd said, not meeting my eyes. "For the greater good."

But there was no greater good waiting at the end of that devil's bargain. Just a cell in an STI prison where Kyor now rots, betrayed by the very system he thought he could manipulate. His attempt to play both sides, to extract some small benefit for the Brotherhood while working with Garrox, ended exactly as I warned him it would. The memory of his face when they led him away, of the bitter resignation in his eyes, still haunts me. Now the facility stands empty, its shadows holding secrets that whisper of broken promises and shattered dreams.

"You know this place well," Neon observes from her position at the tactical station, her enhanced eyes studying my reaction.

"Too well," I growl, memories of past raids surfacing like phantom pain. "Lost good people trying to liberate supplies from here. Back when Garrox's guards shot first and never bothered asking questions."

The bond-sickness burns through my veins, intensifying with each pulse of the Void Reaver's engines. My wings twitch, their membrane-thin edges quivering with barely contained tension. The fever makes my skin prickle beneath my armor, a constant reminder of the biological clock ticking down. Neon's presence on the bridge, barely a meter away, both soothes and inflames the ache. Her proximity eases the worst of the symptoms, but it also amplifies the primal need to claim her, to complete the bond before it's too late.

"Ready when you are, Captain," Neon says, her voice cool and focused as she finalizes the infiltration protocols. Her neural implants cast an ethereal blue glow across her skin, highlighting the sharp angles of her face as she works. She's a whirlwind of controlled energy, her fingers dancing across the console, weaving

through the facility's security systems with practiced ease.

The facility's security systems pulse with an unnatural rhythm that sets my enhanced senses on edge. Something about the energy patterns feels wrong—too precise, too calculated. Like a predator lying in wait.

“These encryption protocols are... odd,” Neon mutters, her neural implants flaring brighter as she digs deeper into the facility's defenses. “They're using a hybrid system I've never seen before. STI architecture layered with Black Eclipse modifications, but there's something else...” She trails off, her enhanced eyes narrowing. “Something almost organic.”

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“Organic?” I move closer, studying the patterns flowing across her display. The bond-sickness flares at her proximity, making my tribal markings pulse with barely contained heat. “What do you mean?”

“The system’s learning from my intrusion attempts,” she explains, her fingers flying across the interface. “Adapting in real-time. It’s like... like someone took my own code and evolved it into something new.” Her voice catches slightly. “Something dangerous.”

“Wait.” Neon’s voice turns sharp, her enhanced eyes widening as recognition hits. “These modifications... I know this coding style.” Her fingers freeze over the interface, implants pulsing erratically. “Only one person could have twisted my protocols like this.”

“Kira,” I growl, the name sending a fresh wave of protective fury through me. My wings mantle instinctively despite the fever burning beneath my skin. The bond-sickness flares hot at the sight of Neon’s distress, primal instincts screaming to eliminate the threat to my mate.

The technical brilliance needed to corrupt Neon’s work is beyond my comprehension, but I understand threats. And seeing Kira’s signature in these systems, knowing she’s been here, watching, waiting... it makes my blood boil despite the fever already consuming me.

“Fall back,” I order, already reaching for my plasma blade. “If Kira’s involved—”

“Too late,” Neon cuts in, her enhanced eyes widening as new data streams across her

vision. “Multiple contacts. They’re already inside.”

The words barely leave her lips before the facility’s emergency protocols engage. Blast doors slam shut with pneumatic force, sealing us in the main cargo hold. Emergency lights strobe red, casting twisted shadows across empty storage containers and abandoned equipment. The bond-sickness roars through my veins, but the primal need to protect my mate burns even hotter.

“Get behind me,” I growl, wings mantling despite the agony that tears through them. My enhanced senses strain against the fever, cataloging every shadow, every potential threat. The cargo hold suddenly feels like a cage, and Neon is trapped here. Because of me.

Emergency lights strobe in a pattern that makes my tribal markings pulse in response, each flash illuminating another corner where death might lurk. The recycled air carries traces of weapon oil and modified armor—distinctive scents that set my predatory instincts on high alert. Someone’s here, watching, waiting. And they’re between us and freedom.

“We’re surrounded,” I murmur, low enough that only Neon can hear. My wings quiver with the effort of staying extended, but I’d rather collapse than leave her exposed. “At least three hostiles, maybe more.”

The bond-sickness might be burning me alive from the inside, but I’ve never felt more focused. Every cell in my body screams to protect her, to eliminate any threat to my mate. Even if it kills me.

Then I smell it—the faint, metallic tang of modified combat armor. The subtle whirl of enhanced servos. The nearly silent footsteps of soldiers trained to move like ghosts.

“Contact,” I growl, my wings snapping wide despite the pain that tears through them. “Three o’clock high.”

The first plasma bolt screams through the air before I finish speaking. I twist, wings creating a living shield between the attack and Neon. The shot impacts my armor, sending waves of agony through my fever-wracked body. But the bond-sickness transforms the pain into something else—raw energy fueled by the desperate need to protect my mate.

Three Eclipse soldiers emerge from the shadows, their modified armor gleaming with an unnatural sheen. They move with inhuman grace, servos whirring as augmented muscles propel them forward. Standard Eclipse troops don’t move like this. These are something else. Something new.

“Captain!” Zara’s warning comes just as my vision blurs, the bond-sickness striking at the worst possible moment. I stagger, wings trembling as another wave of fever hits. The closest soldier sees my weakness and lunges, plasmablade humming with lethal intent.

The battle dissolves into controlled chaos. Zara and Grig engage the remaining soldiers while Neon covers my momentary weakness. My vision swims, tribal markings burning bright enough to cast crimson shadows across the metal walls. Every movement costs more than it should, the bond-sickness turning simple maneuvers into exercises in pure willpower.

But there’s something wrong about this fight. The soldiers aren’t pressing their advantage, aren’t using tactics that could easily overwhelm us. Instead, they’re... testing. Probing. Like they’re gathering data rather than trying to kill us.

“They’re scanning us,” Neon confirms through gritted teeth as she parries another strike. “Combat analysis protocols. Everything we do, every move we make—they’re

sending it somewhere.”

The last soldier falls, their modified armor crackling with residual energy. But before I can warn the others, the fallen soldier’s neural implants pulse with a final transmission. Data streaming outward, carrying everything they learned about our fighting styles, our weaknesses, our patterns.

The cargo bay doors hiss open, flooding the space with harsh light from the corridor. A tactical team sweeps in, weapons raised but not yet targeting. A woman strides through their formation, her expression grim as she surveys the fallen Eclipse soldiers.

“Sophisticated combat analysis systems,” she observes, crouching to examine one of the modified bodies. “The Eclipse is evolving their methods. These aren’t standard troops anymore.” Her piercing blue eyes lift to meet mine. “Though I suspect you’ve already figured that out, Captain Thar’Kal.”

I spin toward the sound, wings flaring despite the agony that tears through them. A figure emerges from the shadows, her tactical team spreading out behind her with practiced efficiency.

“Well, well,” a familiar voice cuts through the darkness, precise and cold as a blade. “The infamous Captain Thar’Kal and his crew.”

I recognize that voice—Officer Neve McCoy, the Planetary Police investigator who exposed Kyor’s corruption. Her reputation for relentless pursuit of justice is matched only by her uncanny ability to appear at the most inopportune moments. The last time our paths crossed, she was building the case against Kyor’s luminore smuggling operation. She let me go then, acknowledging that some forms of piracy serve a greater good. But her presence here now can’t be coincidence.

“And...” McCoy pauses, her sharp gaze locking onto me with unmistakable recognition. “Lyra Arden. Last time I saw you, you were disappearing into the maintenance shafts of Orion Outpost. Right after that interesting data breach in the STI’s secure servers.”

I stiffen beside her, my wings twitching as if ready to shield her from a threat. My eyes narrow, the possessiveness unmistakable. “Lyra—?”

“Not now,” Neon cuts in sharply, shooting me a warning glance before turning back to McCoy. “I go by Neon Valkyrie these days. And I doubt you tracked me across half the sector just to reminisce.”

Lyra Arden. My wings shift restlessly at the revelation of her true name, a piece of herself she’s kept hidden even from me. The bond-sickness burns hotter in my veins as I study her profile, noting the slight tension in her jaw, the way her enhanced eyes flicker with barely contained anxiety. She guards her secrets like a dragon hoards treasure, each one a wall built from past pain and betrayal. But I’ve earned the right to know this truth, to understand the woman behind the hacker’s mask she shows the world. Later, when we’re alone, I’ll have words with my mate about this.



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The bond-sickness flares hot in my veins as I step between McCoy and Neon, my wings mantling protectively despite the fever weakening my muscles. “A lot’s changed since Kyor’s arrest, Officer McCoy. Including who your real enemies are.”

“Has it?” McCoy’s footsteps echo as she emerges fully into view, her red hair gleaming like fresh blood under the emergency lights. Her piercing blue eyes miss nothing as they scan our group, lingering on my chest markings pulsing with fever. “Or are we all just playing different sides of the same corrupt game?”

My wings shift restlessly, the bond-sickness making each movement cost more than it should. But I force myself to focus through the fever, to see the careful way McCoy positions herself—close enough to appear non-threatening, far enough to maintain tactical advantage. “You could say the the game changed when the Eclipse moved from plain old extortion and into... acquisitions.”

“Interesting theory,” McCoy says, her tone carefully neutral. “And what evidence supports these... allegations?”

“Unless those records have been falsified,” Neon cuts in, her enhanced eyes narrowing as she studies McCoy.

McCoy’s expression doesn’t change, but something shifts in her eyes. “Interesting theory. Care to elaborate?”

“Not particularly.” Neon’s neural implants pulse brighter as she works, probably scanning McCoy’s credentials even while maintaining this verbal sparring match. “But I’m curious why a decorated officer like yourself is skulking around an

abandoned medical depot instead of chasing real criminals.”

“Who says I’m not?” McCoy signals her team to lower their weapons—not holster them, but no longer aimed directly at our heads. A calculated show of... trust? Or manipulation? “The Black Eclipse has compromised everything they touch. Including the STI’s most secure facilities. Neutralizing corruption is my area of expertise.”

The revelation hangs in the air like plasma smoke, acrid and dangerous. I exchange glances with Zara, seeing my own suspicions reflected in her eyes. This could be exactly what we need—or another trap in a game we’re only beginning to understand.

“Prove it,” I challenge, though the effort of maintaining my defensive stance makes my wings tremble. The bond-sickness burns hotter, fed by the adrenaline of confrontation and Neon’s proximity. “Why should we trust you?”

“Because I’ve been tracking their operations since before they got their hooks into Kyor Drakonforge,” McCoy says, her voice carrying the weight of bitter experience. “Since before they started using luminore shipments as leverage against outer colonies.”

“The Tasha incident,” Neon says suddenly, her enhanced eyes narrowing. “You were the one who exposed High Chieftain Garrox’s corruption and helped the human girl. Who protected her when everyone else believed the lies.”

McCoy inclines her head, that sharp smile softening slightly. “Someone had to stand up for the truth. Just like someone needs to expose how deep the Eclipse’s influence really goes.” She pauses, her gaze flickering between us. “The question is, are you interested in being those someones? Or should I arrest you all and sort it out later?”

The bond-sickness chooses that moment to strike hard, sending fire racing through my veins. My wings falter, the effort of keeping them extended becoming almost

impossible. Neon moves closer instinctively, her presence both soothing and intensifying the fever burning beneath my skin.

“Captain?” Zara’s voice carries layers of meaning—concern for my condition, questioning about McCoy’s offer, readiness to fight our way out if necessary.

I study McCoy through the haze of fever, weighing options that grow more limited with each passing moment. She could be lying. Could be working for the Eclipse herself. But something in her eyes, in the way she recognized Neon’s abilities, suggests otherwise.

“What exactly are you proposing?” I ask, forcing my voice steady despite the tremors wracking my body.

“An alliance,” McCoy says simply. “You help me trace these shipments back to their source, share what you know about Eclipse operations. In return, I provide official cover for your activities and access to STI resources.” Her gaze shifts to Neon. “Including protection from certain parties who might be hunting talented hackers.”

Neon stiffens beside me. “You know about that?”

“I know someone’s been using classified protocols to track you. Someone with intimate knowledge of both STI and Eclipse systems.” McCoy’s expression hardens. “Someone who knows exactly what they’re looking for.”

The implications hit like a physical blow. She knows about Kira. Or at least suspects. The question is, how much does she know? And can we risk trusting her with the full truth?

“And if we refuse?” I ask, though the bond-sickness makes the words scrape against my throat.

“Then I arrest you all for trespassing, theft, and whatever else I can make stick.” McCoy shrugs, the gesture almost elegant in its casualness. “But I don’t think you will. Because you know as well as I do that we’re stronger together than apart.”

I look at Neon, seeing the same conflict in her eyes that I feel burning in my blood. Trust is dangerous. Allies can become enemies in the space between heartbeats. But trying to fight the Eclipse alone... that’s suicide.

“Your call, little hacker,” I say softly, my wings drooping slightly as another wave of fever hits. “You’re the one they’re hunting.”

Neon’s fingers brush against my arm, the touch sending electricity through my overheated skin. “We need resources,” she admits reluctantly. “And someone with official authority to back us up when this gets messy.”

“When?” McCoy asks, amusement coloring her tone.

“Trust me,” Neon says, her voice carrying an edge of bitter experience. “With the Eclipse involved, it’s always when, never if.”

“Then we have a deal?” McCoy extends her hand, the gesture both offer and challenge.

I meet Neon’s gaze one last time, seeing in her enhanced eyes the same desperate hope I feel—that this time, trust won’t lead to betrayal. That this time, we might actually have a chance.

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“Deal,” I say, clasping McCoy’s hand despite the fever making my grip unsteady. “But if you betray us...”

“You’ll kill me,” she finishes, that sharp smile returning. “I’d expect nothing less. Now, shall we discuss what was really stored in this facility? Because I don’t think either of us believes it was just medical supplies.”

The facility’s interior feels colder than the void outside, each breath visible in the recycled air. My wings twitch with barely contained tension as we follow McCoy deeper into the complex, past rows of empty storage units that once held enough luminore to power entire systems.

“The Eclipse didn’t just take over Kyor’s routes,” McCoy explains, her voice echoing off metal walls. “They inverted his entire operation. Where he smuggled luminore to help outer colonies, they’re using those same networks to control supply lines. Create artificial shortages.”

The words stir memories of the Brotherhood captains’ meeting—K’vex’s too-careful questions about our supply routes, Vornak’s aggressive posturing, Ralith’s calculated indifference. Could one of them be feeding information to the Eclipse? The thought sends a fresh wave of fever through me.

“I might have something useful for you,” I say, fighting to keep my voice steady despite the bond-sickness. “The Brotherhood recently lost several ships along supposedly secure routes. Routes that only our captains should know about.” I meet McCoy’s sharp gaze. “Cross-reference those disappearances with your Eclipse activity data. Might help identify their infiltration patterns.”

McCoy's expression doesn't change, but something like interest flickers in her eyes. "That could be... enlightening. Especially if we can establish a timeline of when specific routes were compromised."

"And if one of your captains is the leak?" Neon asks softly beside me, her enhanced eyes studying my reaction.

"Then we'll deal with that too," I growl, wings shifting restlessly. "One betrayal at a time."

"And in the meantime?" McCoy asks, her sharp gaze cutting through the shadows. "While we hunt for your traitor, the Eclipse continues weaponizing medical supplies. Making colonies beg for basic treatment."

"Forcing colonies to submit to their rule in exchange for medical treatment," I growl, the words tasting bitter. My wings shift restlessly, partly from the fever and partly from growing rage. "Using suffering as leverage."

"That's not all," Neon cuts in, her neural implants flaring as she accesses another terminal. "They're not just stockpiling luminore—they're modifying it. Running tests on different chemical compositions." Her enhanced eyes widen. "I think they're trying to create an enhanced version that only their people can use."

McCoy nods grimly. "Which makes this facility more than just a storage point. It was a testing ground. A place to perfect their control over who lives and who dies."

The implications land like a punch to the gut. This isn't just about power or profit anymore. It's about systematic extermination through selective treatment. About reshaping the very fabric of society by controlling who has access to life-saving medicine.

“How did you find this place?” I ask McCoy, fighting another wave of fever that makes my markings pulse erratically. “Why were you watching it?”

“We weren’t looking for you specifically,” she admits. “We were tracking unusual luminore shipments, trying to map the Eclipse’s distribution network. Your raid just happened to trip the same security alerts we were monitoring.”

It makes sense—too much sense, perhaps. But we’re running out of options, out of time. The bond-sickness burns hotter with each passing moment, and Kira’s presence in the facility’s systems proves she’s always one step ahead of us.

“We need to shut this down,” I say, my voice rough with pain and determination. “All of it. The testing, the distribution network, everything.”

“Agreed.” McCoy’s expression hardens. “But we do this smart. Gather evidence that can’t be buried or denied. Build a case that will expose not just the Eclipse, but everyone who’s been helping them maintain power.”

“And in the meantime?” Neon asks, her voice tight with barely contained fury. “How many more colonies suffer while we play politics?”

“We help where we can,” I say, catching her gaze. “Keep smuggling pure luminore to those who need it most. But we have to be careful now—Kira’s watching. Learning. Planning.”

The name hangs heavy in the air, though McCoy doesn’t comment on it. Instead, she pulls up another set of classified files on her datapad. “Start with these shipping manifests. They show regular deliveries to coordinates that don’t exist in any official database.”

“Black sites,” Neon murmurs, her implants already processing the data. “Testing

facilities hidden in dead space.”

“Find them,” McCoy orders. “Map their network. Give me something I can use to bring them down—legally and permanently.”

It’s a start. A chance to fight back against the rot that’s been spreading through the galaxy like a cancer. But as another wave of fever washes over me, making my vision blur and my wings tremble, I can’t help but wonder if we’ll live long enough to see it through.

Because time is running out—for the colonies dependent on luminore, for my own survival, for all of us. And somewhere out there, Kira watches and waits, using everything she learns against us.

## Chapter 13

### Neon Valkyrie

TheVoidReaver’s maintenance bay smells of grease and burning metal as I crouch behind a gutted nav console, trying to focus on the delicate circuitry instead of the electric awareness of Cirdox’s presence. Every time he shifts position near the door, my implants helpfully track his movements, making it impossible to ignore how his wings cast shifting shadows across my workbench or how his fever-bright tribal markings pulse in time with my thundering heart.

“You’ve been at that for hours,” he says, his voice rough with barely contained need. The bond-sickness radiates from him in waves hot enough to make my enhanced senses malfunction. My fingers tremble as I connect another crystalline matrix, fighting the urge to go to him, to ease his pain the way we both know I could.



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His wing brushes my shoulder as he moves closer, the gentle touch sending shivers down my spine. “The Brotherhood lost another supply ship yesterday,” he murmurs, his crimson eyes dark with concern. “Third one this month. Right along a route that was supposed to be secure.”

I stiffen, the implications hitting hard even as my body betrays me by leaning into his touch. “You think one of your captains is compromised.”

“K’vex has been asking too many questions about our delivery schedules.” His wings shift restlessly, creating a cocoon of warmth around us that makes it hard to think. “And Vornak’s been pushing for more aggressive action against Eclipse territories. Could be genuine concern, or...”

“Or they’re testing your defenses,” I finish, my heart racing as he leans closer, his fever-hot breath ghosting across my neck. “That’s why we need this detector working. If we can prove the Eclipse is tainting luminore supplies...”

“We can expose whoever’s helping them distribute it,” he growls, his clawed fingers trailing down my arm in a possessive caress that makes my implants stutter and glitch. “But you’re pushing yourself too hard.”

I turn to face him, a mistake that brings us dangerously close. “Says the Kyvernian burning up with bond-sickness because his mate is too stubborn to commit.”

His eyes flash with heat that has nothing to do with fever. “My mate is protecting herself from past hurts. I can be patient.” He cups my face with surprising gentleness. “But watching you work yourself to exhaustion while these encrypted transmissions

eat at you... that's harder to bear."

The tenderness in his voice cracks something inside me. My neural interface fills with streams of data as I access the stolen files, each line of code bringing me closer to answers I'm not sure I want to find. The encryption is sophisticated, bearing Kira's unmistakable signature. She always did have a flair for the elegant solution, even when using it for terrible purposes.

"I have to finish this," I whisper, though my hands have stilled on the components. "Before more ships disappear. Before the Eclipse's tainted luminore spreads further. Before..."

"Before you lose someone else you care about?" he asks softly, understanding darkening his gaze.

I close my eyes against the truth in his words, but his warmth surrounds me, offering shelter I'm finally starting to believe I deserve.

> INITIATING DECRYPTION SEQUENCE...

>

> WARNING: Hostile code patterns detected

>

> PROCEED Y/N?

My hands hover over the interface, suddenly unsure. These files could tell us everything—who's working with the Eclipse, where they're striking next, how deep the conspiracy really goes. But they could also be exactly what Kira wants me to find.

A trail of digital breadcrumbs leading straight into another trap.

“You’re hesitating,” Cirdox observes, his voice carefully neutral. “Why?”

“Because I know her,” I say softly, memories of late-night coding sessions and shared dreams of exposing corruption flooding back. “Know how she thinks. These transmissions... they’re too easy to track. Too perfectly laid out.” I rake my fingers through my hair, a nervous habit from my early hacking days. “It’s like she wanted me to find them.”

“Then spring the trap,” he growls, the predatory note in his voice making my pulse jump. “But on our terms.”

Before I can respond, my upgrade chimes with an incoming transmission. McCoy’s face appears in my enhanced vision, her expression grim. “We’ve got movement. Eclipse transport just entered the sector, heading toward the abandoned medical depot near Morcrest. Small vessel, probably a scout, but the signature matches what we discussed.”

Ice floods my veins as the implications hit. “They’re testing our new defenses,” I say, already running calculations. “Seeing if we can detect their modified luminore shipments.”

“Agreed.” McCoy’s image flickers as she accesses additional data. “My team’s tracking them, but we need to know what’s in that cargo hold. If they’re moving more of their tainted supplies...”

“We’ll handle it,” Cirdox cuts in, his wings mantling with barely contained eagerness despite the fever burning through him. “The Void Reaver can be there in two hours.”

“Wait.” I grab his arm, feeling the heat of his skin even through his armor. “You can

barely stand. The bond-sickness—”

“Will have to wait,” he says firmly, though I see how the effort of maintaining control makes his tribal markings pulse erratically against his bronze skin. His wings shift restlessly, creating patterns of shadow that draw my eye despite my best efforts to stay focused. “This is our chance to prove the Eclipse is weaponizing medical supplies. We can’t waste it.”

He’s right, damn him. But watching him fight through the fever, seeing how each movement costs him more energy he can’t spare, makes something twist painfully in my chest. My implants helpfully inform me that my own vital signs are elevated—heart rate increased, stress hormones spiking, emotional response patterns indicating heightened concern. They also note, with clinical precision, how my body temperature rises 1.2 degrees when his wing accidentally brushes my shoulder.

“Fine,” I say, gathering the half-finished detector components while trying to ignore how his scent—metal and smoke and something fiercely alien—makes my enhanced senses malfunction in the most inconvenient ways. “But we do this smart. No heroics, no unnecessary risks.” I meet his gaze steadily, though it costs me to see the fever burning in those crimson depths. “I mean it, Cirdox. I won’t watch someone else die because I wasn’t fast enough to save them.”

The words hang between us, heavy with unspoken meaning. His hand catches mine as I reach for the last component, the heat of his skin sending electricity through my nerve endings that has nothing to do with my implants and everything to do with the way he looks at me—like I’m something precious and dangerous all at once. We both know I’m not just talking about this mission. The ghost of Kai’s death, of Kira’s betrayal, shadows every choice I make.

“I’m not him,” Cirdox says softly, his hand catching mine. The contact sends electricity through my nerve endings, making my implants misfire spectacularly.

“And I’m not leaving.”

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“You might not have a choice,” I whisper, the words bitter on my tongue. “The bond-sickness—”

“Then give me a reason to fight it.” His thumb traces patterns on my wrist that make focusing nearly impossible. “Give us both a reason to stop running.”

I should pull away. Should focus on the mission, on stopping whatever the Eclipse is planning. Every survival instinct I’ve honed screams at me to maintain distance, to protect myself—to protect him—from what’s coming. My enhanced vision automatically begins calculating escape routes, mapping the fastest path to the nearest airlock.

But as I watch him struggle against the fever burning through his veins, something inside me fractures. The walls I’ve built so carefully begin to crack, letting in emotions my implants can’t quite categorize. Because maybe running isn’t the answer anymore. Maybe it never was.

“I’m scared,” I admit, the words barely a whisper. “Not of you. Of this. Of wanting something I might not get to keep.” My fingers trace one of his tribal markings, feeling how it pulses with fever beneath my touch. “Everyone I care about either leaves or dies. And you’re already burning up because I can’t—”

The words catch in my throat as I watch another tremor wrack his powerful frame. My enhanced vision catalogs his deteriorating condition with clinical precision—temperature climbing, muscle tremors increasing, neural patterns growing more erratic. All because of me. Because I’m too afraid to complete the bond, too damaged to give him what he needs to survive. Each day I hesitate, the bond-sickness

burns hotter in his veins, consuming him from the inside out. My indecision is literally killing him, and that knowledge tears at me worse than any Black Eclipse torture ever could.

“I’m killing you,” I whisper, the guilt crushing my chest like a quantum singularity. “Every time I pull away, every time I let my fear win—I’m choosing my comfort over your life. What kind of monster does that make me?” My hands shake as they map the fever-bright patterns on his skin, testament to the price he’s paying for my cowardice. “You deserve someone whole, someone brave enough to love you without reservation. Not... not someone so broken they’d rather watch you suffer than risk their heart.”

His wings snap forward, creating a sanctuary of shadow and warmth that blocks out everything else. “Then we face that fear together,” he says, his voice rough with emotion that bypasses all my defensive protocols. “No guarantees. No certainties. Just us, figuring it out as we go.”

When his lips find mine, it’s not the desperate clash I expected. Instead, it’s achingly gentle, full of all the things neither of us knows how to say. My enhanced senses catalog every detail—the slight tremor in his hands as they cup my face, the way his wings quiver with barely contained need, the taste of copper that suggests the fever is wearing him down faster than he admits.

The kiss speaks of everything we can’t put into words—trust earned through shared battles, desire that burns hotter than the bond-sickness in his veins, the weight of past pain and fragile hope for a future I never dared imagine. But as his wings start to curl around us, reality crashes back. We’re in the middle of a critical mission, with enemies potentially watching our every move.

I pull back reluctantly, though everything in me protests the distance. “We can’t,” I whisper, my voice rough with emotion I can’t quite suppress. “Not here. Not now.”

His wings quiver with barely contained need, but he nods, understanding in his crimson eyes. “Later,” he growls, the promise in his voice sending shivers down my spine despite my best efforts to maintain control.

My enhanced vision catalogs his vital signs—fever still burning hot, tribal markings pulsing with intensity that makes my implants stutter in their analysis. The bond-sickness isn’t getting better, and this interrupted intimacy probably isn’t helping. Another thing to feel guilty about. Another way I’m hurting someone I care about.

“Focus on the mission,” I say, as much to myself as to him. “We need to contact McCoy, figure out our next move.”

He straightens, though I can see the effort it costs him. “Always so practical, little hacker,” he teases, but there’s understanding beneath the playful tone. We both know what’s at stake—and that some things, no matter how desperately wanted, have to wait.

Before I can respond, my neural interface chimes with an urgent alert. The decryption program I left running has finally broken through Kira’s last firewall. Data streams across my vision, each revelation worse than the last.

“No,” I breathe, pulling away from Cirdox to access the full feed. “No, no, no.”

“What is it?” He moves with me, wings mantling protectively as he reads over my shoulder. “What did you find?”

“It’s worse than we thought.” My fingers fly across the interface, mapping connections that make my blood run cold. “Kira isn’t just working with the Eclipse. She’s helping them perfect their control over luminore distribution. Creating artificial shortages, targeting specific colonies...” My hands clench into fists. “Damn you, Kira. What happened to protecting people? What happened to exposing corruption?”



The data keeps coming, each new file adding another piece to a puzzle I wish I couldn't solve. Star charts, shipping manifests, classified STI communications—a web of conspiracy that reaches higher than I ever imagined.

“She’s talking to someone inside the STI,” I continue, my voice tight with barely contained fury. “High level. They’re planning something big. Something that—” I break off as a new file decrypts, its contents making my stomach drop. “No. They wouldn’t.”

“Show me,” Cirdox demands, his fever-bright eyes scanning the display. His wings curl tighter around us, as if he can somehow shield me from the truth we’re uncovering.

“Vulpexia,” I say, the word ashen in my mouth. “They’re going to hit Vulpexia. Use it as a demonstration of what happens to worlds that resist Eclipse control.” My fingers trace projected attack vectors across the star map. “If this works, if they succeed... they won’t just control luminore. They’ll control who lives and who dies across the entire sector.”

A spike of pain lances through my temple as another encrypted message breaks through my firewalls:

GETTING WARMER, VALKYRIE. BUT YOU’RE STILL NOT SEEING THE WHOLE PICTURE.REMEMBER WHAT I TAUGHT YOU—SOMETIMES THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE CODE IS WHAT’S NOT THERE.

“Kira,” I breathe, recognizing her signature. My hands tremble over the keys. “She’s watching. Right now.”

My fingers fly across the interface, tracking signal patterns that make my blood run cold. “McCoy,” I say, initiating an emergency transmission. “I need you online.

Now.”

Her face materializes in my enhanced vision almost immediately, expression sharp with concern. “What did you find?”

“Black Eclipse transport, heading into Vulpexian space.” My implants stream tactical data directly to her secure channel. “Small vessel, probably a scout, but the signature...” I pause, double-checking the encryption patterns. “It matches those modified ships we’ve been tracking. The ones carrying tainted luminore.”

McCoy’s eyes narrow as she processes the information. “How certain are you?”

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“Certain enough that I’ve triple-verified the signature patterns.” I stream the encrypted data through our secure channel, letting McCoy see the evidence herself. “The transport’s using modified shielding—same configuration we found at the medical depot. And the energy readings...” My enhanced vision highlights specific anomalies. “They match the tainted luminore shipments exactly.”

McCoy’s expression hardens as she analyzes the data. “Timeline?”

“Based on their current trajectory and speed, they’ll reach Vulpexian space in less than six hours.” My implants calculate possible scenarios, each one worse than the last. “If this is just a scout ship, the main fleet won’t be far behind.”

“And once they establish a foothold—”

“The entire sector becomes vulnerable,” I finish, watching the tactical projections play out across my neural interface. “They’ll control every major trade route, every medical supply line. Vulpexia’s just the beginning.”

Our eyes meet through the neural link, and I see my own grim understanding reflected in her expression. We both know what’s coming—and that stopping it will take more than just one rogue hacker or one determined officer. Ice floods my veins, freezing the lingering warmth of Cirdox. While I was letting myself feel something real, Kira was out there, setting her plans in motion. How many people will die because I let myself get distracted?

“We need to move,” I say, already reaching for my discarded clothes. “If they’re starting their advance—”

“Wait.” McCoy’s voice cuts through the comm with sudden urgency. “There’s something else you need to know. About the Vulpexian connection.”

I pause, noting the careful way she chooses her words. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“I have a contact there. Someone who might be able to help us stop whatever Kira’s planning.” Her image flickers in my enhanced vision. “Ambassador Ta’vag.”

“A politician?” I pull away from Cirdox, incredulity sharpening my voice. “You want me to trust a politician? After what happened with Kyor?” The memory of Kyor’s betrayal, of how his “help” nearly got us all killed, makes bile rise in my throat.

“Ta’vag is different,” McCoy insists, her usually sharp tone softening slightly. “He opposed Garrox’s luminore deals, fought against Eclipse influence in his sector. His fur ripples when he’s distressed—makes him a terrible liar, actually. The Eclipse would never trust him with their operations.”

I rake my fingers through my hair, that old nervous habit surfacing again. “Right. Because the last time someone vouched for an ally, it worked out so well.” The bitterness in my voice surprises even me.

“I wouldn’t suggest this if I wasn’t certain,” McCoy says quietly. “I’ve worked with Ta’vag before. He helped expose Garrox’s corruption when everyone else looked the other way.”

Cirdox moves closer, his fever-hot presence both comforting and distracting. “If McCoy trusts him, that’s worth considering. She’s not exactly known for giving trust easily.”

The words hit harder than they should, making my throat tight. Trust. Such a simple thing, but so terrifyingly powerful. I’ve spent so long running from it, hiding from it,

believing it would get me killed. But maybe it's what will save us instead.

"Fine," I say, already pulling up Ta'vag's records on my neural interface. "But I want everything—surveillance feeds, communication logs, anything that might help us verify his loyalties. And we do this carefully."

"Already sending the files," McCoy says. "But Neon? We're running out of time. If the Eclipse launches this attack—"

"I know." I close my eyes, feeling the weight of responsibility settle heavy on my shoulders. "If they succeed, Vulpexia won't just fall. It'll be the first of many."

Cirdox's wings create that familiar pattern of shadow and warmth that somehow makes even the worst situations feel manageable. "Then we fight," he says simply. "Together."

As we head for the bridge, my neural interface catalogs our chances of survival, running probability scenarios and threat assessments. The numbers aren't good. But for the first time since Kai died, since Kira revealed herself, since this whole mess began, I don't care about the odds.

Because for once, the odds and calculations don't matter. My implants can run probability scenarios until they overheat—it won't change what needs to be done.

## Chapter 14

### Cirdox

I grip the edge of the tactical display, fighting to keep my balance as the safe house's obsidian walls blur and swim before my eyes. The bond-sickness tears through my veins like plasma fire, turning even the recycled air into acid in my lungs. My wings

tremble against my back despite my best efforts to keep them still, their membrane-thin edges betraying weakness I can't afford to show. Every shadow in this damn place seems to move, every sound hammers against my enhanced senses until I can barely tell what's real and what's fever-twisted imagination.

"Captain." Zara materializes from the shadows, her russet fur bristling with barely contained concern. Her tail lashes once, a tell she's never quite mastered. "The Brotherhood captains are reconvening to discuss the new security protocols. But your condition..."

"Has nothing to do with our mission." The words scrape against my raw throat as another wave of disorientation hits. The room tilts sideways, forcing me to catch myself against the wall. My wings snap tight against my back, hiding their trembling through centuries of ingrained discipline. "The Eclipse won't wait for me to recover. Neither can we."

The safe house's main chamber contracts around me as I enter, its black walls seeming to pulse in time with my fevered heartbeat. The bond-sickness makes every shadow writhe and dance, turning familiar spaces into alien landscapes that set my predatory instincts on edge. Most of the captains from our previous meeting have returned—some in person, others appearing as flickering holograms above the tactical display. Their faces blur together in my fever-addled vision, but I force myself to catalog each one, to show no weakness despite the inferno raging beneath my skin.

K'vex's six arms move in precise patterns that my addled mind struggles to track, each gesture carrying layers of meaning I can't quite grasp. The sight sends fresh waves of suspicion through me—are those movements simple nervousness, or coded messages to unseen allies? She whispers something to Vornak, whose massive Bravorian form tenses subtly in response. The interaction makes my wings twitch with barely contained aggression, though I manage to keep them folded against my

back. Every instinct screams that they're plotting against me, but I can't trust those instincts anymore. Not when the bond-sickness turns even loyal allies into potential threats.

"I see you've recovered from your... indisposition at our last gathering," K'vex observes, her silver eyes calculating as they track my unsteady gait. All six hands still momentarily—a predator scenting blood. "Though perhaps 'recovered' is too generous a term."

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The bond-sickness chooses that moment to surge, making my tribal markings flare like burning brands against my fevered skin. I grip the edge of the table, wings trembling despite my desperate attempt to keep them still. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision, but I force myself to meet her predatory gaze.

"My health is not the concern of this council," I manage, though the words scrape against my raw throat. Sweat beads on my bronze skin, betraying the fever consuming me from within. "The implementation of our new security protocols is."

"Is it not?" Vornak rumbles, his scaled fingers leaving grooves in the obsidian table. "When our leader can barely stand during tactical briefings? When he brings unknown variables into our most secure meetings?" His golden gaze shifts meaningfully to where Neon stands in the shadows, her neural implants casting ethereal blue patterns across her skin.

"Neon Valkyrie's presence is necessary," I growl, though the effort sends fresh waves of fever through my blood. "Her expertise in cybersecurity—"

"Her expertise?" K'vex interrupts smoothly, all six hands moving in perfect synchronization now. "Or perhaps her... other qualities that seem to have captured our leader's attention?"

The insinuation ignites something carnal in my blood, hotter than even the bond-sickness burning through my veins. My wings snap wide despite the agony it causes, casting shadows over the assembled captains as I surge to my full height. The fever makes my tribal markings blaze crimson, but I channel the pain into raw dominance.



"Choose your next words carefully," I growl, letting my predatory nature show through. Even weakened, I'm still apex—still the warrior who carved his place in the void through blood and steel. "Unless you'd prefer to discuss your own... qualities. Like how your hands keep twitching toward those hidden weapons whenever secure routes are mentioned."

Several captains shift uncomfortably, but I'm not done. The bond-sickness might be burning me alive, but nothing will stop me from protecting what's mine. "If any of you question Neon's value to the Brotherhood, remember this—while you've been whispering accusations, she's been tracking the Eclipse's movements. Finding their weaknesses. Preparing to strike."

Neon steps forward, her voice carrying that edge of steel I've come to admire. "If you have concerns about my capabilities, I'm happy to demonstrate them. Perhaps by exposing which of you has been feeding our secure routes to the Eclipse?"

My wings curl slightly around her—not caging, but claiming. Let them see. Let them understand that challenging her means challenging me. Even as the fever races through my blood, I bare my fangs in a deadly smile. "Well, K'vex? You seem particularly interested in our security protocols lately."

The chamber falls silent. K'vex's hands still completely—a tell I've never seen before. Her silver eyes narrow, calculating new odds, reassessing threats. "Merely doing my duty to the Brotherhood," she says, false concern dripping from every word. "Unlike some who appeared in our midst so... recently."

"Interesting choice of words." I activate the tactical display, though the holographic data swims sickeningly before my fevered vision. "Tell me, how many ships have we lost this week? Following routes that were supposedly secure?"

K'vex's lowest set of hands twitches—another tell. "The Eclipse grows bolder. We all

know this."

"Yes," I agree softly, dangerously. "They do. Almost as if they know exactly where to strike."

The accusation hangs unspoken in the air, heavy with implications. Let her wonder how much we know, how close we are to exposing the truth. Sometimes the threat of discovery is more effective than revelation itself.

"And you believe one of us—" Vornak begins, but I cut him off with a sharp gesture that sends pain lancing through my wings.

"I believe the Eclipse has eyes and ears where they shouldn't." The words come out rougher than intended as another spike of fever tears through me. "I believe someone is profiting from betrayal while our people suffer. And I believe—"

The bond-sickness chooses that moment to strike with devastating force. The room spins violently, my enhanced senses overwhelmed by phantom sounds and impossible colors. I grip the edge of the tactical display, wings flaring wide for balance, but it's too late. The captains' concerned murmurs merge into a deafening roar as my knees buckle.

"Captain!" Zara's voice cuts through the chaos, sharp with command. "This meeting is adjourned. We'll reconvene when—"

"When our leader has explained exactly what's wrong with him?" K'vex suggests softly, her words carrying to every corner of the room. "When we understand why he brings outsiders into our most secure deliberations? Or when the Eclipse has destroyed everything we've built because we followed a compromised commander?"

I force myself upright through sheer willpower, though my tribal markings pulse

erratically with the effort. "Interesting, K'vex, how quickly you turn to questioning my judgment rather than addressing the real threat." My wings shift, creating shadows that dance across the obsidian walls. "The Eclipse grows bolder with each passing day, striking our most secure routes with uncanny precision, yet you'd have us waste time debating my personal affairs?"

Her composure remains perfect—too perfect, perhaps—as she spreads her six hands in a gesture of calculated innocence. "I merely suggest that clear minds make better decisions, Captain. Especially when those decisions affect all our lives."

"Clear minds also recognize patterns," I say, letting my gaze sweep across the assembled captains. "Like how our enemies always seem to know exactly where to strike. How they anticipate our defensive measures with suspicious accuracy." The words hang in the air, weighted with implication. Let them draw their own conclusions for now.

The other captains shift uneasily, exchanging glances that speak volumes. Vornak's scales ripple with barely contained tension. Ralith's tail twitches nervously. Even Shen'va's ethereal features tighten with concern. They're starting to see it too—the pieces of a puzzle they've been too blind to notice.

"Perhaps," I continue, my voice rough but steady, "instead of questioning my ability to lead, we should focus on securing our operations against those who would destroy everything we've built."

The tension in the room ratchets higher as other captains begin to shift uneasily, reassessing recent events in light of my accusations. K'vex's hands move in increasingly complex patterns, but I notice how several of the captains who seemed ready to support her moments ago are now watching her with careful speculation.

"This is madness," she says, but there's a note of uncertainty in her voice now.

"You're clearly unwell, Captain. Perhaps it would be best if—"

"If what?" Neon steps forward, her implants pulsing with barely contained energy. "If someone more... amenable... took command? Someone who wouldn't notice the encrypted transmissions being sent from Brotherhood frequencies to unknown recipients?"

The revelation lands like a plasma blast. Several captains shift uneasily, hands drifting toward weapons more from instinct than intent. I notice how K'vex's six hands move in subtly contradicting patterns, betraying an inner conflict her carefully neutral expression tries to hide.

"What exactly are you suggesting?" Vornak demands, his obsidian scales rippling with barely contained aggression.

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"I'm suggesting," Neon's enhanced eyes sweep the assembled captains, "that someone in this room has been feeding our secure routes to outside parties. The evidence is in the transmission logs—if you know where to look."

"The Brotherhood doesn't appreciate baseless accusations," K'vex says smoothly, though I notice how her hands have stilled completely—too still, like a predator trying to avoid detection.

The bond-sickness surges again, turning my vision red at the edges. But I force myself to stand straight, to maintain the facade of strength even as my wings tremble with the effort. "Then prove them baseless. All of you will submit your ships' logs to Neon for analysis. Complete access, no exceptions."

"You're asking us to surrender our autonomy," Vornak booms, his scales rippling with barely contained fury. "The Brotherhood wasn't built on blind obedience."

"No," I growl, letting my wings flare despite the agony it causes. "It was built on trust. Trust that's been betrayed by someone in this room. I won't let more of our people die because someone decided credits matter more than loyalty."

The assembled captains exchange glances, weighing options, measuring risks. K'vex's expression remains carefully neutral, but I see how her hands have resumed their contradictory movements—some reaching for weapons while others make soothing gestures. The tells are subtle, but to someone watching for them, they might as well be screaming confessions.

"I'll submit my logs," Ralith says suddenly, breaking the tense silence. "I have

nothing to hide."

One by one, the other captains nod their agreement. Only K'vex hesitates, her multiple hands still moving in those telling patterns.

"Of course," she says finally, her voice smooth as polished steel. "Though I maintain this is an overreaction to a few unfortunate coincidences."

"We'll let the evidence speak for itself," Neon replies, her enhanced eyes lingering just a moment too long on K'vex's restless hands.

"This meeting is adjourned," I manage, though the words come out rougher than intended. "Zara will coordinate the log transfers. The rest of you are dismissed."

Zara opens the chamber door and follows the captains as they file out quickly, their previous concerns about my health seemingly forgotten in light of the more immediate threat to their operations. But as the last of them leaves, my strength finally fails. My knees buckle as another wave of fever hits, and only Neon's quick reflexes keep me from collapsing.

"Stubborn, reckless idiot," she mutters, but her touch is gentle as she helps me toward my quarters. "You could have gotten yourself killed pulling that stunt."

"Had to be done," I growl, though each step sends fresh fire through my veins. "Had to show strength, even if—"

"Even if it kills you?" She stops suddenly, forcing me to meet her gaze. "That's not strength, Cirdox. That's pride. And it's going to destroy you if you don't let someone help."

The words hit harder than they should, perhaps because of the genuine concern I see

in her enhanced eyes. Or perhaps because deep down, I know she's right. The bond-sickness is progressing faster than I expected, turning simple tasks into battles of will. Soon, I won't be able to hide it at all.

"Let me help you," she says softly, her hand coming up to trace the burning lines of my tribal markings. "Not because of the bond, not because of fate or biology or whatever cosmic force threw us together. But because I choose to. Because I want to."

The admission hangs between us, weighted with implications neither of us is quite ready to voice. But I feel it in the way she supports my weight, in how her enhanced senses track my every labored breath. Something has shifted between us—a barrier crumbling, a truth neither of us can deny anymore.

We make it to my quarters just as another spike of fever hits. I sink onto the bed, my wings spreading limply across the sheets as the bond-sickness burns through my defenses. But Neon's presence helps, even as it intensifies the primal need coursing through my blood.

She settles beside me, careful not to jostle my wings. The silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken truths and growing understanding. Finally, I gather the courage to speak the words that have haunted me since McCoy's revelation.

"Lyra," I say softly, feeling her stiffen against me. "That's your real name, isn't it? Not Neon. Not the mask you show the world."

She shifts slightly, her enhanced eyes dimming as if trying to hide from the truth. "Lyra died the day she realized how corrupt the system really was. The day she watched her mentor betray everything they'd fought for." A bitter laugh escapes her. "Neon knows better. Neon survives."

"And which one is real?" I urge gently, though the fever makes even that small effort cost. "The survivor or the dreamer?"

The question hangs between us, weighted with implications neither of us wants to voice. I feel her tension, the way her eyes scan the shadows as if searching for threats that lurk just out of sight. After fighting the bond for so long, this newfound vulnerability clearly terrifies her.

"Who hurt you so badly?" I ask softly, my wings curling tighter around us. "Who taught you that caring means losing?"

She stiffens against my chest, then forces herself to relax. When she speaks, her voice carries echoes of old wounds. "It wasn't just one person. One betrayal." Her fingers trace absent patterns on my skin, as if the movement helps her organize painful memories. "But Kira... she was the worst."

The name hangs between us like a drawn weapon, though its power to wound hasn't diminished despite my familiarity with it. Kira—the sister-figure turned traitor who now hunts Neon with terrifying precision. I've watched how the mere mention of her makes Neon's implants pulse erratically, seen the shadows that darken her enhanced eyes whenever another piece of code bears Kira's signature. Even now, knowing she's actively working with the Eclipse to destroy everything we're fighting to protect, that name still carries the weight of betrayal and lost trust.

"She was more than my mentor," Neon continues, each word carefully measured. "She was... family like Kai... after my parents—" She breaks off, fingers curling into my shirt. "After everyone else left or died. She taught me everything I know about hacking, about surviving in a galaxy that sees humans as inferior. And then she disappeared and sold her soul to the Eclipse. The same people who killed her brother."



The raw pain in her voice makes my wings curl protectively around us, creating a sanctuary of shadow and shared warmth. "So you became Neon Valkyrie instead. Created a new identity, a new purpose."

"A better one," she says fiercely. "Neon doesn't trust. Doesn't need anyone. Can't be betrayed because she never lets anyone close enough to matter." Her fingers trace absent patterns on my chest, just above where the bond-sickness burns hottest. "It worked, too. Until you."

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"What changed?" I ask softly, though my heart thunders with the weight of her potential answer.

She's quiet for a long moment, her neural implants casting shifting patterns across her skin as she thinks. "You did something no one else has done since Kira," she says finally. "You saw past the walls. Past Neon the infamous hacker, past all the carefully constructed defenses. You saw me—really saw me—and still wanted to stay."

"Because you're worth staying for," I say simply, though the words send fresh fire through my veins. "Your strength, your determination, that fierce heart that won't let you stop fighting for what's right—how could I not want that? Want you?"

She makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "Even knowing everything I've done? Everything I am?"

"Especially knowing that." I catch her chin gently, forcing her to meet my gaze despite how the simple touch sends heat racing through my blood. "You think your past makes you unworthy of trust? Of connection? Look at me, Lyra. Really look. I'm a pirate, an outcast who turned his back on everything he was born to be. And yet here we are."

"Here we are," she echoes softly, her enhanced eyes studying me with an intensity that makes my markings pulse brighter. "With you dying from bond-sickness because I keep choosing fear over action. Every day I hesitate, telling myself I'm protecting us both, when really..." Her voice catches, implants flickering with barely contained emotion. "I'm killing you slowly, using my past trauma as an excuse while watching the fever burn you alive. What kind of person does that make me? Someone so afraid

of loss that they'll cause it through their own fears?"

The admission hangs between us, heavier than any declaration of love. Because this isn't about fate or biology or some cosmic force pushing us together. This is about choice. About seeing each other—truly seeing—and choosing to stay anyway.

"Then stop fighting," I growl, wings mantling with barely contained need. "Stop running from what we both know is inevitable."

"It's not that simple." But she doesn't pull away when I draw her closer, doesn't resist when my wings create a private universe of shadow and shared breath. "The bond... it terrifies me. Not because it's forcing us together, but because it's showing me everything I could lose. Everything I've spent years convincing myself I didn't want."

"I know." I press my forehead to hers, sharing heat and hope and desperate need. "But we're stronger together than apart. You proved that today. We make each other better, challenge each other, protect each other. Isn't that worth the risk?"

She traces the burning lines of my tribal markings, her touch both soothing and inflammatory. "And if I lose you anyway? If the bond-sickness takes you before—"

"Then at least we'll have had this," I cut in, catching her hand and pressing it harder against my chest where she can feel my heart thundering beneath her palm. "These moments, this connection. Better than dying alone, wondering what might have been."

"Damn you," she whispers, but there's no heat in it. "When did you get so wise, pirate?"

"About the time a fierce little hacker invaded my ship and turned my world upside down." The words come out rougher than intended as another wave of fever hits, but

I force myself to continue. "The time you put yourself between me and a plasma blast. The moment you chose to trust me with your pain, your fear... your real name."

She's quiet for a long moment, her fingers gentle as they trace my burning markings. Finally, she releases a shaky breath. "Lyra," she whispers, like sharing a secret. "My name is Lyra. And I'm tired of running."

The admission hits me harder than any physical blow. I pull her closer, my wings creating a cocoon of shadow and shared warmth around us. "Then don't," I murmur against her hair. "Stay. Fight with me, not against me. Let me be your sanctuary, like you've become mine."

She makes a sound of pure frustration before crushing her mouth to mine. The kiss is desperate, almost angry—all teeth and tongue and barely contained need. My wings snap tight around us as I respond with equal fervor, pouring centuries of longing into the connection.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard. "I won't watch you die," she says fiercely, raw honesty bleeding through her usual walls. "Not like this. Not when I can do something about it."

"Then stop fighting what we both know is inevitable," I growl, my voice rough with fever and need. My wings snap tight around us, caging her against my chest. "You're mine, little hacker. You have been since the moment you stepped onto my ship."

She tenses, those enhanced eyes flashing with defiance even as her pulse races beneath my touch. "I don't belong to anyone."

"No?" I catch her chin, forcing her to meet my gaze despite how the simple contact sends fire racing through my blood. "Then why does your body betray you every time I'm near? Why do those precious implants of yours malfunction at my touch?"

"Bastard," she hisses, but doesn't pull away. The bond pulses between us, raw and demanding.

"Your bastard," I remind her, letting my claws scrape lightly across her skin. "And you know what I am—what we are together. Stop denying it."

The bond-sickness burns through my veins, but her proximity makes it bearable. Makes it worth every moment of agony that led us here. Because now she's where she belongs—in my arms, under my wings, finally accepting what we both knew from the start.

She settles against me with a sound that's half surrender, half challenge. "If you die on me," she mutters, "I'll find a way to bring you back just so I can kill you myself."

My answering laugh is more growl than humor. "That's my mate."

## Chapter 15

### Neon Valkyrie

"I can't watch you die." The words escape before I can stop them, my enhanced vision cataloging how the bond-sickness burns through Cirdox's veins. His tribal markings pulse with fever-bright intensity, each flash a countdown I can't ignore. "After this mission. When we're safe. Then I'll complete the bond."

Cirdox's wings shift against the Void Reaver's bridge, casting shadows that dance like restless spirits across the polished metal. Even standing still costs him now—I can see it in the subtle tremor of his wings, the way his markings pulse erratically against his bronze skin. My implants helpfully inform me his temperature has risen another 0.3 degrees in the last hour alone.

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“You’re certain?” His voice carries centuries of carefully contained hope, though the words end in a barely suppressed grimace.

“Yes.” The single syllable feels like jumping into the void without a tether, terrifying and liberating all at once. “But we do this right. Not rushed, not desperate.” My fingers find his, twining together despite how his fever burns against my skin. “We finish this mission, stop whatever the Eclipse is planning, then...”

“Then you’re mine,” he growls, the possessive note in his voice sending electricity through my neural interface. “No more running, little hacker.”

“No more running,” I agree, though my heart pounds against my ribs. “Now let’s end this quickly. I intend to collect on that...booty.”

Cirdox’s laugh rumbles deep in his chest. “Humans and their pirate words. Though I must admit, the thought is...intriguing.” He presses a gentle kiss to my temple, his arms tightening around me briefly in a protective squeeze that makes my implants misfire spectacularly. His expression sobers as another wave of fever makes his markings pulse brighter. “But first, we have a mission to complete. Lives depend on us exposing whatever the Eclipse is doing here.”

The STI Luminore Research Facility lies before us, a fortress of gleaming metal piercing Orion’s perpetual twilight. Each level bristles with automated defenses, but it’s the deliberate gaps in their data streams that set off warning bells. Someone’s created blind spots in their security—the kind only a hacker would recognize. The kind meant to hide something.

“This is wrong,” I mutter, my implants highlighting anomalous patterns in the facility’s defense grid. “The security protocols are too...familiar.” Fear claws at my throat as recognition hits. “These are my techniques. My algorithms, twisted and inverted.”

“Kira.” Cirdox doesn’t phrase it as a question.

“She’s using everything against me.” My fingers dance across the interface, probing for weaknesses I know are there because I helped design similar systems. “Creating holes that look random but are actually—”

“A trap,” he finishes, wings mantling protectively despite how the movement makes him stagger. Fresh beads of sweat roll down his temple, his markings flaring bright enough to cast crimson shadows.

I catch his arm as he sways, steadying him even as my implants scream warnings about his deteriorating condition. “We should abort. Your fever’s climbing too fast. If we wait much longer to complete the bond—”

“No.” His voice carries steel despite the tremor in his wings. “The Eclipse is weaponizing luminore, turning an energy resource into a tool of oppression. We stop this now, or countless lives pay the price.” His burning gaze finds mine. “Some things are worth dying for, little hacker.”

“You’re not dying,” I snap, fear making my voice sharp. “Not today. Not ever. We get in, get the data, get out. Then we complete this bond before it kills us both.”

The facility towers above us like a monument to scientific hubris, its gleaming spires piercing Orion’s perpetual twilight. Each level bristles with automated defenses, but it’s the deliberate gaps in their security that set off warning bells in my upgrades. This is no ordinary research complex—it’s the heart of STI’s luminore development

program, where they perfect the medical applications that keep millions alive across the outer colonies. Or at least, that's what it was before the Eclipse sank their claws into it.

The facility's defenses fall with suspicious ease, each security protocol falling away like a carefully staged performance. My enhanced systems recognize the underlying architecture—fragments of code I helped write years ago, now twisted into something both familiar and wrong. Kira's signature is all over it, breadcrumbs leading us deeper into whatever trap she's laid. But we have to know what the Eclipse is doing with their stolen luminore, even if it means walking straight into her web.

The stakes couldn't be higher—if the Eclipse has truly found a way to manipulate luminore's healing properties, they'll control who lives and who dies across entire systems. Already, reports filter in from the outer colonies of mysterious shortages, of settlements going dark when they can't meet the Eclipse's increasingly predatory terms. This facility holds the answers we need to expose their operation. The question is whether we'll survive long enough to use them.

The Void Reaver shudders as Grig guides us into the facility's auxiliary docking port, his pale blue fingers dancing across the controls with characteristic precision. Through the viewport, I watch auxiliary clamps engage with a hiss, securing us against the station's artificial gravity.

“Maintain full cloak,” Cirdox orders, his wings shifting restlessly as he studies the tactical display. “If anything larger than a maintenance drone approaches, disengage and retreat to the fallback coordinates.”

Zara's fur bristles slightly as she checks weapon systems. “And leave you both trapped inside?”

“Better than losing the ship,” he growls, though fever makes his voice rougher than



usual. “The Brotherhood can’t afford to lose another vessel to the Eclipse. Especially not the Reaver.”

“Understood, Captain.” Grig’s large eyes blink with careful deliberation. “But please remember—ships can be replaced. Crews cannot.”

The research labs sprawl across an entire level, their sterile surfaces reflecting harsh overhead lighting. My implants automatically begin scanning equipment, analyzing data streams, searching for anything out of place. But it’s the data analysis from my implants that catches the first sign of wrongness—molecular patterns in the luminore samples showing deliberate manipulation, synthetic compounds introduced with surgical precision. The quantum resonance readings are all wrong, shifted just enough to create dependency in organic tissue without triggering standard toxicity alerts.

“They’re not just stealing it,” I breathe, my enhanced eyes widening as I process the data streaming through my neural interface.

“What do you mean?” Cirdox moves closer, his wings mantling protectively despite the fever weakening him.

“They’re weaponizing it,” I explain, gesturing to the molecular analysis displayed before us. “Look at these energy signatures—they’re altering its fundamental quantum properties, introducing synthetic resonance patterns that make their modified luminore incompatible with standard medical equipment. The more a colony’s infrastructure adapts to their tainted supply, the more dependent they become on Eclipse-controlled power sources. And only the Eclipse would control the modified crystals.”

Cirdox studies the holographic displays through fever-bright eyes. “Controlling who has access to power. Who lives and dies in the outer systems.”

“Exactly.” My fingers fly across the interface, downloading everything I can find. “They’re turning an energy resource into a weapon of mass control. Once colonies start using their modified version—”

The anomalies in the security protocols nag at me as I dig deeper into the facility’s systems. Something about the encryption patterns feels hauntingly familiar—like looking at old code I wrote years ago, twisted and inverted into something darker. My implants highlight subtle irregularities that make my skin crawl.

Behind me, Cirdox prowls the perimeter of the control room, his wings shifting restlessly as he monitors the security feeds. The bond-sickness burns bright in his tribal markings, but he refuses to let it slow him down. Every few minutes his path brings him closer, his fever-hot presence both comforting and distracting as he checks the doors and vents with predatory thoroughness.

“These encryption patterns,” I mutter, fingers flying across the interface. “They’re...wrong. Like someone took standard STI protocols and corrupted them deliberately.” A shiver runs down my spine as my implants analyze the code structure. “Someone who knew exactly how I would try to break them.”

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Cirdox pauses his patrol, crimson eyes narrowing as he studies the scrolling data over my shoulder. “Kira?” His wings mantle protectively, though the effort makes his markings pulse brighter with fever.

“Has to be. This is her signature, but twisted.” My hands still over the keys as memories surface—late nights spent coding together, sharing secrets and dreams of exposing corruption. “She always did have a gift for elegant solutions. Even when using them for terrible things.”

“These modifications,” I murmur, fingers hovering over the interface. “I know this style.” The realization hits like a punch to the gut. “Because I helped develop it.”

A shadow shifts in my peripheral vision, there and gone so quickly my upgrades can’t track it. But I don’t need enhanced senses to recognize that presence. Some things burn themselves into memory too deeply to forget.

“Elegant, isn’t it?” The voice emerges from the darkness like poison seeping through water—smooth, deadly, achingly familiar. “How a few small changes to the quantum signature can alter everything. Just like a few strategic modifications to luminore can transform clean energy into a weapon of control.”

Her movements are too precise, too calculated—like watching code execute in real-time. My enhanced vision catalogs the modifications with clinical horror: military-grade cyber-limbs that move with liquid grace, dermal armor woven seamlessly into synthetic flesh, neural processors far beyond anything available on the black market. This isn’t the work of some back-alley tech dealer. The Eclipse has systematically replaced almost everything that made her human, leaving only enough organic matter

to house her consciousness. She's a living weapon now, more machine than the sister who once taught me to see beauty in elegant code.

Kira steps into view, each movement proof of the Eclipse's cruel perfection. Her neural implants pulse with that wrong-red glow, casting scarlet shadows across features I once knew as well as my own. She looks exactly as I remember—tall, lean, dangerous. But there's something mechanical about her now, something that suggests the sister who taught me to hack, who shared dreams of exposing corruption, is gone. In her place stands a weapon forged from grief and revenge, precision-engineered by the very organization that killed her brother.

"The colonies think they're receiving treatment," she continues, that broken-code smile never reaching her enhanced eyes. "They don't realize each dose binds them tighter to the Eclipse. True power isn't about force, Neon. It's about creating necessity."

"Hello, Kira." My voice stays steady despite the way my heart pounds against my ribs. "I wondered if I'd find your signature here. Still twisting everything you touch into weapons?"

"Your laugh still sounds the same," she says, her modified eyes scanning me with cold precision. "Still trying so hard to be tough little Neon Valkyrie, the infamous hacker who answers to no one. But we both know that's not who you are, don't we, Lyra?" Her smile turns cruel. "You're still that scared girl I found crying in the maintenance shaft after your parents died. The one who needed someone else to teach her how to survive."

Every word hits like a physical slap, each one precisely targeted to old wounds. "At least I didn't betray everything my brother died for," I spit back. "He fought the Eclipse's corruption while you—"

“While I what? Learned from his mistakes?” Her enhanced eyes pulse with an unnatural red glow. “Kai died screaming because he thought he could change things. Because you convinced him to keep pushing, keep fighting a system that was always going to win.” Something flickers beneath her mechanical calm—grief or rage, I can’t tell anymore. “I chose to survive. To thrive. And now look at us—you’re still running, still hiding behind false names and borrowed strength, while I...” She gestures to her modified form. “I’ve become something greater.”

The bitterness in her voice speaks of years of carefully nurtured hatred, of a sister-bond twisted by loss and betrayal into something monstrous. But there’s something else there too—a desperate need to justify her choices, to prove that selling her soul to the Eclipse was somehow worth the price.

Cirdox’s wings snap wide despite the obvious cost, creating a barrier between us. The movement costs him—I can see how his markings pulse erratically, how his muscles tremble with the effort of maintaining the defensive posture.

“So this is what you’ve become,” he growls, his voice rough with disgust despite the fever burning through him. “From mentor to hunter, stalking your own student through the void like wounded prey.”

“Hunting implies I don’t know exactly where she’ll be.” Kira’s enhanced eyes never leave mine. “But I taught her everything she knows about hacking. Every pattern, every technique.” Her head tilts slightly, the movement too precise to be natural. “Did you really think I wouldn’t recognize my own algorithms when you used them to break into places?”

“You taught me to fight corruption,” I snap, though my voice wavers slightly. “To expose people who abuse power. Now look at you—working for the same monsters who killed your brother.”

Something flickers in her enhanced eyes—pain? Regret? But it's gone before I can be sure. "Kai died because he was weak. Because he thought ideals could change anything in this galaxy." Her voice carries years of carefully nurtured hatred. "The Eclipse understands what you never did, Neon. Power is the only truth that matters. The only thing that keeps you alive."

She gestures, and Eclipse operatives materialize from the shadows, their modified armor gleaming under the harsh lights. But it's their neural signatures that make my blood run cold—the same unnatural uniformity I detected earlier, suggesting extensive enhancement.

"Your mate is dying," Kira continues, that broken-code smile returning. "I can see it in his vital signs. The bond-sickness burns through him while you hesitate, too afraid to commit, too weak to actually fight for something beyond your own survival." Her enhanced eyes narrow. "How long before he collapses completely? Hours? Minutes?"

As if in response to her words, Cirdox suddenly staggers, his wings drooping as another wave of fever hits. I move to support him, but Kira's next words freeze me in place.

"Don't help him," she says softly, her enhanced troops raising weapons. "Let him fall. Watch him suffer, just like you watched Kai die. Remember how that felt? Watching through your neural link while they tore him apart, calculating odds instead of acting?" Her smile turns cruel. "I've always wondered—did you feel it when he died? When his neural signature just...vanished?"

"Enough!" The word tears from my throat as I launch my prepared virus, sending it racing through the facility's systems. But Kira's already moving, her own upgrades countering my attack with brutal efficiency.

"Still predictable," she taunts, her neural commands flying faster than thought. "Still

thinking in patterns I helped create. When will you learn? True power isn't about following rules—it's about breaking them."

Cirdox lunges at her, wings snapping wide despite the fever burning through him. But Kira anticipated this—her enhanced reflexes letting her sidestep his attack with mechanical precision. As he passes, she triggers something in her hand—a device that floods the air with a concentrated aerosol compound.

The effect is immediate and devastating. Cirdox drops to his knees, his tribal markings flaring like burning brands against his skin as the chemical catalyst interacts with his already unstable biochemistry, amplifying the bond-sickness to unbearable levels.

"Fascinating," Kira observes, her broken-code smile never wavering. "The Eclipse's research into Kyvernian biology has been quite enlightening. Did you know their bond-sickness creates unique chemical markers? Makes them so very vulnerable to the right compounds."

"Get away from him!" I snarl, my hands already flying across my interface, trying to trigger the facility's ventilation systems. But she's locked me out, her viral countermeasures spreading faster than I can hack through them.

Cirdox struggles to rise, his wings trembling violently as the amplified fever tears through him. But even weakened, he's still dangerous—his claws leaving deep gouges in the metal floor as he fights against the chemical assault. His predatory instincts won't let him stay down, won't let him stop trying to protect me, even as the compound pushes his body past its limits.

"Stop!" I scream, my hands flying across the interface as I try to counter her attack.  
"You'll kill him!"

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“That’s the point.” Her voice carries a terrible mechanical calm. “Choose, Neon. The encryption key you stole from the Eclipse database, or your mate’s life. Watch him die knowing you could have saved him, just like Kai.”

Time seems to slow as I process options, my enhanced vision calculating probabilities and escape routes. Cirdox writhes on the floor, his wings spasming as Kira’s attack tears through him. The bond-sickness burns through his veins like plasma fire, turning his tribal markings into lines of liquid agony against his bronze skin.

The encryption key I stole from the STI that night—the one that revealed how deep the Eclipse’s tendrils reached into official channels—burns in my neural cache. The same data that forced me to run, that exposed how they were manipulating luminore supplies and falsifying shipping manifests to hide their control over medical distribution. The tactically logical choice is clear—sacrifice one life to save many. It’s exactly the kind of calculation that got Kai killed.

I’m done letting fear control my choices.

“You’re right about one thing,” I say, my fingers dancing across my neural interface as I access the dormant virus I embedded in the STI’s root protocols that night. “Action matters more than words.”

I trigger the modified version of Kira’s own signature encryption—the one she used to teach me about system vulnerabilities, about how the most sophisticated defenses often ignore threats that mirror their own architecture. The virus flows through the facility’s network, using the same security protocols she helped design to breach her



neural implants. Each line of code is a lesson she drilled into me, twisted and inverted until her own techniques become the key to bypassing her enhanced defenses.

Her eyes widen as the first failsafes trigger, recognition dawning as she realizes I've weaponized her own methods against her. "You wouldn't," she breathes, but we both know I already have.

Her eyes widen as the first line of code hits. "What are you—"

"Showing you what you taught me about power," I say, launching wave after wave of corrupted data at her neural interface. "About breaking rules. About survival."

She staggers, red implants flickering as my virus tears through her defenses. Her control over Cirdox breaks, but the damage is done. He lies motionless on the floor, his wings spread limply, tribal markings pulsing with dangerous irregularity.

"Kill them both!" Kira screams, her mechanical calm finally shattering. She signals to someone out of sight, and blast doors slide open revealing a squad of Eclipse operatives who must have been lying in wait. They move with that unnatural synchronization that marks them as enhanced, their neural signatures burning like cold stars in my tactical display.

I throw myself over Cirdox's prone form, my enhanced systems working overtime to counter incoming fire. But we're surrounded, outnumbered, and he's not moving. My implants flash urgent warnings—multiple hostiles converging, their movements suggesting a practiced containment protocol. They're not just trying to kill us—they're herding us away from the exits, cutting off escape routes with clinical precision.

"Stay with me," I beg, my fingers pressed to his throat where his pulse flutters weakly. "Please, Cirdox. I can't lose you too. Not like this. Not when I finally—"

A subtle vibration in my neural port signals an incoming transmission: “In position. Light it up on my mark.” McCoy’s voice, tight with controlled tension. Of course—she insisted on having her team standing by when we infiltrated, despite my protests about keeping this quiet. “Standard procedure,” she’d said with that sharp smile. “Always have backup when raiding STI facilities.”

I trigger the preset signal, and the far wall explodes inward exactly where we’d mapped structural weaknesses during our initial scan. McCoy’s tactical team pours through the breach right as my virus hits the facility’s security grid, turning automated defenses against the Eclipse operatives. The timing is perfect—a synchronized strike that catches our enemies in devastating crossfire.

“Get him out of here!” McCoy shouts over the chaos, her team moving with practiced efficiency to secure our exit route. “We’ll handle this!”

The next few moments blur into a symphony of plasma fire and breaking glass. My enhanced vision tracks multiple targets, highlighting escape vectors as McCoy’s team systematically pushes back the Eclipse forces. They’re good—better than standard police tactical units. The way they move suggests specialized training in dealing with enhanced opponents.

But none of that matters as much as the weakening pulse beneath my fingers, the way Cirdox’s tribal markings pulse with increasing irregularity. I have to get him out of here. Have to save him. Because I finally understand what I’ve been running from—and I refuse to lose him just when I’ve found the courage to stop running.

I don’t hesitate. Using strength I didn’t know I had, I half-drag, half-carry Cirdox toward the exit. His wings drag limply behind us, leaving trails of shed membrane that make my heart clench. Every few steps he tries to help, to support his own weight, but his legs keep buckling.

“Stay with me,” I repeat, the words becoming a desperate mantra. “Just a little further. Please, just hold on.”

The screech of tearing metal drowns out Kira’s howl of rage as we sprint through the facility’s collapsing corridors. Her fury follows us like a physical force, making my neural implants misfire with phantom echoes of past pain. But I can’t let those memories paralyze me. Not now. Not when Cirdox’s life depends on every second we can steal from fate.

“Stay with me,” I growl as he stumbles again, his wings dragging against the walls. The bond-sickness burns through him like plasma fire, turning his tribal markings into a frightening display of erratic pulses—some areas barely flickering while others blaze bright enough to cast crimson shadows across the sterile walls. My enhanced vision catalogs his deteriorating vital signs with merciless precision, each new reading worse than the last.

We dodge another volley of plasma fire, the heat of it singeing my tactical suit. Behind us, Kira’s enhanced soldiers move with terrifying synchronization, their modified reflexes letting them gain ground with every step. But they’re not trying to kill us. They want us alive—want me alive—and that’s somehow worse than death.

“Almost there,” I pant, though my own muscles scream in protest. Cirdox’s weight grows heavier against me as the fever consumes what little strength he has left. His skin burns hot enough to make my enhanced sensors glitch, tribal markings pulsing with a desperate, primal need that tears at my heart. This is my fault. My fear. My hesitation slowly killing him.

The Void Reaver’s airlock appears ahead like salvation, its emergency lights painting everything in shades of blood and shadow. We stumble through somehow, though I’ll never remember exactly how we made it. As soon as we cross the threshold, Cirdox’s legs give out completely. His magnificent wings spread across the deck in a display

of defeated grace, their thin edges quivering with exhaustion.

“No,” I whisper, dropping to my knees beside him. My hands shake as they trace his fever-bright markings, each touch sending feedback loops of data through my implants—temperature critically elevated, neural patterns growing erratic, cellular degradation accelerating. “Don’t you dare give up. Not now. Not like this.”

His eyes find mine, crimson depths clouded with pain but still burning with that fierce protectiveness that makes my heart ache. “Worth it,” he manages, voice rough as plasma-scored metal. “Keeping you safe... always worth it.”

“Not if it kills you,” I say fiercely, my own voice breaking. “I won’t watch someone else die because I was too afraid to act.”

The ship’s engines roar to life around us as Zara initiates emergency launch protocols. But I barely notice, too focused on the way Cirdox’s markings pulse with dangerous irregularity—some areas barely glowing while others burn bright enough to leave scarlet ghosts dancing in my enhanced vision. He’s running out of time. We’re running out of time.

And I have a choice to make.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

“No,” I whisper, gathering him into my arms despite how his fever burns against my skin. “No, no, no. Stay with me. The mission’s over, remember? I promised. I promised after the mission...”

His eyes flutter open, crimson depths glazed with fever and pain. “Little hacker,” he manages, the words barely audible. “I’m sorry...”

“Don’t you dare,” I choke out, tears burning my eyes. “Don’t you dare apologize. Don’t you dare leave me. I choose you, understand? I choose us. Just stay with me long enough to complete the bond. Please...”

His wings twitch weakly, trying to curl around us one last time. “Always knew... you’d be worth... waiting for...”

“Then keep waiting,” I beg, pressing my forehead to his. “Just a little longer. Stay with me, Cirdox. I love you, you stubborn, noble idiot. I love you, and I won’t let you die.”

### Chapter 16

#### Neon Valkyrie

TheVoidReaver’s corridors blur past as I half-drag, half-carry Cirdox’s burning form, his wings dragging limply behind us. Each labored breath sends fresh waves of heat radiating from his fever-bright tribal markings.

“Medical bay’s ready,” Zara calls out, her red fur bristling with barely contained

worry as she races alongside us. “We should—”

“No time,” I snap, my enhanced vision cataloging Cirdox’s deteriorating vital signs. “The bond-sickness is progressing too fast. Normal medical intervention won’t help now.”

Grig’s voice crackles through the ship’s comm. “Multiple vessels entering sensor range. Eclipse signatures. They’re pursuing.”

“Just keep them off us,” I growl, stumbling as Cirdox’s legs give out completely. His wings spasm violently, nearly knocking me over as another wave of fever tears through him. “How long until they’re in weapons range?”

“Seven minutes,” Grig reports, his usual calm wavering slightly. “Maybe less if they’ve modified their engines like the last group.”

“Get us out of here,” Zara commands, her voice steady as she helps support Cirdox’s other side. Though his fever-hot skin makes her fur bristle, her movements remain precise and controlled. “Grig, maximum thrust, evasive pattern delta.”

“Executing now,” Grig responds, his pale blue fingers dancing across the controls with characteristic efficiency. The Void Reaver’s engines surge to life, their familiar rumble a reassuring counterpoint to the chaos we’re leaving behind.

We’re cutting it close—I can feel it in the way Cirdox’s markings pulse with dangerous irregularity, in how each breath seems to cost him more energy he can’t spare. But with Zara coordinating our escape and Grig at the helm, I know we’ll make it. They’ve gotten us out of worse situations before.

Time to stop running from what’s been inevitable since the moment I stepped onto this ship. Time to trust not just Cirdox but the crew I’ve come to think of as our

family.

Cirdox's wings drag limply behind us, leaving trails of shed membrane that make my heart clench. The bond-sickness burns through him like fire, turning his tribal markings into a frightening display of erratic pulses—some areas barely flickering while others blaze bright enough to cast crimson shadows across the polished metal surfaces. My upgrades catalog his deteriorating vital signs with merciless precision, each new reading worse than the last.

“Stay with me,” I beg, my voice rough with emotion I can't quite suppress. “Please, just hold on.”

His eyes flutter open, crimson depths glazed with fever and pain. “Lyra,” he manages, the words barely audible. “I'm sorry...”

“Don't you dare,” I choke out, tears burning my eyes. “Don't you dare apologize. Don't you dare leave me. I choose you, understand? I choose us. Just stay with me long enough to complete the bond. Please...”

His wings twitch weakly, trying to curl around us one last time. “Always knew... you'd be worth... waiting for...”

“Then keep waiting,” I beg, pressing my forehead to his. “Just a little longer. Stay with me, Cirdox. I love you, you stubborn, noble idiot. I love you, and I won't let you die.”

We make it to his quarters just as another spike of fever hits. He sinks onto the bed, his wings spreading limply across the sheets as the bond-sickness burns through his defenses. His tribal markings pulse erratically, some barely flickering while others blaze bright enough to cast crimson shadows.

“Tell me how to complete the bond,” I say, my fingers trembling as I unfasten his armor. Each piece that falls away reveals more of his fever-hot bronze skin. “I won’t watch you die when I can save you.”

His crimson eyes lock onto mine, dark with need and something deeper. “Blood exchange,” he growls, voice rough with restraint. “I drink from you, then you from me. The mixing of our essences creates an unbreakable connection.”

I pause in removing his chest plate, my heart thundering. “Will it hurt?”

“Yes,” he admits, wings shifting restlessly. “But the pleasure...” His markings flare brighter. “It transcends physical sensation. Creates a bond deeper than flesh.”

My hands still over the last clasp. “I’m scared,” I whisper, the admission costing me. “Not of the pain. Of letting someone this close. Of losing control.”

He catches my trembling fingers, pressing them against his burning chest where his heartbeat races beneath my palm. “Then we’ll face that fear together. No more running, little hacker.”



*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

The bond pulses between us, raw and demanding as I study his fevered form. His tribal markings blaze against bronze skin, their erratic rhythm betraying how close he is to collapse. My implants helpfully inform me his temperature is dangerously elevated, cellular degradation accelerating with each passing moment.

“Are you certain?” he asks, voice rough with need and fever. His wings shift restlessly, creating patterns of shadow that make my heart race. “Once we begin, there’s no going back. The bond will be permanent, unbreakable.”

Instead of answering, I lean forward and press my lips to one glowing marking on his chest. The contact sends electricity through us both, making my neural interface misfire spectacularly. His skin burns against my mouth, tribal patterns pulsing brighter at my touch.

“I choose you,” I whisper against his heated flesh. “I choose us.”

His hands tangle in my hair as I trail kisses along the burning lines of his markings. Each touch draws a rumbling growl from deep in his chest, the sound more predatory than human. When I reach his throat, I pause, suddenly uncertain.

“Show me,” I breathe, looking up to meet his fever-bright gaze. “Show me how to complete the bond.”

With aching gentleness, he guides my mouth to his throat. “Here,” he growls, indicating a spot where his pulse thunders beneath bronze skin. “Bite hard enough to draw blood. The exchange must be mutual for the bond to take.”

I trail kisses along his throat, feeling his pulse race beneath my lips. “And you? Where will you mark me?”

His wings curl tighter around us, creating a sanctuary of shadow and shared breath. “The junction of neck and shoulder,” he murmurs, clawed fingers ghosting over the spot. “Where everyone will see that you’re mine.”

His wings quiver at my touch, tribal markings pulsing brighter. “The joining of wing and flesh,” he growls, voice rough with need. “Most sensitive. Most intimate.” His eyes find mine, burning with possession. “Where only a true mate would dare to touch.”

I trace the spot with my tongue, feeling how the thin membrane trembles beneath my touch. Here, where bronze skin transitions to wing, the flesh is delicate enough for my human teeth. His markings flare crimson as I scrape my teeth experimentally against the spot.

“Yes,” he hisses, wings mantling with barely contained need. “Make me yours, little hacker.”

I hesitate only a moment before sinking my teeth into his flesh. The taste of copper floods my mouth, electric and alien. His wings snap wide as he growls, the sound vibrating through my entire body. Power floods my system—raw, primal energy that makes my implants surge.

Before I can respond, his eyes lock with mine, burning with renewed intensity. “Where?” he growls, his voice rough with need. “Where do you want my claim, little hacker?”

I rise from the bed slowly, holding his fevered gaze as my fingers find the fasteners of my tactical suit. “Watch me,” I murmur, letting the material part to reveal inch

after inch of skin. His wings mantle with barely contained need as I shed each layer, tribal markings pulsing brighter with every new expanse of flesh exposed.

When the last piece falls away, his crimson eyes burn with possessive heat as they trail over my body. A low growl rumbles in his chest, primal and appreciative. “Beautiful,” he breathes, wings curling forward as if to cage me. “My fierce little hacker.”

I guide his hand to the sensitive hollow where my inner thigh meets my hip, that private place where the skin is delicate and untouched. The dim light of his quarters casts intimate shadows across our joined forms, his bronze skin almost luminous against my paler flesh. His fingers trace slow, deliberate patterns there, each touch sending electricity through my neural implants and making the muscles beneath quiver with anticipation.

“Here,” I whisper, vulnerability and desire making my voice rough. The spot feels almost sacred—a place no one else has ever touched with such reverence, where the skin is soft and sensitive enough that even his gentlest caress makes my breath catch. “Mark me where only you will ever see.” A wicked smile curves my lips as his clawed fingers map that intimate territory, learning how each subtle variation in pressure makes me gasp or shiver.

The junction is a canvas of pale skin—where strength meets softness, where the firm muscle of my thigh yields to the more delicate curve of my hip. The perfect spot for his mark, hidden from the world but impossible for me to forget.

His answering laugh is more growl than humor, but I feel his strength returning as his fingers tighten possessively on my skin. “Clever mate,” he purrs, nuzzling the chosen spot. “Already learning to play with fire.”

His fangs pierce flesh with exquisite precision, sending waves of pleasure-pain racing

through my nervous system. The bond flares between us, burning away any remaining barriers. I feel his fever receding, replaced by something hotter, more demanding.

His wings create a living canopy around us as we complete the exchange, sharing breath and blood and destiny. When he finally releases my thigh, his tongue gentle as it seals the wounds, I feel the bond settle into place—an unbreakable connection humming with shared power and promise.

“Mine,” he growls, his markings now pulsing with healthy vigor instead of desperate fever. “My fierce little hacker.”

“Yours,” I agree, trailing my fingers along his newly strengthened markings, marveling at how they pulse with vitality rather than fever now. Each touch sends electricity through my neural implants, the bond between us humming with shared desire. “And you’re mine, my beautiful pirate.”

My enhanced vision catalogs every detail of him—the powerful lines of his body, the way his muscles ripple beneath bronze skin that radiates health instead of sickness. But it’s his eyes that capture me, burning with possessive love that makes my heart race. The bond lets me feel his desire, his joy, his fierce protectiveness wrapping around me like his wings.

I can’t help but stare in wonder at how perfectly he’s made for me, even in ways that mark him as gloriously alien. His arousal rises proud between us, thick and long, the head slightly flared and shaft adorned with intricate patterns that match his tribal markings. Like everything else about him, it’s a masterpiece of raw power and beauty that makes my breath catch.

“See something you like, little hacker?” he teases, though his voice roughens as my fingers trace those intimate patterns. The bond pulses between us, carrying echoes of

shared pleasure that make us both gasp.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper, leaning down to press reverent kisses along the glowing lines of his markings. “Every perfect, powerful inch of you drives me wild.” My lips trail lower, following the burning patterns that pulse beneath his bronze skin. His hands find my hair, fingers tangling in the strands as his breath catches.

“Look who’s talking,” he growls, though the words end in a gasp as my tongue traces one particularly sensitive marking. His wings quiver with barely contained need, creating patterns of shadow across my skin. “My fierce little hacker, who fights like a warrior and hacks like an artist.” His claws scrape gently against my scalp, making me shiver. “Everything about you calls to me. Your strength, your fire, the way you never back down from a challenge...”

“I want to taste you,” I murmur against his heated flesh, looking up to meet his intense gaze. “To know every part of you. To be yours, completely.” The last words come out rough with need, with the certainty of finally accepting what we both know is inevitable.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

His eyes darken with desire, fangs glinting in the dim light. “Then taste me, little hacker,” he growls. “Make me yours, completely and forever.”

I trail kisses lower, my lips brushing against his skin as if it were sacred ground. When I reach his cock, I pause, looking up at him once more. His eyes are filled with a desire so intense it takes my breath away. I lean down, my tongue flicking out to taste the salty sweetness of his skin.

He groans, his hands tightening in my hair as I take him into my mouth. His cock is hard and hot, the ridges along its length sending shivers of pleasure through him as I move my tongue along its length. I take him deeper, my mouth working in tandem with my hand, driving him to the edge of madness.

His breath hitches as I swirl my tongue around the sensitive tip, tasting the salty sweetness of his precum. His grip on my hair tightens, guiding me gently but firmly, urging me to take him deeper. I comply, relaxing my throat to accommodate his length, feeling the ridges of his shaft pulsing against my tongue.

Cirdox’s hips lift slightly, meeting my movements, his body trembling with the effort to maintain control. His wings flare out, casting shadows that dance across the walls as his tribal markings pulse brighter with every flick of my tongue. The bond between us pulses with shared need, growing stronger with each passing moment.

I pull back slightly, taking a breath before plunging down again, taking him deeper than before. His groan is primal, a sound of raw need that makes my own desire flare hotter. I can feel his pleasure echoing through our bond, amplifying my own arousal. My free hand slides down my body, finding the slick heat between my thighs, circling

my clit with steady pressure.

His eyes, glowing with an inner light, meet mine, and in them, I see the reflection of my own desire, mirrored and amplified. “Neon,” he growls, his voice rough with need. “You’re driving me mad.”

I hum around his cock, the vibration making him groan louder. His hips buck, seeking more friction, more contact. I give it to him, increasing the suction, the pace of my movements matching the desperate need coursing through both of us.

His hands leave my hair, moving to cup my face, his thumbs brushing against my cheekbones as he looks down at me with a mix of awe and raw lust. “I need you,” he rasps, his voice hoarse with desire. “All of you.”

I release him from my mouth, my hand still stroking his length as I look up at him. “Then take me,” I say, my voice steady despite the pounding of my heart. “Make me yours, completely and forever.”

With a growl that vibrates through his entire body, Cirdox sits up, his hands gripping my shoulders as he pulls me into a searing kiss. Our tongues tangle, and I can feel the sharp points of his fangs against my lips, a reminder of the wild, untamed creature he is.

He breaks the kiss, his breath coming in ragged gasps. “Then let us begin,” he says, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine.

Cirdox guides me onto my back, his body looming over mine. He kisses his way down my neck, his fangs grazing my skin, sending jolts of electricity straight to my core. His hands roam over my body, exploring every curve and hollow with a reverence that makes my heart ache.

“You are mine, Neon,” he murmurs against my skin, his voice filled with a possessive pride that sends a thrill through me. “And I am yours.”

I feel the gentle touch of his claws as they trail down my body, leaving a path of fire in their wake. His wings curl around us, creating a cocoon of warmth and intimacy that blocks out the rest of the universe. I am hyperaware of every sensation, every brush of his skin against mine, every whispered word that escapes his lips.

He pauses at my hips, his crimson eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that steals my breath. “You are mine, Neon,” he growls, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine. “And I am yours. Forever.”

His hands grip my thighs, spreading them wide as he lowers his head. The first touch of his tongue against my core sends a jolt of electricity through me, making me gasp. He takes his time, exploring every fold, every sensitive spot with a reverence that leaves me trembling. His tongue flicks out, tasting and teasing, driving me to the brink of madness.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, guiding him closer, needing more. He responds with a growl, his fangs grazing my inner thighs as he delves deeper. The sensation of his rough tongue against my clit sends waves of pleasure coursing through me, building with each expert stroke.

“Cirdox,” I moan, my hips bucking against his mouth as he brings me closer to the edge. His hands grip my ass, holding me in place as he feasts on me, his growls of pleasure vibrating through my core.

He slides a finger inside me, then another, stretching me, preparing me for what’s to come. The combination of his tongue on my clit and his fingers moving inside me is overwhelming, pushing me closer to the brink with each thrust.



“Come for me, little hacker,” he commands, his voice a low growl against my flesh. “Let me taste your pleasure.”

His words send me spiraling over the edge. My orgasm rips through me, a wave of ecstasy that leaves me gasping and shaking. He laps at my core, drinking in my release, his growls of satisfaction sending aftershocks of pleasure through my body.

As the waves of my orgasm subside, he looks up at me, his eyes glowing with desire and something deeper, something primal. “You are mine, Neon,” he says, his voice a possessive growl. “And now, we become one.”

He moves up my body, his wings mantling around us as he positions himself at my entrance. I can feel the broad head of his cock nudging against me, and I spread my legs wider, inviting him in. With a slow, deliberate thrust, he enters me, stretching me, filling me completely.

The sensation is overwhelming, a mix of pleasure and a sweet, burning ache that borders on pain. I gasp, my fingers digging into the firm muscles of his back as he begins to move inside me. Each stroke sends waves of pleasure coursing through my veins, the bond between us pulsing with our combined rhythms.

His wings unfurl, casting a shadow over us as they beat slowly, rhythmically, in time with our lovemaking. The air around us crackles with energy, the bond between us drawing on the raw power of the Void Reaver itself. I can feel the ship’s engines resonating within me, their power amplifying the sensations coursing through my body.

“You feel so good, Neon,” Cirdox growls, his voice laced with awe and raw, unbridled lust. “So perfect.”

I wrap my legs around his hips, pulling him deeper, wanting to feel every inch of him

inside me. Our bodies move together as one, our pace quickening, our breaths mingling in harsh, desperate pants. The pleasure builds, a spiraling tempest that threatens to consume us both.

Cirdox's fangs extend once more, gleaming in the dim light. With a thrust that borders on savage, he strikes again, his fangs sinking into the juncture where my neck meets my shoulder. The pain is sharp, but it only serves to heighten the pleasure, sending me spiraling over the edge.

I cry out, my inner walls clenching around him as my orgasm rips through me. The bond between us flares, a brilliant conflagration that sears our souls together. Cirdox follows me over the precipice, his release triggering my own, a feedback loop of ecstasy that leaves us both trembling and gasping for air.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

As the aftershocks subside, Cirdox withdraws his fangs, licking the wounds closed once more. He collapses on top of me, his body slick with sweat, his wings enveloping us in a private cocoon. I can feel the bond between us, a glowing beacon in the darkness, unbreakable and eternal.

“You are my bond-mate, Neon,” Cirdox murmurs, his voice filled with a reverence that brings tears to my eyes. “My heart, my soul, my everything.”

The data I stole still pulses through my neural implants, a constant reminder of the Brotherhood hunting us, the Syndicate’s bounty on our heads, and the countless other threats lurking in the void. As Cirdox’s wings tighten around me, his warmth seeping into my bones, Zara’s voice comes softly through the ship’s comm system.

“Captain. Eclipse pursuit vessels have broken off—radiation’s too thick for their tracking systems. We’re safe for now.”

Cirdox rumbles an acknowledgment, the sound vibrating pleasantly against my cheek. His wings shift, creating a cocoon of shadow and shared warmth that blocks out everything beyond this moment. The bond hums between us, strong and sure, as steady as the Void Reaver’s engines thrumming beneath us.

“Sleep, little hacker,” he murmurs, pressing a gentle kiss to my temple. “I’ll keep watch.”

I drift off to the sound of his heartbeat, strong and regular now that the bond-sickness has been cured, and the quiet assurance of Zara coordinating our escape through the nebula’s protective embrace. For the first time since I can remember, I feel truly,

completely safe.

## Chapter 17

Cirdox

The stars blur past the Void Reaver's viewport as I savor the steady pulse of strength in my veins. No more fever burning through me like plasma fire, no more trembling wings betraying weakness I couldn't afford to show. The mate-bond thrums between us, Neon's presence a constant warmth in my mind even as she works several decks below.

"Captain." Zara approaches, datapad in hand. Her russet fur still bristles slightly—old habits die hard after weeks of watching me struggle. "The efficiency reports you requested. And... there's something else."

I accept the pad, noting the tension in her stance. "What is it?"

"K'vex's ships have been spotted near the medical facilities in Sector Seven. Again." Her tail lashes once—a tell she's never quite mastered. "Third time this week."

The information sends a surge of protective fury through my blood. Even with the bond-sickness cured, the threat to those colonies burns like acid in my throat. My wings shift restlessly, casting shadows across the bridge. "Send the coordinates to tactical. Have Grig plot an intercept course."

"Already done, sir." Her relief at my recovered strength wars with lingering concern. "Though perhaps we should—"

"Captain," Neon's voice cuts through the comm, carrying that edge of steel that first drew me to her. "You need to see these energy signatures. Something's not right

about these patrol patterns.”

I feel her focused determination through our bond, sharp as a blade and twice as dangerous. My fierce little hacker, already three steps ahead of everyone else. “On my way.”

“Good.” A hint of playful defiance colors her tone. “Though I can think of several other reasons you should join me down here.”

I growl softly, my wings mantling at her teasing despite the gravity of the situation. “Behave yourself. We have work to do.”

Her laugh echoes through the bridge. “Since when has that stopped us?”

The crew pretends not to notice our exchange, but I catch Zara’s knowing smile. They’ve watched their captain fight the bond-sickness too long not to celebrate his victory. But we all know the war is far from over. The Eclipse still threatens everything we’ve built, and K’vex’s betrayal cuts deeper than any plasma burn.

The power thrumming through my veins reminds me that I’m no longer fighting alone. With each breath, I feel Neon’s presence—sharp and brilliant and full of possibility. But that connection brings responsibility, the need to protect not just my crew but the mate who’s bound her life to mine.

“You’re brooding again,” Neon observes through our private channel. “I can feel it. Come down to tactical. I’ve found something in these transmission patterns that will definitely interest that protective instinct of yours.”

“Is that an order?” I ask, already moving toward the lift.

“Consider it a very compelling suggestion from someone who knows exactly how to

handle brooding pirates.”

I chuckle, my wings shifting with anticipation even as my mind catalogs threats and contingencies. The bond-sickness may be cured, but our enemies still circle like vultures in the void. At least now I face them at full strength, with a mate whose brilliance matches my own.

The tactical room glows with holographic data streams as I enter, but my attention fixes immediately on Neon. She’s bent over the main console, the blue light of her neural implants casting ethereal patterns across her skin. My gaze lingers on the smooth skin above her collar, unmarked territory that makes my fangs ache with possessive need. Now that the desperate rush of bond-sickness is past, I want to claim her daily—not from necessity but pure desire. I want to mark her again and again until there’s no doubt she’s mine by choice, not just fate.

“Look at this,” she says without turning, her fingers dancing through virtual interfaces. “K’vex’s latest transmission patterns. They’re not just coordinating attacks—they’re setting up supply chain disruptions across three sectors.”

I move behind her, my wings curling forward instinctively to cage her against the console. “Show me.”

She leans back against my chest, her body fitting perfectly against mine as she projects the data into the air between us. “See these routing protocols? They match exactly with recent Eclipse movements. Too exactly.”

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“Clever little hacker,” I growl, nuzzling the spot where my marks decorate her throat. Her pulse quickens beneath my lips. “Always finding patterns others miss.”

“Cirdox,” she breathes, though her hands still move through the data with professional precision. “We should focus on—”

I spin her to face me, claiming her mouth in a kiss that makes her neural implants misfire spectacularly. She responds instantly, her fingers tangling in my hair as I press her against the console. The bond pulses between us, raw and demanding.

When we finally break apart, we’re both breathing hard. “I should get back to the bridge,” I murmur against her lips, though my wings remain curled around her.

“You should,” she agrees, but her hands trail down my chest, her fingers tracing my tribal markings in ways that make them pulse with dangerous brightness. “Though we have a few minutes before anyone comes looking...” Her touch grows bolder, exploring the ridges and valleys of my muscled abdomen with deliberate slowness.

I growl softly, catching her wandering hands. “Dangerous game, little hacker.”

“Maybe I like dangerous games,” she purrs, pressing herself against me. The heat of her body through the thin material of her tactical suit sends electricity racing through my veins. “Especially with dangerous pirates.”

My wings snap forward, caging her against me as I claim her mouth in a searing kiss. She responds with equal hunger, her fingers tangling in my hair as she arches into me. The bond between us pulses with shared need, making my markings flare bright

enough to cast crimson shadows across her skin.

Later, as I straighten my uniform and she adjusts her tactical suit, she gives me that wicked smile that never fails to stir my blood. Her lips are still swollen from our kisses, her skin flushed with lingering pleasure. “I’ll be up shortly. Just need to... straighten up a bit.”

“As you command, little hacker,” I murmur, feeling her satisfaction pulse through our bond. “As you command.”

Let the Eclipse and their conspirators come. They’ll find the Void Reaver’s captain and his mate more than ready for whatever challenges lie ahead.

Through the newly forged bond, a subtle warmth pulses in my chest as Neon strides onto the bridge, already analyzing data streams with the intensity that makes her such a formidable hacker. Her movements are precise and efficient as she accesses the tactical station, the glow of her neural implants highlighting the claiming marks on her neck—marks I can’t help but focus on with possessive satisfaction.

K’vex materializes on the holographic display, her six hands moving in those subtly contradicting patterns that have always set my instincts on edge. “Captain Thar’Kal,” she begins, mandibles clicking with barely concealed tension. “The Brotherhood council has concerns about recent... events.”

“Really?” I let my wings spread slightly, a casual display of strength. “I wasn’t aware the council had concerns about increased efficiency and improved tactical response times.”

From her station, Neon’s fingers dance across the controls as she initiates a series of complex navigational calculations. The results appear instantly on my command display, each projection more precise than the last. Her small, satisfied smile tells me



everything I need to know about her confidence in the data. The holographic faces of the other Brotherhood captains flicker with unease as they watch us work in perfect synchronization.

I gesture to the holographic display where Neon has reconstructed the Eclipse's supply chain manipulations, showing how they've been systematically corrupting luminore shipments across three sectors. The data streams paint a damning picture of their operation's scope—one that would have remained hidden without my mate's exceptional skills.

"A thorough analysis," K'vex concedes, though her hands never stop their restless movement. "Perhaps too thorough. Such detailed intelligence gathering could expose our own operations to unnecessary scrutiny." Her suggestion carries a note of concern that might seem reasonable to others, but something about it raises my hackles.

Vornak's hologram shifts, his obsidian scales seeming to catch the projection's light despite his incorporeal form. "The captain's methods have proven effective," he rumbles, though his tone carries lingering skepticism. "For now, results matter more than tradition."

Neon responds without looking up from her station, her voice carrying that familiar edge of steel that first drew me to her. Her fingers tighten almost imperceptibly on the tactical controls, betraying the tension beneath her calm exterior. "The captain's strategies have reduced our losses by sixty percent since implementation." She finally raises her gaze to meet K'vex's eyes without flinching. "Unless you'd prefer we return to previous protocols?"

The subtle tension in her shoulders and the dangerous calm in her tone tell me everything I need to know about her anger, even without our newly formed connection. My fierce little hacker, always ready to defend what's hers. The challenge in her tone makes my markings pulse brighter, pride and possessiveness

mingling through our connection.

K'vex's gaze fixes on Neon for a moment too long before returning to me. "Of course not. But with the Eclipse's recent movements—" She spreads her hands in what appears to be a gesture of concern. "Perhaps a more distributed approach would be prudent? Smaller patrol groups, less predictable patterns..."

"Spreading our forces thin?" I interrupt, moving to stand behind Neon's station, my wing brushing her shoulder in a casual display of unity. "The Eclipse thrives on isolated targets." I nod to Neon, who projects our latest intelligence onto the main display. "While maintaining our current formation has actually increased our defensive capabilities."

The holographic data fills the bridge—shipping manifestos, security protocols, tactical assessments. Neon's eyes gleam with that particular intensity she gets when she's found something significant, her fingers dancing across the controls with practiced precision. The slight upturn of her lips and the confident set of her shoulders tell me she's pleased with what she's uncovered as she manipulates the information, highlighting patterns that only her enhanced capabilities could detect.

"This level of coordination..." K'vex's hands move in rapid calculation patterns. "How exactly do you maintain such precise formations without compromising operational security?"

"That's need-to-know," Neon replies smoothly, but I catch the slight narrowing of her eyes, the way her fingers pause fractionally over the controls. After years of combat and leadership, I recognize the signs of a predator sensing prey—she's spotted something in K'vex's reaction, some subtle tell that's set her hacker's instincts humming.

I rest my hand on the back of Neon's chair, my tribal markings pulsing in time with

her neural implants—a visible reminder of our connection that makes several captains shift uncomfortably. Let them be unsettled. Let them see what happens when strength meets strategy, when trust overcomes fear.

“The Brotherhood,” I declare, letting my voice carry the full weight of command, “is entering a new era. Those who adapt will thrive. Those who cling to old doubts...” I let my wings spread fully, casting shadows across the bridge. “Well, that’s their choice to make.”

The assembled holograms shift uneasily. Vornak’s obsidian scales ripple with barely contained tension while Ralith’s tail twitches nervously. Shen’va’s ethereal wings mantle slightly, their oily feathers catching the blue light of the projection. Even Drokmar’s usually impassive frog-like features betray a hint of concern.

Only K’vex maintains her perfect composure, all six hands moving in those telling contradictory patterns. “Pretty words, Captain. But the Brotherhood wasn’t built on speeches.”

“No,” I agree, baring my fangs in what might be a smile. “It was built on results.”

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Neon's quick nod and subtle smile tell me she approves, her fingers never stilling on the controls as she continues to process data. We move in perfect synchronization, each anticipating the other's needs without words. It's a dance we've been practicing since she first stepped onto my ship, now refined by an intimacy that runs soul-deep.

K'vex's mandibles click rapidly—the only outward sign of her discomfort. “The council will want more than impressive displays and vague promises, Captain.”

Vornak's obsidian scales catch the light as he steps forward. “Results speak louder than council debates. The Eclipse's recent failures to intercept our shipments suggest the captain's methods have merit.” His golden eyes narrow as he studies K'vex. “Strange that you'd question success.”

“My concern,” K'vex's six hands move in contradicting patterns, “is for our continued survival. The Eclipse grows bolder by the day. Perhaps if we shared our defensive protocols more openly among the captains...”

Zara's russet fur bristles as she takes her position at my right. “Interesting suggestion. Though recent data suggests information compartmentalization has actually improved our success rate.”

“Mere correlation,” K'vex replies too quickly, her compound eyes shifting between the gathered captains. “Though if you doubt my motives—”

“Then they'll have proof of them soon enough,” I growl, baring my fangs in what might be a smile. “Starting with the Eclipse supply chain we're about to dismantle. Unless you have objections to that as well?”

Shen'va's white feathers ripple with interest. "I, for one, look forward to seeing how our... colleague... responds to this operation."

K'vex's hands finally still—a momentary pause that speaks volumes. "No objections, Captain. We await your tactical briefing."

I exchange a subtle glance with Neon, whose slight nod confirms she's caught the same tells I have. Her enhanced eyes track the last flickering traces of K'vex's transmission, no doubt already analyzing the encrypted patterns for irregularities. Perfect. Let K'vex think we're blind to her deception while she carefully positions herself to observe other captains' reactions rather than focusing on me directly. The trap is baited—now we just need her to take it.

The bridge's comm system chimes with an incoming priority transmission. "Captain, Officer McCoy requesting immediate audience," Zara announces from her station.

"Put her through," I command, noting how K'vex's hands twitch at the interruption.

The bridge erupts in barely contained outrage as McCoy's hologram materializes. Several captains rise from their seats, their expressions ranging from shock to fury at seeing an STI officer in a Brotherhood meeting.

"This is unprecedented," Vornak booms, his obsidian scales rippling with agitation. "Since when do we allow STI officials into our secure channels?"

"The same officials who imprisoned Kyor?" K'vex's hands move in sharp, aggressive patterns. "Perhaps the sickness has affected more than just your health, Captain."

I let my wings spread wide, a display of dominance that silences the immediate protests. "The situation has changed. The Eclipse threatens more than just our operations now." My gaze sweeps the assembled captains. "Sometimes surviving

requires new alliances.”

McCoy’s hologram stands calmly in the center of the chaos, her stern features betraying nothing as she waits for the outburst to subside. Through our bond, I feel Neon’s tension spike at the precarious situation—she knows better than most how delicate this balance is.

“We can debate allegiances later,” I growl. “Right now, Officer McCoy has intelligence relevant to our immediate survival. Unless anyone objects to hearing about Eclipse movements in their own territory?”

The challenge in my tone makes several captains shift uncomfortably. Even K’vex’s hands still momentarily as she recalculates her position.

McCoy’s hologram materializes, her stern features cast in blue light as she cuts through the tension with clinical precision. Her gaze sweeps across the assembled Brotherhood captains with careful neutrality before focusing on me. “Captain Thar’Kal, we’ve detected significant Eclipse activity near the medical facilities in Vulpexia and neighboring colonies. Their patterns suggest an imminent attack.” She pauses, choosing her next words deliberately. “I know the Brotherhood typically... avoids official channels, but given the stakes, I thought you should be informed immediately.”

The subtle emphasis on “official channels” sends ripples of unease through the gathered captains. McCoy’s presence here—a high-ranking Planetary Police officer addressing Brotherhood leadership directly—speaks volumes about the severity of the situation.

I stand behind Neon at the tactical station, watching her fingers dance across the display as her neural implants pulse with concentrated effort. Her posture shifts subtly—shoulders tensing, head tilting—tells of intense focus I’ve learned to read.

“They’re not just targeting random facilities,” she says, her voice carrying that edge of steel I’ve come to admire. “Look at these distribution patterns. They’re systematically cutting off supply lines to specific colonies.”

K’vex leans forward. “Fascinating. The timing suggests insider knowledge of our patrol schedules.” The question carries too much weight, too much specific interest.

“The source of their intelligence is less relevant than our response,” I growl, my wings mantling slightly. “What matters is protecting those colonies.”

A subtle chime announces another incoming transmission. Murmurs of discontent ripple through the Brotherhood captains as Ambassador Ta’vag’s hologram materializes, his russet fur catching the blue light of the projection. Several captains shift uneasily—STI officials aren’t typically welcome at Brotherhood gatherings.

“Your presence is also... unexpected, Ambassador,” Vornak rumbles, obsidian scales gleaming as he leans forward.

Ta’vag’s fur ripples in what might be amusement. “Desperate times call for desperate measures, Captain. The diplomatic corps can provide legitimate supply routes through neutral territories. It would allow us to bypass their blockades while maintaining plausible deniability.”

“A sound strategy,” K’vex agrees too quickly, her six hands moving in those telling contradictory patterns. “But such coordination requires... delicate handling. As your most experienced trade route captain, I would be honored to personally oversee the information flow between agencies. To ensure nothing sensitive falls into the wrong hands, of course.”

I note how her lowest set of hands drift toward concealed weapons even as her upper hands make soothing gestures. She’s fishing for access, trying to position herself at

the center of our intelligence network.



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“Your... concern for security is noted,” I reply carefully, my wings shifting to a more defensive posture. “But given recent breaches in Brotherhood communications, we’ll be maintaining strict compartmentalization. Each captain will receive only the information directly relevant to their assigned sector.”

K’vex’s compound eyes fix on me with unsettling intensity. “The Brotherhood’s new security protocols are... quite thorough. Perhaps too thorough for efficient operations?” Her six hands move in those telling contradictory patterns I’ve come to distrust. “Surely some allowances could be made for senior captains?”

The way she probes for exceptions, for weaknesses in our defenses, only confirms my suspicions. Ever since we implemented the new security measures, she’s been pushing—subtly at first, but growing bolder as her desperation increases.

“The protocols exist for everyone’s protection,” I say firmly, watching how her hands still momentarily at my refusal. “No exceptions. Not even for senior captains.” I let my wings spread slightly, a casual display of strength that carries clear warning. “Unless you have specific concerns about your ability to comply?”

Her mandibles click once—a tell I’ve noticed appears when she’s recalculating odds. “Of course not, Captain. I merely thought, given our long history of mutual trust...”

“Trust,” I interrupt, my voice carrying steel beneath its surface, “is earned through actions, not history. And lately, some actions have been... questionable.” I activate the tactical display, highlighting recent patrol routes that coincide too perfectly with Eclipse movements. “Perhaps you’d care to explain these interesting coincidences?”

“A wise precaution,” McCoy adds, her holographic features hard as steel. “Given recent concerns, we can’t be too careful about operational details.”

K’vex’s compound eyes fix on McCoy with an intensity that makes my wings twitch. “Recent concerns? I wasn’t aware—”

“Exactly,” Neon cuts in, her voice carrying a hint of predatory satisfaction. “That’s rather the point of security protocols, isn’t it?”

The tension ratchets higher as K’vex’s hands move in increasingly agitated patterns. Through our bond, I feel Neon’s tactical mind working, piecing together a puzzle I can’t quite see yet. But I trust her instincts as much as my own, perhaps more. Whatever she’s noticed, whatever pattern she’s detected, I know it’s significant.

“We’ll begin deployments immediately,” I declare, my wings shifting with casual authority. “Vornak, coordinate with the Bravorian fleet. Ta’vag, secure those diplomatic channels. McCoy, keep us updated on Eclipse movements.” I sweep my gaze across the assembled holograms, letting it rest briefly on K’vex as her hands move in those telling patterns. “I trust everyone understands the importance of proper protocol during such... delicate operations.”

Her mandibles click once, sharply, before her hologram fades.

After the Brotherhood captains’ holograms fade, leaving only McCoy and Ta’vag’s projections illuminating the bridge, I gesture for Zara to take command. “Maintain current course and alert me to any anomalies in K’vex’s movements.”

“She’s going to make a move soon,” Neon murmurs, her neural implants pulsing with contained energy. “That last question about security protocols? She’s planning something.”

I nod, my wings curving protectively around her even as pride swells in my chest. My mate might be new to Brotherhood politics, but her instincts are razor-sharp. “Then we’ll be ready when she does.”

In my private office, McCoy’s hologram paces with contained energy while Ta’vag’s fur ripples with barely suppressed tension. The space feels smaller than usual, heavy with the weight of unspoken concerns.

“Kira slipped through our containment protocols during the facility raid,” McCoy states, her normally stern features tight with worry. “Those Eclipse enhancements gave her capabilities we weren’t prepared for. And what we’ve uncovered since then...” She pauses, jaw clenching. “The corruption goes deeper than we suspected. We’ve identified four STI officials taking bribes to ignore Eclipse operatives tampering with luminore shipments. This isn’t just isolated incidents anymore—it’s systematic infiltration.”

My wings snap wide at the mention of Kira, tribal markings flaring with barely contained fury. The thought of that traitor still hunting my mate, still threatening everything we’ve built, makes my blood boil. “She won’t escape next time,” I growl, the words carrying centuries of predatory certainty. “No amount of enhancements will save her when I get my claws on her.”

Ta’vag’s ears flick back—a sign of distress I’ve learned to recognize. “Several council members have already been compromised. The diplomatic corps remains secure for now, but...” His fur ripples again. “We can offer sanctuary if needed. My personal estate on Vulpexa has extensive security measures.”

I lean against my desk, wings settling as I consider their words. “The Brotherhood won’t abandon the outer colonies.”

“Of course not,” McCoy says, her hologram flickering slightly. “But those shipping

manifests Neon uncovered... the patterns match intelligence we've gathered on other Eclipse operations. Especially the routing protocols through Sector Seven." She pauses, her expression grim. "The same sector where K'vex's ships have been running 'routine patrols' with unusual frequency."

Ta'vag's fur ripples with concern. "My diplomatic contacts have noted similar anomalies. The timing is... troubling."

The soft chime of my private comm interrupts our discussion. Neon's image materializes in a secure holographic window, her movements deliberately casual as she looks at data streams. She shrugs out of her worn leather jacket, letting it fall carelessly to the floor. The simple tank top beneath clings to her curves, its fabric soft and well-worn from countless hours spent hunched over control panels. Her movements are casual but deliberate as she kicks off her boots, each motion highlighting the graceful efficiency that makes her such a formidable hacker. The sight of my claiming marks on her neck sends a surge of possessive pride through me, even as her enhanced eyes scan complex encryption patterns.

"Found something interesting in K'vex's communication logs," she says, rolling her shoulders to ease tension. The movement causes her suit to slip slightly, revealing more of my marks. "Her transmissions are too perfect—no personal patterns, no individual quirks. It's like watching someone perform from a script."

I growl softly, both aroused and intrigued by her combination of professional focus and subtle seduction. "Show me."

Her fingers dance through virtual interfaces as she sheds another piece of armor, revealing the elegant line of her collarbone. "See these timestamps? They align perfectly with Eclipse movements in the outer sectors. Too perfectly." She stretches, the motion both natural and deliberately enticing. "Normal communications have irregularities, personal touches. These are sanitized, like they've been processed

through multiple filters.”

“Clever mate,” I purr, watching her work with growing appreciation—both for her tactical brilliance and the teasing glimpses of skin she reveals. “You think she’s using Brotherhood protocols as cover?”

“Exactly.” Neon’s smile is sharp as she removes another piece of gear, her movements fluid and precise. “She’s feeding them our positions, but making it look like routine patrol reports. The question is, how many others are involved?”

McCoy clears her throat, reminding me of her and Ta’vag’s continued presence. “We’ll need irrefutable proof before moving against a Brotherhood captain. Evidence that can’t be dismissed as coincidence.”

“We’ll get it,” Neon promises, her expression fierce despite the deliberately casual way she’s loosened her hair. “K’vex is good, but she’s not better than me. No one who relies on stolen protocols can outthink someone who helps write them.”

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I feel a surge of pride through our bond—pride in her abilities, her determination, her perfect balance of strength and grace. “Set the trap,” I tell her, wings mantling slightly as she stretches again. “We’ll be ready when she makes her move.”

After ending the transmission, I turn back to our allies. “Keep monitoring those financial trails,” I instruct McCoy. “And Ta’vag, maintain those diplomatic channels. We’ll need multiple vectors of proof to convince the council.”

They nod, their holograms fading as I rise to join my mate in our quarters. The hunt has begun, and K’vex won’t escape this time. Not with my fierce little hacker on her trail, combining technical brilliance with predatory instinct in ways that make my markings pulse with pride and desire.

### Chapter 18

#### Cirdox

I stride through the corridors of the Void Reaver, my wings mantling with anticipation as I make my way to Neon’s quarters. The ship hums around me, its familiar rhythms a comforting backdrop to the primal need coursing through my veins. My mate has issued a challenge, and I intend to rise to the occasion. Her door slides open at my approach, revealing her standing in the center of the room, her tactical suit discarded in a heap at her feet. She’s clad only in a thin silk robe that does little to hide the curves beneath, her eyes gleaming with mischief and desire.

“Took you long enough, Captain,” she purrs, her voice carrying that edge of defiance that never fails to stir my blood. But there’s something else there too—a vulnerability

that speaks to her need for connection, for reassurance amidst the chaos of our current situation.

I growl softly, my wings spreading wide as I step into the room, the door sliding shut behind me with a soft hiss. “You know what happens to little hackers who tease dangerous pirates?”

Her smile is pure temptation. “Why don’t you show me?”

With a swiftness born of years of combat training, I cross the room, my wings wrapping around her as I pull her against me. Her breath catches, her hands coming up to grasp my shoulders as I claim her mouth in a searing kiss. She tastes of sweet defiance and pure feminine power, a combination that never fails to drive me wild.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, I rest my forehead against hers, my hands cupping her face. “You are mine, Neon,” I murmur, my voice rough with need. “And I am yours. Let me remind you what that means.”

Taking her hand, I lead her through the ship, our path taking us deeper into sections she’s never seen before. The corridors grow wider, the ceilings higher, until we stand before a massive set of doors that slide open at my command.

Neon’s gasp of wonder is music to my ears as she steps into the vast hangar, her eyes widening at the sight before us. The glass dome stretches overhead, revealing the infinite expanse of space beyond, stars gleaming like diamonds against the velvet black. Below, the deck is clear, a perfect stage for what I have in mind.

“Cirdox,” she breathes, her voice filled with awe. “This is... incredible.”

I turn to her, my wings spreading wide as I take her hands in mine. “This is where I come to remember why we fight,” I say softly. “The stars remind me that there’s

always something worth fighting for. And now, you remind me of that every day.”

Her eyes shine with unshed tears as she looks up at me, her fingers tightening around mine. “Show me,” she whispers. “Show me what it means to be yours.”

With a gentle tug, I pull her into my arms, my wings wrapping around us both as I claim her mouth once more. This kiss is slower, deeper, a promise of the connection we share. Her hands roam over my chest, tracing the patterns of my tribal markings, each touch sending sparks of pleasure through me.

I break the kiss only long enough to shed my own clothing, leaving me standing before her in nothing but the glow of my markings and the starlight filtering through the dome above. Her eyes roam over me, her gaze lingering on the evidence of my desire for her, before she reaches out to trace the length of me with delicate fingers.

A growl rumbles deep in my chest as I capture her wrist, bringing her hand to my mouth so I can press a kiss to her palm. “Not yet, little hacker,” I murmur against her skin. “First, let me show you what these wings are truly for.”

Before she can react, I scoop her into my arms, my wings beating strongly as I lift us both from the deck. Her gasp of surprise turns into a laugh of pure delight as we soar upward, the air rushing around us as I carry her higher, closer to the stars.

“Gods,” she gasps, clinging tighter as the vast expanse of space stretches endlessly around us. “I never knew flying could feel like this.”

I chuckle, my heart swelling with pride and love for this incredible woman in my arms. “And we’re just getting started.”

With a shift of my wings, I change our trajectory, sending us spiraling through the air in a dance that’s part flight, part courtship display. Neon’s laughter rings out, her eyes



shining with joy and exhilaration as she clings to me, her trust in my strength absolute.

As we reach the apex of our flight, I pause, holding us suspended in the air beneath the starlit dome. Neon's breath comes in quick gasps, her cheeks flushed with excitement and desire. Slowly, I let us drift downward, my wings beating lazily as I bring us back toward the deck.

But this time, when our feet touch the ground, I don't release her. Instead, I lay her gently on the cool metal, my body covering hers as I claim her mouth once more. She responds instantly, her legs wrapping around my waist as she pulls me closer, her need matching my own.

I trail kisses down her throat, lingering over the claiming marks that bind us together. Each press of my lips to her skin sends a shiver through her, her body arching up to meet mine. I can feel the heat of her, the scent of her desire wrapping around me like a drug, urging me on.

My hands roam over her body, exploring every curve and hollow, committing each to memory. She's so soft, so delicate, yet so strong—a contradiction that never fails to captivate me. I want to learn every inch of her, to know her body as well as I know my own.

As I reach the juncture of her thighs, I pause, looking up at her with a wicked smile. "And now, little hacker," I murmur, my voice rough with need, "let me show you what these wings can really do."

With a swift movement, I spread my wings wide, using the powerful muscles of my back to lift her hips from the deck. She gasps, her eyes widening as she realizes what I intend. But there's no fear in her gaze—only desire and trust.

I position myself at her entrance, the head of my cock nudging against her slick folds. She's ready for me, her body welcoming as I slide into her with a single, smooth thrust. Her cry of pleasure echoes through the hangar, her inner walls clenching around me as I fill her completely.

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And then, with a beat of my wings, I lift us both from the deck, my body still joined with hers as we soar upward once more. Her cry of surprise turns into a moan of pure ecstasy as I begin to move within her, each thrust timed to the beat of my wings.

We spiral through the air, our bodies joined as one, the sensation of flight amplifying every touch, every kiss. Neon clings to me, her nails digging into my shoulders as she meets each thrust with eager desperation. The connection between us pulses with shared pleasure, each sensation echoing through both of us, building higher and higher.

I can feel her orgasm building, her body tensing around me as she nears the peak. With a final, powerful beat of my wings, I drive us both over the edge, her cry of release echoing through the hangar as my own climax rips through me.

For a moment, we hang suspended in the air, our bodies still joined, our breaths mingling as we come down from the heights of ecstasy. Then, gently, I bring us back to the deck, my wings wrapping around us both as I cradle her against my chest.

“That,” she grins, her eyes sparkling with mischief, “was almost as good as hacking the STI mainframe. Almost.”

I chuckle, a low rumble that vibrates through both of us. “Almost? Well, my cheeky little hacker, I think my cock would beg to differ. It’s ready to show you just how much more it can offer.”

I press a kiss to her forehead, my heart swelling with a mix of love and primal desire. Neon looks up at me, her eyes reflecting the soft glow of the starry glass dome

around us. The air is cool, but her body radiates warmth, drawing me in like a moth to a flame.

“You’re so beautiful,” I murmur, my voice barely a whisper as I trace the line of her jaw with my fingertips. Her skin is soft, inviting, and I can feel the hum of our bond pulsing beneath the surface, a constant reminder of our connection.

She reaches up, her fingers tangling in my hair as she pulls me down into a deeper kiss. Our lips meet, and it’s like the universe aligns, every star and planet falling into perfect harmony. Her taste is intoxicating, a mix of sweetness and heat that sends electricity coursing through my veins.

I deepen the kiss, my tongue exploring her mouth with a hunger that matches the burning in my eyes. Her hands roam over my chest, her touch sending shivers of pleasure through me. I can feel her desire, her need, mirroring my own. Breaking the kiss, I trail my lips down her neck, my fangs grazing her skin, sending jolts of electricity straight to her core. Her breath hitches, and I can feel her heart racing against my chest. I move lower, my wings unfurling to create a cocoon of privacy around us.

“Cirdox,” she whispers, her voice a mix of pleasure and need.

“Tell me what you need, little hacker,” I growl, my voice rough with desire as I meet her gaze. The sight of her beneath me, eyes dark with passion, makes my markings pulse brighter. In that moment, I know she’s mine, completely and irrevocably.

I continue to stroke her with my fingers, feeling her wetness and the way her body responds to my touch. Her breath hitches as I bring her closer to the edge, her hips moving in rhythm with my hand. As she nears the peak, I rise up, positioning myself at her entrance. Her eyes meet mine, filled with a desire so intense it takes my breath away. I enter her slowly, savoring the feeling of her body yielding to mine, the

sensation of our souls entwining.

Her breath catches as I fill her completely, her inner muscles clenching around me. The bond between us flares brighter, amplifying every sensation. I begin to move, each thrust sending waves of pleasure through both of us. Her nails dig into my back, urging me deeper, harder.

“Cirdox,” she gasps, her voice a mix of pleasure and desperation.

“Yes, my fierce one,” I purr against her throat, my wings mantling with possessive need. “Let me feel you come apart for me.” I can feel her orgasm building, the tension in her body coiling tighter and tighter. I increase my pace, driving us both toward the inevitable climax.

Her body arches against mine, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. “Neon,” I growl, my voice low and possessive. “Come for me, little hacker. Let me feel you.”

As we climb higher, I lean down, my fangs finding the juncture where her neck meets her shoulder. The bite is sharp, but it only serves to heighten the pleasure, sending us both spiraling over the edge. With a cry, she reaches her peak, her body convulsing around me as her orgasm rips through her. The sensation sends me over the edge, my own release exploding within her.

I collapse on top of her, my wings enfolding us in a cocoon of warmth and safety. Her heart beats against mine, our breaths mingling as we come down from the high. “You are my heart, Neon,” I whisper, my voice rough with emotion. “My soul, my sanctuary. You are the stars that guide me through the darkest void, the flame that burns away all doubt. You are mine, completely and eternally.”

Later, back in my quarters, I watch Neon curled in my wing’s embrace as she accesses data through her neural implants. The intimate glow of her tech meshes

perfectly with my tribal markings, creating an ethereal dance of light and shadow across the walls. She's pulled on one of my shirts, the fabric draping off one shoulder to reveal some of my claiming marks. The sight stirs possessive pride, but it's her fierce concentration that truly captivates me—the way her brilliant mind works in perfect harmony with her enhanced systems, processing data streams with an efficiency that matches my centuries of tactical experience.

“K'vex's communications are too clean,” she murmurs, eyes distant as she navigates virtual pathways invisible to others. Her fingers tap against my chest absently, unconsciously seeking connection even while deep in her work. Through our bond, I feel the sharp edges of her suspicion. “Every transmission perfectly formatted, routed through exactly the right channels. It's like she's following a manual on how to avoid detection.”

I run my fingers through her hair, savoring how she unconsciously leans into my touch while maintaining her focus. Our bond hums with shared purpose—her technical brilliance complementing my strategic insight in ways that make us formidable together. “Almost as if someone gave her that manual?” The implications are troubling. K'vex's recent behavior, combined with her suspicious questions about security protocols, paints an increasingly damning picture.

“Exactly.” Neon's neural implants pulse faster as she dives deeper into the encryption, her mind moving with the same predatory grace I bring to combat. “Normal communications have irregularities, personal quirks. These are too perfect.” She projects a holographic timeline into the air between us, her fingers dancing through the data with practiced precision. “And look at the timing... Each transmission coincides perfectly with Eclipse movements in the outer sectors.”

I study the pattern, centuries of tactical experience merging with her technical analysis. Where she sees code anomalies, I recognize battle formations. Where I spot strategic weaknesses, she finds system vulnerabilities. Together, we build a complete

picture that neither could fully grasp alone. “She’s feeding them our positions. Using Brotherhood patrols as cover to coordinate attacks.” My wings curl tighter around Neon as anger rises. “How many of our people has she betrayed?”

“Too many.” Neon’s voice carries that dangerous edge I’ve come to recognize—the same tone I use when preparing for battle. Her fingers trace one of my tribal markings absently, our bond thrumming with shared determination. “But we can’t move against her directly. Not yet.” She looks up at me, her enhanced eyes meeting mine with perfect understanding. “We need proof that will stand up to Brotherhood scrutiny. And we need to know who else is involved.”

I catch her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm, feeling how our strengths align like perfectly calibrated weapons. “You have a plan.”

Her answering smile is sharp as a blade, matching my own predatory instincts. “McCoy’s been tracking financial irregularities through the diplomatic corps. If we can link those to K’vex’s transmissions...” She activates her comm with a thought, her neural commands as precise as my wing strikes in combat. McCoy’s hologram materializes beside the bed.

The officer takes in our intimate position with professional detachment. “I take it you’ve found something?”

“Sending you the encryption patterns now,” Neon confirms, her fingers moving through virtual interfaces while I provide tactical context through our bond. “Cross-reference them with Ta’vag’s financial data. Look for any matches in timing or routing protocols.”

McCoy nods, her stern features tight with concentration. “I’ll have my team start immediately. Ta’vag has already positioned diplomatic resources to provide cover if needed.”

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“Good.” I feel Neon’s satisfaction through our bond, her strategic mind already mapping contingencies. “We’ll need legitimate channels when this breaks open. The Brotherhood won’t be able to ignore evidence from multiple sources.”

“Just be careful,” McCoy warns. “K’vex isn’t working alone. Push too hard too fast, and we’ll lose any chance of identifying her network.”

After McCoy’s hologram fades, Neon turns in my embrace, her expression serious. The glow of her implants mingles with my tribal markings, a physical manifestation of how perfectly we complement each other. “We’re going to have to move soon. The Eclipse is planning something big, and K’vex is their key to making it happen.”

The ship’s chrono chimes softly, marking the start of third shift. Neon stretches against me before reluctantly pulling away. “I should analyze these encryption patterns more thoroughly. Meet you in your office in twenty?”

I press a kiss to her temple, savoring her warmth one last moment before duty calls. “Don’t get too lost in the data streams, little hacker.”

Her answering smile carries that fierce determination I’ve come to cherish. “No promises. But I’ll find what we need.”

## Chapter 19

### Neon Valkyrie

The data flows through my neural implants with a clarity I’ve never



experienced—sharper, faster, more intuitive. It's as if the mate-bond with Cirdox has not only changed my heart but has also upgraded my very hardware. My tech responds with an almost symbiotic efficiency, each data pattern unfolding with a precision that would have been impossible just days ago. It's like my systems have been waiting for this connection, now finally complete.

I pause, fingers drifting to the claiming marks on my neck, a soft, involuntary smile curving my lips. The connection we forged is... astounding. How could something so primal, so instinctual, mesh so flawlessly with my tech? I'd feared that binding myself to him would mean surrendering my independence, my control. Instead, it's as if the vastness of space has suddenly been mapped in perfect detail, each star burning brighter, each pathway clearer. And there's... a lightness where his constant pain used to be. A relief that floods through our bond, a silent, shared joy that he's free.

A flicker of red in the usual blue data stream catches my eye—an encryption pattern I'd recognize anywhere. My heart pounds as I dive deeper, neural implants pulsing with increased activity as I decrypt the fragmented message. What emerges makes my blood run cold.

"Cirdox," I say, voice tight with controlled urgency. "You need to see this." My fingers fly across the tactical display, pulling up the evidence I've been gathering for weeks. The communication logs materialize between us, timestamps perfectly aligned with Eclipse movements in ways that can't be coincidence.

His wings snap wide as he processes the implications, markings pulsing with dangerous intensity. "K'vex," he growls, the name carrying years of betrayal. "Show me everything."

I project the full scope of her treachery—fleet positions leaked to Eclipse vessels, security protocols compromised, even detailed reports about his recovery from bond-sickness. "She didn't just sell out a few patrol routes," I explain, highlighting key

transmissions. “She gave them everything.”

Cirdox’s predatory instincts surge through our bond as he studies the data, his wings mantling with barely contained fury. “Clever little hacker,” he murmurs, though his voice carries steel beneath the praise. “You’ve been tracking her all along.”

Before I can respond, the tactical display erupts in cascading warnings. K’vex’s sabotage is spreading faster than we anticipated, corrupting system after system with viral precision. Through our bond, I feel Cirdox’s tactical mind racing, calculating odds even as his protective instincts scream to get me to safety.

“Neon!” Cirdox’s voice carries the full weight of command as he sees the pattern forming in the chaos. “Take control of the systems. You’re the only one who can counter her algorithms fast enough to save the ship!”

The urgency in his tone galvanizes me into action. My fingers fly across the interface as I dive deep into the corrupted code, fighting to contain the digital infection before it reaches our core systems. He’s right—my neural implants give me an edge that might mean the difference between survival and watching everything we’ve built burn around us.

My fingers fly across the interface as strings of corrupted code spread through our defenses like poison. “Multiple breaches detected,” I report, neural implants burning as I fight to contain the damage. “They’re dismantling our security protocols faster than I can patch them.”

“Computer, initiate security protocol Delta-Seven,” I command, but the system responds with ominous silence. My screens flicker and distort as foreign code consumes my carefully maintained defenses.

“Engineering reports critical failures in the shield matrix,” Grig calls out, his usually

steady voice tight with tension. His pale blue fingers dance across multiple control panels. “The targeting systems are rejecting manual overrides.”

Zara’s fur bristles as she checks another failing system. “Navigation’s compromised. They’re locking us out of our own helm controls.” Her tail lashes with barely contained fury. “Even the backup systems are failing.”

“K’vex couldn’t have done this alone,” I growl, desperately trying to salvage what I can. “These encryption patterns... they’re too sophisticated, too familiar.” My heart pounds as recognition hits. “This is Kira’s work. She must have helped K’vex compromise our systems after she escaped the facility raid.”

The realization makes my blood run cold. McCoy warned us Kira’s Eclipse enhancements made her more dangerous than we anticipated. Now she’s turned my own security protocols against us, using intimate knowledge of how I think, how I code, to tear down everything I’ve built to protect this ship—this family.

“The auxiliary power couplings are still holding,” Grig reports, his large eyes fixed on the engineering readouts. “If we can reroute essential systems through the secondary grid—”

“No time,” Zara cuts in, her sharp ears flattening against her skull. “Multiple Eclipse signatures detected. They’re moving to surround us.”

My fingers fly across the interface, fighting against code that feels like a twisted mirror of my own work. Every security measure I’ve crafted since joining the crew is being dismantled with surgical precision. If they gain full control of our systems, it won’t just mean our capture—it will give the Eclipse access to every Brotherhood shipping route, every facility we protect, every colony depending on us for luminore... for survival.

“They’re not just trying to take us down,” I say, watching another firewall crumble. “They want our entire network. Every supply line, every safe harbor, every resistance contact we’ve built.” The enormity of what’s at stake makes my voice rough. “If they succeed, the outer colonies won’t stand a chance.”

Through our bond, I feel Cirdox’s fury rise like a storm as he realizes the depth of this betrayal. His wings snap wide, casting shadows across the bridge as he moves to coordinate our defense. But we both know that without our systems, we’re fighting blind.

The proximity alarms shriek to life as multiple Eclipse warships materialize from hyperspace, their weapons already charged and targeting systems locked onto the Void Reaver. We’re surrounded, outgunned, and our own tech is turning traitor in our hands.

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But Cirdox is already moving, his wings spread wide with lethal grace as he takes command of the deteriorating situation. The betrayal of a Brotherhood captain demands a response only he can give—and the fury burning through our bond promises it will be devastating.

The proximity alarms shriek to life, a deafening cacophony that drowns out my words. Multiple Eclipse warships materialize from hyperspace, their weapons already charged, their targeting systems locked onto the Void Reaver. Cirdox's tribal markings blaze with barely contained fury, his wings snapping wide as a feral snarl escapes his throat. His claws leave deep gouges in the command console as he assesses the threat, every line of his powerful body radiating lethal intent. The crew flinches at his display of raw aggression, but I recognize it for what it is—the rage of a predator watching enemies threaten what's his.

“They dare,” he growls, his voice carrying centuries of predatory menace. “They dare threaten my ship, my crew, my mate.” His wings cast crimson shadows as his markings pulse brighter. “They’ll learn why Kyvernians are feared across the void. Open a channel to K’vex,” he commands with barely contained fury. “Now.”

When her hologram materializes, his wings snap wide with aggressive dominance. “You betrayed us,” he snarls, baring elongated fangs. “The Brotherhood trusted you, protected you, and you sold us to the Eclipse.”

K’vex’s hologram flickers into existence, her six hands moving in a triumphant dance, her mandibles clicking with a satisfaction that makes my skin crawl. “I warned the Eclipse she’d be a problem, Neon Valkyrie,” she sneers. “Her reputation for disrupting carefully laid plans. But even the best hacker can’t fight when her systems

are turned against her.”

My fingers dance desperately across the tactical controls, a futile attempt to regain control. But the sabotage runs deeper than I feared—far deeper than should have been possible. I had checked these systems personally, spending countless nights poring over every line of code, every security protocol. Had tested and retested each firewall, each encryption layer. I was so certain I’d created an impenetrable defense.

Yet now each command line I enter twists and corrupts, my own code turning treacherous under my hands. The neural implants that usually amplify my abilities sputter and spark, sending jolts of pain through my skull as they try to interface with compromised systems. How did I miss this? What subtle backdoor did Kira exploit while I was distracted by other threats?

The realization hits like a physical blow—I was so focused on external attacks, on protecting against obvious intrusions, that I overlooked the possibility of someone already having deep access. Someone who could plant dormant code, hiding it within legitimate Brotherhood protocols. Someone who knew exactly how I would try to defend against conventional hacking attempts.

My mind races through recent system logs, searching for any hint I should have caught. Those minor glitches in the navigation array last week. The split-second delays in tactical displays that I dismissed as routine lag. Even the way certain encryption patterns seemed almost too perfect, too clean. All signs I ignored, too confident in my own abilities to consider that the threat was already inside our defenses, waiting to strike.

“The Brotherhood trusted you,” Cirdox snarls, his voice a low growl that vibrates through the ship, his wings mantling with a fury that makes the air crackle with energy. Through our bond, I feel his protective instincts warring with his duty as captain, a conflict that tears at me even as I fight my own battle.

“The Brotherhood is obsolete,” K’vex replies, her voice dripping with disdain. “The Eclipse offers order, control. They understand that some must be sacrificed for the greater good.” Her compound eyes fix on me, cold and calculating. “Starting with your mate.”

The ship rocks violently as the first volley slams into our shields. Warning klaxons blare, a discordant symphony of impending doom, as multiple systems report critical failures. Our defenses, crippled by K’vex’s treachery, crumble under the Eclipse onslaught. The Void Reaver shudders beneath my feet, her proud spirit wounded by this betrayal from within as much as the enemy fire from without.

“Zara!” Cirdox barks, his voice a command that cuts through the chaos. “Get us clear of their firing solution!”

But even as his first officer executes a desperate evasive maneuver, I see more Eclipse ships emerging from hyperspace, boxing us in with a tactical precision that speaks of intimate knowledge of our capabilities. They knew exactly where to hit us, exactly how to neutralize our advantages. My screens fill with cascading failure warnings, a digital death spiral.

The tactical screens suddenly flicker and die, only to reignite with a nightmarish display—every Brotherhood vessel’s position laid bare in perfect, clinical detail. Red targeting vectors spider across the projection, each line connecting to a waiting Eclipse warship. It’s not just tactical data—it’s an execution map, showing exactly how they plan to systematically destroy each ship.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” K’vex’s voice carries an almost reverent tone as the crew watches in horror. “Every formation, every fallback position, every emergency protocol—all precisely calculated for maximum effect.”

The display shifts, showing thermal readings of crew locations aboard each vessel.

Hundreds of life signs pulse like dying stars, completely unaware they're being hunted. Combat veterans like Zara and Grig turn ashen as they recognize the implications—this isn't just an ambush, it's an extinction event.

“Watch closely,” K'vex commands as the first targeting solutions lock into place. “The Eclipse wants you to understand exactly how thoroughly you've been betrayed.”

The screens erupt in a synchronized dance of destruction as two Brotherhood ships explode simultaneously, their crews never even having a chance to react. The precision of it is terrifying—each blast carefully calculated to cripple rather than destroy, ensuring maximum casualties while preserving valuable resources for salvage.

Through our bond, I feel Cirdox's rage building like a storm as he watches his people die, betrayed by one of their own. His tribal markings pulse with fury bright enough to cast crimson shadows across the bridge. But beneath the anger, there's something worse—the dawning realization that every strategy, every contingency he'd planned, had been engineered to fail from the start.

“You won't win,” I tell K'vex, my fingers flying across the corrupted interface as warnings flash across my screens. “The Eclipse can't control everything.”

“Can't we?” Her mandibles click in amusement, a sound that grates on my nerves. “Your neural implants are quite sophisticated, Neon. Imagine what secrets we'll extract once we've properly analyzed them—and you.”

My hands still for a fraction of a second before resuming their desperate dance across the controls. Each command line I enter twists and corrupts, my own code turning treacherous under my fingers. The neural implants that usually amplify my abilities sputter and spark, sending jolts of pain through my skull as they try to interface with



compromised systems.

“Zara!” Cirdox shouts over the blaring alarms. “Primary defense grid is failing. Switch to auxiliary controls!”

“Already on it,” she calls back, her russet fur bristling as she works. “But we’re losing systems faster than I can reroute power.”

The ship rocks violently as another volley strikes home. Through the viewport, I catch glimpses of Brotherhood ships trying to rally, to form some kind of defensive screen around us. But their formations are in shambles, their coordinated movements dissolving into chaos as compromised communications leave them blind and vulnerable.

“Tactical systems at thirty percent,” Grig reports, his usually calm voice tight with tension. “Enemy vessels closing from all vectors.”

My screens fill with cascading failure warnings as more Brotherhood ships fall into disarray. The Eclipse knows exactly where to hit us, exactly how to neutralize our advantages. I slam my fist against the console in frustration as another command sequence fails.

“Having trouble?” K’vex’s hologram asks, all six hands moving in mocking patterns. “Such a shame when sophisticated systems turn against their users, isn’t it?”

I bare my teeth in a fierce grin, though my heart pounds against my ribs. “Keep talking. Every transmission gives me another chance to crack your encryption.”

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The ship lurches again, throwing me against my station as the deck plates shudder beneath my feet. But I refuse to give up, refuse to let them win. They may have compromised our systems, but they haven't broken us yet.

"Cirdox," I say through gritted teeth, watching him coordinate the defense with predatory efficiency from his command position. His wings are mantled aggressively as he barks orders, tribal markings pulsing with battle-rage. "We need to—"

Another blast rocks the ship, and this time the impact sends cascading power failures through the tactical center. Through our bond, I feel his fury spike as he slams his fist into the command console, fangs bared in a snarl of frustration. Even as systems fail around us, he maintains the iron control that makes him such a formidable captain, his tactical genius shining through every calculated command.

"Maintain defensive formation!" he roars to the Brotherhood ships trying to rally around us, his voice carrying that edge of authority that brooks no argument. "Zara, reroute auxiliary power to the forward shields. Grig, prepare for emergency jump protocols."

As my screens go dark, I realize with cold certainty that this is only the beginning of K'vex's endgame. But watching Cirdox fight to protect his crew, his ship, his mate—it reminds me why I chose to bind myself to this fierce, noble warrior. He won't go down without making the Eclipse pay dearly for their treachery.

Another blast rocks the ship, a catastrophic impact that sends cascading power failures rippling through the tactical center. As my screens go dark, a chilling realization dawns: this isn't just an attack; it's a carefully orchestrated execution.

Emergency bulkheads slam down, cutting off our primary escape route, the metallic clang echoing like a death knell. I feel Cirdox's desperate need to reach me warring with his duty to defend the ship, a conflict that tears at my own soul. The deck shudders beneath my feet, a rhythmic vibration that signals the approach of boarding craft. Their cutting beams are already slicing through our compromised defenses.

The tactical center fills with smoke as another explosion rocks the ship. I hesitate, knowing that with only Grig, Zara and Cirdox on the bridge, every capable hand is needed. But as my neural implants register the cascading system failures, I realize our primary tactical controls are compromised beyond recovery.

"The secondary command center," I say, fingers flying across my failing console. "Its quantum processors are isolated from the main system—they run on protocols I designed myself. K'vex never had access." I lock eyes with Cirdox. "Someone needs to get those systems online or we'll lose everything."

Through our bond, I feel his understanding war with his protective instincts. We both know splitting up is dangerous, but with such a small crew, we need every advantage we can get. Zara and Grig are irreplaceable at their stations—keeping the ship moving and our weapons operational. Only I have the expertise to bring the backup systems online.

"Go," he growls, though his wings shift with barely contained tension. "We'll hold them here."

My neural implants flicker and spark, struggling against the system-wide corruption, but years of surviving in the digital underbelly of the galaxy have taught me to trust my instincts over technology. The Eclipse wants this tactical center intact—which means we need to deny them that advantage. All our classified data is here: Brotherhood safe routes, colony defense codes, crew personnel files that could expose our allies.

I slam my palm against the emergency protocols panel, initiating a localized data purge that will fry not just the computers, but the quantum cores themselves. Better to destroy our own tech than let it fall into enemy hands. The console sparks and dies under my fingers, taking vital ship data with it. I feel Cirdox's desperate need to reach me warring with his duty as captain. The ship-wide comm crackles with his commands as he coordinates defense from the bridge, his voice tight with barely contained rage.

Before I can move, he's there, wings mantled possessively as he pulls me against him. His mouth claims mine in a kiss that's equal parts dominance and desperation, fangs grazing my lowerlip. The heat of his tribal markings burns against my skin as he growls, low and fierce. "Come back to me, little hacker."

The intensity in his crimson eyes makes my breath catch, but there's no time to savor the moment. The ship shudders under another impact, and we both know what's at stake. I force myself to step back, though every cell in my body screams to stay.

"Protect the ship," I tell him, my voice steadier than my racing heart. "Protect our crew." Even as I say it, I know our separation is exactly what the Eclipse wants. They're trying to divide us, to weaken the tactical advantage our bond provides. But sometimes the only way to win is to spring the trap—and make them regret it.

## Chapter 20

### Neon Valkyrie

The taste of Cirdox's fierce kiss lingers on my lips as I sprint through the darkened corridor, my neural implants casting an eerie blue glow against the metal walls. His words echo in my mind—"Come back to me, little hacker"—a command and a prayer wrapped in that growling voice that makes my heart race even now. But there's no time to dwell on the warmth of his touch or the desperate possessiveness in his

crimson eyes. Not when every second counts.

The first explosion rocks the corridor outside, followed by the distinctive sound of boarding parties breaching the hull. I grab a fallen attacker's weapon, checking the charge as I plan my route through the chaos. They may have compromised our systems, but they can't hack my intimate knowledge of the Void Reaver's corridors.

The first Eclipse boarding party rounds the corner ahead, their tactical gear gleaming in the flickering emergency lights, marking them as elite strike teams. I don't hesitate. Years of running from corporate hunters, of evading security patrols, have honed my survival instincts. And now, those skills are subtly amplified by the Kyvernian strength flowing through our bond, a new edge to my reflexes.

The first attacker—a hulking Bravorian with obsidian scales and razor claws—lunges with the overconfident swagger of someone expecting an easy target. They always underestimate hackers. I duck under his swing, the movement sending sparks cascading from a damaged conduit overhead. His scales ripple with surprise as I use his own momentum against him, driving my elbow into the sensitive pressure point where neck meets shoulder plate. He drops with a satisfying thud that reverberates through the metal deck plating.

His partner, a lean Muspel with pale blue skin that seems to shimmer in the emergency lighting, raises an energy weapon. But I'm already moving, my enhanced reflexes carrying me through the smoke-filled air. The acrid scent of burning circuitry fills my lungs as I dodge between flickering holographic displays, using their erratic patterns to disorient him. His large, luminous eyes blink rapidly, trying to track my movement through the chaos.

It's a trick I learned in the shadowy back alleys of the Orion Outpost—using technology against those who rely too heavily on augmented targeting systems. The Muspel's weapon discharge goes wide, leaving a scorched pattern on the bulkhead

behind me. Before he can compensate, I'm inside his guard, my boot connecting with his wrist in a move that lacks Cirdox's natural grace but gets the job done. The weapon clatters across the deck as warning klaxons scream overhead, their urgent wail nearly drowning out the sound of more boarding parties breaching the hull.

Smoke curls around my ankles as I retrieve the fallen weapon, its familiar weight a comfort in my hands. Through the haze, I catch glimpses of other crew members engaged in similar struggles—Zara's russet fur bristling as she coordinates defense from a secondary command post, Grig's pale fingers dancing across emergency controls with characteristic precision. The Void Reaver shudders beneath us as another explosion rocks the ship, but I can't focus on that now. Not when more Eclipse troops will be here any second, their boots already thundering through adjacent corridors.

This isn't the elegant combat Cirdox has been teaching me—all controlled power and predatory efficiency. This is survival, pure and simple, learned in the digital trenches where every advantage counts. But right now, staying alive matters more than looking good doing it.

"Command center breached!" Zara's voice crackles through the failing comm system, a desperate cry that cuts through the chaos. "Multiple hostiles, heavily armed!"

I grab one of the fallen attacker's weapons, checking the charge as I plan my route. The ship's layout flows through my mind—not from tactical displays, not from neural feeds, but from hours spent exploring every corridor, every vent, every hidden passage of my new home. They may have compromised our systems, but they can't hack my intimate knowledge of the Void Reaver's guts.

Through the private team comms, I hear Cirdox coordinating the defense, his tactical genius shining even in the midst of this digital firestorm. His voice carries steel as he directs the crew, using the ship's compromised systems against the attackers, venting

sections to space, sealing others to trap boarding parties. Even through the static-filled channel, the fury in his tone at our separation is unmistakable, a searing heat that's matched only by his resolve to keep his crew—our family—alive.

They're herding us. The realization hits me with chilling clarity as I evade another patrol. The boarding parties' movements aren't random. Each strike, each carefully placed explosive charge, is designed to push us further apart, to guide crew members away from key defensive positions. My neural implants, though flickering, manage to map their advance patterns, revealing the unmistakable strategy.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

“They’re trying to split us up,” I mutter, disabling another attacker with a quick burst of code that overloads his weapon’s power cell. It’s a temporary fix, a digital band-aid, but it buys me a few precious seconds.

I hear Cirdox’s voice crackling through the failing comm system, his commands breaking up as interference grows stronger. Each burst of static feels like another barrier being forced between us, the electronic disruption a physical manifestation of the growing distance that threatens to strain our bond.

“. . . defensive positions . . . hold the line . . .” His words cut in and out, but the authority in his tone still carries through, even as the connection deteriorates further. The Eclipse is systematically taking down our communication systems, isolating different sections of the ship. Soon we won’t even have this tenuous link.

My heart clenches at the thought of Cirdox up there with only Zara and Grig to defend the bridge. They’re skilled—the best—but they’re drastically outnumbered. Through our bond, I feel Cirdox’s rage warring with exhaustion as he coordinates the defense. Zara’s probably at his right hand, bristling as she maintains weapons control, while Grig’s pale blue fingers dance across navigation with characteristic precision. But they’re only three against an army of Eclipse forces.

My thought cuts off as another explosion rocks the ship, a violent tremor that throws me off balance. The lights flicker, emergency systems struggling to compensate for the cascading damage. Through the smoke and chaos, I hear the distinctive, sickening thud of more boarding craft attaching to our hull.

“Neon!” Grig’s voice, usually calm and precise, is barely a whisper through the static



of the failing comms. “They’re targeting the auxiliary power couplings. If they breach—”

I grip my weapon tighter, torn between racing to help my family on the bridge and protecting the critical systems they need to keep us alive. The rest of his warning dissolves into a burst of static, but I’m already moving. The auxiliary power couplings are vital—if the Eclipse takes them out, we’ll lose what little control we still have over the ship’s systems. But reaching them means moving further from Cirdox, stretching our bond to its breaking point.

Through the static of the failing comm system, Cirdox’s voice comes in broken fragments, rougher than usual with barely contained pain. “Go,” he growls, the word crackling with interference and emotion. “The crew needs those couplings more than I need you within arm’s reach.”

Through our bond, I feel how much it costs him to say those words, to willingly increase the distance between us. The connection strains between us like a taut wire stretched to its limit, each step carrying me further from his protective presence.

I race through smoke-filled corridors toward the auxiliary power couplings in the secondary command center, my neural implants mapping the fastest route through the chaos. Each turn takes me further from Cirdox, our bond stretching painfully thin like a signal losing strength. But the crew needs these systems operational, even if maintaining them means increasing the distance between us.

The auxiliary control room is eerily quiet when I arrive, emergency lighting casting strange shadows across banks of humming equipment. My fingers fly across the nearest console, neural interface connecting smoothly as I dive into the power grid’s core systems. The familiar dance of code usually brings comfort, but now every sequence feels wrong, corrupted by K’vex’s sabotage.

“Come on,” I mutter, isolating compromised sectors while rerouting essential power through backup channels. “Just give me something to work with.”

A warning flashes through my neural feed—unauthorized access attempts multiplying across the network. They’re trying to breach the auxiliary systems, using the same protocols K’vex must have given them. My enhanced fingers dance faster, racing to strengthen firewalls even as more sections of code turn treacherous under my commands.

The secondary command center erupts in chaos as emergency bulkheads slam down, isolating me from the rest of the crew. My neural implants catalog multiple hostile signatures converging on my position while trying to maintain connection with the ship’s failing systems. Through our bond, I feel Cirdox’s desperate need to reach me warring with his duty to defend the bridge.

I race to the terminal at the back of the room to initiate emergency protocols, my fingers flying across interfaces to protect what data I can. Better to destroy our own systems than let them fall into Eclipse hands. Smoke fills the air as overloaded consoles spark and die, taking vital ship information with them.

The first explosion rocks the corridor outside, followed by the distinctive sound of cutting torches slicing through hull plating. Our bond stretches painfully thin as more attackers force themselves between us, Cirdox’s presence fading like a signal losing strength. My heart pounds against my ribs in fear, not of the enemy, but of that growing silence where his strength should be.

I check my stolen weapon’s charge as I analyze the tactical display, watching enemy movements through the ship’s compromised systems. The Void Reaver’s layout flows through my mind—not from tactical displays or neural feeds, but from hours spent exploring every inch of my new home. They may have compromised our systems, but they can’t hack my intimate knowledge of these corridors.

A subtle creak behind me makes my muscles tense. The air shifts, carrying the faint scent of ozone and metal that marks Eclipse tactical gear. Someone's in the room with me, and they're trying very hard to be quiet.

Time seems to slow as my implants process the nightmare materializing before me. Kira emerges from the shadows like a digital specter, her movements unnaturally fluid, each step precisely calculated. The crimson glow of her cybernetic enhancements casts blood-red shadows across features I once knew as well as my own. Elite Eclipse troops flank her, their weapons trained on me with mechanical precision.

"We need to stop meeting like this," Kira says, her synthetic voice carrying that terrible mechanical calm that still haunts my nightmares. "Though I must admit, you surprised me at the facility. Using my own encryption against me?" Her enhanced eyes pulse with something almost like pride. "I taught you well."

The words hit like physical blows, each syllable precisely targeted to old wounds. My hands clench into fists as I remember how close she came to killing Cirdox with that chemical compound, how she nearly took everything from me before I'd even accepted what he meant to me.

Through our fraying bond, I feel his desperate fury, his need to reach me warring with duty. But we both know it's too late. The Eclipse has orchestrated this separation with terrifying precision, and now I face my past alone.

"You taught me to fight corruption," I say, watching her elite team move to flank us. Their movements mirror her mechanical precision—more programs than people. "Not become it."

"Still so naive." Her crimson implants pulse with cold amusement. "You've bonded with a pirate captain, thrown your lot in with smugglers and thieves, yet you cling to

this illusion of moral superiority?” She takes a step closer, each movement unnaturally smooth. “The Eclipse simply admits what everyone else denies—power is the only truth that matters.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?” I ask, noting how her lowest set of cybernetic enhancers twitch slightly. “That turning energy supplies into weapons of control is somehow better than what killed Kai?”

Something flickers beneath her mechanical calm—grief or rage, I can’t tell anymore. “Kai died because he was weak. Because he thought ideals could change anything.” Her enhanced eyes narrow. “But you’ve grown stronger since then, haven’t you? Found your own power. The question is, will you be smart enough to survive using it?”

The threat hangs between us, sharp as a blade and twice as deadly. We both know this confrontation was inevitable—the sister who chose to become a weapon facing the one who chose to keep fighting. The only question is which of us learned our lessons better.

My fingers twitch toward my interface panel, a desperate instinct, even as her enhanced eyes track the motion with mechanical precision. Those eyes used to crinkle with warmth when she called me “sister.” Now they’re cold calculation matrices, processing my every move through whatever programs the Eclipse has wired into her brain.

For just a heartbeat, I catch a flicker of something in her expression—pain? Regret?—but it vanishes beneath layers of cybernetic enhancement before I can be sure it was ever there. The Kira I knew is buried somewhere beneath all that tech, but I don’t know if enough of her remains to reach.

“You know,” she says, idly cycling the charge on her weapon—a redundant gesture, a

tic left over from organic days. “When K’vex relayed the intel on your . . . attachment to the Kyvernian captain, I almost flagged it as corrupted data. NeonValkyrie, bonded? You couldn’t even maintain a stable connection with Kai, and look how that terminated.” Her laugh is a burst of static, devoid of warmth.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

“Don’t you dare speak his name,” I snarl, my heart pulsing with a rage-fueled energy that threatens to overload my systems. I monitor the bridge’s security feeds, catching glimpses of Cirdox coordinating the defense, his wings mantled as he barks orders to the crew. The Void Reaver shudders under another barrage, but I know he won’t abandon his post—not while his people need him. Through the flickering displays, I watch Zara and Grig working in perfect sync at their stations, keeping our damaged systems operational against overwhelming odds. This fight is mine, and I need to trust them to handle theirs.

“Why not?” Kira’s elite team moves to flank her, weapons trained on me, their movements precise and synchronized. “I was there too, remember? I watched my brother die because you were too afraid to trust anyone but yourself. Too convinced you could handle everything alone.”

“That’s not what happened.” My fingers tighten on my stolen weapon, the cold metal a small comfort in this chaotic nightmare. “Kai died because the Eclipse—”

“Because the Eclipse knew exactly how to manipulate you,” she cuts in, her voice a venomous whisper. “Just like they knew exactly how to turn your isolation against you. Why do you think the STI hired you? Why do you think they put you in position to find that data?”

“I knew the STI was rotten,” I snap back, my voice tight with fury. “That’s why I took the data in the first place. You think this changes anything? It just proves I was right.”

“No,” she agrees, raising her weapon, her cybernetically enhanced eyes gleaming

with a cold, calculating light. “Now you’re just another liability that needs to be contained.”

“K’vex was right about you and the Kyvernian,” she says, synthetic undertones making her voice unnaturally smooth. “When she told me you’d actually bonded with someone, I almost didn’t believe it. The great Neon Valkyrie, finally letting someone close enough to touch her heart.” Her broken-code smile never reaches her enhanced eyes. “Though your neural implants have certainly evolved since I last saw them. The Eclipse’s research division will be particularly interested in how they’ve adapted to the mate-bond. Once we’ve properly extracted them, of course.”

There is no humanity in her tone, just cold machine precision calculating the most efficient way to tear us apart. The sister who once taught me everything I knew about neural interfaces is gone, replaced by something that sees only specimens to be dissected, patterns to be analyzed. The way she studies my implants’ glow reminds me of how she used to examine code—methodical, relentless, focused only on finding exploitable weaknesses.

I launch myself sideways as Kira fires, the energy bolt scorching the wall where I stood, leaving a trail of molten metal and the acrid stench of ozone. My bond-enhanced reflexes give me a split-second advantage, but I’m outnumbered, cornered, and my systems are flickering. The elite team moves with a practiced precision, cutting off my escape routes, forcing me back, away from any semblance of cover.

Through our bond, I feel Cirdox’s desperate need to reach me, a raw, primal urge that’s almost painful in its intensity. But K’vex’s betrayal has left the bridge in chaos, a maelstrom of failing systems and desperate maneuvers. He’s fighting his own battle, trying to prevent the Eclipse from completely seizing control of the ship. The crew needs him there, even as every fiber of his being screams to protect his mate.

A flash of movement catches my enhanced vision—one of Kira’s elite soldiers

emerging from a ventilation shaft, his Malaxian bulk barely fitting through the opening. All four arms move with lethal grace as he drops to the deck, each limb equipped with different weapons. His iridescent scales shimmer beneath state-of-the-art combat armor, marking him as one of the Eclipse's enhanced operatives. My neural implants catalog the modifications—reinforced skeletal structure, accelerated reflexes, integrated weapon systems that make him more machine than organic.

I don't hesitate. A quick burst of code overloads his primary weapon, sending feedback screaming through its targeting systems. The distraction is minimal—these troops are too well-trained to rely on a single weapon—but it gives me the opening I need. As he switches to his secondary arms, I grab a flickering holographic display panel, ripping it free in a shower of sparks. The distorted emergency warnings create a strobing effect, momentarily confusing his enhanced optical sensors.

His lower arms reach for me as the upper pair draw backup weapons, but I'm already moving. My foot connects with a gap in his armor where flexibility is prioritized over protection—the sweet spot where Malaxian exoskeletons are weakest. The impact isn't pretty or technically perfect, but I feel something crack beneath my boot. He staggers, all four arms flailing to maintain balance, giving me precious seconds to put distance between us.

"You've gotten better," Kira admits, her voice devoid of emotion as she watches me fight with a clinical detachment. "But you're still predictable. Still trying to protect everyone but yourself. Still letting your conscience make you vulnerable."

She's right. Even now, with Eclipse forces closing in, I can hear crew members trapped in nearby sections, their panicked voices carrying through the damaged bulkheads. If I retreat now, if I focus solely on escape, I might save myself. But I can't abandon them to the Eclipse's mercy. Not when they've become more than just crew—they're family. And that's exactly what Kira knew I would do. She counted on my loyalty being my weakness, just like it was with Kai.



The tactical part of my brain knows she's using my protective instincts against me. But knowing the trap doesn't make it any easier to walk away from people who need me. Not anymore. Not since I stopped running and learned what it means to truly belong somewhere.

The ship lurches violently, a catastrophic tremor that signals their sabotage has reached the main power grid. Emergency lights flicker and die, plunging the corridor into a near-total darkness, broken only by the sporadic flashes of weapons fire and the eerie glow of my neural implants. In that moment of chaotic darkness, Kira's team makes their move.

The first stun blast catches me in the shoulder, a searing jolt of energy that sends electricity arcing through my cybernetics. I stumble, fighting to maintain consciousness as my enhanced systems short out, overwhelmed by the sudden surge. The second hit drives me to my knees, my muscles spasming uncontrollably as the energy disrupts the delicate balance between organic and technological.

"Finally," Kira says, her voice a cold whisper in the darkness as her team secures me. "The Eclipse has plans for both of you." She kneels beside me, her enhanced eyes gleaming with a predatory light. "And this time, you'll get to watch someone else die because of your choices."

The last thing I see before darkness claims me is the flash of Eclipse energy weapons, the desperate, terrified faces of the crew I swore to protect, their fear a chilling echo of my own.

## Chapter 21

### Cirdox

TheVoidReaverrocksviolently as another barrage of Eclipse fire slams into our

shields, the impact sending tremors through the deck plates beneath my feet. Through the viewport, I watch their ships move with mechanical precision, each formation perfectly aligned to maximize damage while minimizing our chances of escape. The bridge is a chaos of flashing warning lights and blaring alarms, the acrid smell of burning circuitry filling my lungs.

“Port shields failing!” Zara’s fingers dance across her console, her russet fur bristling as she diverts power from non-essential systems. “Two more Eclipse cruisers emerging from hyperspace, bearing three-four-zero!”

Grig’s pale blue skin gleams with sweat as he executes another desperate evasive maneuver, the ship groaning under the strain. “Hull integrity at sixty percent, Captain. We can’t take much more of this.”

I grip the command chair, watching tactical displays flash with cascading system failures. The Eclipse knows our every move, anticipating each strategy before we can execute it. K’vex’s betrayal has given them everything—our protocols, our formations, the very patterns of thought that kept us alive all these years.

A sudden silence in my mind stops my heart. The warm pulse of Neon’s presence through our bond... vanishes.

“NEON!” The name tears from my throat, a primal roar of loss that makes the bridge crew flinch. My fist slams into the command console, leaving a dent in the reinforced metal. The pain barely registers through the burning emptiness where her presence should be. Those Eclipse bastards took her. They took my mate.

“Captain!” Zara’s fur bristles with alarm as she abandons her station, rushing to my side. “What happened? What’s wrong with Neon?”

Grig’s large eyes widen with concern, his pale blue fingers stalling on the controls. “Is

she...?”

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

“She’s alive,” I growl, fighting to control the rage threatening to consume me. “But I can barely feel her.” My wings snap wide with barely contained fury, casting crimson shadows across the smoke-filled bridge.

“We’ll find her,” Zara promises, her voice fierce with loyalty even as her tail lashes with agitation. “Whatever it takes.”

“Engineering reports multiple breaches,” Grig adds, his usually calm voice tight with urgency. “But if you can sense anything through the bond, even a direction...”

“Report!” I snarl, fighting the urge to tear the bridge apart with my bare hands. Every instinct screams to abandon my post, to hunt them down, to rip apart anyone standing between me and my mate. But I’m still captain. These people trust me. Need me. Just like she trusted me to keep her safe.

“Shields at thirty percent and dropping.” Zara’s voice cracks slightly—she knows what Neon means to me. Her paws tremble as she reroutes emergency power, the displays before her a frantic dance of red warning indicators. “Multiple breaches on decks four and seven. Grig’s rerouting auxiliary power, but we’re losing life support in those sections.”

Another explosion rocks the ship, the impact throwing several crew members from their stations. Sparks rain from damaged conduits overhead as I grip the command chair, my claws digging deep grooves into the armrests. Through our stretched bond, I catch fragments of Neon’s fear, her pain. Each pulse is like acid in my veins. I failed her. I let them take her.

The main viewscreen fills with the sleek, deadly silhouettes of Eclipse warships, their black hulls absorbing what little starlight reaches us. They move like predators, synchronized and lethal, cutting off every possible escape route.

“They’ve targeted the secondary power couplings,” Grig reports, his long fingers dancing desperately across failing controls. The usual calm precision of his movements is gone, replaced by barely controlled panic. “If they take those out—”

“We’re dead in space,” I finish, forcing myself to study the tactical display through a haze of rage. The holographic projection shows our situation in stark detail—the Eclipse ships have us surrounded, a perfect trap born of K’vex’s betrayal. That snake knew all our protocols, all our escape routes. She handed them everything.

Gods, Neon. I’m so sorry. I should have seen it coming. Should have protected you better.

“Your orders, Captain?” Zara’s question cuts through my self-recrimination. She’s right. I can’t let grief consume me. Not when the crew needs their leader. Not when Neon needs me to stay focused.

The tactical display flickers, showing the Eclipse formation shifting. They’re pulling back, satisfied with their prize. My mate. My heart. Leaving us to die in the void while they...while they...

My roar drowns out the emergency klaxons, the sound echoing through the bridge like thunder. My wings snap wide, casting crimson shadows as my tribal markings pulse with fury bright enough to illuminate the smoke-filled air. “The Juntarian nebula’s radiation will mask our energy signature,” I growl, my tactical mind working even through the rage. “And the magnetic fields can temporarily stabilize our failing shields if we calibrate them correctly.”

“The nebula’s particle density could buy us time to make repairs,” Grig adds, his pale fingers already dancing across the navigation controls. “The same interference that masks us will disrupt their targeting systems.”

“And we have supply caches hidden in the outer rings,” Zara realizes, her fur bristling with renewed determination. “Emergency parts, medical supplies...”

“No.” My fangs bare in a predatory snarl as I slam my fist through the tactical display, shattering the hologram of the nebula. “We don’t have time to regroup. Every second we waste is another moment they have my mate.” My wings snap wide, casting crimson shadows across the smoke-filled bridge. “They want to cripple us? Let them try. But I’m going after her. Now.”

“Captain,” Zara protests, her fur bristling with concern. “The ship’s systems are failing. We can’t possibly—”

“They took my mate.” The words come out as a primal growl that makes the bridge crew flinch. Through our stretched bond, I feel Neon’s fear spike, then smooth into calculated determination. She’s fighting. Planning. Even now, she refuses to give up. “I don’t care if we have to tear through every Eclipse ship in the sector. I’m getting her back.”

Grig’s pale fingers dance across the navigation controls, his usual methodical nature replaced by fierce loyalty. “Their flagship’s shields are strongest at the bow. But if we come in from below, using the radiation interference to mask our approach...”

“Do it.” I grip the command chair, my claws leaving deep gouges in the metal as another tremor rocks the ship. “Zara, prepare boarding parties. We strike hard and fast.” My tribal markings pulse with battle-fury as I feel Neon’s presence grow stronger. She’s close. And nothing—not failing systems, not overwhelming odds—will keep me from her now.

The crew's expressions shift from fear to fierce resolution as the strategy takes shape. It's desperate, yes, but it's also tactically sound. And right now, we need both.

"Zara, send encrypted bursts to our allies. Short-range only—nothing they can trace. Grig, plot the least predictable course through the nebula's outer bands. We're not just running—we're preparing to strike back."

The Void Reaver shudders violently as we tear into hyperspace, systems screaming in protest. Warning klaxons blare as structural integrity readings plummet into the red. But I barely notice the chaos. All I can focus on is that faint pulse through our bond—Neon's fierce spirit, refusing to give up. Fighting. Waiting for me.

Hold on, little hacker. I'm coming for you. And the Eclipse is about to learn what happens when you steal a Kyvernian's mate.

The Void Reaver screams out of the slingshot maneuver, her hull plates groaning under the strain as we hurtle past the pulsar's lethal gravitational field. Warning klaxons blare through every deck as stress indicators flash critical red across my command display. But we've done it—we've achieved what the Eclipse thought impossible. Their flagship fills my viewport, its sleek obsidian hull bristling with weapon arrays and defense turrets. The sheer arrogance of their design makes my markings pulse with fury—all those gleaming sensors and perfectly aligned gun ports speak to an empire convinced of its own invincibility.

Through our bond, I feel Neon's presence grow stronger, a beacon guiding me straight to her location somewhere in that massive vessel's heart. My wings snap wide, casting crimson shadows across the bridge as primal instinct merges with tactical assessment. We're close enough now that I can pick out individual shield generators, spot the subtle power fluctuations that betray vulnerable points in their supposedly perfect defenses. Close enough that nothing—not their technology, not their numbers, not even their precious logic—can stop me from reaching my mate.

“Zara, maintain defensive fire. Grig, bring us in close,” I command, my voice ringing with a cold fury that chills even me. “Get me within range of their auxiliary shield grid. Neon left us a gift—her cloaking algorithms are still buried in our core systems.”

My fingers dance across the command console, accessing the hidden subroutines my clever mate designed before her capture. The familiar patterns of her code flow across my screen—elegant, precise, deadly. Like her. Even now, she’s protecting us with her brilliant mind.

“But Captain,” Zara protests, her russet fur bristling with concern. “The strain on our damaged systems—”

“Will be worth it,” I growl, my tribal markings pulsing with predatory intent. “I’m going aboard alone. The cloaking field will only mask one signature—and I need you both here, keeping the Void Reaver ready for a fast extraction once I have her.”



*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

“Captain,” Zara protests, her russet fur bristling with concern. “You can’t take on an Eclipse flagship by yourself.”

“I won’t be by myself,” I growl, my tribal markings pulsing with predatory intent. “I’ll have a mate-bond guiding me straight to their heart. And I’ll have you two keeping them busy from out here.”

The ship’s secure comms crackle to life with a chorus of outraged roars as I send encrypted coordinates to our allies. Vornak’s voice, amplified by his ship’s systems, booms through the bridge. “Thar’Kal! That treacherous Rhilnar scum! We just picked up the distress signals. K’vex will pay for this betrayal. The Bravorian fleet stands ready. Just give us the target coordinates.”

Other captains chime in through the encrypted channel, their voices a mix of fury and grim determination. Shen’va, their ethereal tone laced with steel, pledges the Seraphim’s support from the outer rim. Zyx’tal, her voice clipped and precise, offers the Muspel fleet’s tactical expertise. Even Drokmar, usually pragmatic to a fault, growls his condemnation of K’vex’s treachery, though his pledge of support is carefully worded, leaving room for calculated retreat. Ralith, ever the pragmatist, remains silent, no doubt assessing the shifting power dynamics before committing his forces.

“Three Brotherhood ships lost in the outer sector,” Vornak growls through the static, his voice heavy with grief and fury. “The Stellar Wind... the Night’s Promise... good crews, loyal crews.”

“The Crimson Vale’s engines are critical,” Shen’va adds, their ethereal voice tight

with controlled anger. “We had to evacuate the engineering deck. Twenty of our finest...”

“My weapons officer served with K’vex for ten cycles,” Drokmar cuts in, unusual emotion roughening his gravelly tone. “She trusted her. We all did.”

The weight of their losses settles like ice in my chest, each name another wound that demands vengeance. These weren’t just crews, they were family.

“We lost good people today,” I acknowledge, my voice carrying both grief and steel. “Brothers and sisters who trusted the Brotherhood to keep them safe. K’vex didn’t just betray me—she betrayed every one of us, every principle we stand for.”

A moment of heavy silence fills the comms, broken only by the distant sound of battle alerts.

“The Brotherhood stands united against betrayal,” I declare, my voice rising with command and conviction. “Not just for vengeance, but for justice. For every ship lost, every life taken. K’vex thought she could shatter us by aligning with the Eclipse. She’s about to learn that betrayal only strengthens the bonds between those who remain true.”

“I’m transmitting coordinates for the Eclipse flagship,” I continue, watching the tactical display as friendly signatures begin to move into position. “I need you to hit them hard—draw their defensive forces away from the central sectors. Make them think this is a full Brotherhood assault.” I pause, letting the implications sink in. “While they’re occupied with you, I’m taking a small team aboard. They have something that belongs to me.”

Around us, Eclipse warships maintain their blockade with mechanical precision, their coordinated movements speaking to an intimacy with our tactics that makes my

markings pulse with fury. K'vex's betrayal has given them everything—our protocols, our strategies, the very patterns of thought that kept the Brotherhood alive all these years.

Through our stretched bond, I feel only fragments—sharp spikes of fear and pain that fade into a hollow emptiness where her vibrant spirit should be. The silence burns deeper with every passing moment, threatening to shatter my hard-won control. She's alive, but the bond is muted, distorted—like trying to hear her voice through layers of static.

The comm system crackles, and a chillingly familiar voice fills the bridge. My wings snap wide at the sound, recognizing the synthetic undertones that have haunted Neon's nightmares.

“Cirdox Thar’Kal.” Kira's voice carries an artificial warmth that sets my teeth on edge. “I have a message for you. From your... mate.”

Static crackles, and then Neon's voice, strained but defiant, fills the bridge. “Don't play their game, Cirdox. They're trying to provoke you. Don't—”

The transmission cuts off abruptly, replaced by Kira's chilling laughter.

## Chapter 22

### Neon Valkyrie

The acrid, chemical burn in my nostrils sears my lungs, mixing with the coppery taste of blood that fills my mouth—a souvenir from fighting back when they dragged me in here. My neural implants spark and misfire, sending jolts of white-hot pain through my skull with each erratic flicker of the emergency lights. Damn Eclipse bastards knew exactly how to scramble my tech, leaving me cut off from the digital world

that's been my sanctuary for so long.

The holding cell is a sick joke—a perfect cube of gleaming durasteel without a single flaw or feature to latch onto. No seams to exploit, no shadows to hide in, just endless reflective surfaces designed to mess with your head until you start doubting your own sanity. They think their precious tech can break me? I've survived worse. I've rebuilt myself from nothing before.

The acrid taste of blood fills my mouth as Kira's transmission ends, my warning to Cirdox cut off by a brutal backhand that sends me sprawling. The cold metal floor of the Eclipse holdingcell presses against my cheek as I struggle to focus through the waves of pain radiating from my scrambled neural implants.

“Get her up,” Kira commands, her synthetic voice carrying that terrible mechanical precision that still haunts my nightmares. “The lab is prepped and waiting.”

Rough hands haul me to my feet, Eclipse guards flanking me with military efficiency as they drag me through sterile corridors. My boots scrape against polished floors, leaving scuff marks that somehow feel like tiny acts of defiance. The antiseptic smell grows stronger as we approach what can only be their research wing, making my stomach churn with dread.

The lab doors hiss open to reveal a nightmare of gleaming medical equipment and monitoring stations. At the center stands a reclined examination chair, its restraints and neural interface ports leaving no doubt about its purpose. My heart pounds against my ribs as they force me into it, the cold metal pressing against my back through the thin fabric of my tactical suit.

“Comfortable?” Kira asks, running her augmented fingers along a tray of examination tools with obscene tenderness. “You always did hate medical procedures. Remember how you used to hold my hand during implant maintenance?” Her broken-code smile

never reaches her enhanced eyes. “Such a shame we’ve grown so... distant.”

“Go to hell,” I spit, testing the restraints even though I know it’s futile. They’re made for containing subjects—subjects like me.

“Now, now,” she chides, selecting a neural probe from her collection. “Is that any way to talk to family?” The probe whirs to life, its tip glowing with an eerie blue light. “Let’s see how those implants have adapted to the mate-bond, shall we?”

The first touch of the probe against my neural port sends white-hot agony shooting through my skull. I bite back a scream, refusing to give her the satisfaction, but I can’t stop the way my body arches against the restraints. Through our bond, I feel Cirdox’s answering surge of fury and fear.

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“Fascinating,” Kira murmurs, studying the readings on her displays. “The integration is far more complete than our models predicted. The Eclipse will be very interested in how your technology has merged with his... primitive biology.”

She adjusts something on the probe, and fresh waves of pain crash through my system. This time I can’t hold back the cry that tears from my throat. The room blurs around me as tears fill my eyes, but I force myself to meet her gaze.

“He’s coming for me,” I gasp out between ragged breaths. “And when he does—”

“Oh, I’m counting on it,” Kira interrupts, her synthetic voice carrying an almost gleeful edge. “In fact, let’s give him a proper invitation, shall we?”

My heart pounds as she activates the comm system, her cybernetic enhancements pulsing with cruel anticipation. “Cirdox Thar’Kal,” she purrs, the artificial warmth in her voice making my skin crawl. “I have a message for you. From your... mate.”

The way she says that last word, like our bond is some primitive curiosity to be studied, fills me with rage. But underneath that anger, raw fear claws at my chest as I watch those enhancements pulse with deadly intent. Her enhanced eyes study me like a specimen to be dissected, and I know exactly what the Eclipse has planned.

“Don’t play their game, Cirdox,” I shout, fighting against my restraints. “They’re trying to provoke you. Don’t—”

Kira cuts the transmission with a laugh that sounds more like corrupted code than anything human. The sound chills me to my core, because I recognize the emptiness

in it—the same hollowecho that comes from losing your humanity piece by piece to their “improvements.”

They won’t just extract information—they’ll tear apart my neural implants, analyze how they’ve adapted to the mate-bond, use me as a test subject for their twisted experiments. The thought of being strapped to their medical tables, of having my mind and body violated by their “procedures,” sends ice through my veins.

Our bond pulses with Cirdox’s desperate fury, his need to reach me, and for the first time since Kai died, I’m truly terrified—not just of dying, but of being transformed into something inhuman, something broken, like what they did to my sister.

The lights flicker again, sending another spike of agony through my implants. I try to access the ship’s systems, to give Cirdox some advantage, but the Eclipse’s security protocols are too strong. My neural interface sparks and sputters, useless. All I can do is bare my teeth in a feral grin, hiding my growing desperation behind defiance. They can’t know how much this helplessness terrifies me.

“Still trying to protect him?” Kira’s voice carries that horrible synthetic sweetness, a twisted parody of the sister who once taught me everything I knew about hacking. An Eclipse technician adjusts something on the restraint panel, sending fresh waves of interference through my neural network. I bite back a cry of pain, refusing to give them the satisfaction.

“Just like you tried to protect Kai?” She crouches beside me, her cybernetically enhanced eyes pulsing with an unnatural crimson glow. The familiar accusation cuts deeper than any physical pain. “We both know how well that worked out.”

I close my eyes, focusing on the bond with Cirdox—that strange, powerful connection I never expected to trust. It’s my only lifeline now, my only way to fight back. I can feel him coming, his fury burning like a star through our connection. I just

have to hold on, have to keep them distracted long enough for him to reach me. The thought steadies me, gives me strength even as another surge of interference makes my implants scream in protest. The mention of Kai's name hits harder than any physical blow, memories flashing through my mind—his broken body sprawled across blood-stained concrete, his eyes wide and unseeing as Eclipse forces stormed the facility.

“He trusted you,” I spit, tasting copper and rage. “He was your brother!”

“He was weak,” she replies, her voice devoid of emotion. “Just like you're weak. Clinging to outdated notions of family, of loyalty.” Her enhanced hand grips my chin, forcing me to meet her gaze. The sister I once knew is gone, replaced by this cold machine wearing her face. “The Eclipse offers power, control. Everything I deserve.”

Another attempt to access the ship's systems sends white-hot agony through my skull. The electromagnetic pulse they used during my capture has turned my neural architecture into a maze of broken pathways and corrupted connections. Each interface attempt feels like razors scraping across my synapses, accompanied by bursts of static that taste like burnt circuitry.

“Your implants are quite sophisticated,” Kira muses, her artificial eyes scanning my neural ports with clinical interest. “The way they've adapted to the Kyvernian mate-bond... fascinating. The research division will be particularly interested in analyzing them.” Her broken-code smile never reaches those enhanced eyes. “Once we've properly extracted them, of course.”

She turns to the Eclipse technicians hovering nearby, their tools gleaming under the harsh medical lights. “Begin preliminary scans. I want a complete neural map before our guest arrives.” Her voice carries that terrible mechanical precision that still haunts my nightmares. “And do try not to damage her... permanently. We need those implants intact.”



The silence stretches like a physical weight after Kira leaves, broken only by the insistent throbbing in my skull where they've been probing my neural implants. Each pulse of pain sends fresh waves of nausea through me, but I force myself to stay conscious, to keep fighting. The bond with Cirdox flickers like a dying flame, growing weaker with each failed attempt to reach him through the Eclipse's dampening field.

Time passes in a blur of agony. They've left me strapped to this medical gurney, surrounded by cold machinery and the steady beep of monitoring equipment. My implants sputter and spark, trying to interface with systems that reject them, sending jolts of electricity through my nervous system. But I don't scream. I won't give them that satisfaction.

"Fascinating," one of the Eclipse technicians mutters, adjusting something that makes my vision white out momentarily. "The mate-bond has actually altered her neural architecture. The integration is far more complete than our projections suggested."

"Increase the probe intensity," another voice commands. "We need deeper access to understand the modifications."

Fresh pain explodes behind my eyes as they push harder, trying to map the changes the bond has made to my systems. My body arches against the restraints, muscles spasming uncontrollably. Still, I don't make a sound. Instead, I focus on memories of Cirdox—his wings mantling protectively around me, the warmth of his tribal markings against my skin, the fierce tenderness in his crimson eyes. They can hurt me, but they can't take that away.

The door hisses open again, and Kira's silhouette appears, her enhanced eyes gleaming in the harsh medical lighting. "Status report?"

"Subject is showing remarkable resilience," one technician responds, his voice

clinically detached. “But the neural stress is approaching critical levels. We risk permanent damage if we continue at this intensity.”

“Unfortunate,” Kira says, studying me with cold calculation. “But we’ve gathered enough data for now. Return her to the holding cell. We need her... relatively intact for what comes next.”

Two guards move to unfasten the restraints, their grip bruising as they haul me upright. My legs buckle immediately—I haven’t moved in hours, and the neural damage has affected my motor control. They drag me between them like a broken puppet, my feet barely touching the ground.

“Stay strong, little sister,” Kira whispers as we pass, her synthetic voice carrying a twisted echo of affection. “The real pain hasn’t even started yet.”

The journey back to my cell is a nightmare of flickering lights and intermittent consciousness. Every step sends fresh agony through my implants, which are now firing randomly, sending conflicting signals to my muscles. The guards have to practically carry me, my body refusing to cooperate.

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When they finally reach the cell, they simply release their grip, letting me crumple to the cold metal floor. The impact barely registers through the haze of pain. I curl into myself, trying to contain the tremors wracking my body, each breath a struggle against the darkness threatening to consume me.

The door seals with a final hiss, leaving me alone in the dimly lit cube. My neural implants continue to misfire, sending random bursts of data through my damaged systems. But beneath the pain, beneath the fear, a spark of defiance still burns. Because I know something Kira doesn't—I know exactly what a Kyvernian warrior will do to protect his mate.

And when Cirdox comes, the Eclipse will learn just how badly they've miscalculated.

Through the haze of pain, I hear distant explosions rocking the ship, each vibration traveling through the cold metal walls of my cell. My neural implants flicker and spark, damaged from Kira's "interrogation," but I force myself to focus through the agony. The tactical chatter filtering through the ship's compromised communications tells a story that makes my throat tight with emotion.

Through the haze of pain, I hear distant explosions rocking the ship, each vibration traveling through the cold metal walls of my cell. My neural implants flicker and spark, damaged from Kira's "interrogation," but I force myself to focus through the agony. The tactical chatter filtering through the ship's compromised communications tells a story that makes my throat tight with emotion.

It's not just Cirdox coming for me. The whole Brotherhood is mounting an assault. I hear Zara's voice, sharp with barely controlled fury as she coordinates attack vectors.

Sweet, methodical Grig, his usually calm tone carrying an edge of steel as he calculates targeting solutions. They're risking everything—their ships, their lives—for me. The realization brings tears to my eyes.

When did they become so much more than just a crew? When did Zara's protective scolding and Grig's quiet support become as essential as breathing? I think of all the late-night strategy sessions, shared meals, small moments of laughter and trust built day by day. They're my family. And I might never get to tell them how much they mean to me.

My head throbs as another wave of pain washes over me, the world going grey at the edges. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold on. The damage to my neural implants is severe—I can feel systems failing, connections fraying. But I have to stay conscious. Have to keep fighting. They deserve that much from me.

Through the static of failing comms, I catch fragments: multiple Brotherhood vessels engaging the Eclipse flagship, McCoy's Planetary Police forces joining the attack, even Ta'vag's diplomatic channels being used to prevent Eclipse reinforcements. They've united—pirates, law enforcement, diplomats—all to save one hacker who never thought she'd belong anywhere.

I press my hand against the cold wall, letting the ship's vibrations ground me as darkness threatens to close in. "I'm sorry," I whisper, though they can't hear me. "I'm so sorry I might not make it home." Home. When did the Void Reaver become that? When did these fierce, loyal, incredible people become the family I never thought I'd have?

The cell spins as I slump against the wall, my strength fading. But I smile through the pain, because even if this is the end, I know now what it means to be truly loved.

Cirdox

The silence in my mind where Neon's presence should be burns like acid through my veins. Our bond, usually a warm current of shared strength and fierce devotion, has become a hollow void punctuated by sharp spikes of her fear and pain. Each flash of her agony tears at my soul, made worse by my inability to reach her, to protect her.

"Three more Brotherhood vessels lost in the outer sector," Zara reports, her voice tight with grief. "The Star's Promise, the Crimson Vale... good crews, Captain. Families."

The names slam into me like physical blows, each one carrying faces I know—crews I've shared meals with, captains whose children I've watched grow up in our hidden ports. The weight of their loss threatens to crush me, but it's nothing compared to the icy terror gripping my heart. Because somewhere out there, my fierce, brilliant mate is in the hands of those same monsters. And the fragments of fear bleeding through our stretched bond tell me she's fighting a battle I can't reach.

I check my weapons one final time as I prepare to board the Eclipse vessel. Kira's earlier transmission replays in my mind, her synthetic voice twisting what was once human into something grotesque—the same voice that haunts Neon's nightmares.

"Cirdox Thar'Kal." The artificial warmth had set my teeth on edge, her once-musical lilt corrupted into something that barely passed for human. "I have a message for you. From your... mate."

The way she'd said that last word—like our sacred bond was some primitive curiosity to be studied—makes my tribal markings flare anew with primal rage. But beneath that fury runs a deeper, colder fear. Because I've seen the Eclipse's handiwork scattered across the galaxy in shattered minds and broken bodies. And now they have my heart, my soul, my very reason for breathing in their grasp.

Neon's voice had cut through the static—strained but carrying that core of steel that made me fall in love with her. Even that brief contact was enough to feel the pain she was fighting through, the desperate strength she was clinging to. My claws dig into my palms now as I fight to control the primal need to tear the galaxy apart to reach her.

“The boarding craft is ready, Captain,” Zara says softly, her concern evident in her tone. She knows what this means—leaving the Void Reaver when she needs me most. But she also understands that nothing will keep me from Neon now.

My wings flare wide, tribal markings pulsing with a fury that makes the bridge crew step back. They think they can use Neon against me? They think they can bargain with a Kyvernian's bond-mate? They're about to learn exactly how fatal that mistake will be.

“Zara,” I command, my voice dropping to a dangerous growl that carries centuries of predatory promise, “target their communications array. Grig, prepare for a direct assault on their flagship. We're going through, not around.”

“But their defenses—” Zara begins, her voice laced with concern that would touch me if I could feel anything beyond the burning need to reach my mate.

“Won't matter,” I interrupt, my voice raw with barely contained fury as I slam my fist against the console, leaving deep gouges in the reinforced metal. The tactical display flickers erratically, fragments of data streams bleeding red across the screen like open wounds. Warning indicators pulse with increasing urgency, each flash a reminder of how many systems we've lost to K'vex's betrayal.

I can't feel Neon through our bond—that damnable interference cutting me off from her presence like a wound that won't stop bleeding. The silence where her fierce spirit should be burns through me, bringing whispers of that terrible emptiness I

thought I'd left behind. Bond-sickness scratches at the edges of my consciousness, a creeping darkness I refuse to acknowledge the meaning of. I can't show weakness. Not now. Not when she needs me most.

The not knowing is worse than any physical pain. Is she conscious? Afraid? Fighting back with that fierce defiance that captured my heart? Or have they already broken through her defenses, torn apart the brilliant mind that matches my tactical experience blow for blow? The possibilities torment me, feeding the primal rage that threatens to shatter my careful control.

I grip the command console harder, leaving deep grooves in the metal as another wave of emptiness washes through me. I won't let them see how the bond-sickness claws at my soul, how each moment without her threatens to unravel everything I am. My crew needs their captain, not a mate drowning in desperation. But gods, the darkness is so much colder without her light to guide me home.

"They want a fight?" My wings snap wide, casting crimson shadows as my tribal markings pulse with battle-rage bright enough to illuminate the smoke-filled bridge. "Let's give them one they'll never forget."

McCoy's hologram materializes beside me as I check my weapons with methodical intensity, each movement a promise of violence to come. Her features are drawn tight with concern, the usual stern confidence replaced by grim understanding of what we face. "They're jamming all frequencies, Captain. Our reinforcements are fighting through heavy resistance in the outer sectors, but they won't reach us in time."

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Ta'vag's hologram flickers beside her, his fur rippling with waves of barely suppressed fury that match my own. "I've activated every diplomatic channel at my disposal, but the Eclipse is deliberately ignoring all established protocols. Their reach is worse than I thought."

Their words wash over me like distant thunder, barely penetrating the primal roar of protective instinct drowning out all other concerns. Every heartbeat without Neon is agony, every second we waste in discussion is another moment she suffers at their hands. My mate is in danger. My crew is trapped. And K'vex's treachery has already cost too many lives.

"Zara, maintain cloaked maneuvers. Grig, prepare for emergency hyperspace override—I'll give you the coordinates when I have them." I turn to McCoy and Ta'vag, my tribal markings pulsing with barely contained power. "Buy me time."

Their holograms flicker and fade as I activate my personal comm, monitoring the faint pulses of tactical data Neon manages to send through our strained bond. Even through the pain and interference, she's fighting—using her brilliant mind to analyze Eclipse movements, identify system vulnerabilities, map potential escape routes. She's not just struggling to survive; she's working to protect us all.

My wings flare wide as another fragment of data comes through, the urge to reach her, to shield her, a physical ache in my chest. I don't need complex tactical displays or computer readouts. Her fear is my compass, leading me straight to the heart of the Eclipse's treachery. Her determination sharpens my resolve into a razor's edge.

I study the massive Eclipse flagship looming before us through the viewport, its sleek



obsidian hull bristling with weapon arrays and defense turrets. The sheer arrogance of their design makes my markings pulse with fury—all those gleaming sensors and perfectly aligned gun ports speak to an empire convinced of its own invincibility.

“Zara, coordinate with the Brotherhood vessels. I want synchronized strikes on their primary weapons array.” My voice carries the cold authority of a predator preparing to strike. “Grig, get us as close as you can to their auxiliary docking bay. That’s where I’ll breach.”

Grig’s pale fingers dance across the controls with deadly precision, weaving the Void Reaver through gaps in the Eclipse’s defensive screen. Around us, Brotherhood ships move into attack formation, their coordinated fire drawing attention away from our approach.

Through the crackling comms, Vornak’s voice carries a mix of fierce loyalty and grim understanding: “Thar’Kal, the Bravorian fleet is in position. But their flagship’s defenses...” He pauses, his usual bravado replaced by genuine concern. “The casualties will be severe. Are you certain about this approach?”

My wings snap wide, tribal markings pulsing with battle-fury as I study the tactical display. The Eclipse flagship looms before us, its obsidian hull bristling with weapon arrays and defense turrets. Through our stretched bond, I feel Neon’s painspike sharply, and my claws dig deep grooves into the command console.

“I’m going after her,” I growl, my voice carrying centuries of predatory promise. “The Eclipse wants to use my mate against me? They’re about to learn exactly how fatal that mistake will be.”

Zara steps forward, her russet fur bristling with barely contained emotion as she hands me the final weapons check report. “The boarding craft is prepped, Captain.” Her voice softens slightly. “But if things go wrong...”

“Get our crew to safety,” I command, gripping her shoulder firmly. We both know this could be our final conversation. “Don’t wait for me. That’s an order.”

She meets my gaze steadily, years of friendship and trust evident in her eyes. “The Brotherhood stands with you. But we’ll honor your command if...” She doesn’t finish the sentence. She doesn’t need to.

I turn toward the boarding craft, every muscle tensed for the coming battle. Behind me, the bridge crew moves with grim efficiency, knowing that their captain is about to launch himself into what could well be a suicide mission. But they understand. They’ve seen what the bond between Neon and me means. And they know that nothing—not overwhelming odds, not certain death—will keep me from reaching her now.

“Remember,” I tell her, gripping her shoulder firmly, “your first duty is to the crew. If the Eclipse brings in reinforcements, if the odds turn against us—you jump to hyperspace. That’s an order.”

McCoy and Ta’vag’s holograms flicker on the tactical display, their expressions grim but determined. The Planetary Police forces are already engaging the flagship’s outer defenses, while Ta’vag’s diplomatic channels work to prevent Eclipse reinforcements from arriving.

“Your sacrifice won’t be in vain, Captain,” McCoy promises, her voice tight with respect. “Whatever happens today, the Eclipse pays for their treachery.”

Through encrypted channels, I hear the Brotherhood captains checking in—Vornak’s proud Bravorian fleet, Shen’va’s ethereal warships, even Drokmar and Ralith’s pragmatic forces. K’vex’s betrayal has united us all, though the price may be higher than any of us imagined.

“Remember,” I tell them, my tribal markings pulsing with fierce determination, “this isn’t just about revenge. This is about showing the galaxy that some bonds can’t be broken. That loyalty still means something.” I pause, letting my next words carry the full weight of command. “But don’t throw your lives away needlessly. If the battle turns, save your crews. The Brotherhood must survive.”

I turn to board the assault craft, but Zara’s voice stops me. “It has been an honor, Captain.” The formal words carry years of friendship and trust.

“The honor was mine,” I reply softly. Then I steel myself, pushing aside emotion for the cold focus of combat. “Now, let’s remind the Eclipse why they should fear the Brotherhood. All ships, commence attack!”

The Void Reaver glides through the void like a ghost, her cloaking systems—Neon’s final gift before her capture—masking our approach from the Eclipse’s sensors. Through the viewport, I watch their ships pass within meters of us, their crews blind to the predator in their midst. My markings pulse with fierce pride at my mate’s brilliance, even as worry gnaws at my heart.

Grig’s pale fingers dance across the helm controls with impossible precision, each minute adjustment keeping us perfectly aligned in the flagship’s sensor shadow. One wrong move, one fraction of degree off course, and the cloak’s delicate algorithms could falter. But Grig proves why he’s the finest pilot in the Brotherhood, threading our massive ship through gaps that shouldn’t exist with the fluid grace of a much smaller vessel.

“Boarding craft in position, Captain,” he reports, his usually calm voice carrying an edge of steel I’ve rarely heard. His large eyes remain fixed on his displays, monitoring the thousand variables that could expose us. “Maintaining optimal stealth profile. They won’t see us until it’s too late.”

I grip the command rail, wings mantling with barely contained fury as another spike of pain bleeds through my bond with Neon. Soon, my fierce little hacker. Soon I'll tear apart anyone who dared lay hands on you.

I strap on my combat gear, the familiar weight of my weapons a comforting presence against the burning rage in my blood. My wings flare, impatient to unleash their power.

"Let's get her back," I growl, the words carrying a cold promise of retribution as I check my weapons one final time. My wings flare with barely contained fury, casting crimson shadows across the bridge.

I stride toward the boarding craft, my tribal markings pulsing with lethal intent. Let them come. Let them try to stand between a Kyvernian warrior and his captured mate. They're about to learn exactly how fatal that mistake will be.

The bond tugs at my soul, guiding me like a compass pointing true north, though the signal feels weaker, more fragmented than before. Each pulse carries echoes of her pain, her fading strength. The bond-sickness scratches at the edges of my consciousness, a creeping darkness I refuse to acknowledge the meaning of. Hold on, little hacker. Just hold on.

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The boarding craft launches into the heart of the Eclipse flagship, its shields barely holding against the concentrated fire. But I don't flinch, even as another wave of emptiness washes through me where her vibrant presence should be. I can feel her, so close now, though her light flickers like a dying star. And nothing, not even death itself, will stop me from reaching her side. The hollow ache in my chest grows stronger with each passing moment, a physical reminder of what the bond-sickness is trying to tell me—that time is running out.

I grip the launch controls tighter, leaving deep grooves in the metal as I fight back the primal fear threatening to consume me. She has to survive. The alternative is unthinkable. The darkness where her fierce spirit should be burns through me like acid, but I force myself to focus. My crew needs their captain, not a mate drowning in desperation. Even if every heartbeat without her is agony.

The Eclipse flagship is a labyrinth of sterile corridors and pulsating energy fields—a cold, calculating environment that reflects the heart of their ideology. But I don't need maps or sensors. I have Neon, and that's all the guidance I need.

### Chapter 24

#### Cirdox

The sterile corridors of the Eclipse flagship stretch before me like arteries of some vast mechanical beast, each pulsing with the cold blue light that marks their technological "superiority." My tribal markings cast crimson shadows across gleaming walls, their glow deliberately dimmed but impossible to fully suppress—not with the fury burning in my blood. The bond pulls at my soul like a compass seeking true north,

each pulse carrying fragments of Neon's pain that fuel my rage.

The first security checkpoint appears ahead—four guards in pristine tactical gear that speaks to Eclipse precision and arrogance. Their enhanced sensors should have detected my approach, but they've grown complacent in their technological superiority. Fatal mistake. My wings snap wide as I launch myself forward, moving with a speed born of centuries of combat training and the primal drive to reach my mate.

The first guard dies before he can raise his weapon, my claws finding the vulnerable seam where helmet meets armor. The second manages to draw his sidearm, but a sweep of my wing sends him crashing into the wall with bone-crushing force. The third and fourth coordinate better, their modified reflexes allowing them to take defensive positions. But they've never faced a Kyvernian warrior fighting to protect his mate.

I move like smoke between them, every motion a perfect blend of power and precision. My wings become weapons, razor-sharp edges slicing through armor while blocking their retreat. One guard's enhanced eyes widen in fear as he realizes too late that his precious technology is no match for primal fury. The other tries to trigger his emergency beacon, but my claws tear through his armor like paper, silencing him permanently.

A fifth guard emerges from a side corridor, his weapon already charged. But desperation makes him sloppy. I catch his energy blast on my wing, the reinforced membrane dispersing the charge even as I close the distance between us. His enhanced reflexes let him dodge my first strike, but he's not prepared for how quickly I recover. My claws find his throat with surgical precision, and his dying gurgle carries a warning to anyone monitoring their comms.

I don't bother hiding the bodies or silencing alarms. Let them know death stalks their

halls. Let them feel the same fear they've inflicted on my mate. Let them realize too late that all their technology, all their "improvements," mean nothing against a Kyvernian protecting what's his.

The bond tugs harder now, each pulse carrying more of Neon's fading strength. My markings flare brighter in response, their glow reflecting off pools of spilled blood like warning beacons. They thought they could take my mate, could use her against me? They're about to learn exactly how fatal that mistake will be.

I move deeper into the ship, every sense heightened by protective fury. The sterile corridors all look identical, but I don't need maps or markers. The bond guides me unerringly toward her, each step carrying me closer to the heart of the Eclipse's stronghold. More guards will come. More will die. And nothing—not their technology, not their numbers, not even death itself—will keep me from reaching her.

The air grows colder as I stalk through the sterile corridors of the Eclipse flagship, each step carrying me closer to their research wing. The clinical scent of antiseptic and ozone burns my nostrils, mixing with subtle undertones of fear and pain that make my tribal markings pulse with renewed fury. They dare experiment on my mate? They dare try to understand the sacred bond between us with their cold science?

My claws leave deep gouges in the metal walls as I fight to contain the primal rage burning through my veins. The bond-sickness claws at my mind, a creeping darkness that threatens to consume me entirely. But I won't let it. Not when Neon needs me. Not when her brilliant light flickers so dangerously through our stretched connection.

The first patrol never sees me coming. My wings snap wide as I drop from the shadows above, using their enhanced strength to slam two soldiers into opposite walls before they can raise their weapons. The impact leaves dents in the reinforced metal, their bodies crumpling to the floor like broken toys. The third manages to get off a

shot that scorches my shoulder, but the pain barely registers through the battle-fury singing in my blood. My claws find his throat with lethal precision, tearing through reinforced armor like tissue paper.

Let them come. Let them try to stand between a Kyvernian warrior and his captured mate. I am done with mercy. Done with restraint. They will learn why my people are feared across the galaxy, why even the ancient legends speak of our fury in whispered tones.

Another patrol rounds the corner—elite troops this time, their movements betraying extensive cybernetic enhancement. The first raises his weapon with inhuman speed, but I'm already moving, my wings carrying me through the air in a deadly dance. My claws rake across his faceplate, shredding the reinforced material and the flesh beneath. His partner's energy blast catches my wing, leaving a trail of searing pain that only feeds my rage.

I spin, using the momentum to sweep my wings in a devastating arc that sends two more soldiers crashing into the ceiling with bone-crushing force. They don't get up. The last tries to retreat, reaching for his emergency beacon with cybernetically enhanced reflexes. My fangs find his throat before his fingers touch the control, the taste of copper flooding my mouth as I tear through vital arteries.

The corridor falls silent except for my ragged breathing and the distant hum of ship systems. Through our bond, I feel Neon's presence growing weaker, her usual fierce spirit flickering like a dying star. The emptiness where her vibrant mind should be burns through me like acid, feeding the primal rage that threatens to shatter my careful control. Each pulse of her pain drives my claws deeper into my palms, drawing blood that drips unnoticed to the polished floor.

I am coming, little hacker. And the Eclipse will pay in blood for every moment of pain they've caused you. They thought they could use our bond against us, thought



they could break what makes us strong. But they don't understand. This connection between us isn't just about comfort or pleasure—it's about two souls finding their perfect match, about strength multiplied rather than divided.

My markings pulse brighter as I sense her location more clearly now, like a beacon calling me home. She's close, so close, and nothing—not their technology, not their numbers, not even death itself—will keep me from reaching her side. The darkness threatens to overwhelm me where her fierce spirit should be, but I force myself to focus through the pain. My mate needs her warrior, not a captain drowning in desperation.

The next group of soldiers doesn't even have time to scream. I move through them like a force of nature, each strike precisely calculated to cause maximum damage. My wings sweep wide, using their enhanced strength to devastating effect as I tear through their ranks. Claws and fangs find weak points in armor with deadly accuracy, my body moving with the fluid grace of a predator born to kill.

Blood drips from my claws as I stand among the fallen, my tribal markings casting crimson shadows across their broken forms. This is what I am—what I've always been beneath the careful control of a Brotherhood captain. A warrior. A protector. A mate who will tear apart the galaxy itself to reach the one who holds his heart.

Hold on, Neon.

The ship's antiseptic air carries traces of ozone and something worse—the metallic scent of blood. Her blood. The knowledge feeds the darkness clawing at my soul, threatening to unleash something even I might not be able to control. But I can't let rage blind me. Not when one mistake could cost Neon everything.

A security door blocks my path, its control panel pulsing with encrypted lockouts. I smile grimly, remembering how Neon would tackle such obstacles—her fingers

dancing across interfaces while making sarcastic comments about outdated protocols. The memory sends fresh protective fury through me. I tear the panel free with my claws, using brute force where she would have applied finesse. The door sparks and dies, sliding open with a protesting groan.

Through the smoke-filled corridor, K'vex emerges like a nightmare made flesh. My markings pulse brighter as I take in the changes—fresh surgical scars threading across her carapace where gleaming metal now pierces organic tissue. Cybernetic ports dot her exoskeleton, their crimson glow a perversion of natural bioluminescence. The sight makes my stomach turn. They've already started transforming her into one of their soulless machines.

“I was wondering when you'd arrive.” Her voice carries that new artificial smoothness that sets my teeth on edge. All six hands move in unsettling patterns, their movements too precise, too calculated—like watching a puppet whose strings are pulled by cold algorithms rather than organic intent. “Your mate is quite resilient. The research division is particularly interested in how her neural architecture has adapted to your... primitive biology.”

My wings snap wide, tribal markings blazing with lethal intent as I face the traitor who handed my mate to these monsters. The metallic sheen creeping across her once-proud form only fuels my fury. This is what awaits Neon if I fail—this hollow shell where a warrior once stood.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

“Protected me?” K’vex laughs, the sound like grinding metal. “The Brotherhood is dying, Thar’Kal. A relic desperately clinging to outdated notions of loyalty and honor while the galaxy evolves beyond you.” Her mandibles click with cruel amusement. “I simply chose the winning side. The Eclipse offers something far more valuable than your precious traditions—perfect order through perfect control.”

Her cybernetic enhancements pulse with an unnatural crimson glow as she studies me. “Though I must admit, watching your primitive mate-bond being dissected has been... fascinating. The way she screams when they probe her neural ports...” She tilts her head, all six hands moving in a mockery of sympathy. “Such a shame you weren’t there to protect her. But then, that’s what the Brotherhood does best, isn’t it? Makes promises it can’t keep.”

The words ignite something primal in my soul, awakening an ancient power that burns through my veins like liquid fire. My tribal markings explode with crimson fury, casting blood-red shadows across the sterile corridor as I launch myself at K’vex with lethal grace. My wings snap wide, their span filling the space as I channel centuries of warrior heritage into pure, unstoppable force.

K’vex’s eyes widen as she realizes her fatal miscalculation. Her six arms move in a blur, each wielding a different weapon with mechanical precision, but she’s fighting something beyond her algorithms and strategic projections.

I move like shadow and storm combined, my wings becoming razor-edged weapons as I weave through her defenses. Each strike carries the weight of my promise to Neon, each movement fueled by the desperate need to reach her. K’vex may be enhanced, may have superior technology, but she’s fighting against something

primal, something that transcends her cold logic.

My claws tear through her reinforced armor like tissue paper, leaving deep gouges that spark and smoke. She staggers back, all six arms moving in desperate patterns as she tries to maintain distance. But I'm relentless, driven by a force deeper than conscious thought. The bond pulses through me like a star going nova, transforming my body into a weapon honed by love and fury.

"You calculated everything," I growl, my voice carrying centuries of predatory power as I slam her against the wall, pinning four of her arms with my wings while my claws find her throat. "Except what it means to threaten a Kyvernian's mate."

Her mandibles click in desperate patterns as she realizes that all her betrayal, all her careful planning, has led to this moment. She's about to learn exactly how fatal it is to stand between a warrior and his heart's chosen.

My markings pulse with killing intent as I lean closer, letting her see the full depth of what she's awakened. "You betrayed your own kind," I snarl, feeling the rage surge through me like a force of nature. "The Brotherhood gave you shelter, protection, family—and you sold us to our enemies for power."

The fight becomes a blur of violence and desperation. My claws find purchase in her new cybernetic enhancements, tearing through delicate circuitry. She screams, the sound more mechanical than organic, as sparks fly from damaged systems. But still she fights, all six hands moving in increasingly erratic patterns as her programming starts to fail.

"The Eclipse... will break you both," she gasps out, mandibles clicking in dying defiance. "Your primitive bond... means nothing... against perfect order..."

I lean close, letting her see the cold fury in my eyes. "The bond means everything," I

growl. Then I tear out her primary control node, watching the light fade from her enhanced eyes as her systems crash into permanent shutdown.

The victory brings no satisfaction—only renewed urgency as another wave of pain pulses through our bond. Neon's presence feels fainter now, her fierce spirit struggling against whatever horrors they're inflicting on her. I leave K'vex's broken body behind, following the pull of our connection through the sterile corridors.

## Chapter 25

### Cirdox

I stalk through the Eclipse flagship's pristine corridors, leaving a trail of unconscious guards in my wake. Blood trickles from a wound in my side where a lucky shot got through, but I barely notice the pain. My markings pulse with increasing intensity as I draw closer to her location, their crimson glow reflecting off the sterile walls like war paint.

Through our bond, I feel Neon's presence growing stronger—but it's wrong, distorted by whatever they're doing to her. Each pulse carries fragments of agony that tear at my soul, feeding the primal rage burning in my blood. The bond-sickness claws at the edges of my consciousness, a creeping darkness that whispers of time running out. But I refuse to acknowledge it. Refuse to consider failure when my mate needs me.

The research wing rises before me like a temple of steel and glass, its entrance guarded by pulsing force fields and automated defense turrets that spring to life at my approach. The security systems are impressive—state-of-the-art targeting arrays and overlapping energy barriers designed to be impenetrable. If I were thinking tactically, I'd fall back, find another approach.

But this isn't about tactics anymore.

My wings snap wide as I launch myself forward, moving faster than their targeting systems can track. The first turret manages only a single shot before my claws tear through its housing, ripping vital components free in a shower of sparks. I use the momentum to spin into the second, my wing edge shearing through reinforced metal like paper. The third and fourth fall just as quickly, my centuries of combat experience expressed in a dance of lethal precision.

The force fields crackle and hum, their energy matrix designed to repel any conventional attack. But there's nothing conventional about a Kyvernian warrior fighting to reach his mate. I drive my claws into the field generator's housing, ignoring the searing pain as electricity arcs across my skin. My tribal markings flare brighter, drawing on reserves of strength I didn't know I possessed. With a roar that shakes the corridor, I tear the generator free, the force fields collapsing in a cascade of failing power.

Through the reinforced observation windows ahead, I catch glimpses of medical equipment that makes my blood run cold—neural probes and monitoring stations, each one designed to extract data through pain. The air carries the sharp tang of ozone and antiseptic, undercut by something worse—the metallic scent of my mate's blood.

I move with deadly purpose now, each step carrying the weight of a promise. The Eclipse thinks their technology makes them invincible? They're about to learn what real power looks like.

Kira stands in the center of the lab like some cybernetic goddess of death, her mechanical enhancements humming with lethal intent. Elite Eclipse troops flank her, their weaponstrained on my position with mechanical precision. But it's what lies behind her that nearly shatters my control.

The medical lab doors explode inward as I tear through the final security barrier, my wings mantling with killing fury at the sight before me. Neon lies strapped to a medical chair, neural probes violating her implants while monitoring equipment records every moment of her agony. Her body arches against the restraints as they push deeper into her mind, but even now, even through this nightmare, I feel her fighting. My fierce little hacker, refusing to break even as they tear her apart.

“Welcome, Captain.” Kira’s synthetic voice carries that terrible artificial warmth as she emerges from the shadows. “I was wondering when you’d join us.” Her enhanced eyes pulse with cruel calculation as she assesses me, no doubt cataloging every injury from my fight through her guards. “Though I must admit, you’ve exceeded our projected arrival time by several minutes.”

Blood trickles down my side from where an Eclipse guard’s blade found purchase earlier, and my left wing aches from deflecting concentrated weapons fire. But pain is nothing compared to the hollow ache where Neon’s presence should be. My wings spread wide, casting crimson shadows across the sterile lab as a growl builds in my chest—a sound carrying centuries of predatory promise.

“The bond between you is fascinating,” Kira continues, circling me with unnaturally fluid movements. Her cybernetic enhancements gleam beneath the harsh lights, each gesture precisely calculated for maximum psychological impact. “The way her neural architecture has adapted, merged with your primitive biology... The research division will be particularly interested in studying the changes.” She flexes her enhanced limbs, combat protocols visibly engaging. “Once we’ve properly extracted them, of course.”

The threat to my mate shatters the last threads of my control. My roar of primal fury shakes the medical equipment as I launch myself at her, wings mantling with lethal intent. She’s blindingly fast—her Eclipse modifications giving her inhuman speed and precision. But she’s fighting for data, for control. I’m fighting for my heart, my

soul, my very reason for breathing.

Kira's enhanced reflexes let her dodge my initial strike, her cybernetic limbs a blur as she counters. The blow that catches my injured side sends fresh waves of agony through my battered body, the earlier wounds threatening to slow me down. Through our strained bond, I feel Neon's consciousness flickering like a dying star. Time is running out.



*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

My wings sweep forward, using their raw power to drive Kira back even as my claws rake across her reinforced armor. She hisses—a sound more static than organic—as my attack draws first blood. Her counter-strike comes instantly, enhanced muscles propelling her into a spinning kick that would have crushed a normal opponent's skull.

I twist away at the last second, feeling the wind of her strike pass centimeters from my face. My wings snap out for balance as I pivot, using the momentum to drive my elbow toward her exposed flank. She blocks with impossible speed, her augmented arm absorbing an impact that should have shattered bone.

“Your combat protocols are remarkably adaptable,” she purrs, her synthetic voice betraying no strain despite the growing damage to her systems. “No wonder she chose to bond with you. Though I wonder...” Her next strike slips past my guard, enhanced fingers digging into my wounded side. “How long can even a Kyvernian warrior fight with three cracked ribs and a torn wing membrane?”

The pain is excruciating, but I use it—channel it into the primal rage burning through my veins. My wings slam forward with devastating force, catching her in mid-taunt and sending her crashing into a bank of monitoring equipment. Sparks shower around us as delicate machinery shatters.

She recovers impossibly fast, launching a devastating combination of strikes. Her cybernetic enhancements allow her to attack from multiple angles simultaneously, each blow precisely targeted to existing injuries. I block what I can, my wings providing crucial defense, but several hits slip through. Fresh blood runs down my chest as her razor-sharp attachments find purchase.

But she's made a critical error—she's fighting to disable, to capture, to study. I'm fighting to reach my mate. And nothing else matters.

Through our bond, I feel Neon's presence growing weaker, her consciousness flickering as the neural probes dig deeper. The sight of her pain, combined with the hollow ache in my chest where her vibrant spirit should be, ignites something primal inside me. My tribal markings blaze with battle-fury bright enough to cast shadows.

I let Kira's next attack land, ignoring the searing agony as her enhanced fist crashes into my already broken ribs. The impact drives the breath from my lungs, but it also puts her exactly where I need her. My wings snap forward with every ounce of strength I possess, the powerful muscles I usually use for flight becoming weapons of pure destruction.

The blow catches her squarely, sending her crashing into the reinforced wall hard enough to crack both her armor and the metal behind it. Before she can recover, I'm on her, my claws finding the subtle gaps in her cybernetic defenses. She screams—a sound that shifts between human and machine—as I tear through delicate circuitry.

“You're too late,” she gasps, artificial voice crackling with damage as sparks fly from her failing enhancements. “The procedures have already begun. Her neural architecture will never be the same.”

Primal fury erupts through me at her words. My roar drowns out the blaring alarms as I slam her against the wall again, my claws buried deep in her reinforced chest plate. “The Eclipse's greatest mistake,” I snarl, watching fear finally breach her mechanical composure, “was thinking they could control something as sacred as a mate-bond.”

As I face Kira, my tactical mind races to analyze her vulnerabilities. Her movements are unnaturally fluid, cybernetic enhancements giving her speed and strength no human should possess. But beneath the mechanical precision, I catch glimpses of

organic weakness—the slight tremor in her left hand, the way she favors her right side, small tells that betray the human core still buried under all that tech.

The sister who once protected Neon isn't completely gone—just buried beneath layers of Eclipse programming and cybernetic control. Through our bond, I feel Neon's conflicted emotions about her sister, the hope that some part of her might still be saved warring with the knowledge of what she's become.

When Kira lunges, I spot the power conduit running along her spine—the central hub connecting her enhanced systems. A killing blow would be easier, but I know what that would do to Neon. Instead, I time my strike precisely, my claws finding the exact point where synthetic meets organic.

The final moments of my battle with Kira unfold in a blur of desperate fury. Her cybernetic enhancements whir and spark as she launches herself at me, movements unnaturally fluid. But she's made one fatal miscalculation—she's fighting with cold machine precision, while I'm driven by something far more primal. The need to protect my mate burns through my veins like molten steel, making my tribal markings pulse with deadly intent.

“You're too late,” she taunts, her synthetic voice carrying that horrible mechanical calm even as my claws tear through her reinforced armor. “The Eclipse has already begun extracting her neural architecture. Soon there will be nothing left of the sister she remembers.”

The words hit like physical blows, but they only feed the rage burning in my soul. With a roar that shakes the medical bay, I slam her against the nearest wall, my wings mantling with lethal purpose. “You were supposed to protect her,” I snarl, watching fear finally crack through her artificial composure. “She trusted you!”

“Trust is weakness,” she spits, but there's something beneath the words—a flicker of

the sister she used to be, struggling against the Eclipse's programming. "The Eclipse showed me true power."

"No," I growl, my claws finding the primary power coupling that feeds her enhanced systems. "They showed you how to become a slave."

Her eyes widen as she realizes what I'm about to do, genuine emotion breaking through the mechanical mask. "Wait—"

I don't hesitate. With a savage twist, I tear the power core free from her cybernetic spine. The crimson glow fades from her enhanced eyes as cascading system failures ripple through her body. She collapses in my arms, more human than machine for the first time since this nightmare began.

Looking down at her unconscious form, I see past the Eclipse modifications to the sister who once protected Neon, who taught her everything about neural interfaces and digital warfare. She's alive—barely—but the monster they turned her into is finally silenced.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, though I know she can't hear me. "But I won't let you hurt her again."

I stagger toward the medical chair, each step sending fresh waves of agony through my battered body. Blood drips steadily from multiple wounds, and breathing feels like swallowing fire. But none of it matters as I reach for the restraints holding my mate.

"Took you long enough, Captain," she whispers against my chest, though I can feel how much the words cost her. Her usual snark carries an edge of pain that makes my heart clench.

“I’m here now,” I murmur, pressing my lips to her temple while reaching for my comm. “McCoy, we need immediate extraction and medical support. I have her.”

Her body goes limp in my arms as consciousness finally fades, but our bond pulses with renewed strength. She’s hurt, damaged in ways that will take time to heal. But she’s safe. She’s mine. And I will never let anyone take her from me again.

The alarms blare deafeningly as I cradle Neon’s unconscious form against my chest, her neural implants still sparking erratically. Her skin is too pale, too cold, and the bond between us feels dangerously thin. Each erratic pulse of her implants sends fresh waves of fear through me—what did those Eclipse bastards do to her?

“Hold on, little hacker,” I growl, my wings mantling protectively as another explosion rocks the corridor. The wound in my side burns with every step, blood soaking through my tactical gear where K’vex’s blade found its mark. But the pain is nothing compared to the terror of feeling Neon’s presence growing weaker through our stretched bond.

Eclipse forces converge from multiple directions, their weapons fire filling the air with deadly energy. I twist, using my wings as shields while returning fire one-handed. My tribal markings pulse with battle-fury as I clear a path through the chaos, each movement a careful balance between protection and survival. Nothing matters except getting her to safety.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

My boots slip in my own blood as I round another corner, the corridor spinning dangerously. The extraction point seems impossibly far, and more hostiles pour in from adjacent sections. A blast catches my left wing, searing through membrane and muscle. The pain nearly drives me to my knees, but I force myself onward. I won't fail her. Not again.

"Multiple hostiles converging on your position," Zara's voice crackles through my comm. "You need immediate extraction!"

I snarl in acknowledgment, unable to spare breath for words as I fight through another wave of attackers. My wings sweep wide, knocking back the closest soldiers while I empty my weapon into the rest. The recoil sends fresh agony through my injured side, but I barely notice. Every second counts now.

Finally, I reach the small boarding craft I arrived in which promises escape, if I can just get us there. I gather my remaining strength and launch us both forward, my damaged wings straining to carry us the final distance.

We crash into the cockpit as enemy fire fills the air around us. I slam the hatch closed with one hand while cradling Neon's limp form against my chest with the other. The controls respond sluggishly to my blood-slicked fingers as I punch in the launch sequence.

"Hold on, little hacker," I growl, executing a desperate spiral maneuver to avoid their targeting locks. Each violent turn sends fresh waves of agony through my wounds, but I can't fail. Not now. Not with her life in my hands.

The journey back to the Void Reaver is a gauntlet of weapons fire and near misses. Neon remains terrifyingly still in my lap as I pilot one-handed, refusing to release her even as alarms scream warnings of multiple system failures. I feel her presence flickering like a candle in a storm, growing fainter with each passing moment.

When we finally dock with the Void Reaver, Zara and Grig rush forward, but I growl when they try to take her from me. My wings snap wide despite the searing pain, tribal markings pulsing with protective fury. Only when my legs buckle, nearly sending us both crashing to the deck, do I allow them to take her. The last thing I see before darkness claims me is her pale face, her neural implants still flickering with damaged light.

Don't leave me, little hacker. Please. Just hold on.

## Chapter 26

### Neon Valkyrie

Consciousness filters back like fragments of corrupted code slowly piecing themselves together, each bit bringing fresh waves of sensation. The antiseptic scent hits me first, and panic claws up my throat—too similar to the sterile lab where they'd stripped away my defenses one neural probe at a time. My implants spark wildly as my heart rate spikes, the monitors screaming in protest.

But then another scent cuts through the terror—spiced leather and starlight, uniquely Cirdox. The steady pulse of our bond wraps around my battered consciousness like a protective shield, grounding me in the present moment. This isn't the Eclipse lab. I'm safe.

The soft hum of medical equipment still sets my teeth on edge, each tiny sound amplified through my damaged neural architecture—the whisper of fabric as

someone shifts position, the subtle click of monitoring equipment, the barely audible whoosh of recycled air. My implants sputter and spark, failing to establish stable connections with nearby tech. The malfunction sends electricity dancing along my nerve endings, making me flinch.

“Neural patterns destabilizing,” a Borovian doctor growls, his obsidian scales rippling with concern as he studies the medical readouts. “She’s going into fight-or-flight.”

McCoy stands behind the doctor in the medical bay, her stern features drawn with worry as she monitors the situation.

Before the words fully register, Cirdox is there, his wings creating a protective cocoon around me that blocks out the harsh medbay lighting. His presence through our bond radiates fierce love and worry despite what I can tell is significant physical pain on his end.

“You’re safe, little hacker,” he murmurs, pressing his forehead to mine. “I’ve got you. They can’t hurt you anymore.”

Memories flash through my mind in disjointed fragments—his roar of fury as he tore through the Eclipse facility, the way his wings had mantled over me when the extraction went sideways, how he’d refused to let me go even as his own wounds bled freely.

I grip his arms, anchoring myself in his solid presence as my breathing slowly steadies. His tribal markings pulse softly, their familiar crimson glow infinitely more comforting than the sterile white of the medbay lights.

“Neural patterns stabilizing,” I hear the doctor—or is it McCoy—say through the hazy fog of consciousness. My implants feel raw, like someone took sandpaper to my neural pathways, but I catch the subtle shift in her voice—something deeper than



clinical detachment. Not quite envy in her expression, but a profound understanding as she watches us. “The specialized treatment protocols are working. She’s fighting.”

“She never stopped fighting.” Cirdox’s voice is raw, like he’s been roaring for hours. The pride and fierce love carrying through those words makes my chest tight.

I force my heavy eyelids open, ignoring how the light sends fresh spikes of pain through my damaged neural architecture. My implants spark erratically, but none of that matters when I finally focus on him. Dark circles ring his eyes, and fresh bandages wrap his torso, but his smile when our gazes meet could outshine the stars themselves.

“Took you long enough to wake up,” he teases gently, though I feel his relief singing through our bond.

“Had to make sure you missed me properly,” I manage to rasp back, earning a soft laugh that makes his wings quiver.

My breath catches at the sight of him. He looks like he went ten rounds with a Bravorian war squad and lost. Fresh bandages wrap his broad torso, already showing spots of crimson where his wounds have seeped through. His left wing hangs at an awkward angle, the membrane torn in several places. Dark bruises mottle his bronze skin, and there’s a nasty gash above his right eye that’s definitely going to scar.

But his markings pulse with pure joy as our eyes meet, and the smile that breaks across his face makes every bit of pain worth it. He’s the most beautiful male I’ve ever seen.

“Welcome back, little hacker,” he murmurs, his large hand engulfing mine. The contact sends warmth flooding through our bond, chasing away the lingering cold of unconsciousness. His thumb traces gentle patterns on my palm, the tender gesture at

odds with his fierce warrior appearance.

“You look like shit,” I croak, but I squeeze his hand hard enough to make my knuckles white. I’m not letting go. Not ever again. The bond pulses with shared understanding—we both came too close to losing this.

He laughs, the sound rough with exhaustion but gloriously real. “You should see the other guys.” His free hand comes up to brush a strand of hair from my face, and I lean into the contact shamelessly. “Though K’vex and Kira won’t be threatening anyone for a very long time.”

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

The names send fresh shivers down my spine as memories surface—Kira’s synthetic voice as she directed the neural probes deeper, K’vex’s mechanical precision as she detailed exactly how they planned to weaponize our bond. I start to tremble, and Cirdox’s grip tightens protectively.

“The physical trauma is stabilizing,” the doctor says, keeping his voice steady despite his furrowed brow as he studies the readings. “But these neural pathways . . .” he shakes his head and looks gratified to see Officer McCoy step forward.

“I’ve called in specialists from Orion Outpost,” McCoy adds, her usual authoritative tone softened with genuine worry. “The best neuro-techs in the quadrant. The damage the Eclipse’s probes did to your neural architecture is . . . extensive. But they’ve had success with similar cases. It will take time to fully heal.”

I try to sit up, but my body feels like it’s made of lead. Cirdox supports me with gentle hands, helping me find a more comfortable position. The movement sends fresh sparks of pain through my neural ports, making me gasp.

“Easy,” he murmurs, his wing curling around me protectively despite his own injuries. “You’ve been unconscious for three days. Your body needs time to recover.”

“Three days?” I blink in surprise, then immediately regret it as the motion makes my head spin. “What happened after . . .”

“After I got you out?” His chest markings pulse darker, and I feel his fury at the memory bleeding through our bond. “The Brotherhood launched a coordinated strike against Eclipse holdings across three sectors. We’ve already taken down fourmajor

facilities and rescued dozens of other victims from their ‘research’ programs. McCoy’s evidence, combined with what you managed to extract before they caught you, was enough to finally force the STI to act.”

“The Planetary Police have strike teams hitting every Eclipse facility we can identify,” McCoy confirms, adjusting something on my IV. “Ta’vag’s diplomatic channels are working overtime to coordinate with local authorities. We’re not just pushing them back—we’re dismantling their entire operation with your assistance. And, most importantly, you are a free woman.”

Pride and satisfaction war with lingering fear in my chest. “And Kira? Did you . . .”

“She’s alive,” Cirdox says softly, his hand tightening on mine. “In a secure medical facility where they’re working to undo the Eclipse’s programming. It will take time, and she may never fully recover, but there’s hope.”

I nod, ignoring the way the motion makes my vision blur. Hope is more than I expected. More than I dared dream when I first discovered my sister had been transformed into one of their cybernetic monsters.

“The crew sends their love,” McCoy adds with a rare smile. “Though keeping them out of here has been . . . challenging. Especially Zara—she’s appointed herself your personal guardian. I had to threaten to sedate her to make her get some rest.”

The thought of the fierce Vulpexian defending me brings unexpected moisture to my eyes. When did I acquire such a loyal family? The lone hacker who trusted no one now has an entire crew ready to tear apart the galaxy to protect her.

“I’m surprised they managed to keep you out this long,” I say, my voice weak but carrying a hint of my usual snark. My neural implants still spark erratically, sending jolts of pain through my skull, but seeing Cirdox’s tribal markings pulse with relief

makes it worth the effort to speak.

“Bold of you to assume she succeeded,” he rumbles, and McCoy snorts.

“Your mate nearly tore apart half my medical staff when they tried to separate you for treatment,” she says dryly. “We had to set up a second bed in here just to keep him from reinjuring himself trying to reach you.”

“They lived,” Cirdox growls, but there’s no real heat in it. His thumb continues its gentle patterns on my palm, and I feel his contentment humming through our bond. Having me awake and talking has eased some of the desperate tension I can still sense in his muscles.

“Barely,” McCoy mutters, but her eyes are fond as she checks my readings again. “The neural specialists will want to run more tests now that you’re conscious, but I think we can wait until tomorrow. You need rest more than anything else right now.”

I start to protest, but a massive yawn betrays me. Cirdox chuckles, the sound rumbling through his chest in a way that makes me want to curl up against him.

“Sleep, little hacker,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Promise?” I hate how vulnerable the word sounds, but the bond pulses with his fierce response.

“Always,” he growls, his wing tightening around me. “Nothing in this galaxy will take you from me again.”

I let my eyes drift closed, surrounded by his warmth and protection. For the first time since waking, I feel truly safe. The bond hums between us, strong and steady, a

reminder that I'm no longer alone.

The next few days pass in a blur of tests and careful healing. The neural specialists work to repair the damage done by Eclipse probes, but it's slow, delicate work. Every successful interface brings fresh hope, while each failed connection reminds me how far I have to go. Through it all, Cirdox remains my constant anchor, his presence steady and unwavering despite his own injuries.

The crew visits in carefully controlled rotations, bringing gifts and stories to lift my spirits. Zara smuggles in actual coffee from her private stash, while Grig shares tales of how the Brotherhood fleet is systematically dismantling Eclipse smuggling operations. Their visits help piece together what I missed during those three days of unconsciousness.

K'vex's betrayal hit the Brotherhood hard, but it also united us in ways I never expected. Other captains have stepped up, pledging their full support to hunting down Eclipse cells. Even Vornak, who once challenged Cirdox's authority at every turn, now leads strikes against their holdings with devastating efficiency.

A week after waking, McCoy finally clears me to leave the medbay. My neural ports are mostly stable, though certain connections still spark unpredictably. Walking is a challenge after so long in bed, but Cirdox simply scoops me into his arms despite my token protests.

"I can walk," I grumble, even as I curl into his warmth.

"Indulge me," he rumbles, his tribal markings pulsing with satisfaction as he carries me toward his quarters. Our quarters now, I realize with a start. The thought sends a different kind of warmth curling through me.

The bond hums with shared need as he palms open the door and gently lays me on his

massive bed. His markings pulse with an intensity that takes my breath away as he looks down at me, wings mantling protectively.

*Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 7:10 am*

“I thought I’d lost you,” he whispers, and the raw emotion in his voice makes my heart clench. His hands map every inch of me like he’s trying to memorize me all over again, checking for injuries the medical staff might have missed. “When the bond went so quiet . . .”

I pull him down to me, silencing his fears with a kiss that quickly ignites into something deeper. There’s desperation in the way he touches me, like he needs to prove to himself that I’m really here, really safe. I pour everything I feel into the bond—my love, my trust, my absolute certainty that we belong together.

When we finally come together, it’s with a tenderness that brings tears to my eyes. Every touch, every kiss carries the weight of what we almost lost. The bond explodes with shared pleasure and emotion as we move together, erasing any lingering doubts about where I belong. His wings wrap around us like a living cocoon, tribal markings pulsing in time with our racing hearts.

Cirdox’s hands, warm and gentle, trace the contours of my body as if rediscovering every curve and line. His touch is a balm, soothing the lingering aches and fears that the Eclipse left behind. I can feel his restraint, the careful control he exerts to ensure he doesn’t cause me any pain. But beneath that gentleness, there’s a burning desire that matches my own.

His lips find mine in a kiss that’s both tender and hungry, a promise of the passion we’re about to share. I can feel the bond between us pulsing with need, a shared longing that’s been too long denied. As his hands roam lower, exploring the sensitive skin of my hips and thighs, I can’t help but arch into his touch, craving more.



He moves slowly, deliberately, making sure to gauge my reactions with each caress. When his fingers finally slip between my legs, finding the heat and wetness that's been building there, I gasp into his mouth. The sensation is almost too much, but he holds me steady, his wings enveloping us in a cocoon of warmth and safety.

"Cirdox," I whisper against his lips, my voice trembling with need. "I want you. All of you."

His eyes, those deep red pools of desire and love, hold mine as he positions himself between my thighs. I can feel the hard length of him pressing against me, ready but waiting. He's giving me the choice, the control, even now. And that's why I love him—because he understands what I need, even when I can't find the words to say it.

I wrap my legs around his hips, pulling him closer, urging him to take me. He enters me slowly, carefully, his eyes never leaving mine. The sensation of him filling me, completing me, is almost too much. Tears prick my eyes as the bond between us flares with a brilliance that's almost blinding.

We move together, our bodies finding a rhythm that's as natural as breathing. Each thrust, each roll of his hips, sends waves of pleasure crashing through me. His wings pulse with the same rhythm, their tribal markings glowing brighter with each shared breath.

His hands roam over my body, touching, caressing, claiming every inch of me as his own. And I do the same, my fingers tracing the lines of his muscles, the scars that tell the story of his battles, the markings that speak of his heritage. We're not just lovers; we're warriors, bonded by more than just passion. We're bound by love, by shared sacrifices, by the knowledge that we've fought for this moment and won.

As our pleasure builds, I can feel the bond between us growing stronger, more intense. It's not just physical; it's emotional, spiritual. It's everything. And when we

finally reach the peak, the explosion of sensation is almost too much to bear.

We cling to each other, our bodies shaking with the aftershocks of our shared climax. His wings tighten around us, holding me close, protecting me even now. I can feel his heartbeating against mine, the steady rhythm a reminder of the life we share, the love that binds us together.

This fierce, protective warrior is mine, just as I am his. The Eclipse tried to break our connection, to reduce it to cold data, but they never understood. What we share can't be quantified or controlled. It simply is.

Later, wrapped in his wings and watching his tribal markings pulse in contentment, I trace the new scars on his chest. The bond thrums with peaceful satisfaction between us, stronger than ever after our intimate reunion.

"I'm sorry I scared you," I murmur, following the path of a particularly nasty scar that I know came from protecting me during the escape.

He catches my hand, pressing a kiss to my palm. "You have nothing to apologize for. You fought them every step of the way. I felt it through the bond—your strength, your defiance. You never broke."

"We broke them instead," I say with fierce satisfaction. "The data I managed to extract before they caught me, combined with what you recovered during the rescue . . . McCoy says it's enough to bring down their entire operation."

"The Brotherhood is already moving against their remaining cells," he confirms, his fingers playing idly with my hair. "The STI can't ignore the evidence anymore. Even Ta'vag's diplomatic channels are buzzing with calls for action. Things are changing, little hacker."

I shift closer, letting his warmth chase away the lingering chill of memory. “And Kira?”

His arms tighten around me protectively. “The specialists are making progress. The Eclipse’s programming is being purged, but . . . it will take time. She may never fully recover. But there’s hope—yesterday she remembered your name without prompting.”

I nod against his chest, grief and hope warring in my heart. Maybe someday I’ll get my sister back. Maybe I won’t. But I’m not alone anymore.

When Cirdox and I step onto the bridge, Zara’s russet fur practically bristles with excitement. She bounds over, her usual military precision forgotten as she wraps me in a careful hug.

“Finally! The bridge hasn’t been the same without your sarcastic commentary,” she says, her tail swishing with genuine joy. “Grig’s attempts at witty banter are terrible.”

From his position at the helm, Grig’s pale blue features arrange themselves into an exaggerated pout. “I’ll have you know my humor is highly sophisticated. You just lack the intellectual capacity to appreciate it.”

I can’t help but laugh, even though it makes my still-healing implants twinge. “Missed you too, you overgrown blueberry.”

Grig’s large eyes crinkle with amusement as he abandons his post long enough to give me a quick, gentle embrace. “Welcome back, little hacker. Perhaps now the Captain will stop prowling the bridge like a caged predator.”

Cirdox’s wing brushes protectively against my back as he growls, “I do not prowl.”

“Of course not,” Zara agrees with a completely straight face, though her tail twitches with suppressed laughter. “You merely . . . patrol. Aggressively. While glaring at everything.”

The warmth of their welcome, the easy banter and genuine affection, brings tears to my eyes. These people—my family now—had risked everything to save me. And somehow, impossibly, they still want me here.

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Zara pulls me into a careful hug, her russet fur tickling my nose. “Don’t ever scare us like that again,” she growls, but her smile is wide. “I’m not explaining to the medical staff why I had to sedate your mate twice more.”

“Only twice?” I tease, earning a playful swat from her tail.

Looking around at these faces—my family now—I feel something settle deep in my soul. The lone hacker who trusted no one has found her home among the stars. The Brotherhood is changing, becoming stronger and more united than ever. And I’ll be here to help guide that change, with my mate by my side.

Cirdox leads me to the vacant seat beside the captain’s chair. The crew watches with barely concealed grins as he guides me to the empty co-pilot’s chair—the one I’ve noticed has remained conspicuously vacant since I first stepped foot on the Void Reaver.

“This seat,” he says, his deep voice carrying layers of emotion, “has been empty for far too long.” His wings shift restlessly as he meets my gaze, red eyes glowing with intensity. “It belongs to someone who can match my tactical experience blow for blow. Someone brilliant enough to outmaneuver our enemies and brave enough to face whatever challenges await us in the dark between stars.”

My heart skips as I realize what he’s offering—not just a position, but a future. A place truly my own, earned through trust and respect rather than obligation or destiny.

“The co-pilot position is yours,” he continues, “if you want it. Though I warn you—smuggling runs are never boring, especially with the Brotherhood’s

reputation.”

I catch Zara hiding a pleased smile while Grig’s large eyes sparkle with approval. This isn’t just Cirdox’s decision—the whole crew wants me here. The realization warms something deep inside me that I thought had frozen long ago.

“Boring?” I smirk, sliding into the chair that feels like it was made for me. “With my brilliant hacking and your brooding intensity? We’ll be legendary.”

His markings pulse brighter as he moves to his own seat, wings brushing mine in a gesture that sends warmth through our bond. The bridge feels right with both of us here—balanced in a way I never expected to find.

“I love you,” I whisper through our connection, letting him feel the depth of my certainty. This isn’t just about the position or the ship—it’s about choosing each other, every day, in all the ways that matter.

His markings flare again with answering warmth as he reaches for my hand. “And I you, little hacker. Always.”

And as Cirdox plots our course for our first official smuggling run together, I can’t help grinning. The future I never dared dream of is finally mine—ours—and I couldn’t be more excited to see where it leads.

Epilogue

NEON VALKYRIE

3MonthsLater

The air in the Morcrest luminore mine hangs thick and heavy, a metallic tang mixing

with the dust kicked up by our boots. My implants thrum beneath my skin, a low, steady pulse echoing the rhythmic clang of pickaxes against rock. It's a surprisingly comforting sound, a stark contrast to the shriek of alarms and the roar of blasters that have been the soundtrack to my life for the past few cycles. The soft, ethereal glow of the luminore veins crisscrossing the cavern walls paints the rough-hewn rock in shades of otherworldly blue and violet, transforming the industrial space into something almost magical.

"Three point seven karats per ton," I murmur, my fingers flying across the datapad, analyzing the latest yield reports. "Not bad. Better than the projections."

"These Morcrestians are efficient," Cirdox rumbles beside me, his voice a low, resonant sound that seems to vibrate through the very rock beneath our feet. His wing brushes against mine, a casual intimacy that sends a shiver down my spine. The bond thrums between us, a steady current of warmth and affection, a silent conversation that weaves through the dust and noise of the mine. It's strange, this sense of peace, of belonging, in a place that once represented everything I fought against.

Across the table, Droilin, High Chieftain of Morcrest, grunts in agreement, his tusks gleaming in the luminore's otherworldly light. "My people know the value of hard work. And the importance of reciprocity." His gaze meets mine, a flicker of respect, perhaps even gratitude, in his usually stoic eyes. It's a long way from the distrustful glare he'd given me when we first arrived on Morcrest. A lot can change in a few cycles.

Tasha, her hair pulled back in a practical braid, leans forward, her gaze sharp and assessing. "The transport routes are secure," she confirms, her voice carrying the authority of a leader who's earned her position. "The Brotherhood will deliver the luminore to the designated medical facilities within the agreed-upon timeframe."

I nod, my gaze meeting hers. "We'll ensure its safe arrival. No more Eclipse

interference. No more artificial shortages.”

Tasha’s lips curve into a wry smile. “I appreciate the reassurance, Neon Valkyrie. Though I suspect the Eclipse is more preoccupied with rebuilding their shattered reputation than with intercepting luminore shipments for now.” There’s a hint of steel in her voice.

Droilin clears his throat, his gaze shifting to Cirdox. “The Morcrestian people are grateful for your assistance, Captain Thar’Kal. You and your mate have proven to be valuable allies.”

The luminore mines cast an eerie blue glow across the chamber, the light catching on Droilin’s tusks as he studies the proposed trade agreement. My neural implants spark faintly, still sensitive after the Eclipse’s torture, but they catch the subtleshifts in his expression—the way his jaw tightens, the calculating gleam in his eyes.

Cirdox’s wing brushes mine beneath the table, a silent sign of support that sends warmth through our bond. His markings pulse with carefully controlled intensity, betraying the tension he’s masking behind his diplomatic facade. We both know how much rides on this partnership.

“These terms,” Droilin rumbles, his massive fingers tracing the datapad’s glowing text, “they protect my people’s interests?” There’s an edge to his question, centuries of exploitation making him rightfully wary of outsiders seeking Morcrest’s precious resource.

“The Brotherhood will ensure fair distribution,” Cirdox answers, his deep voice carrying the weight of personal honor. “No more black market manipulation. No more artificial shortages from the STI. The luminore reaches medical facilities based on need, not political favors.”



I lean forward, my implants interfacing smoothly with the chamber's systems to project detailed supply chain analytics. "We've integrated failsafes," I explain, highlighting key security protocols. "Multiple verification layers, decentralized oversight. Even if someone wanted to abuse the system, they couldn't without triggering immediate alerts."

Tasha steps closer to examine my projections, her engineer's mind automatically seeking out the mechanical weak points in the security system—access panels, maintenance hatches, physical vulnerabilities that could be exploited. A small smile plays at her lips as she recognizes how I've incorporated her knowledge of ship systems into my digital infiltration plan.

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“The Brotherhood’s reputation has changed under your leadership,” Droilin acknowledges, his gaze shifting between Cirdox and me. “But trust, once broken, is not easily rebuilt.”

“Which is why we’re offering full transparency,” I counter, bringing up another overlay. “Real-time tracking, joint oversight committees, profit-sharing structures that benefit Morcrest’s development programs. This isn’t just a trade deal—it’s a true partnership.”

Droilin’s expression softens almost imperceptibly as he glances at Tasha. She gives him a slight nod, and some of the tension leaves his massive shoulders.

“Very well,” he rumbles, pressing his palm to the authentication panel. “Let us forge this new path together.” A genuine smile breaks across his fierce features. “And what better way to cement our partnership than with a proper Morcrestian celebration? The mines have not seen such festivities since before Garrox’s tyranny.”

Tasha approaches as the others begin discussing logistics, her eyes bright with triumph. “Look at them,” she whispers, nodding toward our respective mates with fond exasperation. “All that muscle and military strategy, and it still took us to create a solution that actually works.”

I can’t help but grin, watching Cirdox and Droilin shake arms in the traditional warrior’s grip. “Someone has to be the brains of the operation.”

Her eyes light up with that familiar engineer’s gleam. “Speaking of operations, I can’t wait to see the Void Reaver’s engine room. It’s been”—she pauses, a knowing smirk

playing at her lips—”well, quite a while since I’ve been allowed near a ship’s core. Not since that whole unfortunate explosion incident that got me exiled.” She winks, both of us well aware that her sabotage conviction had been nothing but Garrox’s lies.

She squeezes my shoulder before heading toward the door where Droilin waits for her. “I’ll start the party preparations. Just wait until you see what a real Morcrestian celebration looks like.”

The bond hums with satisfaction as Cirdox returns to my side, his wing curling protectively around me. “You did it, little hacker,” he murmurs, pride and love radiating through our connection. “You’ve helped create something unprecedented.”

I lean into his warmth, watching the luminore’s glow paint ethereal patterns across his tribal markings. My neural implants hum in harmony with our bond, creating a symphony of connection that still takes my breath away.

“We’re quite the team, aren’t we?” I murmur, letting my fingers trace the edge of a marking that pulses brighter at my touch. The gesture carries all the weight of what we’ve achieved—not just survival, but a future neither of us could have imagined alone.

“The most dangerous in the quadrant,” he rumbles, his eyes dancing with mischief as he draws me closer. “A fierce little hacker who can crash systems with a thought, and the most handsome Kyvernian captain in the Brotherhood. The Eclipse never stood a chance.”

His smile outshines even the luminore’s brilliance as his wings create a private sanctuary around us. In this moment, wrapped in his strength and surrounded by the evidence of our shared victory, I finally understand what it means to be truly home.

The rhythmic clang of the pickaxes fades into the background, replaced by the steady thrum of the mine's ventilation system, a subtle white noise that amplifies the sudden, charged silence between us. The luminore's glow intensifies, casting an ethereal, almost otherworldly light on Cirdox's face, highlighting the sharp angles of his cheekbones, the intensity of his gaze. His wings shift slightly, the leathery membranes brushing against my back, sending a wave of heat through my body.

"You know what I want to do right now?" I whisper, my voice barely audible above the hum of the ventilation system, the words laced with a playful challenge, a subtle invitation.

A slow smile spreads across his lips, a predatory gleam in his red eyes that makes my heart pound against my ribs. "What's that, little hacker?" he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through me, igniting a fire in my core.

"I want to celebrate our victory," I reply, my gaze meeting his with a mix of mischief and heat. "Just you and me." My fingers trace the lines of his tribal markings, delighting in the way they pulse brighter at my touch. "Though first..." I reach over and tap the door controls, engaging the privacy locks with a satisfying click. "Can't have Zara barging in with another 'urgent' report."

Cirdox's deep chuckle rumbles through his chest as his wings curl around us, creating an intimate cocoon. "Wise decision, little hacker. Last time she interrupted, I nearly put claw marks through the console."

"We can't have that," I tease, pressing closer as his markings flare with growing intensity. "Think of the repair costs." My hands continue their exploration, mapping the landscape of his powerful form as the bond between us hums with shared anticipation. "Now, where were we?"

Cirdox's eyes darken with a desire that mirrors my own, and his arms wrap around

me, pulling me close. The warmth of his body presses against mine, and his wings envelop us, creating a cocoon of privacy and intimacy. The mine, with its echoing walls and glowing luminore veins, fades away, leaving only the two of us in this moment.

“You feel incredible,” he whispers, his voice rough with desire as his hands explore my body with a reverent touch. Each caress sends waves of pleasure through me, and I arch into him, my fingers tracing the lines of his tribal markings, feeling the heat of his skin beneath my touch.

“And you feel like home,” I reply, my voice barely a whisper as I lose myself in the sensation of his touch. Our connection deepens, the bond between us amplifying every sensation, every emotion. It’s not just physical pleasure; it’s a deep, spiritual connection that binds us together.

Our clothes fall away, discarded in the rush of our passion. Cirdox’s hands move with practiced grace, each touch igniting a fire in my core. I explore his body in return, my fingers tracing the lines of his muscles, feeling the strength and power that lies beneath his skin.

“You drive me wild, little hacker,” he murmurs, his voice rough with desire. Then softer, more intimate: “My Lyra.” The use of my birth name sends shivers down my spine—he’s the only one I allow to speak it, the only one who makes it sound like a prayer rather than just a name. In his mouth, it becomes sacred, a reminder of the trust and love we share. His lips find mine in a fierce, passionate kiss that leaves me breathless and aching for more.

His hands roam over my body, leaving a trail of fiery sensation in their wake. He cups my breasts, his thumbs circling my nipples, drawing out a gasp from deep within me. I arch into his touch, my body craving more of him. He trails kisses down my neck, his mouth hot and demanding, before capturing one of my nipples between his

lips, sucking and nipping until I'm writhing beneath him.

My own hands are not idle; I explore every inch of him, my fingers tracing the lines of his muscles, feeling the strength and power that lies beneath his skin. I kiss his chest, tasting the slight saltiness of his skin, feeling the heat of his body against mine. His wings unfurl, their leathery texture brushing against my skin, adding another layer of sensation to our connection.

I slide my hands down his body, feeling the hard planes of his abdomen, before wrapping my fingers around his length. He groans, his head falling back as I stroke him, feeling him grow harder in my grasp. The sight of him, so vulnerable and so powerful at the same time, sends a surge of desire through me.

"Lyra," he breathes, his voice a low rumble filled with need. He pulls me closer, his hands gripping my hips as he lifts me up. I wrap my legs around his waist, feeling him press against my entrance. With one smooth thrust, he enters me, filling me completely.

We move together desperately, skin against skin, need driving every touch. His hands grip my hips hard enough to bruise as he claims me. I dig my nails into his shoulders, wanting to mark him, to prove this is real. The mine's luminaire casts harsh shadows across our bodies, turning sweat-slicked skin to liquid gold. The rough stone wall scrapes my back as he drives into me again and again, but I don't care—I need him closer, deeper, more. Our gasps and moans bounce off the cavern walls, raw and unrestrained.

Every thrust sends waves of pleasure coursing through me, and I cling to him, my nails digging into his shoulders. His wings flare out, enveloping us in a cocoon of warmth and protection. Our bond flares with each movement, amplifying the sensations until I can barely think, barely breathe.

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I feel the tension building within me, the delicious ache growing with each thrust, each touch. Cirdox's eyes never leave mine, his gaze filled with love and desire. His hands roam over my body, touching me, caressing me, driving me higher and higher until I'm on the brink.

"Cirdox," I gasp, my voice filled with urgency. He knows what I need, and he gives it to me. His fingers find the sensitive bundle of nerves at my core, circling and pressing until I'm spiraling over the edge. My climax hits me like a wave, crashing over me, leaving me shaking and gasping for breath.

He follows me over the edge, his body tensing as he spills himself inside me. Our bond flares with a brilliance that outshines even the glow of the luminore. We are one, in body, in spirit, in love. The future stretches before us, filled with promise and possibility, and we stand ready to face it together.

In the aftermath, we lie entwined, our bodies still glowing with the remnants of our passion. Cirdox's wings envelop us, a protective shield against the world, a symbol of our unity and love. Through the walls, I can hear the growing sounds of celebration—Zara's distinctive laugh, Grig's melodic voice raised in what sounds suspiciously like a traditional Muspel victory song.

"I love you, Cirdox," I whisper, my voice filled with a profound sense of peace and contentment.

"I love you, Lyra," he replies, his voice echoing with the same deep, unwavering emotion. His tribal markings pulse softly as another burst of laughter filters through from the common area. "Though it seems our crew is rather impatient to celebrate our

return.”

“Can you blame them?” I trace the glowing patterns on his chest, smiling as they brighten under my touch. “We did just help take down a major Eclipse operation.”

“Plus, I hear someone threatened to sedate half the medical staff when they tried to keep him away from me.”

His wings tighten around me playfully. “Only half?” He presses a kiss to my temple as the sounds of celebration grow louder—the crew toasting our successful luminore delivery to the outer colonies. “The Brotherhood’s reputation is improving now that we’re officially sanctioned to transport luminore supplies to medical facilities.”

“Look at us, becoming almost respectable,” I tease, tracing one of his tribal markings.

He laughs, a deep rumble that vibrates through his chest. “We’re still pirates, little hacker,” he says with a wink that makes my heart skip. “Luminore isn’t the only valuable cargo we salvage. Though perhaps we’re more selective these days about whose ships we target.”

“Five more minutes won’t hurt,” Cirdox rumbles, his wings tightening around me as his tribal markings pulse with contentment. “We should probably make an appearance before they come looking for us. I hear Zara’s breaking out her private reserve to celebrate our first official sanctioned run.”

I snuggle closer, savoring one more moment of perfect peace. “Five more minutes,” I murmur against his chest. “They can wait that long to see their captain.”

His answering chuckle rumbles through me like distant thunder. “As my mate commands.”