



Alien's Love Child

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I'm a spaceship captain who doesn't trust anyone.

Especially not the gorgeous alien bounty hunter who just joined my crew.

Davin says he's here to help, but I know better. No one boards a smuggler's ship without an agenda. His smoldering silver eyes and easy charm won't fool me. Not when I can feel the secrets he's hiding.

But space has a funny way of throwing people together. One explosive mission, and suddenly we're tangled in a web of danger, desire, and betrayal.

Every look he gives me makes my pulse race. Every touch pulls me deeper into a connection I can't afford.

He says he's on my side, but I can see the conflict in his eyes. I should keep my distance, protect my ship, my crew, my heart.

Except it's already too late.

Because in a galaxy where enemies lurk behind every star, Davin might be the only one I can trust.

And the one man who can break me.

Read on for: An epic galactic romp through the stars that will have you smiling and sighing as you travel through the Athenaverse. This is a science fiction romance with an alien warrior and the human woman that will steal his heart that will make you believe in the enduring and transcendental power of love through time and space. Escape to another time and place. HEA guaranteed!

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CHAPTER 1

JESSE

I 'm sprawled across the captain's chair, one leg dangling over the armrest, when Rena's voice crackles through the ship's comm.

"Got something that might interest you. Encrypted message coming through."

My heart skips a beat. The credit chip's been running low these past weeks. "Finally. Put it through to my screen."

The holographic display flickers to life in front of me. A man's face materializes – tall, blonde, wire-rimmed glasses catching the light. His features are sharp, angular.

"Captain. I require discrete transportation to Glimner Station."

I straighten in my chair. "You've reached the right ship. Though discrete usually means expensive."

"My funds are... limited at present." He adjusts his glasses with precise movements. "However, my contact on Glimner will compensate you generously upon delivery."

"That's what they all say." I tap my fingers against the armrest. "What's your name?"

"Xander. And I assure you, this arrangement would be mutually beneficial."

"What's the catch?"

"The Alliance and Ataxian Coalition must remain unaware of my movements."

Rena's voice cuts in through the comm. "Jesse, that's a lot of heat to dodge."

"Nothing we haven't handled before," I say, studying Xander's face. There's something clinical about his gaze, like he's examining a specimen rather than having a conversation. "Where are you now?"

"Station 459. I can transmit coordinates for a rendezvous point."

I lean forward, already plotting the route in my head. "Send them through. But listen carefully – if your contact doesn't pay up when we reach Glimner, you'll wish you'd taken your chances with the Alliance."

"Understood." His lips quirk in what might be amusement. "I look forward to our partnership."

The transmission ends, and Rena's footsteps echo down the corridor before she appears in the doorway. "Well?"

"Plot a course for Station 459." I pull up the navigational charts. "Looks like we're back in business."

"Aye aye, Captain," Rena drawls, sliding into the navigator's chair with exaggerated formality. Her fingers dance across the controls, bringing up the holographic star charts.

A metallic clang echoes from the doorway, followed by a string of muttered curses. Taluk's red-scaled face peers around the corner, his black hair falling into his eyes.

"Did I hear right? We've got a job?"

I spin my chair to face him. "You know, eavesdropping on your captain's business isn't exactly professional behavior."

"The door was wide open," he says, gesturing with the wrench in his hand. His scales flush a deeper crimson. "I was just fixing that guardrail like you asked. The one by the cargo hold?"

My irritation fades as I notice the grease stains on his hands and the earnest look in his eyes. I bite my lip, remembering how the rail had nearly given way during our last landing. "Right. Thanks for that."

"Course is plotted," Rena announces, her fingers still moving across the navigation panel. "Found us a nice route that skirts Alliance territory. Should keep us clear of any patrols."

The engines hum to life beneath us as Rena initiates the launch sequence. Through the viewport, I watch Station 459 grow larger against the starfield. Another job, another risk – but at least we're not sitting idle anymore.

Taluk shuffles back toward the door, his tools clanking against his belt. I catch a glimpse of something calculated in his expression before he turns away, but it's gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

"Taking us out," Rena says, and the ship surges forward, leaving our docking bay behind.

The stars streak past the viewport as we break away from Station 337. I prop my boots up on the console, watching Rena's expert hands guide us through the departure sequence. The sound of Taluk's footsteps stomping down the hall echo alongside the

clatter of whoever was on mess hall duty for the day.

My little underground startup is starting to get crowded.

"Remember when it was just you and me?" I ask. "Back when we could barely afford fuel for this bucket?"

Rena snorts. "You mean when we had to share that tiny bunk because the heating was busted?"

"Hey, I kept you warm, didn't I?"

"Yeah, with your cold feet pressed against my back all night." She flicks a switch, adjusting our trajectory. "Though I'll take that over the time we had to hide in that shipping container on Nexus."

"Three days eating nothing but protein bars." I shake my head, grinning at the memory. "But that payout was worth it."

"Barely covered the repairs after you decided to outrun that Alliance cruiser."

"Which I did, thanks to your flying."

She turns to me, a rare smile softening her features. "We've come a long way since then. Got ourselves a proper crew now."

"Speaking of crew..." I lower my voice. "What do you make of our new job?"

"Nerds give me the creeps." Rena's fingers dance across the navigation panel. "Especially ones running from the Alliance."

"Could be worse. Remember that Ataxian diplomat we transported?"

"The one who insisted on meditating in the cargo hold?" She laughs. "I thought the vibrations would shake us apart."

The ship hums beneath us, a familiar melody I've grown to love. Every dent and scratch tells a story – like the scorch mark near the airlock from our first job together, or the patched panel where Rena once had to perform an emergency repair mid-flight.

"We did alright for ourselves," I say softly.

"That we did, Captain." Rena checks our heading. "That we did."

A day later, still on the way to the pickup location, I'm doing my usual maintenance check of the cargo hold when Taluk's shadow falls across the inventory I'm reviewing. His scales catch the light, casting red reflections on the metal walls.

"Captain, got a minute?"

"Sure." I set down my tablet. "What's on your mind?"

He shifts his weight, glancing around like someone might be listening. "It's about the man we're meeting. Xander."

"What about him?"

"I did some digging. He's a scientist who?—"

"Stop." I hold up my hand. The cargo hold suddenly feels smaller, more confined.

"Let me give you some advice, kid. One smuggler to another."

Taluk's mouth snaps shut, his scaled jaw working back and forth.

"We don't dig into our clients' business. Ever. That's rule number one in this line of work. We look at two things – the payment and the risk. That's it."

"But don't you think we should know?—"

"No." I step closer, keeping my voice low but firm. "I'm cutting you some slack because you're new to this. But listen carefully – curiosity gets people killed in our line of work. The less we know, the better we sleep at night."

His scales darken, a sure sign of frustration. The muscles in his jaw flex as he grinds his teeth.

"I appreciate the warning," he says finally. "Won't happen again."

"Good." I pick up my tablet again. "Now, how about you help me inventory these crates? Much safer than poking around in other people's secrets."

He nods, but there's something in his eyes I can't quite read. "Thanks for the insight, Captain."

I watch Taluk methodically counting crates, his movements careful despite his size. My words from earlier still hang heavy in the recycled air. The cargo hold feels too quiet, save for the soft beeping of his inventory scanner.

"Hey." I lean against a stack of containers. "You know, you're doing good work here. Better than I did when I first started."

His scanning falters for a moment. The red scales along his neck ripple – a Vakutan tell for surprise.

"When I was your age, I dropped an entire shipment of Nexian crystals. Right through the cargo bay doors." I tap the floor with my boot. "Made this exact dent, actually. Cost us a fortune."

Taluk's shoulders relax slightly. "That does make me feel better about the time I mixed up the medical supplies with those boxes of contraband fruit."

"Exactly. And look how far you've come since then." I gesture at his organized stacks of inventory. "Most Vakutans I've met wouldn't have the patience for this kind of detail work. You've got good instincts – just need to point them in the right direction."

His dark eyes meet mine briefly before returning to the scanner. "Thanks, Captain," he mutters, but I catch the slight upturn at the corner of his mouth.

"Give it time. A few more years and you'll be twice my size. Imagine the doors that'll open when you can actually intimidate people instead of just dropping things on their feet."

That gets a quiet chuckle out of him. The tension from our earlier conversation dissipates like vented atmosphere.

"Just focus on learning the business first," I say, pushing off from the containers. "The rest will come."

"Thanks," he says again, softer this time, his scales shifting to a warmer shade of red.

I make my way through the narrow corridors of my ship, running my fingers along the worn metal walls. The familiar hum of the engines vibrates through my boots with each step. Through the bridge doorway, Rena hunches over the nav console, muttering calculations under her breath.

"Carry the four, adjust for stellar drift..."

"Still working those numbers?"

"Someone has to make sure we don't end up in an asteroid field." She doesn't look up, but I catch her smile. "Your father taught me that trick with the gravitational vectors, you know. Saved our asses more than once."

A cleaning bot whirs past my feet, spinning in circles as it chases what might be a small rodent that snuck on board at port. The little machine bumps into the wall repeatedly, its sensors clearly malfunctioning.

"Hey, at least it's persistent," I say, stepping over it.

The smell of something burning draws me to the galley. Smoke curls from a pot while one of my newer crew members frantically fans it with a towel.

"Everything under control in here?"

"Absolutely, Captain!" He coughs, waving away smoke. "Just... adding some character to dinner."

Dad would've loved this – the organized chaos, the makeshift family we've built. Mom too, though she'd probably suggest better security protocols. I touch the pendant hanging at my neck, the one she gave me before my first solo run.

"Keep your cargo close and your crew closer," she'd said. "But most importantly, keep them loyal."

The burning smell intensifies. "Maybe I should order takeout when we dock," I mutter, but I'm smiling. This rickety ship, this misfit crew – it's everything they

taught me to build. A proper smuggling operation, running smooth as silk on this side of the galaxy. Well, mostly smooth.

The cleaning bot zooms past again, still chasing shadows. Some things you just can't plan for.

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CHAPTER 2

DAVIN

The stale air of the bar mingles with the sharp bite of cheap alcohol. I nurse my drink, watching the amber liquid swirl in the glass. The bounty board on my PerComm shows nothing but pocket change - thieves who stole bread or jumped their bail on minor infractions.

Not even enough to cover the fuel it'll take to find them.

"Another?" The bartender hovers nearby, cloth wiping endless circles on the counter.

"Not yet." The drink burns less than it should. Everything feels dull these days.

A couple two seats down argues about credits, their voices carrying across the bar. Amateur stuff. Back in my military days, I'd have three different conversations monitored, tracking potential threats while maintaining my cover. The Kaleidian Intelligence Division taught me well - how to blend in, how to disappear in plain sight, how to hear what wasn't being said.

"You military?" The bartender nods at my posture.

"Was." I don't elaborate. No need to mention the wars I prevented, the deals I uncovered, the lives saved before blood could be shed. Spy work isn't glamorous - it's hours of listening, watching, waiting. Just like now.

"Rough transition to civilian life?"

I shrug, taking another sip. The military had structure, purpose. Bounty hunting gives me the same rush of the hunt without all the red tape. No commanding officers telling me to stand down when I'm close to cracking a case. No political considerations stopping me from doing what needs to be done.

A group of miners shuffles in, their boots leaving red dust trails on the floor. Their chatter fills the space, something about a new strike. I half-listen, old habits die hard.

My PerComm vibrates against my wrist, the subtle buzz I've been waiting for. The daily bounty board update is here.

I swipe through the bounties, each one more disappointing than the last. Petty theft, minor fraud, the usual dregs no one bothers with unless they happen to pass them by on the street. My finger pauses mid-swipe as a new listing catches my eye.

Dr. Xander Gatsen.

The bounty number makes me blink twice. That many zeros can't be right. The crimes are redacted - typical Alliance bureaucracy - but for that kind of money, this guy must've done something spectacularly awful.

I tap his image to enlarge it. Tall, gangly human with wire-rimmed glasses and perfectly combed blonde hair. He looks more like he belongs in a research lab than on a most-wanted list.

"You're kidding me," I mutter, taking another sip of my drink. "This is the guy worth all those credits?"

The PerComm displays his last known location: Station 459. Not too far from here,

but the intel suggests he's heading to Glimner. My jaw tightens. Glimner's a cesspool of criminal activity - perfect place for someone to vanish without a trace.

I pull up the contenders list. Only three other hunters have signed up so far. Amateur hour. They probably saw the bounty and jumped without doing their homework. But I know Glimner. Once someone drops into that planet's underground, they might as well cease to exist.

"Time's wasting," I murmur, pressing my thumb to the screen. The PerComm chirps as it registers my bid for the contract.

The bartender drifts back. "Found something good?"

"Maybe." I drain my glass and stand, leaving credits on the counter. "Or maybe I'm chasing shadows."

Station 459 isn't far, but every minute counts. If this Dr. Gatsen makes it to Glimner before I catch up, the trail goes cold. And I hate cold trails almost as much as I hate wasting time.

Station 459's landing pad gleams like polished crystal under the artificial sunlight. My boots click against the pristine surface - everything here screams money. Industrial hubs always do. The kind of place where even the maintenance workers wear designer jumpsuits.

A customs officer eyes my blue skin with barely concealed disdain. "Purpose of visit?"

"Tourism." The lie slides off my tongue easily. My military credentials are spotless, making me practically invisible to port authority checks.

"Enjoy your stay." She waves me through without a second glance.

I meander down the rows of ships, playing the part of a lost tourist. My mark is either going to pay a hefty fee to a seasoned smuggler, or dupe a vacationing family into letting him hitch a ride. My job now is to figure out which it is.

My PerComm scans each vessel, cataloging registration numbers and flight plans. Most are exactly what they appear to be - sleek corporate shuttles and luxury yachts.

Then I spot it.

The ship sticks out like a bruise on perfect skin. Mismatched hull plates, outdated registration numbers, and scoring patterns that suggest recent atmospheric entries at dangerous angles. No legitimate trader flies like that.

"Beautiful ship," a dock worker comments as he passes. "If you're into antiques."

I grunt noncommittally, pretending to admire the next vessel over - a gleaming personal yacht. But my attention stays fixed on the smuggler's ship. The wear patterns around the cargo hold tell stories of rushed jobs and tight spaces.

Perfect.

I circle around, maintaining my tourist facade while the dock grows quieter. Shift change - right on schedule. The gap in security coverage lasts exactly four minutes.

The tracking beacon sits heavy in my pocket. Military grade, undetectable by standard scanners. The kind of tech that costs more than most people make in a year.

Three minutes left.

I drop my tourist datapad, bending to retrieve it near the smuggler's ship. The beacon slides from my sleeve to my palm.

Two minutes.

A quick press against the hull, right where the shield generators create a sensor blind spot. The beacon chirps once in my ear, confirming activation.

One minute.

I'm already walking away, just another tourist who got lost among the ships. Behind me, the beacon begins its work, invisible and patient.

Just like me.

The maintenance alcove provides perfect cover as I watch the ship's airlock cycle open. My tracker wasn't wrong - this is definitely our smuggler's vessel.

A flash of red hair catches the station's artificial light. The woman moves with the practiced ease of someone who knows every bolt and weld of her ship. The captain, of course. And what a beauty she is.

The Vakutan following her draws my attention - barely old enough to be out of school, his red scales still carrying that juvenile sheen. Amateur hour.

"You sure about this place, Jesse?" The Vakutan's voice carries across the dock, higher pitched than I'd expect.

"Taluk, when have I steered you wrong?" Jesse adjusts her jacket. "Best drinks on the station, and the owner doesn't ask questions."

"That's what worries me."

They pass within meters of my position, close enough that I catch the scent of engine grease and ozone from their clothes. No weapons visible, but Jesse's jacket hangs oddly on the right side. Concealed holster, probably.

Twenty minutes pass. I occupy myself by cataloging the dock's security weaknesses. Three blind spots in the camera coverage, two overworked guards more interested in their PerComms than their surroundings, and maintenance access that hasn't been properly secured in what looks like years.

Movement catches my eye. Three figures emerge from the pub's entrance. Jesse and Taluk flank a third person wrapped in a dust-colored cloak that screams 'trying too hard to be inconspicuous.' The hood can't quite hide the glint of wire-rimmed glasses.

My lips curl into a smile. The good doctor needs to work on his disguise game. Even a rookie could spot him.

"Almost home free," Jesse's voice drifts over. "Just act natural."

The trio makes their way back to the ship, Xander's measured stride a sharp contrast to Taluk's nervous energy.

Got you.

The vibrations of Jesse's ship lifting off ripple through the dock. I count to thirty before making my way back to my vessel, maintaining the leisurely pace of a tourist finishing their visit. My boots click against the polished floor, each step measured and unhurried.

My ship's systems come online with a familiar hum. The tracking beacon pulses

steady on my display, a red dot moving exactly where I expect - straight down the Alliance-approved lanes, before dipping into uncharted territory.

"Predictable." I plot a course through Alliance approved travel lanes, almost perpendicular to her own, keeping a healthy distance between us at all times. The lane's busy enough that one more vessel following standard protocol won't raise any flags.

My PerComm chimes with clearance codes as I pass each checkpoint. The border patrol barely glances at my credentials - another advantage of maintaining a spotless record. Amazing how many doors open when you play by the rules.

But even I have to hand it to her: she must have a damn good navigator on board. They're practically gliding through space debris fields without missing a beat. The kind of maneuvers I'd like to try my hand at, if I wasn't so keen on keeping my record shiny enough to get me in the places that mattered.

The red dot veers slightly. I adjust my course, maintaining distance while I check the new trajectory.

"Erebus?" I tap the navigation display. "Interesting choice."

The smuggler's ship descends toward a tiny hideaway port on the Non-Aligned League planet's surface. Smart move - Erebus is a common refueling stop on this route. Nothing suspicious about a quick pit stop.

I bring my ship down two bays over, positioning myself with a clear view of their vessel. The beacon's signal grows stronger as I power down my engines.

"Time to earn that bounty." I check my weapons - stunner set to maximum, restraints secured at my belt. Everything in its place, just like the military taught me.

Through my viewport, I watch Jesse's crew preparing for their stop. Taluk emerges first, his scales catching the harsh port lights. Then Jesse, her red hair unmistakable even at this distance. Then another woman who stretches dramatically, like she's trying to touch the sky.

No sign of Xander, understandably so, but it's starting to look like he's been left unattended. Unless he was annoying enough for them to dump him in the debris field.

"Here we go," I say to myself as I make my way towards the rust bucket ship.

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CHAPTER 3

JESSE

The landing gear whines as we touch down on Erebus's dusty surface. Through the viewport, the refueling station's neon signs flicker against the perpetual twilight, casting purple shadows across the empty landing pad.

"Stay put," I tell Xander, who's already buried in whatever he's typing on his PerComm. "We'll be back once we've arranged the refuel."

He doesn't even look up. "Understood."

The cargo bay door descends with a hydraulic hiss, and Taluk's scales shimmer as he stretches in the dim light. "That guy gives me the creeps."

"Yeah? His money doesn't give me the creeps at all." I step onto the metal ramp. "Keep your opinions to yourself until after we get paid."

Taluk snorts. "If we get paid. Something's off about him."

"When isn't something off about our passengers?" The metal grating clanks under our boots as we head toward the station's office. "Besides, Marv owes me a favor. We'll be in and out before anyone notices we're here."

"You sure about that?" Rena asks. "Place looks dead."

He's right. The usual bustle of mechanics and cargo handlers is conspicuously absent. My hand instinctively moves to where my wallet should be – except it isn't there.

"Shit." I pat my empty pocket. "Left my wallet on the ship. You two go ahead, I'll catch up."

"Want company?" Rena asks.

"Nah, just get Marv to start the refuel. Back in five."

I turn and head back toward the ship. The shadows between the landing pad lights seem darker than usual, and movement catches my eye. A figure in a dark coat approaches my ship, his blue skin stark against the twilight.

My heart pounds. No one should be anywhere near my ship.

"Need some help there?" My hand rests on my concealed blaster as I call out.

The Kaleidian spins around, silver hair shimmering with light. His hand twitches toward his hip before relaxing. "Actually, you might be exactly who I need. This your ship?"

"Depends who's asking." I take a step closer, keeping my stance loose but ready.

"Name's Davin." He spreads his hands, showing they're empty. "Used to run cargo on the Alliance route until raiders hit us last month. Lost my whole crew, my livelihood. Been planetside ever since, looking for work."

"That's a sad story." My eyes scan his clothes – too well-maintained for someone down on their luck. "Raiders are getting bold these days."

"Tell me about it. Took everything except what I had on me." He gestures at his jacket. "Been living off savings, but they're running dry. I've got experience, references if you need them. Willing to take any position available. I can do maintenance, custodial work, I can even flex my muscles at your command."

I swallow something in my throat; I certainly bet he could. The way he's towering over me is sending a chill up my spine.

But the timing's too perfect. A strange Kaleidian, approaching my ship right when we've got sensitive cargo? My PerComm vibrates – probably Rena wondering what's taking so long.

"References from your old employer?"

"Course. Though getting in touch might be tricky, given recent events."

His story sounds rehearsed, practiced. But there's something in the way he holds himself – military straight, despite trying to appear casual. Could be legitimate. Could also be police, or worse.

"What route did you say you worked?" I ask, watching his reaction.

"Alliance. Mainly raw ore runs from the mining colonies."

I tap my fingers against my thigh, considering. Of course he'd run in Alliance routes, he's Kaleidian. As if someone from Kalei would find themselves doing work for Ataxians. And sure, piracy has been seeing quite the surge on the border between Alliance and Unaligned territory.

There's a scar right above his eye that looks pretty fresh and shiny. And there's one more thing I can't deny: we're low on muscle.

My gaze drifts over Davin's broad shoulders. The Kaleidian's built like a battleship, and even trying to appear harmless, he radiates the kind of presence that makes people step aside. The kind of presence I definitely lack.

"Look," I say, crossing my arms. "I've got a tight crew. Me, my pilot, and..." I gesture vaguely toward the station. "Thing is, we run into situations. Situations where looking scary comes in handy."

"And you're thinking I fit that description?"

"You've seen yourself in a mirror lately?" A smile tugs at my lips. "I'm five-four on a good day. My pilot's even shorter. Our muscle's still growing into his scales."

Davin raises an eyebrow. "The Vakutan? Bit young for this line of work."

"That obvious, huh?"

"The way he moves. Still adapting to his adult frame."

I nod. Taluk tries, bless him, but anyone who knows anything about Vakutans can spot his age. He can intimidate a human male, no problem, but anyone else has the experience to clock him as a youth.

"Right now, I have to wave my blaster around more often than I'd like. Gets messy. Having someone who can make people think twice just by standing there? That's worth its weight in credits."

"Assuming I'm interested in your line of work."

"Assuming you're not Alliance looking to bust my operation." I shrug. "We both know your story's got more holes than a meteor-struck hull."

His expression doesn't change, but something shifts in his stance. "That obvious, huh?"

"Cap?" Taluk's voice carries across the pad. He jogs toward us, concern on his face. "Everything okay? Rena sent me to check-"

"Actually," Davin cuts in before Taluk can reach us, "I should come clean. That Alliance cargo story? Not exactly true."

My hand stays near my blaster. "Do tell."

"Ran with the Sirius Syndicate. Big operation, until three weeks ago when Alliance enforcement caught up with us." He runs a hand through his silver hair. "I got out while the rest got caught. Not proud of it, but in this business..." He shrugs. "Sometimes you've got to look after yourself."

The pieces click into place – his military bearing, the fresh scar, the quality clothes. The Sirius bust was all over the feeds. My shoulders relax slightly. "Now that's a story I believe."

Taluk's scales ripple, a sure sign he's agitated. "We don't need another crew member. I handle security just fine."

"Kid, no offense, but you telegraph your moves before you make them." Davin's blue features soften slightly. "I could show you a few things. Military hand-to-hand might serve you better than whatever street fighting you're using."

"I don't need your help." Taluk's hands curl into fists. "And I'm not a kid."

"Didn't mean to suggest-"

"Sure sounded like it."

I step between them before Taluk's pride writes checks his skills can't cash. "Cool it, both of you. Taluk, head back to Rena. Tell her I'll be there in a minute."

"But-"

"Now."

Taluk's jaw works, scales flushing darker red, but he turns and stalks away.

"Strong personality," Davin comments.

"He's good people. Just needs some seasoning." I watch Taluk's retreating back. "And if you're going to join us, you'll need to work with him, not against him."

Davin's expression softens as he watches Taluk disappear into the station. "Kid's got potential. Give him time to warm up to me. Could teach him a thing or two about proper combat techniques."

"Before we get ahead of ourselves..." I lean against my ship's hull, the metal cool through my jacket. "One more thing we need to clear up."

"I'm all ears." He crosses his arms, his blue skin almost luminescent in the station's artificial twilight.

"That every-man-for-himself attitude? It stays in Sirius." I tap my fingers against the hull. "I know Marcus ran that operation like a slave ship. Heard stories about crew members disappearing when jobs went south. So I get why you split."

"You seem well-informed."

"Had a few run-ins with Sirius. Enough to know I want nothing to do with their methods." The memory of a particularly nasty encounter makes my jaw clench. "On my ship, we're like family. We watch each other's backs, share the wins, weather the losses together. No one gets left behind."

"Family." He tests the word like it's foreign to his tongue. "That's a dangerous way to run a criminal enterprise."

"Maybe. But for me it's literal. Born into the business, learned it from my parents before striking out on my own. And I've buried exactly zero crew members since I started operating." I push off from the hull. "Can Marcus say the same?"

His hand drifts to the scar above his eye. "Point taken."

"So here's the deal: you want in, you're all in. No calculated risks where you save your own skin at someone else's expense. We rise together or fall together."

"And if someone betrays that trust?"

"Then they better hope the authorities find them before I do." I meet his gaze steadily. "Family goes both ways, Davin. You protect us, we protect you. Simple as that."

I expect my speech about family values to send him running for the nearest transport, but Davin's lips curve into something almost resembling a smile.

"All in." He extends his hand. "You've got yourself a deal."

Before I can shake on it, Rena's voice cuts through the tension. "Tell me I didn't just hear you hire someone without consulting your pilot first."

"Since when do I need to consult you about hiring decisions?" I turn to find her

striding toward us, Taluk trailing behind like a thundercloud.

"Since always. I'm the one who has to calculate weight distributions for takeoff." She stops beside me, giving Davin an appraising once-over. "Though I suppose adding some muscle won't hurt our payload too much."

"Meet our new security officer." I gesture between them. "Davin, this is Rena, best pilot this side of the system. And you've already met Taluk."

Taluk's scales darken. "We don't need-

"This calls for a celebration," Rena interrupts, clapping her hands together. "And new guy buys the drinks. That's tradition."

"Is it?" Davin asks.

"It is now."

As they head toward the station's bar, I hang back, watching my unlikely crew. Rena's already peppering Davin with questions about his experience, while Taluk sulks three steps behind. The extra muscle will come in handy on Glimner – assuming we make it that far without them killing each other.

My gaze lingers on Davin's broad shoulders, the way his jacket stretches across them as he walks. The view certainly doesn't hurt either.

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CHAPTER 4

DAVIN

The recycled air of the ship tickles my nose as I wake. Across the cramped cabin, Paraxan's massive form hunches over a maintenance panel, his fur catching the small light from above.

"Morning," I say, swinging my legs off the bunk. "Early riser?"

A grunt is my only answer. The Odex's claws click against metal as he works. He's huge, as most Odex are. Eight feet tall and easily three hundred pounds. The fact that he's on board makes it pretty obvious why Rena needs to make such careful weight calculations.

"You know, been meaning to ask. Why'd Jesse need to hire muscle with someone like you aboard? You could snap a person in half without breaking a sweat."

Paraxan's shoulders stiffen. "Too old for fighting. Past my prime."

"Really? Because from where I'm sitting?—"

"Past. My. Prime." His claws scrape against the panel with more force than necessary.

I lean back against the wall. "Right. My mistake."

The maintenance shaft door sticks as Paraxan tries to close it. Without seeming to exert any effort, he yanks it shut with a single pull, the metal groaning in protest.

"Heading to the kitchen now. Making breakfast." He lumbers to his feet, ducking to avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling.

My stomach turns as I notice the amount of fur floating in his wake. "You cook often?"

"When crew lets me. Good at it."

"I'm sure you are." I watch more fur drift down, imagining it coating whatever he's about to prepare. "Very... thorough."

He pauses at the door. "Coming?"

"I'll... catch up. Need to get dressed first."

Another grunt, and he's gone. I eye the fur coating my blanket and wonder if the ship stocks antihistamines.

I step into the corridor just as Rena rounds the corner, her face scrunching up in a violent sneeze. "Achoo! Oh man, he's cooking again, isn't he?"

"If by 'he' you mean our resident furball, then yes." I brush some stray Odex fur off my sleeve. "Does the air filtration system ever catch up?"

"Achoo! Considering he's the one who maintains it? Never." She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. "I see you've had the pleasure of meeting Paraxan. Don't let the strong-silent routine fool you – he's been watching over Jesse since she was knee-high."

"Family friend?"

"More like inherited crew. He served with Jesse's parents back when they were running their own operations. When she struck out solo, he tagged along." Rena leans against the wall, sniffing. "Though these days he mostly stays aboard, tinkering with the engines or shedding in the kitchen."

"Retired?"

"Not officially. But you've seen how Odex are about admitting when they're past their prime. I think that's why he switched crews – Jesse's parents were probably pushing him to hang up his tools."

My mind drifts to the way he'd effortlessly yanked that maintenance panel shut. The strength still evident in those massive arms. Pride keeps the old warrior going, refusing to be put out to pasture. There's something admirable in that – the determination to remain useful, to protect what matters, even as time marches on.

"Speaking of the kitchen..." Rena's nose twitches. "Want to grab breakfast in the mess? Fair warning – his cooking's amazing, but you might want to check for stray hairs."

"Sure, I could eat." I follow Rena down the narrow corridor to the mess hall, ducking under a low-hanging pipe.

Taluk sits at the small table, his red scales catching the overhead light. His eyes narrow as I enter. "Great. The new guy."

"Play nice," Rena says, sliding onto the bench.

"Why should I? We were doing fine without him." Taluk stabs at his food. "What, I'm

not good enough muscle anymore?"

I settle across from him, keeping my movements slow and deliberate. "You know, when I first joined the military, there was this veteran sergeant. Thought I was trying to replace him. Turned out we each had different strengths."

"This isn't the military."

"No, but the principle's the same. I'm not here to step on anyone's toes. Just looking to contribute where I can."

Taluk's jaw works as he considers this. "Yeah? And what exactly can you contribute that I don't already handle?"

"Experience, maybe. Different perspective. But I'm not trying to take your place – seems to me you've carved out your own niche here."

His scales shift color slightly – a sign of lessening hostility. "Well... just don't get in my way."

Paraxan approaches with two steaming bowls, setting them before Rena and me. The aroma hits my nose – some kind of stew, rich with spices I can't identify.

"This is incredible," I say after the first spoonful, carefully avoiding mentioning the fur floating on top.

"Told you." Rena picks out a particularly long strand of fur. "Paraxan's got magic in the kitchen, once you master the art of selective blindness."

Paraxan's chest puffs with pride. "Old family recipe. Passed down generations."

"Along with the fur?" Taluk mutters, but there's a hint of affection in his voice.

The mess hall door slides open with a hiss, and a lanky human stumbles in, his blonde hair disheveled. My target. The bounty I've been hunting. Right here, walking into breakfast like it's just another morning.

"Please tell me there's caffeine somewhere on this rust bucket," he mumbles, adjusting his glasses.

Rena's spoon clatters against her bowl. "Oh! Davin, this is...uh...Xevran, our ship's doctor."

Taluk's scales flush a deeper red. "Yeah, doc's been with us for... a while now."

I take another spoonful of stew, keeping my expression neutral. "Ship's doctor? Must run into some interesting situations to need one on staff."

"I work for food," Xander says quickly, his fingers drumming against his thigh. "Small ships can't usually afford medical care. I fill a need."

Paraxan slides a bowl across the table. Xander's nose wrinkles as he picks out a clump of fur.

"That's... generous of you," I say, watching him prod at his breakfast. "Most doctors I've met prefer actual cash."

"Well, I'm not most doctors." He snatches up a spoon, his knuckles white around the handle.

"Clearly." I lean back, cataloging every nervous tic, every darting glance. "What's your specialty?"

Rena jumps in before he can answer. "General practice. Jack of all trades, you know how it is on small ships."

"Right." I smile, showing teeth. "Always good to have someone who can handle... anything that comes up."

Xander's spoon scrapes against the bowl as he stands. "I should get back to my... patients."

"We have patients?" Taluk asks, earning an elbow from Rena.

"The inventory," Xander corrects, already backing toward the door. "Medical inventory. Very important. Excuse me."

The door whooshes shut behind him, leaving an awkward silence in his wake.

"Interesting doctor you've got there," I say, finishing my stew.

Rena clears her throat. "So anyway, about that maintenance schedule?—"

The door slides open with a soft hiss. Jesse stumbles in, her red hair a wild nest around her face. She yawns, stretching her arms above her head.

Military instinct takes over. I snap to attention, my spine straightening as I rise from my seat. "Captain."

Laughter erupts around the table. Taluk nearly chokes on his stew, and even Paraxan's shoulders shake with silent mirth.

"At ease, soldier." Jesse's eyes dance with amusement. "This isn't the Sirius Syndicate. We're a bit more... relaxed here."

"Sorry, force of habit." Heat creeps up my neck, turning my blue skin a shade darker as I take my seat again.

"Getting crowded in here." Jesse surveys the mess hall, her gaze lingering on the empty space beside me. "Mind if I join you?"

Before I can answer, she slides onto the bench, her bare arm brushing against mine. The contact sends electricity racing through my body, every nerve ending suddenly alive and singing. My breath catches in my throat.

The scent of her hits me next – a mixture of engine grease and something uniquely human, uniquely her. Something clicks into place deep inside my chest, like a key turning in a lock I didn't know existed. The universe shifts, realigns, and suddenly everything makes perfect sense.

Jalshagar. The word echoes in my mind, ancient and undeniable. My hands tremble as I lower them to my lap, hoping no one notices.

"Pass the salt?" Jesse asks, completely oblivious to how she's just turned my world upside down.

I reach for the shaker, my fingers brushing hers as I hand it over. Another jolt of electricity. Another piece of my soul sliding into place.

"Thanks." She seasons her stew, picking out a stray Odex hair. "So what'd I miss?"

"Excuse me."

I stumble out of the mess hall without another word, my heart hammering against my ribs. The engine room beckons – quiet, isolated, perfect for gathering my scattered thoughts. The thrum of machinery drowns out everything except the chaos in my

head.

"This isn't happening." My words echo off the metal walls. "Not now. Not with her."

Jalshagar. The word burns in my mind like a brand. Every Kaleidian child grows up hearing stories about it – the instant recognition of your perfect match, your other half. But it's rare. So rare that most consider it a myth.

The cool metal of the bulkhead presses against my back as I slide down to sit on the floor. My hands shake as I run them through my silver hair.

"Focus." I press my palms against my eyes until spots dance in the darkness. "The job. Remember the job."

But Jesse's face floats in my mind – those green eyes, the scatter of freckles across her nose, the way her presence lit up every nerve ending in my body. The thought of betraying her makes my stomach turn.

"The bounty's worth so much more." My voice sounds hollow even to my own ears. "Just grab Xander, drop him off, collect the money. Simple."

Except nothing's simple anymore. Not with this bond thrumming between us like a live wire. Even now, I can sense her presence above deck, a constant pull in my chest.

"Could tell her the truth." The words taste like ash. "About Xander. About everything."

But I already know how that would end. She's a smuggler, he's her cargo. She'd never understand, never forgive the deception. And the bond would turn toxic, poisoned by betrayal.

"There has to be another way." I bang my head back against the wall, welcoming the sharp pain. "Some way to complete the job without her finding out."

But if there is a way, I'm finding it hard to figure it out.

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CHAPTER 5

JESSE

The engine room hums with its familiar rhythm as I make my way down the corridor. A small cleaning bot whirs past my feet, its collection bin full of the space vermin we picked up at our last stop.

"Good job, little guy," I pat its casing as it beeps cheerfully in response.

Paraxan's furry head pokes out from behind a panel, his whiskers twitching. "Captain."

"How're we looking, Par?"

He gestures to the exposed wiring. "Better since the upgrade. Fuel efficiency up twelve percent."

"Worth every credit then." I lean against the doorframe, watching him work. His methodical movements are oddly soothing. "Need anything?"

"No." He pauses, then adds, "Maybe more wire strippers. These are wearing thin."

"I'll add it to the list."

The sound of movement draws me toward the cargo bay. Davin's deep voice carries through the corridor.

"Plant your feet wider. You're too easy to knock off balance."

I pause at the entrance, watching as Taluk adjusts his stance. His red scales glisten with sweat, but there's determination in his eyes I haven't seen before.

For a moment, I wonder if I did the right thing. Bringing a stranger on board in the middle of such a high stakes job was risky, but it was a calculated risk.

Glimner isn't an easy planet to traverse, especially with such a wanted criminal in our care. The more muscle we have at our disposal, the better. Still, I have question the wisdom in my decision. Even if no one else does.

"Like this?"

"Better." Davin circles him, his blue skin almost luminescent under the bay lights. "Now, when someone comes at you from the side?—"

Taluk moves suddenly, executing a perfect defensive maneuver that has me raising my eyebrows. Maybe the kid's been holding out on us.

"Good." Davin nods, approval clear in his voice. "You're a quick study."

"Thanks." Taluk's chest puffs up slightly at the praise.

I smile to myself, mentally patting my back for bringing Davin aboard. Taluk is opening up, showing he can still learn. Once we deliver Xander, maybe it's time to stop keeping secrets from our newest crew member. He's proved himself useful enough, and something tells me he could be valuable for more than just defense training.

Davin's eyes flick to me, a slight smile tugging at his lips. "Hit the showers, kid."

"We're done for today."

Taluk spins around, his scales flushing a deeper red when he spots me. "Captain! I was just—I mean, we were?—"

"Training. I saw." I push off from the doorframe. "Nice moves."

He ducks his head, mumbling something unintelligible before practically sprinting past me. The sound of his boots clanking against the metal grating fades down the corridor.

"You've got him working hard." I step into the cargo bay, the recycled air carrying a hint of ozone from their workout.

"He's got potential." Davin grabs a towel, wiping his neck. "More than he lets on."

"Noticed that, did you?"

"I notice a lot of things." His silver eyes lock onto mine, something different in his gaze. The same intensity I caught at breakfast when he passed me the salt without being asked. "Like how you've been watching us train."

Heat creeps up my neck. "Just making sure you're not breaking my crew member."

"Is that the only reason?" He steps closer, close enough that I can smell the subtle spice of his skin.

"Maybe I'm concerned about ship safety." I tap my finger against his chest. "Can't have you two damaging the cargo bay."

"The cargo bay." His lips quirk. "Of course. Nothing to do with the view?"

"Well," I drawl, "the scenery isn't terrible."

He laughs, a rich sound that sends warmth spreading through my chest. "High praise from the captain."

"Don't let it go to your head." I step back, maintaining some professional distance. "We've still got work to do."

"Always work with you, isn't it?"

"Someone's got to keep this ship running."

"And you do it beautifully." There's that look again, like he's seeing straight through me.

I clear my throat. "Right. Well, I should check on Par. Make sure he hasn't rewired the whole engine room."

I hurry away from the cargo bay, my cheeks burning. What's wrong with me? I've dealt with attractive crew members before without turning into a stammering teenager.

The ship lurches suddenly, throwing me against the corridor wall. The metal grating bites into my palm as I catch myself.

"What the hell?"

I sprint toward the cockpit, my boots clanking against the floor. The door slides open with a hiss.

"Rena?"

"We're fine." Her fingers dance across the controls, making minute adjustments. "Just had to make a quick course correction."

I drop into the co-pilot's seat, scanning the readouts. "Talk to me."

"Alliance patrol showed up on the long-range scanners." She taps the screen, bringing up the radar display. "Weird thing is, they shouldn't be out here. This is way outside their usual territory."

"Could be a random patrol."

"Since when do Alliance ships randomly patrol smuggler routes in Unaligned territory?" Her blue eyes narrow. "It's like they were waiting for us."

My stomach tightens. "That's impossible. Nobody knew our route except?—"

"The crew." Rena finishes my thought. "And our passenger."

"We vetted everyone." I lean back, running through the possibilities. "And Xander's the one running from them. He wouldn't..."

"Maybe." She shrugs, adjusting our trajectory slightly. "But something about this stinks worse than Paraxan."

"You're not wrong." I check the readouts again. "How's the backup route looking?"

"Clean so far. Should add about six hours to our trip, but better than explaining ourselves to an Alliance boarding party."

"Good call." I squeeze her shoulder. "Thanks for staying sharp."

"That's what you pay me for." She smirks. "Well, that and my sparkling personality."

Leaving the cockpit, I nearly collide with a solid wall of blue. Davin steadies me with a hand on my elbow, his touch sending an electric current through my skin.

"Whoa there, Captain. Everything alright? That was quite a shake earlier."

My mind races through the implications of telling him the truth. A new crew member during a sensitive job, and suddenly Alliance patrols show up? The timing's too convenient to ignore.

"Just some space debris." I shrug, trying to appear casual. "Hazard of taking the scenic route."

His silver eyes narrow slightly. "Must have been some pretty big debris."

"Nothing we can't handle." I step back, putting space between us. "Though the hull could probably use a once-over when we dock next."

"I'm pretty handy with external repairs." He leans against the corridor wall, a small smile playing at his lips. "Military training comes in useful sometimes."

"Does it now?" I cross my arms, fighting a smile of my own. "And here I thought you were just good for teaching Taluk how to throw a punch."

"I contain multitudes, Captain." He pushes off the wall, closing the distance between us again. "Though I notice you haven't taken me up on any training sessions yourself."

"Maybe I don't need training."

"Maybe I'd just like the excuse to spend more time with you."

The words hang in the air between us, heavy with possibility. My heart thunders against my ribs, and I struggle to remember all the reasons why this is a terrible idea.

"Careful there, soldier." I tap his chest with my finger. "That almost sounded like flirting."

"Almost?" His hand catches mine before I can pull it away. "Then I must be doing it wrong."

The ship's intercom crackles to life, Paraxan's voice breaking the moment. "Captain, need you in engineering."

I extract my hand from Davin's grip, ignoring the way my skin tingles where he touched me. "Duty calls."

"Rain check on that hull inspection?"

"We'll see." I start walking backward down the corridor, considering everything 'hull' could be a euphemism for. "Maybe if you ask nicely."

His laugh follows me all the way down the hall, and I try not to think about how much I like the sound.

I enter engineering, the smell of metal and ozone stronger here than anywhere else on the ship. "Everything okay, Par?"

His whiskers twitch as he tinkers with a coupling. "Thought you might need an escape route from your... conversation."

"My what? How did you?—?"

"These ears aren't just for show." He doesn't look up from his work, but I swear his whiskers are curled in amusement.

"That's impossible. You couldn't have heard us from down here. The engine noise alone would?—"

"Not that old yet, Captain." His fur coat bristles as he works. "Though some days it feels like it."

I stop near the bulkhead, crossing my arms. "Right. Well... thanks, I guess?"

"One more thing." He finally looks up, his dark eyes serious. "Taluk's been acting strange lately."

"Strange how?"

"Talking to himself. Real angry like." He scratches behind his ear with a clawed hand. "More than usual, I mean."

"He's young." I wave it off, though something niggles at the back of my mind. "Probably just teenage angst or whatever passes for it with Vakutans."

"Probably." He turns back to his work, effectively dismissing me. "Just thought you should know."

The sound of his tools against metal follows me out of engineering. Sure, Taluk is being more angsty than normal, but Par is also being more chatty. I think we've shared more words today than the entire last month combined.

Things have really shaken up, and I can't help feeling it's my fault.

The crew quarters' hallway stretches before me, its metal walls reflecting the soft overhead lighting. Taluk stands at his locker, muttering under his breath as he rifles through its contents. His scales catch the light, shifting from deep crimson to burgundy with each movement.

"Hey, hotshot." I lean against the adjacent locker. "Saw you working with Davin earlier. Those were some impressive moves."

He jumps at my first words, slamming something into the back of his locker. "Captain! I didn't—I mean—" His throat pouch flutters, a sure sign of anxiety in Vakutans. "Thanks."

"You've been holding out on us. Where'd you learn to move like that?"

"Around." He shifts his weight, blocking my view of his locker's contents. "Just picked things up, you know?"

"Well, keep it up. It's good to see you?—"

The locker door slams shut with a metallic bang that echoes through the corridor. Taluk's scales flush an even deeper red as he practically trips over his own feet backing away.

"Whatever. Thanks."

He hurries off, his boots clanking against the metal grating. His usual awkward gait seems more pronounced, like he's trying too hard to appear casual.

"Teenagers." I shake my head, pushing off from the wall. "Same in every species."

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CHAPTER 6

DAVIN

Paraxan's snoring fills our shared quarters, a rhythmic rumble that would normally lull me to sleep. Tonight, it only serves to highlight my restlessness. The ceiling offers no answers, just the dull metal plating I've been staring at for the past three hours.

My mind circles back to Jesse. The way her eyes light up when she laughs at my stories, how her fingers brush against mine when passing tools in the engine room. It's becoming harder to maintain the professional distance I need for this job.

Throwing off the thin blanket, I swing my legs over the side of the bunk. The metal floor chills my bare feet. Paraxan rolls over, his fur rustling against the sheets.

The corridor stretches before me, dimmed for the night cycle. My footsteps echo softly as I walk, trying to sort through my conflicting priorities. The bounty on Xander would set me up for months, maybe even a year. But Jesse...

I rub my chest where that familiar pull tugs at me. Fated mates are rare enough among my own people. Finding one in a human? The universe has a twisted sense of humor.

The military trained me to compartmentalize, to focus on the mission above all else. But they never prepared me for this. Every time I get close to finalizing my extraction plan for Xander, Jesse's face appears in my mind. The hurt, the betrayal I'd see when

she realizes what I've done.

I pause at a viewport, watching the stars streak by. Maybe there's a way to complete the job without destroying what's growing between us. If I could explain, make her understand...

The smell of fresh tea draws me toward the kitchen. Strange, at this hour. As I round the corner, I stop short. Jesse stands at the counter, her red hair loose around her shoulders, wearing an oversized shirt that barely reaches mid-thigh.

I clear my throat, and Jesse whirls around, nearly sloshing her tea. Her eyes widen, traveling down my chest before snapping back to my face. A blush creeps across her freckled cheeks.

Ah. I forgot to put a shirt on.

Not that she seems to be complaining.

"Can't sleep either?" she asks, her voice slightly higher than usual.

"The old man's snoring could wake the dead."

She laughs, reaching for another mug. "Tea? It's mint."

"Sure." I lean against the counter, deliberately flexing as I cross my arms. "Didn't take you for an herbal tea person."

"There's a lot you don't know about me." She slides the mug across the counter, her fingers trembling slightly. "Though apparently, you don't believe in sleeping with a shirt on."

"Does it bother you?" I smirk, taking a slow sip.

"Please. I've seen plenty of shirtless men before." She rolls her eyes, but her gaze darts to my chest again.

"But none quite so blue?"

"Or so humble." She taps her fingers against her mug. "Though I have to admit, the silver markings are... interesting."

"They're ancestral tattoos. Want a closer look?"

She nearly chokes on her tea. "That's got to be the worst pick-up line I've heard in three systems."

"Who says it's a line? Maybe I'm just being educational."

"Right. Because you're such a devoted teacher." She pushes off from the counter, brushing past me. The brief contact sends electricity through my skin.

Jesse pulls out a chair, the metal legs scraping against the floor. I follow suit, settling into the seat across from her. The tea's warmth seeps through the mug into my palms.

"So, what was it like? Running with the Sirius Syndicate?" Her eyes sparkle with curiosity over the rim of her cup.

I lean back, drawing from an old infiltration mission. "Ever heard of the Nexus heist?"

"Who hasn't? Three ships, supposedly untouchable cargo..." She leans forward. "Don't tell me you were there."

"Right in the thick of it." I tap my finger against the mug. "What they don't tell you is how we got past those quantum locks. Everyone thinks it was some fancy tech or inside job."

"Wasn't it?"

"Nah. Sometimes the old ways work best. Had to spacewalk between ships in complete darkness. No lights, no comm chatter. Just me and the void." I pause, remembering the actual mission. "Used the debris field as cover. Guards never thought to look for someone crazy enough to drift through that mess."

"You're lying." But her smile widens.

"Hand to heart. Lost three good tethers that day. Nearly lost something else when a piece of scrap metal came spinning past." I gesture to my side, where an actual scar sits from a different mission entirely. "Missed me by inches."

"And the cargo?"

"Trade secret." I wink, enjoying how she rolls her eyes. "Let's just say it involved a lot of creative reprogramming and one very confused security AI."

"That's not what I heard happened."

"History's written by the winners. And the ones who don't get caught." I take another sip of tea. "Though I'll tell you this – those reinforced containers everyone talks about? They're not nearly as tough as they look when you know exactly where to hit them."

Jesse props her chin on her hand, completely engrossed. "And where would that be?"

"Now that would be telling." The irony of using my actual military experience to build this false persona isn't lost on me. "Though I might be persuaded to share more stories."

Jesse's lips curve into a smile that makes my pulse quicken. The dim kitchen lights catch the gold flecks in her green eyes.

Why am I holding back? She's right here. I'm sure she'd melt in my palms if I held her close, laid her out on the table...

"Your turn," I say, leaning back. Not yet. It's not time yet. "Fair's fair. Tell me about little Jesse's first adventure."

She traces the rim of her mug. "You really want to hear about twelve-year-old me making a complete fool of herself?"

"Even more now that you've put it that way."

"Fine." She tucks her legs under her. "First time my parents let me help on a real job. We were running stolen medical supplies— actual medical supplies, not the recreational kind. I was supposed to be the lookout while they made the exchange."

"Let me guess – you got distracted?"

"Worse. I thought I saw Ataxian patrol lights and hit the emergency alarm." She covers her face. "Turns out it was just some kid playing with a light stick outside the warehouse."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. The whole operation went sideways. Dad dropped half the supplies trying to

run. Mom twisted her ankle jumping over a crate. And me?" She drops her hands, laughing. "I was so scared I climbed into a ventilation shaft and got stuck."

"How long?"

"Three hours. They had to take apart the whole thing to get me out." She shakes her head. "Dad didn't even yell. Just looked at me, covered in dust and crying, and said 'Lesson one: always verify your intel.'"

"Smart man."

"Yeah. Lesson two was 'know your escape route before you need it.' Lesson three was 'never hide somewhere you can't get out of on your own.'" She drains her tea. "Though I think the real lesson was 'don't trust your pre-teen daughter as a lookout.'"

I laugh at her story, the sound echoing in the quiet kitchen. Jesse rests her chin on her palm, studying me with those mesmerizing green eyes.

"Your turn again." She traces patterns on the table with her finger. "Any great loves in your past? Someone special waiting for you somewhere?"

My smile falters. Is this a test? The way she's not quite meeting my eyes suggests something more than casual curiosity.

"There was someone, once." I rotate my mug, watching the tea leaves swirl. "Back when I was young and stupid. Mira. She lived next door to my family's estate."

"What happened?"

"Life. Her parents had arranged a marriage with some corporate heir before she was even born. We knew it wouldn't last, but..." I shrug, remembering those stolen

moments in the garden, the way her eyes seemed to glow in the moonlight. "You think you can change fate when you're that age."

"Did you try?"

"To what end? She had a duty to her family. I had..." The military. The structure. The escape. "Other paths to follow. Last I heard, she's running her husband's trading empire and has three kids."

"I'm sorry." Jesse's hand twitches, like she wants to reach across the table but thinks better of it.

"Don't be. She's happy. That's what matters." I meet Jesse's gaze, that familiar pull growing stronger. "Besides, sometimes fate has other plans."

The truth of those words settles between us. If I hadn't taken this bounty, if I hadn't tracked her ship... I'd have never found what was actually waiting for me in the universe.

The comfortable silence stretches between us, and I decide to test the waters. "So, what's Dr. Xevran's story? He seems... jumpy."

Jesse's fingers stop their pattern-tracing on the table. Her shoulders tense slightly – most wouldn't notice, but military training makes these tells obvious.

"He's just a doctor looking to help people." She takes another sip of tea, not meeting my eyes. "We're giving him a lift to where he can do more good. He give us free care in exchange."

"Must be some kind of good to need such discrete transport."

"Some places don't make it easy to help people." She shrugs, but her knuckles whiten around her mug. "Sometimes the best intentions get tangled in red tape."

I nod, keeping my expression neutral despite the disappointment settling in my bones. She's still feeding me the cover story. After our shared confidences, the stories, the growing connection – she still doesn't trust me enough for the truth.

"Well, the galaxy needs more good people." The words taste bitter on my tongue. "Especially doctors."

Standing, I stretch, giving her one last chance to open up. "I should try to get some sleep. Thanks for the tea and company."

"Anytime." Her smile is genuine, even if her words weren't. "Sweet dreams, Davin."

Walking back to my quarters, every step feels heavier than the last. The mission should be simple now – she's confirmed she's going ahead with smuggling Xander. But the thought of betraying her trust, even this limited version she's given me, twists something deep in my gut.

Paraxan's snoring welcomes me back to our shared room. I climb into my bunk, the metal frame creaking under my weight. The ceiling offers no more answers than it did hours ago.

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CHAPTER 7

JESSE

The metal grating clanks under my boots as I make my way to Xander's quarters. His door slides open before I can knock, revealing his tall frame hunched over a PerComm. The sterile scent of antiseptic wafts from his room, making my nose wrinkle.

"We're about a day's cycle out from Glimner." I lean against the doorframe, keeping my distance. Something about him sets my teeth on edge. "Just wanted to keep you updated."

"Which landing pad?" He pushes his glasses up his nose, not bothering to look at me.

"The one your contact specified."

"You're certain?" Now he does look up, his gaze sharp behind those lenses. "Glimner has seventeen registered landing pads and twenty-three unregistered ones."

"Listen." I straighten up, squaring my shoulders. "I've been doing this since I could walk. Don't question my professionalism. Your job is making sure your contact shows up with the agreed-upon payment."

"They will have sufficient funds." His lips curl into what might be a smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "I assure you."

"Good."

I turn away, relieved to put distance between us. The sooner we dump this cargo, the better. Something about the way he watches everyone, like we're specimens in his personal zoo, makes my skin crawl.

The ship's intercom crackles. "Jesse?" Rena's voice carries an edge I don't like. "Need you in the cockpit. Now."

My stomach drops. Rena doesn't do urgent unless it's serious. I pick up my pace, jogging toward the bridge.

The metal frame shudders around me as I reach the cockpit doorway. My shoulder slams against the frame as the ship lurches sideways, artificial gravity struggling to compensate. The bitter taste of adrenaline floods my mouth.

"What the hell?" I stumble into the cockpit, gripping the back of Rena's chair.

"Unidentified vessel." Rena's fingers dance across the controls, her jaw tight. "They're forcing a dock. Look at this monster."

The viewscreen shows a ship triple our size, its dark hull reflecting the starlight as it maneuvers alongside us. The docking mechanism extends like a metal serpent.

"Alliance?" My heart pounds against my ribs.

"No call signs, no warnings. Not how they operate." Rena smacks the console as red warning lights flash across the dashboard. "Shit. They're in our systems."

Numbers scroll across the screen, our security protocols failing one by one. The dashboard goes dark, then reboots with an unfamiliar interface.

"Override it!" I drop into the co-pilot seat, typing commands that disappear as fast as I enter them.

"They've locked us out completely." Rena's voice stays steady, but her knuckles whiten on the controls. "Airlock's opening. We've got maybe two minutes before they're through."

The metallic groan of the airlock echoes through the ship. I slam my palm against the intercom.

"All hands, we have unauthorized boarders. This is not a drill. I repeat, unauthorized boarding in progress. Arm up and prepare for hostiles."

"Who the hell are these people?" Rena pulls up the external cameras, showing dark-suited figures assembling in the airlock before even the cameras begin to blip out.

"Don't know." I check my sidearm, the familiar weight offering little comfort. "But they're about to find out why you don't mess with my ship."

I reach for the door controls when it whooshes open. Taluk barrels through, his scales flushed dark red as he shoves me backward. The door seals behind him with a pneumatic hiss.

"What are you doing?" My shoulder hits the navigation console.

"Keeping you safe." Taluk plants himself in front of the door, arms crossed. "Both of you."

"Like hell." I straighten up, squaring off with him. "My ship, my responsibility."

"Davin's handling it." His face twitches with forced authority. "He knows what he's

doing."

"Since when do you make command decisions on my ship?"

"Since—"

A scream echoes through the corridor, followed by the distinct sound of weapon fire.

"Captain!" Xander's voice carries through the metal walls. "They're here for me! Help!"

I lunge for the door, but Taluk catches me around the waist, his claws digging into my jacket.

"Let go!" I twist in his grip. "That's our cargo out there!"

"My job is to keep the crew safe." His breath comes out in sharp bursts. "That's what I'm doing."

"Your job is to follow my orders." I slam my elbow back, but he doesn't budge.

"Jesse." Rena's voice cuts through the chaos. "Something's not right here."

More shouts filter through the walls, followed by the thundering of boots on metal grating. Taluk's grip tightens, and for the first time, I notice his hands aren't shaking.

"Hell of a time for you to become a man," I say, finally wrenching free and fleeing from the room.

I sprint down the corridor, heart pounding against my chest. A thunderous crash echoes from around the corner, followed by Davin's distinctive grunt. I round the

bend to find him shoulder-deep in the maintenance room door, his blue skin glistening with sweat.

"Someone pushed me in here." He yanks his shoulder back, metal groaning. "Locked the damn door."

"Here." I wedge myself next to him, our bodies pressed together in the narrow space. "On three."

His silver hair brushes my cheek as he nods. "One."

"Two." The door creaks under our combined weight.

"Three!"

We slam forward. The door gives way with a shriek of torn metal, sending us stumbling into the cramped maintenance room.

"Didn't catch the guy who got the drop on me." Davin steadies me with a hand on my waist. "Had to be someone big though."

"Less analyzing, more hunting." I check my weapon. "Xander's in trouble."

A roar shakes the corridor, followed by the distinctive thud of a body hitting metal. We sprint toward the sound, rounding another corner just as a black-suited figure sails through the air.

"Down!" Davin tackles me sideways.

The body crashes into the wall where we'd been standing. Paraxan emerges from the cross-corridor, his fur bristling with rage. Another intruder charges him from behind.

"Par, six o'clock!" I shout.

Paraxan spins, catching the second attacker mid-lunge. His claws rake across their suit as he hurls them into their companion. Both crumple to the deck in a tangle of limbs.

"Thanks for the warning." Paraxan's whiskers twitch.

"Too old, huh?" Davin asks with a hint of mirth.

The intercom crackles. "They're disengaging," Rena's voice cuts through the chaos. "Ship's pulling away."

"What?" My stomach drops. "Already?"

"Clean extraction." Paraxan's whiskers twitch as he sniffs the air. "Professional work."

I sprint toward Xander's quarters, my boots clanging against the metal grating. The door hangs open, room pristine except for an overturned chair. His PerComm lies abandoned on the desk, still displaying whatever he'd been working on.

"Rena, get a trace on that ship." I slam my palm against the doorframe. "Now!"

"Working on—" A violent shudder rocks the ship. "Shit."

"What now?"

"They left us a present." Her voice tightens. "External sensors showing explosive devices attached to our hull. Multiple points."

Davin appears at my shoulder. "How many?"

"Six that I can see. They're rigged to detonate on impact."

"One piece of space debris and..." My throat constricts.

"And we're vapor." Rena's fingers click rapidly across controls. "I'm taking us down. First habitable planet I can find."

"How long?" I ask.

"Twenty minutes, maybe less. Depends how much garbage is between us and atmo."

The ship lurches again as Rena changes course. I grab the doorframe to stay upright, Davin's hand steadying my elbow.

"Par." I turn to the Odex. "Engine room. Make sure nothing blows before we land."

He nods once and disappears down the corridor, fur bristling.

"What do you need from me?" Davin asks, his blue skin almost pale in the harsh corridor lighting.

"Find Taluk. I want everyone accounted for when we touch down."

Another shudder rocks the ship. The lights flicker, casting shadows across Davin's face. He nods and walks away with something strange in his gaze.

The landing jars my teeth as Rena sets us down on a barren moon. Red dust swirls outside the viewports, coating everything in a rusty haze. Paraxan's already outside, his massive frame silhouetted against the light as he works on the explosives.

Inside the cargo hold, Davin has our surviving attacker zip-tied to a support beam. Blood trickles from the man's split lip, staining his black tactical gear.

"Talk." Davin's fist connects with the man's jaw. "Who sent you?"

"Let me," Taluk growls, but I grab him by the arm.

"You've played enough hero for today," I say, still pissed at his earlier interference. Taluk narrows his eyes at me, but backs down.

The man's laughter echoes through the hold, high and unhinged. "You really think I'd tell you anything?"

"Worth a shot." Davin draws back for another punch, but the man's head suddenly snaps back, body convulsing.

"No!" I rush forward, but it's too late. White foam bubbles from his lips, his eyes rolling back.

"Poison capsule." Davin checks the man's pulse. "Hidden in his teeth probably. Again: professional job. Whoever did this isn't screwing around."

I kneel beside the body, patting down his pockets. A pistol, brass knuckles, some old papers with crude love notes scribbled on them. Then, my fingers brush something in his breast pocket – a deck of cards. The worn cardboard feels slick against my skin as I pull them out.

"Hey." Rena leans over my shoulder. "Those are from The Lucky Hand on Glimner. High-end place, invitation only."

"Mafia territory." Davin stands, wiping blood from his knuckles. "Makes sense."

Whatever Xander's involved in, it's got their attention."

The cards slip from my fingers, scattering across the floor like fallen leaves. My heart pounds against my ribs as his words sink in.

"What did you just say?"

"The mafia?—"

"No." I turn to face him, my hand inching toward my holster. "You called him Xander. We never told you his name."

CHAPTER 8

DAVIN

The cargo hold falls silent, every pair of eyes boring into me. My skin prickles under their scrutiny, but I maintain my composure, crossing my arms over my chest.

"You lying scumbag, you're a mole, aren't you!?" Taluk yells, puffing up his chest and getting in my space. "You faked getting stuck in that closet to hide that you helped them!"

"A mole?" I bark out a laugh. "For what? Pocket change from some two-bit syndicate?"

Taluk's scales bristle. "Then how'd you know who Xander really is?"

"Because I'm not blind?" I tap my temple. "Athenaverse's most wanted doesn't exactly keep a low profile. That bounty's worth more than this whole ship."

"Exactly why you'd want to cash in," Taluk snarls, taking a step forward.

"Kid, if I wanted the bounty, I'd have grabbed him myself. Why split the take with thugs when I could collect the whole thing?" I lean against a cargo container. "In fact, you seem pretty educated on his bounty yourself. How do we know you're not the mole?"

"You--" Taluk's fists clench.

"Both of you, shut it." Jesse steps between us, her eyes narrowed. "Davin's right. The syndicate's small-time compared to Alliance bounties. This doesn't add up."

Paraxan's footsteps echo through the cargo hold as he boards, his fur bristling at the sight of the dead syndicate member. He steps over the body without comment, heading straight for the engine room.

"All clear?" Jesse calls after him.

A grunt echoes back, followed by the clang of the engine room door.

"Rena." Jesse's voice shifts to that commanding tone I've come to recognize. "Get us to Glimner. Fast as you can manage. Find the closest pad to The Lucky Hand."

"On it." Rena's boots clatter up the metal stairs. "Might need to burn some favors for clearance."

"Burn them all if you have to."

The engines hum to life beneath our feet. Jesse turns to me, her green eyes hard as emeralds. "You. My quarters. Now."

My stomach tightens. This isn't the kind of invitation I'd hoped for when imagining being summoned to her room. The way her jaw clenches tells me this isn't a social call.

"What about them?" Taluk gestures at the dead mafia goons Paraxan left in the hallway.

"Stuff him in a cargo container," Jesse says, already walking away. "We'll space him once we break atmo."

I follow her through the narrow corridors, my heart hammering against my ribs. She knows something. Has to. The question is: how much?

Jesse's quarters are sparse - a bed, a desk with scattered datapads, and a small window showing the blur of stars. The door hisses shut behind me, and she whirls around, her red hair catching the starlight.

"Cut the crap. Right now." Her fingers drum against her holstered blaster. "You're not with that syndicate. That much I can buy. But your story's still too neat, too convenient."

I spread my hands. "You're right."

"Then who are you really?"

"Bounty hunter." The truth slides off my tongue easier than expected. "Tracking Xander. That big of a payday is hard to pass up."

She barks out a laugh. "Right. And I'm the Queen of Mars."

"Check the bounty boards yourself. His face is plastered everywhere." I lean against her desk. "Though I'm guessing you already knew that when you took this job."

"A bounty hunter wouldn't tell me this." Her eyes narrow. "You're playing some angle."

"The angle where I get my target back." I meet her gaze. "Those thugs just complicated everything."

"And why should I believe you now?"

"Because right now, we both want the same thing - Xander back on this ship." I cross my arms. "You need him to complete your contract. I need him for the bounty. Enemy of my enemy?"

Jesse's hand stays near her blaster, but her shoulders relax slightly. "And after we get him back?"

"Then we can sort out who gets to keep him." I shrug. "But first, we need to find him."

"You're assuming I won't just shoot you and space your body right now."

"You won't."

"Pretty confident for someone at gunpoint."

"Because you're smart. You know I have skills you need on a planet like Glimner. Military training. Combat experience. The real stuff, not the sanitized version I fed you before."

Her lips twist into a half-smile. "At least you're honest about being a liar."

Jesse drops into her desk chair, running her fingers through her copper hair. "All this time. Years running a tight ship, never letting my crew down. And then I let a bounty hunter onto my ship." Her laugh holds no humor. "Some captain I turned out to be."

"You saw what you wanted to see." I step closer, the scent of her jasmine shampoo hitting me like a physical force. "But maybe what you saw wasn't entirely false."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

My skin tingles with the urge to touch her, to explain about fated mates and the pull I've been fighting since I first laid eyes on her. She'd probably space me in an instant if I did.

"There are things in this universe bigger than bounties or smuggling runs."

She looks up at me, those green eyes searching my face. "Like what?"

"Like--" The words catch in my throat. How do I explain something I barely understand myself? "Like the way you make me question everything I thought I knew about myself."

Jesse rises slowly from her chair, close enough now that I can see the light dusting of freckles across her nose. The air between us grows thick with possibility.

"That's quite a line for a bounty hunter," she whispers, but there's no bite in her words. "Or a mob goon. Or an ex-Sirius crew. Or whatever you are."

"Not a line." I reach out, my blue fingers hovering just shy of her cheek. "The truth, for once."

She leans forward, her breath warm against my lips--

"Captain!" Rena's voice crackles over the intercom. "Got us clearance at Landing Pad 47-B. ETA two hours to Glimner atmosphere."

Jesse jerks back, the moment shattered. Her cheeks flush as she hits the comm button. "Copy that, Rena. Good work." And with that she rushes out, not bothering to look back

The landing pad stinks of burnt fuel and ozone, typical of the shadier districts on

Glimner. Jesse and I crouch behind a stack of cargo containers, watching a suspect ship. It looks damn close to the one that boarded us not hours ago, and the steam formed by the rain says it just landed.

"That's definitely them."

Jesse shifts closer, her shoulder brushing mine. "Now what?"

A kid in a leather jacket emerges from the ship's cargo hold, lighting up something that glows blue in the evening light. The sweet scent of contraband tobacco wafts our way.

"Stay here." I touch her arm. "Let me handle this."

"Like hell. He's my cargo they took."

"And if he sees you, he'll recognize the captain whose ship they just hit." I raise an eyebrow. "Me? I'm just another face in the crowd."

She grips my wrist. "Don't kill him. We need information."

"Trust me."

"I don't." But she releases me anyway.

I circle wide, using the shadows between ships for cover. The kid's too busy trying to look cool with his smoke to notice me approach. Amateur. One quick move and I have him in a chokehold, dragging him backward into the alley.

"Hey, what the--" His protest cuts off as I tighten my grip.

Jesse materializes from the shadows, pressing her blaster under his chin. "Where's Xander?"

The kid's eyes go wide. "Oh shit."

"Wrong answer." I increase the pressure on his throat. "Try again."

"I can't-- they'll kill me--"

"We'll kill you faster," Jesse says, her voice ice cold. "And unlike them, we're right here."

The kid thrashes in my grip, his voice cracking. "Look, I didn't sign up for this! It was supposed to be a simple grab job!"

"Who do you work for?" Jesse presses the blaster harder under his chin.

"The Lightyear crew, alright? They pay better than the bars--"

A laugh bursts from my throat before I can stop it. "The Lightyear crew? What, did they name themselves after watching old Earth cartoons?"

His face flushes red. "Hey! They're legit! They control half the--"

"Half the playground, maybe."

"You don't know shit about--"

Heavy footsteps echo across the landing pad. Port authority. Their boots splash through puddles, getting closer.

The kid's eyes light up. He takes a deep breath and screams, "Help! They're gonna kill me! Help!"

"Shit." My grip loosens just enough for him to writhe free. He bolts toward the authorities, still yelling his head off.

I grab Jesse's wrist. Her skin burns hot against my palm. "Time to go."

"But--"

"Now." I pull her into the shadows between the ships.

The sound of boots hitting pavement grows louder. A beam of light cuts through the darkness behind us. "Stop! Port Authority!"

Jesse matches my pace as we weave through the maze of ships and cargo containers. Her breath comes in short gasps, but she doesn't slow down. The rain makes the walkways slick under our feet.

"Over there!" Someone shouts.

A blast of energy sizzles past my ear, leaving an acrid smell in its wake. Jesse stumbles, but I keep her upright, dragging her around another corner.

We burst out of the port and into the neon-lit streets. The rain drums against metal awnings, creating a chaotic symphony with our footsteps. Jesse's hand stays locked in mine as we weave through the evening crowd.

"Move!" I shoulder past a group of Vakutans, their scales gleaming under the street lights.

"This way." Jesse tugs me toward a dingy bar, its holographic sign flickering in and out. The Sweet Spot. Real creative.

Inside, the air reeks of cheap alcohol and sweat. Music pounds through ancient speakers, the bass making my teeth rattle. We dodge around a server carrying a tray of something fluorescent green.

"Hey, watch it!"

"Sorry, coming through!" Jesse shouts over her shoulder.

The kitchen door slams open under my palm. A cook drops his knife, cursing in three different languages as we dash past. The back door gives way to a narrow alley slick with rain and whatever else coats these streets.

We press against the wall, our breaths coming in sharp gasps. The distant shouts of authority fade into the city's ambient noise. My heart pounds against my ribs, but not from the running.

"You okay?" I turn to Jesse, scanning for injuries.

Her hands grab my face, fingers cool against my skin. She pulls me down and crashes her lips against mine. The rain soaks through my clothes, but I barely notice. Her mouth is soft, insistent. She tastes like adrenaline and possibility.

I wrap my arms around her waist, drawing her closer. The rational part of my brain screams that this is a terrible idea - I'm here for Xander, for the bounty. But with her pressed against me, those concerns feel distant, unimportant.

She breaks the kiss first, but doesn't pull away. Her breath mingles with mine in the space between us.

"I shouldn't trust you," she whispers against my lips. "But fuck it."

CHAPTER 9

JESSE

The rain's a relentless drummer, pounding out a rhythm on the grimy walls of the alley. Club music throbs through the bricks, a bassline pulsating through me. Davin's hands are in my hair, his blue skin slick with rain, silver hair plastered to his forehead.

I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't be kissing a man I barely know, a man who's practically a stranger. But after the day we've had, the adrenaline, the fear, the thrill—I need this. I need him.

"Jesse," he murmurs against my lips, his breath hot despite the cold rain. His hands slip down to my waist, pulling me closer. I can feel every inch of him, every hard line and muscle.

"We shouldn't," I gasp, even as my fingers trace the ridges of his shoulders, his neck, his jaw. His skin is smooth, like wet stone under my touch.

"Probably not," he agrees, his mouth moving to my neck, sending shivers down my spine. "But I can't seem to stop."

"Me neither," I admit, my heart pounding in my ears, louder than the rain, louder than the music. My hands find his chest, his heart beating as wildly as mine.

He pulls back, just enough to look at me. Raindrops cling to his lashes, his eyes

reflecting the distant neon lights. "Tell me to stop," he says, his voice rough, almost pleading.

I shake my head, water dripping from my hair. "I can't."

A slow smile spreads across his face, a smile that sends heat coursing through me. "Good," he growls, his mouth crashing against mine again.

I lose myself in the sensation, in the taste of him, the feel of him. The rain pours down on us, the music thumps around us, but all I can focus on is him. Him and the fire he's igniting inside me.

Suddenly, he pulls away, his breath ragged. "Jesse," he says, his voice barely audible over the rain and the music. "We need to?—"

I cut him off, pressing my fingers to his lips. "Don't," I say. "Don't say we need to stop. Don't say we need to go. Just... don't."

He looks at me, his eyes searching mine. Then, slowly, he nods, his hands finding their way back to my waist. "Alright," he says, his voice soft. "Alright, Jesse."

And then he's kissing me again, and I'm lost, lost in the rain, lost in the music, lost in him. And right now, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Davin's hands slip under my shirt, his calloused fingers tracing the line of my bra. I gasp, the coolness of his touch a stark contrast to the heat building within me. "Is this what you want, Jesse?" he murmurs, his breath hot on my ear.

"Shut up and keep going," I manage to retort, my voice barely more than a whisper. His hands cup my breasts, thumbs brushing over the sensitive peaks. A groan escapes my lips, low and needy.

He chuckles, a deep rumble in his chest. "Always so demanding."

"You have no idea," I reply, my hands fumbling with his belt. The leather is slick from the rain, but I manage to unbuckle it, my fingers trembling with anticipation.

His breath hitches as I stroke him, his length impressive even through the fabric of his pants. "Jesse," he growls, a warning and a plea all at once.

"Hush," I whisper, my fingers tracing the waistband of his briefs. I slip my hand inside, wrapping my fingers around him. He's hot and hard, silken smooth, and he groans into my ear, a sound that sends shivers down my spine.

"You're playing with fire, Jesse," he says, his voice ragged. His hands are still on my breasts, his thumbs circling, driving me crazy.

"I like the heat," I retort, my grip tightening around him. He throbs in my hand, his hips bucking slightly.

He captures my mouth in a fierce kiss, his tongue sweeping in, claiming me. I stroke him, marveling at his length, at the way he groans into my mouth. His hands leave my breasts, sliding down to grip my hips, pulling me closer.

"Jesse," he murmurs against my lips, his voice barely audible over the pounding rain and throbbing music.

Davin's eyes dart around, checking every shadow, every corner. Satisfied we're alone, he drops to one knee, his hands making quick work of my boots. The rain-soaked laces slip through his fingers, but he's deft, determined. My breath hitches as he tugs them off, one by one, followed by my socks. The alley's cold concrete sends a shiver up my spine.

He looks up, blue skin glistening with rain. There's a question in his eyes, a pause that asks permission. I bite my lip, nodding slightly, heat building in my core despite the cold.

His hands slide up to my waistband, fingers hooking into the belt loops. He tugs, slow and steady, our gazes locked. My pants and underwear slip down, peeling away from my skin, leaving me exposed to the chill, to him. I can't believe I'm doing this. Here. Now. With him.

A grin tugs at the corner of his mouth. "This isn't exactly how I imagined this happening."

I arch an eyebrow, a smirk playing on my lips. "Oh, so you've imagined this?"

He chuckles, a low rumble that I feel more than hear. "Maybe once or twice."

"Only twice?" I tease, my voice barely above a whisper. "I must be losing my touch."

He shakes his head, his hands sliding up my bare thighs, sending shivers up my spine. "Not at all, Jesse. Not at all."

His touch is electric, sending jolts of heat through me. I can feel every callous, every rough patch of skin. It's intoxicating. He's intoxicating.

"And how exactly did you imagine this?" I ask, my voice hitching as his hands slip higher.

He leans in, his breath hot on my skin "Certainly not in a rainy alley, against a grimy wall."

I laugh, a soft, breathy sound. "Well, Davin, maybe you should have planned better."

He pulls back, his eyes looking up at mine. There's a fire burning in them, a heat that matches my own. "Maybe," he says, his voice rough. "But I'm not complaining."

I roll my eyes, but a smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. "Shut up and keep going."

"Always so demanding." He laughs, a sound that's rough and sexy and sends shivers down my spine. "You run a tight ship, Captain."

"And you talk too much," I reply, my hands tangling in his silver hair. I tug gently, pulling him closer.

He groans, a sound that vibrates through me. "Message received," he murmurs, his breath hot on my skin.

And then he's kissing me, his mouth hot and hungry. I gasp, my hands tightening in his hair. He takes advantage, his tongue sweeping in, claiming me. I can taste the rain on his lips, the heat of him, the desire.

His hands slip higher, his thumbs brushing against my core. I gasp, my hips bucking slightly. He chuckles, a low, sexy sound that sends heat coursing through me.

I gasp, my hands tightening in his hair. He groans, a sound that vibrates through me, sending jolts of pleasure coursing through my veins.

"Davin," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the pounding rain and throbbing music. But he hears me, his hands tightening on my thighs, his mouth moving against me in a rhythm that matches the beat of the rain.

I can feel the pleasure building, the heat coursing through me. I can feel the tension coiling in my core, the desire burning in my veins. I can feel everything, every touch, every lick, every kiss. I can feel him.

And then I'm shattering, the pleasure exploding through me. I cry out, my hands tightening in his hair, my hips bucking against him. He groans, a sound that's rough and sexy and sends shivers down my spine.

He doesn't stop, his mouth moving against me, his hands gripping my thighs. He rides out the wave with me, his touch gentle yet firm, his mouth hot and hungry.

And when I finally come down, when the pleasure finally subsides, he looks up at me, a smirk playing on his lips.

Davin stands, his hands gripping my hips, lifting me like I weigh nothing. My back presses against the cold, slick wall, rainwater trickling down my spine. A gasp escapes my lips, a mix of surprise and anticipation.

I wrap my legs around his waist, locking my ankles behind him. His body is hard against mine, all muscle and intensity. I can feel him, hot and ready, pressing against my core. A shiver runs through me, despite the warmth radiating from him.

"This is crazy," I murmur. It's soaked, dripping rainwater onto my face.

He pulls back, just enough to look at me. Raindrops cling to his lashes, his blue skin glistening under the distant neon lights. A smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth. "You strike me as the type who likes a little crazy, Jesse."

I laugh, a breathy sound that's barely audible over the pounding rain.

Before I can respond, he shifts his hips, pressing against me. A moan slips from my lips, low and needy. He chuckles, a sound that's rough and sexy and sends shivers down my spine.

"Still think this is crazy?" he asks, his voice a husky whisper.

I bite my lip, looking into his eyes. They're dark with desire, reflecting the distant lights like tiny galaxies. I can see the hunger in them, the need. It matches my own, a fire burning deep within me.

"Crazy or not," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "Don't stop."

"Wasn't planning on it."

And then he's moving, his hips thrusting against mine, his length sliding against my core. I gasp, my fingers tightening in his hair. He groans, a sound that vibrates through me, sending jolts of pleasure coursing through my veins.

"Davin," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the pounding rain and throbbing music. But he hears me, his hands tightening on my hips, his mouth finding mine.

He kisses me deeply, his tongue sweeping in, claiming me. I can taste the rain on his lips, the heat of him, the desire. It's intoxicating. I can feel every inch of him, every hard line and muscle. And god, he feels good. So good.

He breaks the kiss, his breath hot on my ear. "You feel incredible, Jesse."

And then he's moving faster. I gasp, my head falling back against the wall, my eyes fluttering closed.

"Jesse, I'm-!"

"Come with me!" I cry out, louder than I should have. But he does, and I quickly follow.

He continues holding me there against the wall, our ragged breaths mingling into a cloud between us.

Then, right when I relax, panic strikes me.

"Oh shit, Xander!"

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CHAPTER 10

DAVIN

S topping in the middle of a time sensitive manhunt to have sex in a wet, dark alleyway certainly isn't the smartest decision I've ever had. But I'm finding it hard to regret it.

I help Jesse put her soaking wet clothes back on while trying to figure out our next move.

We know Xander's captors are the Lightyear gang. We know they hire a mix of professionals and dumbass teenagers. We know at least one of them visited the nearby Lucky Hand casino.

"Small businesses," Jesse says, tugging her belt into place. Her hair's plastered to her face, but somehow she makes it work. "They're always the first targets for protection money."

"Smart thinking." My military training kicks in - gather intel, know your enemy. "Gangs like showing off their power to the little guys. Little guys probably willing to talk."

We weave through narrow streets, past neon signs reflecting off puddles. A bell chimes as we push open the door to "Madame Liu's Antiques they were looking to get their hands on it too.

And why wouldn't they?

My hand, almost without thinking, starts traveling down to my gun. One little shot, and this man's ability to destroy millions of lives would be over. But Jesse darts her own out and stops me, her breathing ragged and eyes wide.

Jesse's grip on my arm tightens as the boss adjusts his cuffs. "Any loose ends we need to handle, doctor?"

"The bounty hunters might be a problem," Xander says, pushing his glasses up.

The boss waves his hand. "Already taken care of. We'll stage your death - very tragic, very public. Maybe a shuttle accident." He grins. "We can even put a couple of our guys on board. The insurance payout alone will be worth it."

My jaw clenches. This slimeball's already planning how to profit from a fake death.

"There is one other thing." Xander leans forward. "The ship that brought me here - they'll come looking when they don't get paid."

"The smuggler's vessel?" The boss raises an eyebrow. "Easy enough to handle."

"Actually..." Xander's lips curl into a smile that makes my blood run cold. "I took the liberty of uploading backup schematics to their computer systems. Insurance, you understand. In case something went wrong during transit."

Jesse's fingers dig into my arm so hard they'll leave bruises. I don't dare look at her face.

"Smart man." The boss claps his hands together. "Look at that, we don't even need to get our hands dirty now."

"The crew's rather... resourceful," Xander adds. "Especially their captain."

"Then we'll be sure to report them to the proper authorities." The boss checks his PerComm. "What's the ship's registry?"

My stomach drops as Xander recites Jesse's ship ID. The same numbers I memorized while tracking her. The same ship where Rena's waiting, completely unaware they're about to have company.

Jesse's breathing has gone shallow beside me. I know what she's thinking - we need to warn them. But one wrong move, one creaky step on this catwalk, and we're dead.

The boss pulls out his PerComm, his fingers dancing across the interface with practiced ease. "Captain Reynolds? Yes, it's me. Got something interesting for you."

My jaw clenches as he describes Jesse's ship in perfect detail. The registration numbers roll off his tongue like poetry, each digit another nail in her crew's coffin.

"Dangerous contraband," he continues, voice dripping with false concern. "Biological weapons. Very nasty stuff. No, I couldn't sleep at night knowing I didn't report it."

Jesse's trembling beside me, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. The Alliance doesn't play nice with weapons traffickers - especially not human ones. They'll shoot first, maybe ask questions later if they're feeling generous.

I lean close, my lips barely brushing her ear. "Go. Now. Get to Rena."

She shakes her head, stubborn even in crisis. Her hand finds mine in the darkness.

"Jesse." I squeeze her fingers. "Your crew needs you. I've got this."

The boss is still talking, mapping out exactly where to find her ship. "They're docked in Bay 7. Crew's probably still aboard. Better move fast before they catch wind."

Jesse's eyes meet mine, a thousand unspoken words passing between us. I give her a slight nod.

"Go," I mouth.

She starts inching backward, each movement carefully measured against the creaky metal beneath us. I watch until she disappears into the shadows, my training already kicking in as I assess the situation below.

Five targets. Three armed, two probably not. Xander in the middle, looking smug as a well-fed cat. The boss still on his PerComm, sealing everyone's fate with a smile.

This is what I trained for. Years in the military, countless missions, all leading to moments like this. Only this time, it's not just about the bounty anymore.

CHAPTER 11

JESSE

My boots barely make a sound against the concrete as I slip away from the window. The rain pelts my face, mixing with the cold sweat breaking out across my skin. That bastard Xander has been using my ship, my crew, as his personal data storage.

"Rena, you copy?" I whisper into my PerComm, ducking behind a dumpster as footsteps echo from around the corner.

"Here, Cap. Everything okay?"

"Run a full system scan. Look for any hidden files, especially in the auxiliary drives." My heart pounds against my ribs. "And get Taluk. Have him guard the door. Tell Par to check Xander's room for...anything. Oh, and get the robot to scan for any small and artificial bugs."

"What's going on?"

"Just do it. And Rena? Don't let anyone on or off that ship until I get back."

The footsteps fade away. I press my back against the wet wall, my mind racing through possibilities. If the Alliance finds those weapon schematics on my ship, we're all going down for terrorism. Life in a mining colony would be the best-case scenario.

Through the rain-streaked darkness, I stare at the warehouse's grimy windows. My

fingers trace the spot on my arm where Davin grabbed me, practically throwing me toward the exit. The memory of his touch burns hotter than the bruise forming underneath.

"Get to the ship," he'd growled, his silver hair hanging over his face. "I'll handle this."

Handle this? There are at least eight armed thugs in there, not counting whatever backup might show up. The rational part of my brain screams to run, to protect my ship and crew. But my feet won't move.

A crash echoes from inside, followed by muffled shouts. My hand drifts to my blaster.

"Damn you, Davin," I whisper, the words catching in my throat. "You magnificent idiot."

The rain soaks through my jacket, but I barely notice the cold. All those little moments flash through my mind – the way he'd lean against the galley doorframe during late-night talks, how his eyes would soften when he thought I wasn't looking. Even the lies felt like half-truths, wrapped in genuine care.

My PerComm chirps. Rena's voice cuts through the patter of rain. "Jesse? Found something. It's bad."

"I know." My voice cracks. "But I can't—" Another crash from the warehouse. "I can't leave him."

"Leave who? What's happening?"

My heart clenches. He might be lying about his past, might have his own agenda, but no one fakes the way he stepped between me and danger. No one risks their life for a

mark like that.

"You better survive this," I mutter. "We have a lot to talk about."

"Jesse, the Port Authority is knocking. And they have backup. A lot of it."

The sound of gunfire from inside the warehouse snaps me back to reality. I press my PerComm closer to my mouth. "Stall them, Rena. Cover story twenty-three."

"The maintenance crew one? Jesse, there's at least six Port Authority ships out there."

"Perfect. More people to convince we're just a bunch of broke repair techs on vacation." My fingers tap against the wet wall. "Remember, we've never heard of any scientist. Par's already wiping Xander's quarters?"

"Started the second you called. Taluk's helping."

A bitter laugh escapes my throat. "Good. Make sure they see his clumsy act. Nothing sells 'harmless' like a Vakutan tripping over his own feet."

"And what about the hidden files?"

"Dump them into a secured drive and bury it in the cargo hold. Behind the spare converter should work." The rain plasters my hair to my face. "If they ask why we're planetside?—"

"Yeah, yeah. Needed to stretch our legs after that long haul. Already retrieving the fake chart history. Got it." She pauses. "But Jesse, what about?—"

"Tell them I'm at the market getting supplies. Also I simply can't get enough of antique shopping." Another burst of gunfire makes me flinch. "And Rena? You've

never seen a Kaleidian on this ship."

"What about the logs?"

"Wipe them. All of them. I don't care if you have to fry half our systems to do it." My free hand clenches into a fist. "Make us boring. Make us forgettable."

"On it, Cap." The sound of boots on metal comes through the comm. "They're boarding now."

"Show time. Don't forget to complain about the pay."

"Please. I was born ready to whine about money." The PerComm goes silent.

The bell chimes as I burst into Madame Liu's antique shop, my boots squeaking against the polished floor. The old woman looks up from her sweeping, her wrinkled face creasing with concern.

"Back so soon, dear?" I can hear the fear in her voice, and she peeks around me to see if I'm being followed.

"I need—" My lungs burn. "Something. Anything. Like we talked about earlier?"

Her dark eyes narrow, taking in my rain-soaked clothes and wild expression. Without a word, she disappears behind a curtain of wooden beads.

"Please hurry," I whisper, bouncing on my toes. My PerComm vibrates – another message from Rena. I ignore it.

Madame Liu emerges with a small cloth doll, its stitched smile slightly crooked. "This one speaks to you, I think. Very old Earth design. Handmade."

"Perfect." I fumble with my credit chip. "How much?"

She presses the doll into my hands. "For my favorite customer? Consider it a gift."

"I can't?—"

"Take it." Her fingers close around mine. "And whatever trouble you're in, child? Be careful."

I stuff the doll into my jacket pocket and sprint three blocks to the market district. The vegetable stalls blur past until I spot one with a bored-looking vendor.

"Give me whatever's in season," I say, slapping my credit chip on the counter. "Enough for a crew of five."

The vendor raises an eyebrow ridge. "That's... quite vague."

"Surprise me. Just make it look like I've been shopping all morning."

He loads a bag with purple tubers, something leafy and green, and what might be carrots if carrots were blue. I grab it and turn to leave.

"Your change?—"

"Keep it."

My boots slip on the wet pavement, sending me sprawling. The produce spills across the ground, a purple tuber rolling into a puddle. The doll in my pocket digs into my hip as I scramble up, snatching what I can salvage back into the bag.

It takes everything in me to calm my breathing.

The landing pad looms ahead, my ship's silver hull gleaming under the port lights. Two Authority cruisers block the main approach, their running lights cutting red swaths through the rain.

An officer steps into my path, hand raised. "Ma'am, this area is?—"

A massive furry form shoulders past him. "Captain! You got the spices!" Paraxan's whiskers twitch as he grabs the grocery bag. "Perfect timing. The stew's almost ready."

"Par, I told you not to cook without?—"

"Everyone loves my cooking." He wraps one arm around my shoulders, steering me toward the ship. "Even found my special seasoning blend this morning. Been aging it in the cargo hold."

The officer clears his throat. "Sir, we're conducting an investigation?—"

"Investigation?" Paraxan's ears perk up. "Oh, you must be here about the converter! Told the boss it needed replacing months ago, but you know how cheap these private operators are." He leans closer to the officer, dropping his voice. "Between us? The pay's terrible. But the food allowance..." He pats his round belly.

"Actually, we're?—"

"Speaking of food!" I pipe up, forcing a smile. "That stew won't cook itself. Right, Par?"

"Right, right." He guides me up the ramp, still chattering. "Did you get those purple things? The ones that taste like Earth potatoes? Last batch was stringy, but if you boil them just right..."

The ramp hisses shut behind us, cutting off the officer's protests.

The cargo hold's door slides open, revealing two Port Authority officers looming over Rena and Taluk. Three more officers are scattered around, one hanging upside down in an access shaft while another pries open panels with suspicious precision.

"What's going on here?" I drop my shopping bag, letting a few tubers roll across the floor. Taluk stumbles, nearly tripping as he bends to pick them up.

"Sorry, Cap," he mumbles. "They just started?—"

"Ma'am." The taller officer steps forward, his badge reading 'Waxan.' "We have reason to believe this vessel is involved in illegal smuggling operations."

I press a hand to my chest, letting out a sharp laugh. "Smuggling? Us?" My eyes drift to where Rena stands, arms crossed. "We can barely afford fuel most days."

"Then perhaps you'd like to explain these discrepancies in your maintenance logs?" The second officer waves a datapad. "Three stops in the past month at unregistered ports."

"Unregistered?" I snatch the pad, scrolling through. "Those are independent colonies. They can't afford Alliance certification, but their cash spends just fine." I toss it back. "Look, we're not exactly premium contractors here. We go where the work is."

"And where the oversight isn't."

"Because we sometimes skip the environmental impact forms?" I roll my eyes. "Yeah, guilty. Sue us. But smuggling? That's..." I gesture at Taluk, who's managed to spill half the groceries again. "Have you seen my crew?"

Par chooses that moment to sneeze, sending fur floating everywhere. The officer in the access shaft yelps, losing his grip.

"We're a budget operation," I continue. "Cut-rate parts, long hours, terrible pay. Ask anyone." I spread my arms. "But smuggling? That's crossing a line. We're just trying to make a living here."

"Then you won't mind if we continue our search?"

My fingers twitch toward the doll in my pocket. "Fine. But you're paying for any panels you break. And keep your hands off my private quarters – a girl's got to have some secrets."

An explosion rocks through the port, rattling the ship's hull. My bones vibrate with the force of it, and for a second, I can't breathe.

Waxan's PerComm lights up with urgent chatter. "All units respond. Explosion at Warehouse Seven. Possible terrorist activity."

"Sir!" One of the officers rushes up from the cargo hold. "They're calling everyone in."

"Stay put." Waxan jabs a finger at me. "We're not done here. We have your registration codes. If this ship moves one inch, you'll all be in prison by dinner."

The officers sprint down the ramp. Through the viewport, I watch their cruisers lift off, emergency lights painting the rain red and blue.

My legs give out. I grab the nearest wall, my fingers finding the grooves between panels.

"Jesse?" Rena's voice sounds far away. "Jesse, what was that?"

I sit stunned, my only hope left that this snake of a bounty hunter was slick enough to get out of this one too.

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CHAPTER 12

DAVIN

I watch Jesse's red hair disappear through the window, my chest tightening. The catwalk creaks under my boots as I shift position, peering down at the scene below. Xander sits in a metal chair, gesturing animatedly to the crime boss.

"The dispersal system is nearly perfect," Xander says. "Once it's weaponized, you'll be able to target specific genetic markers. Anything from weeding to pest control to-"

"Pest control," the boss chuckles. "I like the sound of that."

My finger traces the trigger of my rifle. From this angle, it'd be clean – one shot through that brilliant mind of his. The Alliance's bounty specified alive, but right now, dead seems more appealing. The less people who know about this weapon, the better.

I adjust my scope, centering it on Xander's temple. The scientist keeps talking, explaining complex terms to simple criminals who probably can't spell 'genocide.' The irony would be funny if it weren't so dangerous.

"You really think you can pull this off?" The boss's skepticism mirrors my own thoughts.

"Please." Xander pushes his glasses up his nose. "I know what I'm doing. I just needed more time to perfect it. Something my contacts were offering me, but I like

yours much better."

My jaw clenches. The bounty's not worth it – not if the Alliance gets their hands on this. They'd use it just as readily as these thugs. Sometimes the right thing means walking away empty-handed.

I steady my breathing, preparing for the shot. Three guards, all armed. I'll have about two seconds after taking out Xander before they pinpoint my location. The window Jesse used is fifteen feet behind me. Doable.

A guard shifts, blocking my shot. I curse under my breath, waiting for him to move. Below, Xander continues outlining his plans for mass murder, wrapped in the sterile language of science.

One of the guards sneezes, echoing through the warehouse, followed by a sharp intake of breath. Our eyes lock. His hand drops to his weapon.

"Shit."

I roll left as bullets spark against the catwalk's metal railing. The whole structure shudders under my feet as I sprint toward the far end. More shots ping around me, forcing me to zigzag.

"Up there! Don't let him escape!"

My boots thunder across the grating. A bullet grazes my shoulder, burning through fabric and skin. The pain barely registers – I've had worse during basic training.

"Get Xander out of here!" the boss bellows.

Below, chairs scrape against concrete. I risk a glance down to see them shoving

Xander toward a side door. One of the guards slams his palm against a red button on the wall. An alarm wails through the warehouse.

"Really?" I mutter, vaulting over a stack of crates. "Like this wasn't complicated enough."

Heavy boots pound up metal stairs at both ends of the catwalk. More guards pour in through the main entrance, their weapons trained upward. I'm running out of options and space.

"Surround him!"

The catwalk trembles as bodies converge from both directions. I count eight new guards, plus the original three. Not great odds, even for me.

A bullet whizzes past my ear. I duck behind a support beam. The old saying from my drill sergeant rings in my head: "When outnumbered, change the rules of engagement."

I glance at the chain supporting this section of catwalk, then at the crowd of guards below. Sometimes the best way out is down.

"Here's hoping Jesse forgives me for this mess," I mutter, taking aim at the chain's weak point.

My shot rings true, striking the chain's weakest link. Metal shrieks against metal as the catwalk lurches. Gravity takes hold, and I sprint forward, using the falling bridge's momentum to launch myself toward a stack of crates.

"Look out below!" I call out, because I'm just that kind of asshole.

The catwalk crashes down with a thunderous boom. Two guards disappear beneath the twisted metal, their screams cut short. Dust billows up, coating my throat. I roll behind the crates as bullets pepper the area where I landed.

A guard rushes my position, combat knife drawn. Amateur move. I grab his wrist, twisting until bones crack. His knife clatters to the ground.

"Thanks for the gift," I say, snatching up the blade.

He swings wildly with his other hand. I duck under the punch, driving the knife up through his ribcage. Hot blood spills over my fingers as he goes limp.

"Behind you!" another guard shouts.

I spin, using the dying man as a shield. Bullets thud into his back as I draw my own knife with my free hand. The blade whistles through the air, embedding itself in the shooter's throat. He drops his gun, hands clutching uselessly at the steel protruding from his neck.

"Seven left," I mutter, letting the dead guard slide to the floor. "Time to even these odds a bit more."

Gunfire erupts from multiple directions, forcing me back behind the crates. The warehouse echoes with shouted orders and pounding boots. They're trying to flank me, but they're disorganized. Scared. Two quick deaths will do that to green recruits.

I wipe blood from my hands onto my pants, retrieving my thrown knife from the guard's cooling body. The familiar weight settles comfortably in my palm.

"Spread out!" one of them barks. "Don't let him slip away!"

I slip between the shadows of fallen debris, tracking movement through the settling dust. Two guards break from their group, heading toward my last known position. Rookies.

"Check behind those crates," one whispers. "I'll cover you."

I slide the knife between my teeth, tasting metal. The closest guard's breath comes in sharp bursts – fear making his movements jerky, unpredictable. His partner keeps his gun trained forward, completely missing my approach from the side.

My hand clamps over the rear guard's mouth. The knife finds the soft spot under his ear, silencing any warning he might have given. I ease his body to the ground, boots scraping concrete.

"Marco?" The remaining guard turns. "Did you hear some-"

I surge forward, driving my shoulder into his chest. His gun clatters away as we hit the ground. He opens his mouth to scream. My fist connects with his throat, crushing his windpipe. He thrashes once, twice, then goes still.

"Thanks for the dance," I mutter, retrieving his weapon. Standard issue Alliance sidearm – decent enough.

The door where they took Xander looms ahead, reinforced steel with an electronic lock. Nothing military grade, but enough to slow down most people. Lucky for me, I'm not most people.

I wedge my knife into the control panel's seam, prying off the cover. The wiring inside is basic – red to blue, cross the green, and... The lock clicks open with a soft beep.

Inside, Xander huddles in the corner like a frightened rabbit. The boss lounges against a desk, oddly relaxed for someone whose men I just eliminated.

"I knew there was something off about you." Xander's voice cracks. "The way you watched me on the ship, how you always seemed to be wherever I went. Should've trusted my instincts."

"Your instincts?" I keep my stolen gun trained on the boss. "Those same instincts that told you genetic weapons were a good career move?"

"Now, now." The boss pushes off from the desk, hands raised. "Let's be civil about this. Those men out there? Useless, every last one. Couldn't even handle a single intruder properly." He starts a slow clap. "Impressive work, truly. The way you dropped that catwalk?" He motions with his fingers against his lips, making a kissing sound, and flourishes his hand in the air. "Beautiful. Never seen anything like it."

"Thanks for the performance review." My finger tightens on the trigger. "But I didn't come here for compliments."

"Of course not." He grins, still clapping. "You came for him." He jerks his head toward Xander. "And after that display, I'd say you've earned him. And more."

I let out a chuckle, moving closer to the boss, gun aimed between his eyes. "I doubt you'd like the sort of reward I have in mind."

"Think about it." The boss spreads his arms wide. "You've got talent. Real talent. The kind that could take you places in an organization like mine. Fastest growing syndicate on Glimner. We've already done away with Talipa and her crew. And we're just getting started."

He reaches into his coat and retrieves a cigar, which he holds out to me. "Whatever

the Alliance is paying for this sniveling genius, I'll double it."

"Not interested." My grip tightens on the gun.

"Triple it then." He takes a step forward. "Come on, friend. You're clearly not Alliance – too much style. Too much..." He waves his hand, searching for the word. "Panache. We're expanding faster than any syndicate in Glimmer's history. The money's good, the benefits are better, and the retirement plan?" He taps his temple. "Can't beat it."

"There's not enough money in Glimmer's entire economy to make up for what he wants to do." I jerk my chin toward Xander, who's still cowering in the corner. "Mass murder wrapped in scientific jargon is still mass murder."

"Such principles." The boss clicks his tongue. "That's really quite..." His hand moves, quick as a snake. "...a pity."

The gun appears in his grip like a magic trick. But he's not aiming at me – he's pointing at something behind my shoulder. I spin, catching sight of the industrial tanks lining the wall. Warning labels flash red and yellow.

"Shit-"

The muzzle flash blinds me. Glass shatters. Heat slams into me like a physical wall, lifting me off my feet. The world turns orange, then red, then black. The last thing I hear is Xander's startled yelp and the boss's low chuckle before everything dissolves into darkness.

CHAPTER 13

JESSE

The neon signs blur together as I walk through the crowded streets. Another silver-haired man catches my eye, but it's just another Kaleidian tourist. My heart sinks for the hundredth time this week.

"You need to stop doing this to yourself," Rena's voice crackles through my PerComm. "Come back to the ship."

"I can't. Not yet." The words catch in my throat. "He has to be out there somewhere."

"Jesse..."

"Don't. Please." I switch off the PerComm, letting the city noise wash over me instead.

A couple laughs as they pass, the man's deep chuckle hitting me like a punch to the gut. For a split second, it sounds just like him. I spin around, but they're already disappearing into the crowd.

The rain starts, a light drizzle that makes the neon reflect off the wet pavement. My boots splash through a puddle as I duck under an awning. This is just like where we kissed, pressed against the wall, his hands tangled in my hair. The memory burns.

A flash of blue skin in my peripheral vision makes my breath catch. I push off the

wall, shoving past people, muttering apologies. But when I reach the corner, there's no one there who could be him.

"Excuse me, miss?" A street vendor waves me over. "You look like you could use some tea."

"Thanks, but I'm not-" The words die as I spot someone tall with silver hair across the street, walking away. My heart races. "Sorry, I have to-"

I dart between hovercars, ignoring the angry honks. But when I reach the other side, he's gone. Like smoke. Like he was never there at all.

My PerComm buzzes again. This time it's Taluk.

"Captain, we need you back here. There's a potential job."

I lean against a storefront, feeling dizzy while watching the crowds pass by. Every other person seems to have his height, his build, his coloring. But none of them are him.

"I'll be there soon," I say. Reluctantly, with a pit of nausea sitting in my stomach, I let my feet move forward towards the port. Somehow, I know this will be the last time.

The port authority car sits outside my ship like an unwelcome guest that's overstayed its welcome. My boots clang against the ramp as I march up, not bothering to hide my irritation.

Inside, Officer Marrow stands in my cargo hold, datapad in hand. Again.

"You know, if you're going to keep visiting, I should start charging rent."

He looks up, his cybernetic eye whirring. "Captain."

"Three weeks. You've torn apart my ship twelve times. My crew's eating protein paste while you lot play detective." I cross my arms. "What exactly are you hoping to find on search thirteen?"

"We have probable cause-"

"Had. Past tense. Your probable cause went up in smoke with that warehouse." My voice catches on the last word. "Along with..."

Marrow's organic eye softens. "I understand this has been difficult-"

"No, you don't understand. You're bleeding us dry. My accounts are frozen, my reputation's shot, and you've found exactly nothing because there is nothing to find."

"The data-"

"If this doctor or scientist or whatever uploaded anything to my systems, your tech team would have found it by now. Instead, you're standing here, fishing for something that doesn't exist."

Marrow sighs, lowering his datapad. "You're right."

"I'm- what?"

"We've exhausted all reasonable avenues of investigation. Without concrete evidence, we can't justify holding you here any longer." He taps his screen. "I'm officially closing the case. Your accounts will be unfrozen within twenty hours."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. You're free to go, Captain. But I suggest you don't come back." He pauses at the cargo bay door.

The words hit like a physical blow, but I keep my face neutral until he's gone.

Taluk's red scales catch the dim cargo bay light as he approaches, datapad clutched in his hands. "Captain, I might have something."

"Not now, Taluk." My fingers press against my temples.

"It's a good one. Contact I found here wants specialized cargo moved to Gur. Far from here, far from..." He trails off, his dark eyes darting to where Officer Marrow just stood.

"Gur?" The word catches in my throat. That's halfway across the Athenaverse. "How much?"

"Enough to refuel three times over and still have plenty left." His scales ripple with excitement. "I can handle the details. You won't have to-"

"Fine." The word comes out sharper than intended. "Just... make it happen."

His mouth opens, closes, opens again. "Really?"

"You've earned it." My hand lands on his shoulder. "Don't make me regret this."

He practically bounces as he heads to the comm room, already tapping at his datapad. I drag myself up to the cockpit where Rena sits, her boots propped on the console as she stares out at the starport.

"Heard Marrow finally gave up," she says without turning.

I sink into the co-pilot's seat. "Yeah."

"Good riddance."

"Is it?" The words tumble out before I can stop them. "At least while they were searching, there was a chance they'd find something. Some clue about what happened to--"

"Jesse." Rena's voice is gentle but firm. "He's gone."

"I know." The tears I've been holding back all day threaten to spill. "I know that. I just... I can't..."

Rena's arms wrap around me, and I finally let go. The sobs wrack my body as she holds me, not saying anything, just being there like she has been since this whole nightmare started.

"Taluk found us a job," I manage between breaths. "Transporting cargo to Gur."

"That's good. We need the distance." She pulls back, wiping my cheeks with her thumb. "And you need to stop looking for ghosts."

Rena pulls away, settling back into her pilot's chair. "I just don't get it, Jess. You knew him for what, three weeks?"

My fingers trace the edge of the console, following the worn grooves. "Two and a half."

"And he lied to us the entire time." She crosses her arms. "For all we know, everything was an act."

The memory of his lips on mine in that rain-soaked alley floods back. The way his hands trembled when he pulled me close. How his breath caught when I whispered his name.

"It wasn't an act." The words come out barely above a whisper. "There was something there. Something real. Like we were always meant to..."

"Oh honey." Rena's voice softens. "I get it. Remember when I told you about Kex? That mechanic from my Academy days?"

"The one with the sleeve tattoos?"

"Yeah. Thought he was my soulmate after two dates. Turned out he was selling test answers to first-years." She leans forward. "Sometimes the heart sees what it wants to see."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. She means well, but she doesn't understand. This wasn't some teenage crush or hormone-driven attraction. The connection between Davin and me had felt fundamental, like gravity or the laws of physics. Something ancient and inevitable.

"You're right," I lie, forcing a smile. "I'm being ridiculous."

Rena squeezes my hand. "Time and distance. That's all you need."

I squeeze back, swallowing the truth that burns in my throat. Distance won't matter. Time won't heal this. How do you explain to someone that losing him feels like losing a part of yourself you never knew was missing until you found it?

The metallic thunk of crates hitting the cargo hold floor echoes through the ship. Taluk's scales glisten with sweat as he hefts another box labeled "Premium Canned

Goods - Gur Distribution."

My fingers twitch toward the crate's seal. Just one peek...

"Something wrong with the manifest?" Paraxan's gravelly voice makes me jump.

"No, just..." The room spins slightly. "Making sure everything's secure."

"I can double-check the straps," Taluk offers, his dark eyes studying me.

"That's not-" The cargo hold tilts. I grab the nearest support beam. "I mean, yes. Please do."

Paraxan's fur bristles. "You look unwell, Captain."

"I'm fine." The words come out sharper than intended. The memory of Xander's hidden data files burns in my mind, along with the weeks of interrogations that followed.

"Perhaps some of my special tea?" Paraxan suggests.

My stomach lurches at the thought of his fur-seasoned brew. "Thanks, but I think I just need to lie down for a bit."

"We've got this covered," Taluk says, already securing another crate. "Right, Paraxan?"

The Odex nods, whiskers twitching. "Rest well, Captain."

I make it to my quarters before the dizziness overwhelms me. The room that used to feel like home now seems too big, too empty. I collapse onto my bunk, pressing my

face into the pillow that still smells faintly of him.

My PerComm chirps with a message from Rena: "Pre-flight checks in two hours. Need anything?"

I tap back a quick "no" and shut my eyes against the spinning ceiling, trying not to think about what might be in those crates, or about silver hair and blue skin, or about anything at all.

My stomach lurches as the ship makes another minor course correction. I've been spacesick before, but this feels different. Deeper. Like my insides are trying to become my outsides.

"You look like death warmed over," Rena says from the pilot's seat. "And you've been looking progressively worse since we left Glimner two weeks ago."

I swallow hard against another wave of nausea. "Thanks for that stunning observation."

"No, I mean it. Maybe you picked something up there? That rain-soaked alley wasn't exactly sanitary."

The mention of the alley sends my mind spinning back to that kiss, to his hands, to that night when...

My eyes snap wide. "What's the date?"

"What?"

"The date, Rena. What's today's date?"

She checks her PerComm. "The fifteenth. Why-"

I'm already stumbling out of my chair before she finishes, my heart thundering in my chest. The corridor tilts as I make my way to the supply closet, counting backwards in my head.

The medkit's exactly where it should be, third shelf from the bottom. My trembling fingers fumble with the latch until it springs open. There, nestled between bandages and pain patches, sits the small white diagnostic stick.

One drop of blood. That's all it needs.

The prick barely registers through the adrenaline flooding my system. Three seconds feel like three years as the indicator light blinks.

Then it turns blue.

Positive.

The stick clatters to the floor as my knees give out. I press my hand against my still-flat stomach, where a tiny piece of him is growing inside me.

"Jesse?" Rena calls from down the hall. "You okay?"

I can't answer. Can't breathe. Can't process what this means.

A baby. His baby. Our baby.

CHAPTER 14

JESSE

Leo's silver hair catches the artificial sunlight streaming through the station's dome as he toddles across our small garden patch. My heart clenches – he looks more like his father every day.

"Mama, look!" He holds up a fistful of hydroponically grown daisies, roots and all.

"Those were supposed to stay in the dirt, sweetie." I crouch down, helping him replant them. His tiny blue hands pat the soil with surprising gentleness.

My PerComm buzzes. Rena's smiling face fills the screen. "Ready for visitors?"

"Always. Though you caught us destroying the garden again."

"That's my nephew. Breaking things runs in the family."

Leo perks up at her voice. "Auntie Rena!"

"Hey troublemaker. Save some chaos for when I get there."

I brush dirt from Leo's overalls. "How long are you planetside?"

"Few days. Got a quiet run lined up after. Nothing exciting." The unspoken message is clear – no jobs that might draw attention. "Though I did bring something that might

interest you."

"If it's another toy ship, his room's already a fleet."

"Better. Remember that Odex tea blend you loved? Found some on Novaria."

My nose wrinkles. "The stuff that smells like wet fur?"

"The very same. See you in twenty?"

"We'll be here." Where we've been for the past three years. Safe. Hidden. Boring.

I watch Leo arrange his rescued daisies in a crooked line. He has Davin's careful precision, even at two and a half. Sometimes I catch him staring at the stars with that same intensity his father had.

The garden dome's climate controls hum steadily overhead. Everything here is regulated, predictable, secure. It's what Leo needs. What I need.

But some nights, when the station's artificial day cycle dims and Leo's asleep, I still feel the pull of open space. The thrill of outrunning patrol ships. The rush of a successful job.

The memory of silver hair and blue skin under starlight.

Sometimes I think about the way I was raised: always on a ship, surrounded by my father's crew who all raised me like one of their own. I was always in danger. Sometimes they even used me as a distraction! After all, what sort of dangerous smugglers would keep an adorable seven year old on board?

Obviously we were up to no good.

When I find myself missing those days, I wonder why I can't see myself raising Leo the same way. Then I remember.

Mom and Dad ran their crew together. They never thought twice about having me in their world because their world never blew up in their faces.

No, it's better like this. It's better for Leo.

I shake off the thought as Leo tugs my sleeve. "Mama, hungry."

"Let's get cleaned up before Auntie Rena arrives. Race you to the bathroom?"

His delighted shriek echoes through our small home as he runs ahead, leaving a trail of dirt in his wake.

Leo sprawls on the floor, making whooshing noises as he pilots his new toy ship through imaginary asteroid fields. Rena settles next to me on the couch, kicking off her boots.

"You wouldn't believe who applied for the navigator position last week." She takes a long sip of the Odex tea. "A Thraxian who couldn't tell port from starboard."

"You're joking."

"Wish I was. Nearly crashed us into the docking bay during the test run."

I pull my legs under me, getting comfortable. "What about that Kaleidian you mentioned?"

"Too rigid. Kept quoting Alliance protocols." She rolls her eyes. "We need someone who can think on their feet when patrols show up."

"Like that time you reversed our engine signature mid-jump?"

"Exactly. Though I'd rather not have to do that again. Pretty sure I singed off my eyebrows."

Leo crashes his ship into the coffee table with an explosive sound effect. I wince at the bang.

"The crew misses you," Rena says softly. "Especially Paraxan. Says the food's gone downhill since you left."

"That's because no one else will put up with his picky eating habits." I watch Leo right his ship, checking for damage. "How is the old grump?"

"Still complaining about his back. Still refusing to retire." She leans forward. "You know, good navigators are hard to find, and the captain's chair feels a little too big sometimes."

My chest tightens. "Rena..."

"Just saying. The option's there." She gestures around our little home. "This isn't you, Jess. Never has been."

"It has to be now." I nod toward Leo, who's now having an animated conversation with his toy ship. "I can't risk it. Not with him."

Rena's shoulders slump, but she doesn't push. She knows better. Instead, she launches into a story about their latest close call with customs, and I let myself get lost in tales of the life I left behind.

The sun cycle dims, signaling evening on the station. Leo's crashed on the floor,

surrounded by toy ships and spare parts he's collected from who knows where. My son, already showing signs of being a proper spacer.

Rena checks her PerComm and stretches. "Should head back. Ship won't captain itself."

"You could stay the night. Leo would love having breakfast with his favorite aunt."

"Can't. Got that run tomorrow." She hesitates, glancing at Leo. Her fingers tap against her thigh – a tell she's had since I've known her. Something's up.

"Hey kid," I say. "Why don't you go watch that new holo-vid about the space whales? The one Auntie Rena brought?"

Leo's head snaps up. "The glowy ones?"

"Yeah, those." I ruffle his silver hair. "Go on. Grown-up talk time."

He scrambles to his feet, gathering his favorite ship. "Can I have snacks?"

"One packet." I watch him dash off, his footsteps echoing down the hall.

"You know he's going to take two," Rena says with a smirk.

"That's why I said just one."

The door to his room slides shut with a soft hiss. Rena's still doing that nervous tapping thing.

"Okay, spill it." I lean forward. "What's got you wound tighter than a faulty grav generator?"

She won't meet my eyes. That's new – Rena always faces things head-on. My stomach churns.

"What's the big deal, Rena?"

Rena picks at an invisible thread on her sleeve. "Might be nothing, but I ran into Jovan on Novaria."

"How's our favorite information broker? Still charging credits just to say hello?"

"Actually bought me a drink this time." She shifts on the couch. "Had some decent leads. Cargo runs, mostly legal-adjacent stuff."

"But?"

"Someone's been asking about you. A merc."

The air leaves my lungs. I force myself to breathe normally. "What kind of questions?"

"The usual. Where you might be, your usual haunts. Jovan didn't get much else – not even a species description." She touches my arm. "Like I said, could be nothing. Old business catching up, maybe someone from the Xander mess."

My hands curl into fists. "Did Jovan say when?"

"Started about a week ago. Jesse..." She pauses, choosing her words carefully. "You've got backup if you need it. We could move you somewhere else, set up new idents-"

"I'm fine." The words come out sharper than intended. "Really. Probably just

someone following old leads. It happens."

"You sure? Because I can-"

"It's fine." I stand, plastering on a smile. "You should get going if you want to make that run tomorrow."

Rena's expression says she's not buying it, but she knows me well enough not to push. She pulls on her boots, pausing at the door.

"You need anything – anything at all – you call. Got it?"

"Got it. Now go captain your ship."

I watch her walk down the station's corridor until she disappears around the corner. Only then do I let my hands shake.

My hands won't stop trembling as I lock the front door. Three times. Then check it again. The familiar click-hiss should be reassuring, but it's not enough. Nothing feels like enough right now.

I press my forehead against the cool metal. A merc asking questions. Could be anyone from my past – that botched run on Imas, the classified data we "relocated" from the military base, or hell, even something from Mom and Dad's old jobs. Ghosts have long memories in this business.

Leo's delighted laugh echoes down the hallway, pulling me back to the present. Right. Focus on what matters.

I find him sprawled on his bed, eyes wide as luminescent space whales dance across his ceiling. He's already changed into his favorite pajamas – the ones with little

spaceships that match his toy collection.

"Room for one more?"

"Mama, look!" He points at a particularly massive whale gliding overhead. "It's bigger than our whole house!"

"Sure is." I settle beside him, and he immediately curls into my side. His hair tickles my chin. "Did you know real space whales can swallow entire ships?"

"Really?" He's so smart for his age. I figured it must be the Kaleidian in him, human children don't grow up and speak so maturely this young.

"Mmhhh. Your grandpa once had to outrun one. Way, way out past charted space"

"Tell that story!"

"Another time, sweetie. Let's watch these ones first."

The holo casts soft blue light across his room as the whales swim through star clusters. Leo's breathing slowly evens out, but his grip on his ship stays firm. Just like his father – always alert, even in sleep.

I run my fingers through his hair, memorizing the weight of him against me. Whatever's coming, whoever's asking questions, they're not getting anywhere near my son.

The largest whale passes directly overhead, its bioluminescent patterns pulsing like a heartbeat. Leo mumbles something about flying with them someday.

"Maybe you will, little one," I whisper. "But for now, you're staying right here with

me."

CHAPTER 15

JESSE

"Taking some time off," I say, dropping the wrench into the toolbox with a clang. "Family emergency."

Mako wipes his hands on an already-grimy cloth. "How long we talking here?"

"Couple weeks, maybe less."

His antennae twitch – never a good sign. "You're my best mechanic, Jesse. That freighter's coming in next week, and-"

"And Sira can handle it. She's been shadowing me for months."

"She's green."

"She'll do fine." I shoulder my bag. "Unless you're planning to chain me to the shop?"

He sighs, antennae drooping. "You know I wouldn't. Just... come back, okay? Station's not exactly swimming in mechanics who can rewire a hyperdrive blindfolded."

The walk home takes longer than usual. Something prickles at the back of my neck – that old familiar sensation from my smuggling days. I duck into Vendor's Row, weaving between the market stalls. The scent of spiced meat and engine oil mingles

in the recycled air.

A quick glance in a polished display panel shows nothing but the usual crowd behind me. Still, the feeling persists.

I take three random turns, double back twice. The routines Dad drilled into my head as a kid come flooding back. Check your six, vary your pattern, look for the gaps in the crowd.

The station's security cameras sweep across the corridor. I count the seconds between rotations – four, three, two... There. I slip through a maintenance hatch, into the service tunnels that run parallel to the main corridors.

The sensation follows.

My steps barely make a sound on the metal grating. Another turn, another backtrack. Still nothing visible, but...

The market's bustle fades to a distant hum. Just me and the pipes and that crawling feeling between my shoulder blades.

Time to get Leo and put this station in our rear-view mirror.

The door slides open to my small apartment, and Leo barrels into my arms. "Mama!"

"Hey, spacer." I scoop him up, breathing in the scent of finger paint and that generic station-issue shampoo. "Had fun with Ms. Petra?"

"We made rockets!" He squirms down and races to show me a collection of paper constructions on the kitchen counter.

Petra rises from the couch, her dark eyes studying me. "Everything alright? You're home early."

"Just fine." I dig out her payment chip. "Family thing came up. We'll be gone a couple weeks."

She takes the chip but doesn't pocket it. "Jesse... if you need help-"

"Really, it's nothing." I force a smile. "Thanks for watching him today. And all the other days."

"Mama, can I show Sera my rockets before we go?" Leo tugs at my sleeve. "Please?"

My throat tightens. "Not this time, buddy. We need to pack."

"But why not? She's just down the hall!"

"Because..." I kneel down, meeting those green eyes that mirror my own. "Remember how we talked about adventures? This is going to be a special one, just you and me."

"Can Sera come on the adventure?"

Petra's hand squeezes my shoulder. "I'll see myself out. Be safe, okay?"

I manage a nod as she leaves. Leo's lower lip trembles.

"What about my school? And my rockets?"

"Everything will be right here when we get back." I brush a strand of hair from his face. "Your rockets, your school, Sera – they're not going anywhere."

Leo's fingers twist in the hem of his shirt. "Promise?"

"Cross my heart." I make the gesture, just like Mom used to do for me. "Think of it like... remember when we watched that documentary about space explorers? Sometimes they'd go away for a while, but they always came back home."

"With cool stories?"

"The coolest." I tap his nose. "Now, what do you think an explorer needs to pack?"

His face scrunches in thought. "Um... socks?"

"Definitely socks. What else?"

"My star projector!" He dashes to his room, returning with the battered device that turns his ceiling into a galaxy every night. "And Rex!"

"Rex is a must." I help him tuck the stuffed dinosaur into his backpack. "How about we play a game? First one to pack five things wins."

"What do I win?"

"Extra dessert at our first stop."

His eyes light up. "Deal!"

Leo zooms around the apartment, gathering his treasures while I slip essential documents into hidden compartments in our bags. He chatters about each item – his favorite shirt because it has rockets, the data pad with his games, the blanket from Aunt Rena.

"That's five!" He bounces on his toes. "I win!"

"You sure did, spacer." I ruffle his hair. "Want to help me pick my five things?"

"The blue sweater," he says immediately. "It's soft for hugging."

My chest tightens. Even on the run, he's thinking about hugs. "Blue sweater it is."

We work together, his small hands helping fold clothes and sort supplies. He doesn't question why I'm packing more than just five things, or why I keep checking the door.

"Are we going with Auntie Rena?" he asks while putting on his backpack.

I bite my lip. While that might have been the easy way, anyone who's gathering intel on me will certainly be checking on my old crew too. Better not to bring the danger to everyone I love.

"Afraid not, honey. Auntie Rena has a lot of work to do right now. But we'll see her and the others again soon."

I put on my own backpack and sigh turning off the lights and saying a temporary goodbye to my home of three years. The most stationary place I've ever lived in.

"Ready for our adventure?" I squeeze Leo's small hand as we step into the corridor.

"Wait!" He tugs me back. "Look at that, Mama!"

A maintenance bot scuttles across the ceiling, its spindly legs clicking against the metal. Any other day, I'd let him watch it work – he loves anything mechanical – but right now every second feels like a countdown.

"We can watch the bots another time, honey. Come on."

Three steps later: "Mama, the stars are different!"

He points at the massive viewport spanning the station's curve. The eternal dance of stars and ships glitters against the black, and yes, the configuration has shifted since yesterday. My pulse quickens. We need to move.

"That's because the station rotates, remember? Like your star projector." I gentle him forward. "Let's play a game. Who can walk the quietest?"

"Me!" He tip-toes exaggeratedly, making more noise than his normal walk.

A shadow moves at the end of the corridor. My grip on Leo's hand tightens.

"Ooh, a butterfly!" He stops dead, watching an escaped pet flit past.

"Leo, please." The words come out sharper than intended. I soften my voice. "We don't want to miss our ride."

"But it's pretty. Can we catch it?"

"Not today, spacer." I scoop him up, settling him on my hip despite his protests. "Remember what explorers do when they're on a mission?"

He wraps his arms around my neck. "Stay focused!"

"That's right. And what's our mission?"

"To have the best adventure ever!"

My throat constricts. If only he knew we're running from something far scarier than his imaginary space monsters. I press a kiss to his temple and quicken my pace, praying we make it to the docking bay before whoever's hunting us catches up.

My heart slams against my ribs as a massive figure steps out from behind a support column, blocking our path to the docking bay. The black coat he wears sweeps the floor, and for a moment the corridor spins, my vision blurring at the edges.

"Hi!" Leo waves from my arms. "I like your coat. It's swooshy!"

The overhead lights catch silver hair, blue skin.

No.

It can't be.

Three years of thinking he died in that explosion, of raising our son alone, and now-

"What's your name?" Leo asks, squirming in my grip.

Those familiar eyes meet mine for just a fraction of a second before sliding to Leo. "I'm Tyren." His voice is exactly as I remember it, that deep rumble that used to make my stomach flip.

But something's wrong. Who the hell is Tyren? Why doe she look exactly like Davin, save a couple new scars?

My fingers dig into Leo's sides, probably too tight, but I can't seem to loosen my grip. The man I mourned stands before me, alive and well, using a false name with his own son.

Leo tilts his head. "That's a funny name. Are you blue everywhere? I am!"

"Leo," I manage to croak out, but my throat feels like it's closing up.

"Most Kaleidians are," Not-Tyren says, his lips quirking in that half-smile I used to dream about. "It's nice to meet you, Leo."

The way he says our son's name – my knees nearly buckle. Does he know? Has he been watching us? The questions swirl like a sandstorm in my mind, but all I can do is stand here, frozen, while my three-year-old chats with the ghost of his father.

"You need to come with me." His hand shifts, drawing back his coat to reveal the glint of a weapon at his hip. "Both of you."

My arms tighten around Leo. "Why?"

"Everything will become clear very soon." His voice carries that same commanding tone I remember from our missions together. But it's wrong somehow. "Let's not make this difficult."

"Are you taking us on our adventure?" Leo bounces in my arms, oblivious to the tension crackling between us. "Mama said we're going on a special trip!"

"Something like that." Not-Tyren's eyes never leave mine. "We have transport waiting."

A maintenance bot whirs past overhead, its clicking legs drawing Leo's attention. "Look, another one! This one's bigger!"

The split second Not-Tyren glances up is all I need. I spin on my heel and bolt down the service corridor, Leo's startled yelp echoing off the metal walls.

"Hold tight, baby." I duck through a narrow gap between pipes, hearing heavy footsteps behind us.

"But the nice blue man-"

"Not nice." The words come out between pants as I navigate the maze of maintenance tunnels. "Very not nice."

A shout rings out behind us: "You think you can run from me?"

I slam my palm against an access panel, and a blast door hisses shut between us. Through the small window, I catch one last glimpse of his face – those eyes I used to trust now dark with something I can't read.

"Mama?" Leo's voice trembles. "I'm scared."

"Don't be scared, spacer." I kiss his forehead, already moving again. "Remember what explorers do when they meet something scary?"

"Run away really fast?"

Despite everything, a laugh bubbles up. "That's right. And nobody runs faster than us."

CHAPTER 16

TYREN

The Boss' office reeks of cheap cigars and expensive cologne. I stand at attention, my military training kicking in despite the gaps in my memory.

"Tyren, you're my best man for this job." The Boss leans back in his leather chair, smoke curling around his face. "That smuggler I told you about, Jesse, she's got something we need. Data. Bioweapon schematics."

"Why now?" My head throbs. Every time I try to remember anything before three years ago, it's like hitting a wall.

"Because money's getting tight. Our usual shakedowns aren't turning profits. And when they suffer, we suffer, which makes them suffer more. That bioweapon was our ticket to the highlife. But Xander's dead, blown to bits in that explosion. The one you did everything to prevent. This is our last shot at getting those plans." He taps ash into a crystal tray. "Word is she's holed up on a remote station, playing house."

"And you're sure she has the data?"

"Has to be. Xander uploaded everything to her ship's computer before we grabbed him. Probably thought he was being clever, having a backup." The Boss slides a data chip across his desk. "Here's her last known location, credentials, everything you need."

I pocket the chip. Something doesn't sit right, but I can't place what. "Simple grab and bag?"

"Get creative if you have to, but I want her alive. She's the only one who might know where those files are hidden."

"Consider it done." I turn to leave, but he calls after me.

"Oh, and Tyren? Don't let that pretty face fool you. She's craftier than she looks. Real mind games, that one. And not afraid to use her pretty face either."

The corridor outside his office stretches long and empty. My boots echo against metal flooring as I head for the docking bay. A ship waits, sleek and dark, ready for immediate departure. The guard nods as I board, no questions asked. That's how things work in the Lightyear gang - do your job, keep your mouth shut.

As I break atmosphere, I study Jesse's file. Red hair, green eyes, known associates. But something about her image makes my chest tighten. Must be the headache again. They've gotten worse lately, along with these strange flashes of... something. Memories that don't feel like mine.

I punch the coordinates into the autopilot, before going back to Jesse's picture. This should be a straightforward job. So why does it feel like I'm missing something crucial?

I trace the scar tissue across my chest. The Boss saved my life that day. At least, that's what they tell me.

"You were a mess when we found you," The Doc had said while changing my bandages those first few weeks. "Third-degree burns, skull fracture. The explosion nearly killed you."

My fingers find the ridge where synthetic skin meets real flesh. "Lucky you boys were there."

"Lucky the Boss believes in loyalty." Doc's words echo in my memory. "Most would've left you for dead."

The gang spent a fortune on my recovery - reconstructive surgery, physical therapy, cognitive rehabilitation. A lifetime of memories, gone in an instant. But they gave me purpose, an identity. Tyren, their most effective enforcer.

"Your name's Tyren," the Boss had told me when I first woke up. "You're family."

The headaches spike whenever I try to remember anything before that day. Doc says it's normal, that traumatic brain injuries take time to heal. But sometimes...

I pull up Jesse's file again, studying her face. Something tugs at the edges of my consciousness, like a word stuck on the tip of my tongue.

"You're one of us now," the Boss reminded me during our weekly check-ins. "We take care of our own."

And they have. They gave me a home when I had nothing, not even memories. The least I can do is bring them what they need. This woman, this smuggler - she's just another job.

The headache intensifies. I close the file and press my palms against my eyes until stars burst behind my eyelids.

The throbbing in my skull becomes unbearable. I fumble through my pack for pain meds, dry-swallowing two tablets. The tiny cabin feels like it's spinning, so I stretch out on the narrow bunk.

Space debris pelts against the viewport, creating a rhythmic pattern that lulls me under. My consciousness drifts, and suddenly I'm in a dark alley. Water streams down my face, but I'm not cold. Heat radiates between two bodies pressed together.

Red hair slides through my fingers like silk. Green eyes, bright even in the darkness, stare up at me. Her breath catches as I push her against the wet brick wall. The scent of her skin fills my nose - sweet with a hint of engine grease.

She whispers against my mouth. Her fingers trace patterns on my chest, setting my nerves on fire.

I capture her lips, drinking in her taste. She wraps her legs around my waist, and I support her weight easily. Our clothes are soaked through, clinging to skin, but we don't care. Nothing exists except this moment, this woman, this burning need.

The dream shifts, fragments. Flashes of pale skin decorated with freckles. The sound of my name breathed like a prayer. The feeling of coming home.

I jolt awake, covered in sweat. The headache has dulled to a manageable ache, but my heart pounds against my ribs. The viewport shows we're still in hyperspace, stars streaking past in endless lines.

"Just a dream," I mutter, running a hand through my hair. Must be the isolation getting to me. Can't remember the last time I was with a woman.

But something about it felt so real. The way she said my name...

But that wasn't my name. What was it? The memory is fading, fast.

Probably for the best.

My PerComm flickers to life, casting a blue glow across my face in the dim cabin. Jesse's file expands into a network of connections, faces floating like ghostly markers in the holographic display.

A furry face catches my attention - Paraxan, an Odex. Something about those whiskers... A flash of memory: the smell of spiced meat, fur floating in soup. My stomach growls in response.

"Display crew manifest," I command, and more faces materialize.

Rena, the pilot. Blonde hair pulled back tight, expression no-nonsense even in her ID photo. The way she holds herself screams military training. A tickle of recognition makes my head throb. Had she been at the controls that day?

Taluk's photo shows a young Vakutan trying too hard to look tough. His red scales gleam under artificial light, but there's something off about his pose. Like he's playing a part.

"Cross-reference: explosion on Glimner, three years ago."

My PerComm chirps, pulling up news articles. Most mention Xander's death, but what caused it... no word. Investigation closed. No bodies found. They must have slipped away with the data while I lay burning in the wreckage.

The Boss was right. They're the key to everything. My fingers trace the scar on my chest as determination solidifies in my gut. Whatever games Jesse's playing, whatever tricks she has planned - I'll find those files.

The headache spikes again, but I ignore it. The mission is all that matters now.

I track Jesse from the shadows of the station's maintenance corridors. Her work

clothes are stained with grease, red hair tied back in a messy knot. She moves with purpose through the cramped streets, dodging vendors and avoiding eye contact.

My head pounds watching her. Something about the way she walks, the swing of her hips...

"Fresh bread!" A vendor's cry breaks my concentration. "Still warm!"

Jesse pauses at her apartment complex, an aging structure that's seen better days. The security panel beeps as she enters her code. I memorize the pattern of her fingers.

After she disappears inside, I find a shadowed alcove across the street. The wait stretches on, my muscles cramping from staying still. Just as I consider moving in, the door slides open.

Jesse emerges with a small boy clutching her hand. My breath catches. His skin is pale blue like mine, silver hair falling into eyes that match his mother's. He can't be more than three.

They turn down an alley - a shortcut to the transport hub. I circle around, cutting through a maintenance shaft to get ahead of them. The familiar weight of my stunner presses against my hip.

The alley opens into a small courtyard. Perfect. I step out of the shadows just as they round the corner.

Jesse freezes. The boy peers around her legs, curious. Her face drains of color as she takes me in, those green eyes widening with recognition and fear.

The boy, all innocence and unable to comprehend his situation, greets me with a cheerful smile. Jesse's eyes go wide in both recognition and fear.

Just as I thought. She must have assumed she'd left me for dead.

Jesse snatches up the boy and bolts down a side passage. My training kicks in as I pursue, tracking their footsteps echoing off metal walls. The station's maintenance corridors twist like a maze, but I know these routes better than she does.

A flash of red hair whips around a corner. The boy's crying now, his sobs bouncing off the walls. My chest tightens at the sound.

I cut through a service tunnel, emerging ahead of them. Jesse skids to a stop, clutching the boy to her chest. Her eyes dart around, seeking escape.

"Nowhere to run." I draw my stunner, keeping it low but visible. "Come quietly."

"Please." Her voice breaks. "He's just a child."

The boy buries his face in her neck, silver hair exactly like mine catching the light. Something tugs at my mind, but I push it away.

"Then don't make me use this. You're coming with me, one way or another."

She backs away, shielding the boy with her body. "I'll scream."

"And security will find a known smuggler trying to flee. How well do you think that'll work out?" I take a step closer. "Your son doesn't need to see his mother stunned and dragged away. Make this easy."

Her shoulders slump. Defeat crosses her face as she sets the boy down.

"Leo, baby, stay right here. Mommy needs to talk to this man."

She approaches slowly, hands raised. When she's within reach, I grab her bare arm to secure her - and the world stops.

Electric shock races up my arm. My skin burns where we touch. I know this feeling; something that's been etched in my blood since birth. A warning of what's to come passed down from generation to generation.

This criminal smuggler is my Jalshagar. My fated mate.

CHAPTER 17

JESSE

Leo clings to my leg as we walk up the ramp to Davin's ship. No, not Davin - Tyren, as he calls himself. My heart pounds against my ribs with each step.

"Please, you have to remember something," I say, keeping my voice low so Leo won't pick up on my fear. "The day we met at that pit stop? The stories you told me about your crew?"

"Move." He pushes me forward with the barrel of his gun.

"Mommy?" Leo's tiny fingers dig into my thigh. "I'm scared."

I run my hand through his silver-blue hair - so much like his father's. "It's okay, baby. We're just going on a little trip."

"I told you to stop talking." The familiar rumble of his voice sends shivers down my spine, but there's none of the warmth I remember.

"The explosion at the warehouse - what happened to you?" The words tumble out despite his warning. "We thought you were dead. I mourned you."

He yanks me around to face him, those piercing eyes searching mine. For a moment, something flickers across his face - confusion, maybe recognition. But it's gone as quickly as it comes.

"I don't know what game you're playing, but I'm not this Davin person."

"Then how do you explain this?" I reach out, my fingers hovering over the scar on his chest - visible through his partially open shirt. "You got this fighting those pirates near Exodus Station. You told me that story on my ship."

He jerks away from my touch. "My first job with the family. Knife fight went wrong."

"No, it wasn't. You have to remember we-"

"Enough!" The word echoes through the cargo hold. Leo whimpers, and I pull him closer. "One more word and I'll separate you two for the journey."

My mouth snaps shut. The threat in his voice is real, even if the memories aren't. I guide Leo to a bench along the wall, fighting back tears as I watch the man I loved secure the cargo bay door.

Leo's warmth against my side anchors me as I study the man at the controls. The way he moves, the set of his shoulders - it's all Davin. Even that slight hesitation before he hits the nav controls, like he's double-checking his coordinates.

"What's wrong with that man, Mommy?" Leo whispers, his breath tickling my ear.

I stroke his hair, buying time to choose my words carefully. "I'm not sure, baby."

But I am sure. The scar on his chest - I'd traced it with my fingers that night in the kitchen, when he'd told me about the pirate attack. He'd described every detail: the ambush near Exodus, the knife that caught him between the ribs, the way his crew had patched him up with their limited med supplies.

The same scar. The same story, just... twisted.

My mind races through possibilities. A twin brother? No, he'd told me he was an only child. Besides, the genetic odds of two Kaleidians having identical scars in identical places...

He turns his head slightly, catching me watching him. Those eyes - they're the same ones that had looked at me with such tenderness in that rain-soaked alley. But now they're cold, distant. Like looking at a stranger wearing a loved one's face.

The explosion at the warehouse... head trauma could explain the memory loss, the new identity. The mafia finding him, reshaping him into this "Tyren" person.

"Stop staring," he snaps.

"Can't help it," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "You look exactly like someone I used to know."

Something flickers across his face - that same flash of uncertainty I'd seen earlier. He opens his mouth as if to respond, then shakes his head and turns back to the controls.

I pull Leo closer, my mind made up. This is Davin. And somehow, I'm going to make him remember.

Leo's stomach growls loud enough to echo through the ship's cabin. He tugs at my sleeve, eyes watery. "Mommy, I'm hungry."

"Shut him up," Davin - no, Tyren - snaps from the pilot's seat. But there's a catch in his voice, a hesitation that wasn't there before.

"He's two and a half," I say, keeping my voice level. "He needs to eat regular meals."

You want him quiet? He needs food."

Davin's shoulders tense. He doesn't turn around, but his fingers tap against the control panel. "Fine. Kitchenette's down the hall, first door on the right. Make it quick."

I lift Leo into my arms, his little head nestling against my shoulder. As I pass Davin's chair, his eyes flick to Leo, then away just as fast.

The kitchenette is cramped but functional. Military-grade appliances line the walls - exactly like the ones Davin described from his service days. I set Leo on the counter while I rummage through the cabinets.

"There's protein packs in the bottom drawer," Davin calls from the doorway, making me jump. He leans against the frame, arms crossed. "Should be some fruit preserves too."

"Thanks." I pull out the items, trying to ignore how his presence fills the small space. "Leo, sweetie, want some star-berries with your protein pack?"

Leo nods, but his eyes are fixed on Davin. "Your skin is pretty. Like the sky at home."

Davin's jaw clenches. For a moment, something soft crosses his face - the same look he'd given me that night in the kitchen years ago. But it vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

"Just... hurry up," he mutters, turning away. But he doesn't leave, just stands there watching as I prepare Leo's meal.

I dig through more drawers, pushing aside packets of dehydrated meals and vacuum-sealed rations. "This is depressing. When's the last time you ate something that

actually grew in soil?"

"Food is fuel." He shifts against the doorframe. "These are efficient."

"Efficient?" I hold up a protein pack, its silvery wrapper catching the light. "This stuff tastes like recycled boot leather. How much money do you make per job? Because I know it's enough to afford real food."

Leo giggles as he munches on his star-berries. "Boot leather!"

"The preserves are real food," he says, his jaw tightening.

"These?" I shake the jar. "They're more preservative than berry at this point. Look at the manufacture date - this jar is older than Leo."

A muscle twitches in his cheek. "If my pantry offends you so much, feel free to not eat."

"I'm just saying, for someone who can afford a ship this nice..." I gesture at the high-end appliances. "Would it kill you to stock some fresh produce? Maybe a vegetable or two?"

"Vegetables go bad. Protein packs don't."

Leo points at Davin's face. "You're turning purple!"

I glance up. Sure enough, his cheeks have darkened to a deeper blue - the Kaleidian equivalent of a blush. Leo's observation sets off another round of giggles.

"The boy needs to learn about practical nutrition," Davin mutters, but there's less edge to his voice.

"The boy needs to learn that food can actually taste good." I toss him a protein pack.
"Here's your boot leather dinner."

He catches it one-handed. "It's not that bad."

"Says the man who probably hasn't tasted real food since-" I catch myself before saying 'since that night in my kitchen.' "Since who knows when."

There's something there. Something familiar coming back to his eyes.

I've found a thread, now I have to keep pulling

I follow him out of the kitchenette, leaving Leo happily munching away at his meal.
"Your nav system's outdated. That's at least three generations old."

"It works fine." He strides down the corridor, but I notice how his steps slow just enough to let me keep pace.

"Sure, if you enjoy taking the scenic route everywhere. Those algorithms are ancient. No wonder it took you so long to track us down."

He stops abruptly, turning to face me. "I found you, didn't I?"

"After three years. Not exactly a speed record." I tap the corridor wall. "Bet your drift compensation's off too. That would explain the wobble during takeoff."

"There was no wobble." His blue skin darkens again, that familiar flush creeping up his neck.

"Please. I could feel it from the cargo hold. When's the last time you calibrated your thrusters?"

"Last week." He crosses his arms, mirroring my stance. "And my drift compensation is perfect."

"Is that why your shirt's buttoned wrong?"

His eyes drop to his chest, where sure enough, the buttons are misaligned.

"That has nothing to do with-" He stops, frowning. "How did you..."

"Know?" I step closer, close enough to smell that familiar scent of starship fuel and leather. "The same way I know you double-check your six before turning a corner. The same way I know you hate the taste of caffeine but drink it anyway because you think it's practical."

His eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I see something spark behind them - recognition, confusion, fear. His hand moves toward his chest, where the scar lies beneath his misaligned shirt.

"You don't know me," he says, but his voice wavers.

"Yeah, actually, I do."

"Go watch your damn kid and leave me alone." He spins away, stalking toward the cockpit. "Some of us have actual work to do."

I lean against the wall, watching his retreat. His shoulders are tight, fists clenched at his sides. He's rattled, I know he is. I'm getting through to him.

"Sure thing, boss." I push off from the wall. "Wouldn't want to distract you from your very important brooding."

He stops mid-stride, and I can practically see the muscle jumping in his jaw. "I don't brood."

"No? What do you call this whole dark and mysterious act then?"

"It's called doing my job." He doesn't turn around, but his voice has lost some of its edge. "Which would be a lot easier without your running commentary."

"Right, because silence is so much better for thinking." I start walking back toward the kitchenette. "You know where to find us when you're done pretending to check those perfectly calibrated thrusters."

A grunt is his only response, but I notice he doesn't correct me about the thrusters this time. And as I round the corner, I catch him glancing over his shoulder, that familiar crease between his brows - the one that always showed up when he was puzzling something out.

He'll be back. The Davin I knew could never resist a technical challenge, and I've just questioned his ship's maintenance. Plus, I've seen how his eyes keep drifting to Leo when he thinks I'm not looking.

It's just a matter of time.

CHAPTER 18

TYREN

Sleep evades me again. The hum of the ship's engines should be soothing, but my mind races with fragments that don't make sense. Memories scatter like broken glass, cutting deep when I try to grasp them.

I press my palms against my eyes. The darkness behind my eyelids fills with flashes – Jesse's laugh, the curve of her neck, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug. But that's impossible. I've never seen her drink tea.

"You're getting soft, Tyren," I mutter to myself, rolling onto my side. The narrow bunk creaks under my weight.

The boss's words echo in my head: "She'll try to get in your head. That's what she does. Crafty little minx has talked her way out of more situations than I can count."

But these visions feel real. Too real. The way she looked at me today when I adjusted our course – like she knew exactly what I was going to do before I did it. Like we'd flown together before.

My hand traces the small burn scars on my arm; a physical marker that reminds me why I do what I do. The medics said the explosion should have killed me. Sometimes I wonder if it did, and this is some sort of purgatory where nothing makes sense.

The mate bond pulses between us, even through the walls separating our quarters. It's

supposed to be impossible – Kaleidians don't bond with humans. That's ridiculous. Yet here I am, feeling her presence like a second heartbeat.

"Get it together," I growl, punching my pillow. "You're Tyren. You work for the boss. That's all that matters."

But if that's true, why do I remember the taste of chamomile on her lips? Why do I know exactly how she laces her boots? Why does every fiber of my being scream that I'm on the wrong side of this mission?

I sit up, running my fingers through my hair. The mate bond thrums stronger, and I wonder if she's awake too, thinking about me. About us. About whatever truth lies buried under these fractured memories.

"I need to stretch my legs," I say to no one, an excuse to get out of bed and pace the quiet hallways.

Something small and solid crashes into my legs, nearly knocking me off balance. A mop of silver hair tilts back, revealing wide eyes that mirror his mother's.

"Sorry!" Leo scrambles back, his tiny hands fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. "I was playing spaceship."

My chest tightens. The kid's fear radiates off him in waves, yet there's something else – curiosity maybe? The mate bond pulses, reminding me of Jesse. This is her son. Our-

No. Not our anything. I've never seen this woman before, the resemblance is a coincidence. She simply must have a type.

"Up!" Leo raises his arms, fear forgotten. "I wanna see out the window!"

My hands move before I can stop them, lifting him easily. His small weight settles against my chest, and something shifts inside me – a crack in the wall of certainty I've built around myself.

"Is it true you can see the stars better from up here?" Leo presses his nose against the viewport, leaving smudges. "Mom says they look different on every planet."

"They do." The words come out softer than I intend. "See that blue one? That's Kalei's sun."

"You're from there! Is it pretty? Do they have ice cream? Mom says some planets don't have ice cream and that's sad."

A laugh escapes me before I can catch it. "We have something better. Frozen crystal fruit that changes flavor while you eat it."

"Really?" His eyes go wide. "Can we get some? Please?"

The earnestness in his voice hits like a punch to the gut. I should put him down. Return to my quarters. Instead, I find myself pointing out constellations, explaining how ships navigate between them.

"Did you know," Leo whispers conspiratorially, "that Mom can fly through an asteroid field with her eyes closed?"

"No, she can't" I say without thinking. "Rena can though."

Leo gasps. "You know Auntie Rena?!"

Footsteps pad down the corridor, and Jesse appears in sleep shorts and an oversized shirt that slips off one shoulder. For a moment I'm pleased I let them bring their

luggage on board. Her hair's a mess, curling wildly around her face. Something in my chest tightens at the sight.

"Leo, what did we say about bedtime?" She crosses her arms, but there's no real heat in her voice.

Leo, still pressed against my chest, waves at the viewport. "But Mom, look! Tyren's teaching me about the stars. Did you know there's special fruit on Kalei that changes flavor while you eat it?"

"Time isn't real in space anyway." The words slip out before I can stop them. "The stars don't set or rise here."

"Don't encourage him." Jesse's eyes meet mine, and something flashes in them – recognition, hurt, hope? The mate bond pulses stronger, and I have to look away.

"He's right though." Leo bounces in my arms. "No sun means no bedtime."

"Nice try, spaceman." Jesse steps closer, close enough that I catch the faint scent of engine grease and something floral. "But growing boys need sleep, even in space."

"But Mom-"

"Bed. Now." She holds out her arms, and I transfer Leo over, trying not to notice how our fingers brush in the exchange. "Say goodnight to Da- ...to Tyren."

"Night!" Leo wraps his arms around Jesse's neck. "Can we have space fruit tomorrow?"

"We'll see." Jesse's voice softens as she carries him away. "Sweet dreams, little star."

I watch them disappear down the corridor, my hands still warm from where they touched them both. The name feels wrong now – Tyren. Like wearing someone else's clothes.

The smell of coffee draws me to the kitchenette. My steps falter at the doorway as Leo's giggle echoes off the metal walls.

"No, Mom, you're doing it wrong!" He waves his spoon like a conductor's baton. "The spaceship goes whoosh, then zoom, then kaboom!"

Jesse arranges protein cubes into a pattern on his plate. "Oh, excuse me. I didn't realize I had a flight instructor at my table."

"I learned from the best." Leo beams at her. "Remember when you showed me how to dodge asteroids?"

"That was a simulation, mister. And you crashed into every single one."

"Did not!"

My head throbs. A flash of Jesse in the captain's seat, giving orders while Rena's hands dance over controls as she guides us through... No. That never happened.

The mate bond pulses, and Jesse's head snaps up. Our eyes meet across the room. The spoon slips from her fingers, clattering against the table.

"Good mor-" she starts.

I turn and walk away before she can finish, my boots heavy against the deck plating.

Hours later, I'm organizing supplies when voices drift from the cargo hold. Curious

despite myself, I follow the sound.

"And this goes here?" Leo sits cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by spare parts. He holds up what looks like a burnt-out power coupling.

"That's right." Jesse helps him connect it to something that might have once been a data pad. "Now we just need to route power through-"

"The auxiliary battery!" Leo finishes. "I remember. You showed me how to fix the com unit last time."

My vision blurs. Jesse's hands covered in engine grease, Par teaching me the peculiarities of the ship's systems. The proud smile when I improved the shield configuration...

The memory slams into me like a physical blow. I stumble back, knocking over an empty crate.

"Are you okay?" Jesse stands, concern etched across her features. "You look pale."

"Fine." The word comes out rough. "I'm fine."

I retreat to my quarters, but the memories follow. They can't be real. They can't be mine. But if that's true, why do I know exactly how Jesse talks to her crew? Why do I remember the sound of her laugh?

The mate bond thrums between us, a constant reminder that nothing about this mission is what it seems.

Much later, I'm checking the navigation systems one last time before turning in when footsteps approach from behind.

"Leo's asleep. We need to talk." Jesse's voice is firm, brooking no argument.

"It's late."

"I've given you time to figure it out yourself." She moves to block my exit. "But I'm done waiting."

My head throbs. "There's nothing to figure out."

"Look at me." When I don't, she steps closer. "He is your son."

The word hits like a physical blow. "He's not-"

"Three years ago. In that alley on Glimner. Rain soaking through our clothes, your hands in my hair-"

"Stop." The memory crashes through my carefully constructed walls: Jesse pressed against wet brick, her lips tasting of rain and desperation.

"You pushed me away," she continues. "Told me to get back to the ship, to stay safe while you handled the warehouse."

My hands shake. "That's not possible."

"The silver in his hair. The way he tilts his head when he's thinking – just like you do. He's your son, Davin."

The name triggers something. Gunfire. Smoke. Jesse's face illuminated by emergency lights as I shoved her toward safety.

"Get out of here!" My own voice echoes in my head. "Go warn the crew. I'll handle

this. Go!"

"You remember." Jesse's fingers brush my arm. "I know you do."

The explosion. Heat searing across my chest. The last thought before darkness took me – keeping her safe.

The mate bond surges between us, and suddenly I'm drowning in memories. Jesse's smile across the galley table. Her fingers intertwined with mine. The way she said my name – my real name.

"I told you to run." My voice cracks. "I needed you safe."

"I know." Her hand cups my cheek. "Welcome back, Davin."

CHAPTER 19

JESSE

I press Davin against the cool metal wall of the hallway, my heart pounding like a kick drum. His blue skin is warm under my touch, his silver hair tickling my fingers. He's real. He's alive. And he's here, with me.

"You remember," I whisper, searching his eyes. They're the same eyes that had once held a galaxy of secrets, now they glimmer with recognition.

"I remember," he echoes, his voice barely above a murmur. His hands find my waist, pulling me closer. Our bodies align like they were never apart.

I trace the scar on his face, one that wasn't there before. "Does it hurt?" I ask, my voice hitching slightly.

He shakes his head, a smirk playing on his lips. "Not as much as your kiss."

A laugh escapes me, soft and low. "Well, we wouldn't want you to suffer," I tease, leaning in. Our lips meet, gently at first, then with a hunger that's been suppressed for far too long. His hands tangle in my hair, my body arches into his.

Between kisses, he murmurs, "We should be quiet." His breath is hot on my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

"Mm-hmm," I agree, biting my lip to stifle a moan. I glance towards Leo's room, the

door slightly ajar. The soft glow of the light spills into the hallway, a reminder of the little life we created. A life that deserves a family, whole and united.

Davin follows my gaze, his expression softening. "He's beautiful, Jesse," he whispers, his voice filled with awe.

"He's ours," I reply, a swell of pride and love filling my chest. Our eyes meet, a silent promise passing between us. We'll make this work. We'll be a family.

His hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing away a stray tear. "I'm not going anywhere," he says, his voice firm with resolve. "Not again."

I nod, too choked up to speak. Instead, I lean into him, our lips meeting once more. This time, it's a slow burn, a promise of forever. And in the quiet of the hallway, under the hum of the station's lights, we seal our fate with a kiss.

Then, Davin takes me by the hand and leads me down the hallway. There's no need for words; we both know what we want right now.

What we need.

Davin kicks the door to his room shut behind us, his lips still locked with mine. The room is bathed in the soft glow of a nearby neon sign, casting dancing shadows on the walls. His hands are in my hair, my back pressed against the cold metal of the door.

"You know," I murmur between kisses, "we've got all night."

He pulls back just enough to smirk at me, his breath hot on my lips. "And I intend to use every second."

I chuckle, my hands sliding down his chest, fingers tracing the line of his scar. He shivers under my touch, his eyes never leaving mine. I can feel his heart pounding, echoing my own.

"You're wearing too many clothes," he growls, his hands finding the hem of my shirt.

"You're one to talk," I retort, tugging at his belt. He laughs, a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine.

We stumble towards the bed, a tangle of limbs and laughter. His room is sparse, the bed little more than a cot, but it's enough. It's more than enough. He tugs my shirt over my head, his fingers brushing against my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

"God, I've missed you," he murmurs, his voice barely a whisper. His hands cup my face, his thumbs brushing against my cheeks. His eyes search mine, filled with a hunger that mirrors my own.

"Show me," I whisper back, my voice barely steady. "Show me how much you've missed me."

His response is a kiss, deep and hungry. His hands explore my body, reacquainting with every curve, every line. I gasp into his mouth, my own hands exploring his body, tracing the lines of his muscles, the scars that tell a thousand stories.

We fall back onto the bed, a tangle of limbs and heated kisses. The world outside fades away, leaving only us, only this. Only the feel of his skin against mine, the taste of his lips, the sound of his breath mingling with mine.

"Jesse," he whispers, his voice a ragged prayer. And in that moment, I know. I know that he's mine, that he's always been mine. And I'm his, completely, utterly his.

I tug at his belt, a smirk playing on my lips. "You know how many times I've imagined doing this?" I ask, looking up at him through my lashes.

Davin raises an eyebrow, a hint of a smile on his face. "Oh yeah? And what exactly did you imagine?"

I pull the belt free, tossing it aside. "Well, for starters," I say, my fingers working on the button of his pants, "I didn't imagine you'd be so chatty."

He laughs, a low rumble that sends a shiver down my spine. "Is that so?" he says, his voice dropping an octave.

I nod, finally freeing the button. I can feel his breath hitch as I slowly slide down his zipper. "Mm-hmm," I murmur, my eyes never leaving his. "In my fantasies, you were always the strong, silent type."

He smirks, his hands finding their way into my hair. "Well, I wouldn't want to disappoint," he says, his voice barely a whisper.

I chuckle, my hands sliding down his hips, taking his pants with them. "Too late for that," I tease, my eyes traveling down his body. I can feel the heat radiating off him, see the desire in his eyes. It's intoxicating.

I lean in, my breath hot on his skin. I can feel him tense, his hands tightening in my hair. I smirk, my lips brushing against him. "You know," I say, my voice barely a whisper, "I think I like the chatty version of you."

And with that, I take his cock into my mouth. He groans, his head falling back, his hands tightening in my hair. I take my time, exploring every inch of him. His taste, his scent, it's all so familiar, yet so new. It's like coming home after a long journey.

I look up at him, our eyes meeting. His are filled with desire, with need. It's a heady feeling, knowing that I'm the one doing this to him. That I'm the one making him feel this way.

I take him deeper, my hands finding their way to his hips. His breath hitches, his body tensing. I can feel his heart pounding, can see the pulse in his neck. It's a rhythm that matches my own, a symphony of desire and need.

"Jesse," he whispers, his voice barely audible. It's a plea, a prayer. A name that holds a thousand memories, a thousand promises.

I hum in response, the vibration making him groan. His hands tighten in my hair, his body tense. I can feel him getting close, can feel the tension building. But I don't rush. I take my time, savoring every moment, every taste, every sound.

Because this isn't just about him. It's about us. About reconnecting, about rediscovering each other. About making up for lost time. And I intend to enjoy every second of it.

Davin's hand wraps around my wrist, his grip firm yet gentle. "Not so fast," he growls, his voice low and husky. I raise an eyebrow, a smirk playing on my lips.

"Oh yeah?" I challenge, my voice barely above a whisper. "And why's that?"

He tugs me towards the bed, a wicked grin on his face. "Because I'm not done with you yet."

I stumble slightly, caught off guard, but he steadies me, his hands on my hips. His touch is electric, sending shivers down my spine. "Is that so?" I murmur, my heart pounding like a drum.

"Mm-hmm," he hums, his lips brushing against my ear. His breath is hot, his voice a low rumble that sends a shiver down my spine. "I've got plans for you, Jesse."

I can't help but laugh, a soft, breathy sound. "Plans, huh? And what exactly do these plans entail?"

He grins, his hands sliding down to cup my ass. "Wouldn't you like to know?" he teases, his fingers digging into my flesh. I gasp, my body arching into his.

His lips find my neck, his teeth grazing against my skin. I shiver, my body aching with need.

Davin's hands slide up my body, his fingers tracing the curve of my waist, the swell of my breasts. I can feel his heart pounding, can see the desire in his eyes. It's intoxicating.

His fingers find the hem of my shirt, tugging it up and over my head. I don't resist, my body aching with anticipation.

"First," he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear, "I'm going to lay you down on this bed." His hands find my wrists, gently guiding me down onto the mattress. I go willingly, my body trembling with desire.

"And then?" I ask, my voice barely audible. He grins, his hands sliding down my body, his fingers tracing the line of my pants.

"And then," he whispers, his voice barely a growl, "I'm going to make you scream."

"You talk a big game," I tease, my voice barely a whisper. His fingers find my inner thigh, tracing a line up to my center. I gasp, my body arching into his touch.

"Oh, I do more than talk," he growls, his fingers slipping inside me. I moan, my body clenching around him. He grins, his thumb finding my clit, circling it slowly.

"Fuck," I gasp, my hands fisting the sheets. His lips find my ear, his breath hot on my skin.

"That's the idea," he murmurs, his fingers moving inside me, his thumb circling my clit. I can feel the tension building, can feel my body aching with need.

"Davin," I whisper, my voice barely audible. His fingers curl inside me, hitting that spot that makes me see stars. I gasp, my body trembling with pleasure.

"That's it, baby," he whispers, his voice barely a growl. "Let me hear you."

His fingers move faster, his thumb circling my clit with just the right amount of pressure. I can feel my orgasm building, can feel the tension coiling in my belly.

He pulls his hand back and, in one smooth motion, he's inside me. It's somehow soft and rough at the same time, exactly what I need to get me over the edge.

And with that, I do. My body convulses, my orgasm ripping through me. I whimper his name, my body clenching around his fingers, my hands fisting the sheets. He rides out my orgasm with me, his fingers moving slower, his lips gentle on my skin.

As I come down from my high, I open my eyes to find him smiling lazily at me.

"Welcome home," I say.

CHAPTER 20

DAVIN

I stand outside Leo's room, my heart hammering against my ribs. The door panel glows with a soft nightlight, casting shadows across the hallway.

"You're going to do fine," Jesse whispers, squeezing my arm. "He's a sweet kid. Just... be gentle."

"What if he hates me?" The words slip out before I can stop them. "Our first meeting, I practically terrorized both of you."

"Hey." Jesse steps in front of me, her green eyes fierce. "You weren't yourself then. And kids are more forgiving than you think. Besides, he's been asking about his daddy for months now."

"What did you tell him?"

"That his father was a brave man who got lost, but might find his way back someday." She smooths down my collar, a familiar gesture that sends warmth through my chest. "We weren't ready for the death talk yet, so I avoided it. And look, here you are."

"I don't know the first thing about being a father."

"Neither does any new parent. We figure it out as we go." She pokes my chest. "You

commanded entire squadrons in the military, didn't you? One toddler can't be scarier than that."

"Those soldiers weren't my flesh and blood."

"True. But Leo already has your stubborn streak." She grins. "And your appetite. Kid can put away three bowls of cereal in one sitting."

That pulls a chuckle from me. "Poor you."

"Just... be yourself. The real you." She reaches up, traces the scar on my face. "The man who shared tea with me in the middle of the night and told me stories about the stars. That's the father Leo needs."

The door slides open with a soft hiss. Jesse steps in first, and I hear rustling sheets and a sleepy mumble.

"Hey sweetie," she says. "Someone's here to meet you. Again."

My throat tightens as a small figure appears in the doorway, rubbing his eyes. Leo's silver hair catches the light, matching mine perfectly. His skin is a lighter shade of blue than mine, but those eyes – they're all Jesse's.

"Tyren?" Leo peers up at me, clutching a stuffed animal to his chest.

Jesse kneels beside him. "Remember how I told you about your daddy? How he got lost but might find his way back?"

"Uh-huh." Leo nods, still studying me.

I drop to one knee, bringing myself closer to his level. My military training never

prepared me for this moment. "I... I'm your father, Leo."

His brow furrows. "Like when Mira's new daddy 'dopted her?"

"No, baby." Jesse smooths his hair. "Tyren's name is Davin, and he's your real daddy. He helped make you. But he got hurt and lost his memories for a while. That's why he couldn't be with us."

"Lost memories?" Leo tilts his head. "Like hide and seek?"

A laugh escapes me. "Something like that. But I found them again. Found you both."

"Can you stay?" His voice is small, hopeful. "Mommy gets sad sometimes when she talks about you."

Jesse's breath catches. I reach out, hesitant. "If you'll have me, I'd like to stay for a very long time."

Leo takes a step forward, studying my face with an intensity that reminds me of Jesse. "Your hair's like mine."

"Yeah, kid. It is."

Leo launches himself at me with the unrestrained enthusiasm only a toddler can muster. My arms come up automatically, catching him as he collides with my chest. The impact sends a jolt through my scarred skin – a reminder of the explosion that stole my memories.

"Daddy!" His small arms wrap around my neck, and something inside me fractures. The mafia's conditioning battles with instinct, with truth. This child, this perfect blend of Jesse and me, breaks through walls I didn't know existed.

"Hey there, little warrior." The words come naturally, though part of me still thinks in Tyren's voice, still sees the world through a hitman's eyes. But Leo's silver hair tickles my chin, so like my own, and his grip is strong – stubborn, like both his parents.

"You smell like space," Leo declares, pulling back to study my face. His nose wrinkles exactly like Jesse's does when she's thinking hard about something.

"That's because I've been traveling." My throat tightens as he traces the scar on my face with tiny fingers. No fear in those eyes, just curiosity. "Looking for you and your mom."

"Did the bad guys hurt you?" He pokes at my chest where the worst of the scarring lies beneath my shirt. "Is that why you got lost?"

"Nah, nothing can hurt me," I say firmly. Jesse makes a small sound behind us, but I keep my eyes on Leo. "But I'm better now."

"I get lost sometimes too." He nods sagely. "But Mommy always finds me. She's good at finding things."

A laugh bubbles up, surprising me. It feels foreign, like something Tyren wouldn't do, but right. "She found me too, didn't she?"

"Uh-huh." Leo settles against my chest, already growing heavy with sleep. "Can you tell me a story? About space?"

I look to Jesse, who nods, wiping at her eyes. "One story," she says. "Then breakfast."

"So there I was, facing down three space pirates," I say, settling Leo onto my lap as Jesse rummages through my sparse kitchen cabinets. "Their ship was twice the size of

mine."

Leo's eyes widen. "Were you scared?"

"Never." I tap his nose. "Want to know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I had a secret weapon." I lean in close, lowering my voice. "My ship might've been smaller, but it was faster. And smarter."

"Ships can't be smart," Leo giggles.

"Oh yeah?" The sound of Jesse opening and closing cabinets punctuates our conversation. "This one was. See, while the pirates were busy trying to catch me, I flew straight into an asteroid field."

"That's dangerous!" Leo clutches his stuffed animal tighter.

"Very. But I knew something they didn't." I create a makeshift asteroid field with my hands. "The rocks weren't random. They moved in patterns, like a dance."

From the kitchen, Jesse snorts. "Is this the Carina Belt story?"

"You know it?"

"You told it to me that night in the galley." She peers around the corner, brandishing a spatula. "Though I remember more cursing and less dancing asteroids."

"This is the kid-friendly version." I wink at her before turning back to Leo. "So there I was, weaving through the asteroids. The pirates followed, thinking they had me

cornered."

"Did they catch you?"

"Nope. Because right when they thought they had me..." I pause for dramatic effect.
"I cut my engines."

Leo gasps. "But you'd crash!"

"That's what the pirates thought too. But remember - I knew the dance." I demonstrate with my hands. "My ship drifted right between two massive rocks, quiet as space itself. And those pirates? They flew right past me, straight into the biggest asteroid in the belt."

"Boom?" Leo asks hopefully.

"More like crunch." I make a crushing motion with my hands. "Their ships got stuck between the rocks like sandwich filling."

"You're embellishing," Jesse calls out. "I've seen the report. Only one ship got caught."

"Am I telling this story or are you?"

"Sorry, sorry." She waves the spatula in surrender. "Continue your tall tale."

Leo tugs on my sleeve. "What happened next?"

"Well, while they were stuck there, I called in the authorities. Those pirates spent the next ten years in a very small cell, thinking about their life choices."

"Is that really true?" Leo asks.

"Cross my heart." I draw an X over my chest.

Leo sprawls on the floor, surrounded by random trash that sticks together as he constructs what he claims is a spaceship. The starlight streams through the window, casting rainbow patterns across his silver hair.

"He has your focus," I murmur to Jesse, who's curled up next to me on the couch. "Won't stop until the job's done."

"Mmm. But that scowl? Pure Davin." She pokes my side. "Speaking of focus, what's eating at you?"

My jaw tightens. "The Lightyear gang won't stop. Not until they get what they want."

"About that." Jesse shifts, lowering her voice. "I have something that might interest them. A backup of Xander's data."

The muscles in my back tense. "You kept it?"

"Insurance." She shrugs. "Old habits. It's encrypted, stored on a secure drive. We could trade it for our safety."

"That data..." The words stick in my throat as I watch Leo make whooshing noises, flying a block through the air. "It's a bioweapon, Jesse. People could die."

"People will die anyway. The gang will find another way to get what they want." Her fingers find mine, squeezing. "But right now, they're focused on us. On Leo."

"Daddy, look!" Leo holds up his creation. "It has lasers!"

"That's great, kid." I force a smile. "Very tactical."

Jesse's voice drops lower. "I know this might be selfish, but what choice do we have? We can't keep running forever. Not with him."

The weight of the decision settles on my shoulders like a gravitational anchor. Military training screams about duty, about preventing mass casualties. But Leo's laughter cuts through those thoughts, sharp and clear as a warning siren.

"You're right," I concede. "But we do this smart. Set conditions. Make sure they can't trace it back to us."

"Already ahead of you." Jesse's lips quirk. "I didn't survive this long by being careless."

I turn to Jesse, taking in the familiar constellation of freckles across her nose, the way her red hair catches the starlight. My fingers trace her jawline, remembering how I'd first noticed that particular shade of green in her eyes aboard her ship, before everything went sideways.

"Thank you," I whisper, leaning in close.

"For what?"

"For not giving up on me. For raising our son. For..." The words catch. "For giving me a family when I didn't know I needed one."

Her lips curve up. "Even when you were playing hitman?"

"Especially then. You saw through that facade pretty quick."

"Hard to forget those brooding looks of yours." She taps my nose. "Though the scar adds a certain roguish charm."

I capture her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "I mean it, Jesse."

She shifts closer, her breath warm against my lips. "You've got the rest of our lives to show your gratitude, spaceman." Her fingers thread through my hair. "And I plan to collect. With interest."

"That a threat or a promise?"

"With me?" She grins. "Usually both."

CHAPTER 21

JESSE

I trace the line of Davin's jaw, his silver stubble rough against my fingertips. His blue skin is warm, inviting. He leans in, his lips meeting mine, and it's like the first time all over again. A spark ignites, and I'm suddenly ravenous, starving for his touch.

"We shouldn't," he whispers, his breath hot on my cheek. But his body betrays his words, pressing against mine, eager.

"Probably not," I agree, my fingers already working the buttons of his shirt. "But since when have we ever done what we should?"

He chuckles, a low rumble that vibrates through me. "Good point."

His hand slides up my thigh, sending shivers down my spine. I arch into him, a soft gasp escaping my lips. His mouth captures mine again, swallowing the sound. Our breaths mingle, ragged and hungry.

"You drive me crazy, Jesse," he murmurs, his lips trailing down my neck. Each kiss is a brand, a claim.

"Likewise, Davin," I breathe, my hands exploring the hard planes of his chest. I pause at a burn scar, a reminder of what we've lost, what we've found. His heart beats strong under my touch.

He shifts, his weight pressing me into the mattress. I can feel his desire, hard against me. But he takes his time, his hands and mouth exploring, rediscovering. I match his pace, our bodies moving in sync, a dance we've never forgotten.

The room is filled with the soft sounds of our passion, the rustle of fabric, the catch of breath. We're quiet, mindful of little Leo napping down the hall. But our silence only intensifies the moment, each touch, each kiss, a secret shared between us.

"Jesse," he whispers, his voice hoarse with desire. It's a question, a plea.

"Yes," I answer, my body aching for him. "Yes."

And then there are no more words, only the language of our bodies, the rhythm of our love. The world outside fades away, leaving only Davin and me, together again, as it was always meant to be.

Davin's fingers work the buttons of my shirt, his knuckles brushing against my skin. I shiver, not from cold, but from the anticipation that courses through me.

"You're taking your sweet time," I whisper, my voice barely audible. I can feel his smile against my collarbone as he places a soft kiss there.

"Patience, Jesse," he murmurs, his breath warm on my skin. "Good things come to those who wait."

I scoff lightly, "Since when have I ever been patient?"

He chuckles, a low rumble that vibrates through me. "True. But maybe you should try it sometime."

His hands slide to my shoulders, pushing the shirt down my arms, leaving me bare to

the waist. His eyes, dark with desire, roam over me, and I feel a flush spread across my chest. I reach for him, but he captures my wrists, pinning them gently above my head.

"Not yet," he says, his voice hoarse. "Let me explore."

His lips find the sensitive spot beneath my ear, and I gasp, arching into him. He takes his time, kissing, nipping, tasting his way down my neck, across my collarbone, and down to the swell of my breasts. I squirm beneath him, my breath coming in short gasps.

"Davin," I breathe, his name a plea on my lips.

He looks up at me, his eyes meeting mine, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "Yes, Jesse?"

I growl in frustration, and he laughs, a full-throated sound that sends shivers down my spine. He releases my wrists, his hands moving to the waistband of my pants. He unfastens them, his fingers brushing against my skin, sending jolts of electricity through me.

He hooks his thumbs into the waistband, pausing for a moment. "Lift," he commands, his voice soft but firm. I obey, raising my hips off the bed. He slides my pants down, his lips following the newly exposed skin, kissing every inch as if it were sacred ground.

I watch him, my heart pounding, my body aching with need. He looks up at me, his eyes filled with desire and something else, something softer, more intimate. It makes my heart flutter, and I reach for him, pulling him up to me, capturing his lips with mine.

His body presses against mine, his skin hot against my own. I can feel his heartbeat, strong and steady, echoing my own. I wrap my arms around him, holding him close, never wanting to let go. He deepens the kiss, his tongue exploring, claiming, and I match his fervor, pouring all my longing, all my love into this moment.

Davin stands, his eyes never leaving mine as he unbuckles his belt, slowly sliding it from the loops. He's taking his sweet time, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. He knows he's teasing me, and he's loving every second of it.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I say, propping myself up on my elbows, trying to keep my voice steady. But the sight of him, the anticipation, is sending shivers down my spine.

He chuckles, a low rumble that seems to vibrate through me. "Maybe just a little," he admits, his fingers working the button of his pants.

I roll my eyes, but a smile tugs at my lips. "Well, don't take all day. We haven't got forever, you know."

He raises an eyebrow, a playful challenge in his eyes. "Oh, really? And why's that?"

I shrug, trying to act nonchalant. "Leo's nap won't last forever. And neither will my patience."

He laughs, a full-throated sound that sends a wave of heat crashing over me. "Fair enough," he says, finally sliding his pants down his legs, stepping out of them.

He stands there, unabashedly naked, and I drink him in. The hard planes of his chest, the jagged scar that runs down his side, a reminder of the life he's led. And lower, his desire, hard and ready.

He climbs onto the bed, his body covering mine. His skin is hot, almost feverish, and I can feel his heart pounding in his chest, matching the rhythm of my own. He leans down, his lips capturing mine in a slow, deep kiss.

"God, Jesse," he whispers against my lips, his voice hoarse with desire. "You drive me crazy."

I smile, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

He shifts, his body settling between my legs. I can feel him, hard and hot, pressing against me. I lift my hips, urging him on, and he smiles, a wicked grin that sends a jolt of electricity through me.

I growl in frustration, and he laughs, that low rumble that drives me wild. He reaches down, his fingers finding me, ready and eager. He strokes me gently, his touch sending waves of pleasure crashing over me.

"Davin," I gasp, my body arching into his touch. "Please."

He smiles, a slow, sexy grin that sends my heart racing. "Say it, Jesse. Tell me what you want."

I look into his eyes, my body aching with need. "I want you, Davin. Inside me. Now."

His smile widens, and he leans down, capturing my lips in a fierce, passionate kiss. And then, slowly, torturously, he enters me, filling me completely.

I gasp, my body stretching to accommodate him. He stills, giving me time to adjust, his eyes never leaving mine. "You okay?" he asks, his voice soft, concerned.

I nod, my body already moving, already urging him on. "More than okay," I whisper,

my voice barely audible. "Perfect."

And then there are no more words, only the language of our bodies, the rhythm of our love. He moves slowly at first, his hips rocking against mine, each thrust sending waves of pleasure crashing over me. I match his pace, my body moving in sync with his, our breaths mingling, our hearts beating as one.

The room is filled with the soft sounds of our lovemaking, the rustle of fabric, the catch of breath.

I can feel it building, the pressure, the heat. My body tenses, my breath coming in short gasps. Davin's pace quickens, his thrusts becoming more urgent, more desperate.

"Jesse," he whispers, his voice hoarse with desire. It's a question, a plea.

"Yes," I answer, my body aching for release. "Yes, Davin. Now."

And then it hits me, a wave of pleasure so intense it leaves me breathless. I cry out, my body convulsing, my nails digging into Davin's back. He groans, his body stiffening as he finds his own release, his face buried in the crook of my neck.

We lie there for a moment, our bodies still entwined, our breaths slowly returning to normal.

I run my fingers through Davin's silver hair, each strand cool against my skin. His head rests against my chest, his breathing steady. The weight of what we're about to do settles in me like a stone.

And now, with a clear head and open heart, a realization dawns on me. I know what Davin is going to say before he does.

"We can't give them the data," he says, his voice firm and commanding.

His eyes open, those piercing eyes that see right through me.

"I know," I whisper, feeling awash with guilt.

"If we hand it over, they'll use it. People will die. Lots of people," he continues. My fingers still in his hair. "And they won't just let us walk away after. No matter how much you beg, I know. They'll kill us all anyway."

"Leo would never be safe." The words catch in my throat. "We'd always be looking over our shoulders, waiting for the other shoe to drop."

I start to tremble at the thought, but Davin's hand steadies me.

"So, here's the plan. We run. Take Leo and disappear. Somewhere off the grid, far away from Glimner."

I meet his gaze. "I know some places, old smuggling routes my family used. Places even the mafia won't think to look."

"They'll hunt us," he says. "I know them. They may not be the toughest gang on Glimner, but the boss is brutal. He won't let us disappear without trying."

"Let them try." A smile tugs at my lips. "Only one of their men ever found me, and he's on my side now."

He returns my smile, that rare, genuine one that makes my heart skip. "I'll disable the geo tracker in the nav system. From there we can dump this ship and buy a new one."

I lean forward, pressing my forehead against his. "I've got some money stashed away.

Enough to get us started somewhere new."

"I've got resources too. Safe houses. Contact who owe me favors." His thumb traces circles on my palm. "We'll need to move fast, change ships often."

"It won't be easy on Leo."

"Better than the alternative."

I nod, knowing he's right. "So we're doing this?"

"We're doing this." He pulls me close, his lips brushing my ear. "Together."

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CHAPTER 22

JESSE

The morning sun streams through the viewport of our latest ship, casting a golden glow across Leo as he zooms his toy spacecraft around the galley. His giggles echo off the metal walls, bringing a smile to my face as I prepare breakfast.

"Mama, look! We're going to another adventure!" Leo swoops the toy in elaborate patterns.

"Just like us, huh buddy?" I ruffle his silver hair, so much like his father's. "What's our destination this time?"

"Space pirates!" He crashes the toy into my hip.

"I thought we were the good guys now," Davin says, ducking through the doorway. His blue skin gleams in the artificial light as he scoops up Leo, tossing him into the air.

"Higher, Daddy!"

I slide a plate of protein cakes across the counter. "Breakfast first, space adventures later."

"But Mama-"

"Listen to your mother," Davin says firmly, settling Leo into his chair. "Even space pirates need fuel."

Leo attacks his breakfast with gusto, syrup dripping down his chin. "Can we stay here longer? I like the purple trees."

Davin and I exchange glances. We've been on this moon for three weeks – longer than anywhere else since we ran.

"We'll see, little star," I say, wiping his face. "Maybe a few more days."

"I still haven't picked up any chatter from them," Davin murmurs, his hand finding mine under the table. "We should be safe here for now."

I lean into him, watching Leo recreate a space battle with his fork. Several months of running, of late-night ship changes and close calls, but our son thinks it's all one grand adventure. Maybe that's the greatest gift we could give him – turning fear into wonder.

"More syrup please!" Leo brandishes his empty fork like a sword.

"What do we say?" Davin prompts.

"More syrup please, space commander sir!"

I laugh, reaching for the bottle. Some things never change, no matter which corner of the galaxy we hide in.

I trace my finger along the nav display, the familiar star patterns bringing back memories. "You know, we're not far from Rivina. Beautiful little place - waterfalls that glow in the dark, floating markets."

"Another smuggling hotspot?" Davin raises an eyebrow, cleaning up the remains of breakfast.

"Actually, no. That's what made it perfect for certain... discretionary shipments. The locals mind their own business, but they're kind. I delivered medical supplies there during the drought two years ago."

Leo looks up from his toys. "What's a waterfall, Mama?"

"It's like... remember the shower on the last ship? But bigger, and prettier, and outside."

"Can we see it?" His eyes light up.

I catch Davin watching me, his expression thoughtful. "What do you think?" he asks softly. "Rivina's pretty far from the regular patrol routes."

The possibility settles in my mind - a real home, not just another temporary hideout. "Leo needs more than ship cabins and quick getaways. He should have friends his age, maybe even school someday."

"But?" Davin prompts.

"But staying in one place..." I run my hands through my hair. "It's risky. If they find us-"

"We can't run forever, Jesse." He moves closer, his voice low enough that Leo can't hear. "We've got enough credits saved. I could find work in security, you could-"

"What, become a respectable citizen?" I snort. "I wouldn't know where to start."

"You could start by teaching Leo to swim in those waterfalls you mentioned."

I watch our son, making explosion sounds as he crashes his toys together. He deserves more than this perpetual chase across the stars. "The northern continent has these amazing mountain ranges," I say slowly. "Small communities, mostly farmers. Easy to blend in."

Davin leans against the counter, his expression softening as he watches Leo play. "You know this is the right choice. Not just for him, but all of us."

I smile at the thought of playing family with Davin. "The great bounty hunter, settling down?" I bump his hip with mine. "What would your old military buddies say?"

"They'd probably die of shock." He pulls me closer, his arm warm around my waist. "But I've missed enough of his life already. And yours."

Leo crashes his toy ship into Davin's leg. "Daddy! Be the bad guy!"

"Sorry, kid. I'm retired from being the bad guy." He scoops Leo up, settling him on his shoulders. "How about we be explorers instead?"

"Like Mama?"

I laugh. "More legal than Mama's old exploring."

"We could get a place near those mountains you mentioned," Davin says. "Something with a yard. Maybe even a workshop where I could teach him to fix ships."

"And a garden," I add, surprising myself with how much I want this. "I always wanted to grow real food, not just hydroponics."

"A garden?" Davin's eyes crinkle. "Never figured you for the farming type."

"Hey, I'm full of surprises." I tap his chest. "I've spent so much of my life in sterile space, dirt is just so appealing now. Besides, someone needs to teach our son that food doesn't just appear in storage containers."

Leo bounces on Davin's shoulders. "Can I have a tree house?"

"We'll see about that, little star." I reach up to steady him. "First we need to find the right place."

"Rivina," Davin says firmly. "Let's do it. We can start looking for property as soon as we land."

The certainty in his voice makes my heart skip. After months of running, of watching over our shoulders, we're choosing something different. Something permanent.

The blocks clatter against each other as Leo stacks them higher and higher, his tiny tongue poking out in concentration. Davin steadies the tower with one hand, his movements gentle despite those battle-hardened reflexes.

"Red one next," Leo demands, shoving a block into Davin's palm.

"Where should it go?" Davin asks, and my chest tightens at the tenderness in his voice.

"Top!" Leo bounces on his knees, nearly toppling the whole structure.

I trace the edge of my PerComm, the property listings for Rivina blurring together. The Lightyear gang isn't known for letting go of grudges. Even when they find out we destroyed Xander's data, they'll want revenge for the betrayal. For the

embarrassment.

"Mama, look!" Leo's voice pulls me back. "It's bigger than Daddy!"

"That's quite the achievement. What are you building?"

"A castle. For us!"

Davin catches my eye over Leo's head. He knows that look on my face, the one that means I'm running scenarios, plotting escape routes. Old habits.

"Your mother's thinking too hard again," he says to Leo, but his words are meant for me.

"We can't just pretend they won't find us," I whisper.

"No." He hands Leo another block. "But we can't let them steal his childhood either."

The tower sways dangerously as Leo adds another level. Just like us – one wrong move and everything could come crashing down. But watching them together, seeing Leo's face light up when Davin praises his engineering skills, I know we can't keep running. Some risks are worth taking.

"More blocks!" Leo demands, and I join them on the floor, choosing a blue one that matches Davin's skin.

The mountain air hits my lungs, fresh and clean, so different from recycled ship atmosphere. Our boots crunch on the gravel path leading to the weathered stone house. Wildflowers dot the surrounding meadow, their purple petals swaying in the breeze.

"And what brings you folks to Rivina?" The property agent's PerComm clicks as she inputs information.

"I'm Mira," I say, the practiced lie flowing easily. "My husband Kane works in deep space communications maintenance. We're looking for somewhere quiet to raise our son."

"Space maintenance? That explains the..." She gestures vaguely at Davin's blue skin.

"Kaleidian engineering programs are the best," Davin says smoothly, adjusting Leo on his hip.

"I'm Captain Leo!" our son announces proudly.

"Oh, he's precious." The agent laughs. "Playing pretend?"

"He loves his space adventures." I ruffle Leo's hair. "Don't you, sweetie?"

"Shh, Mama! We're undercover!" Leo stage-whispers, making the agent coo.

The house itself is perfect - sturdy stone walls, large windows overlooking the valley, and enough land for that garden I've been dreaming about. The previous owners left years ago, letting nature reclaim parts of the property.

"The nearest neighbors are two kilometers that way." The agent points north. "Perfect for privacy, though the isolation isn't for everyone."

"It's exactly what we're looking for," Davin says, examining the security system. "The solitude will be good for my work."

"And the mountain air will be wonderful for Leo's health," I add, maintaining our

cover story. "The station we were on was so industrial."

"Well, the price is negotiable, given how long it's been empty." She taps her PerComm. "Shall we discuss terms?"

Leo squirms down from Davin's arms, running to the window. "Mama, look! Purple trees, just like before!"

I catch Davin's eye and smile. Maybe this time, we really can make it work.

The mountain breeze carries the scent of fresh-cut wood as Davin and I arrange furniture in what will become Leo's room. Our son naps downstairs, worn out from "helping" us unpack all morning.

"This doesn't feel real," I say, smoothing the star-patterned blanket across Leo's new bed. "Having an actual house. Staying in one place."

Davin pauses in mounting a shelf, his tools spread across the floor. "You know what's stranger? I actually want to stay."

"Really?" I lean against the doorframe, studying his profile. "The great wanderer, ready to settle down?"

"Trust me, I'm as surprised as you are." He secures the last bracket. "Growing up, I couldn't wait to leave. My family had this estate on Kalei - generations of military service bought a lot of land. But it felt..." He gestures vaguely.

"Suffocating?"

"Exactly." He tests the shelf's stability. "I used to climb out my window at night just to look at the stars. Drove my parents crazy."

"And now?"

"Now?" He crosses to where I stand, his fingers brushing my hip. "Now I look at this place, and I see possibilities instead of walls. A home instead of a cage. Some place to call my own."

"That's... surprisingly poetic for you."

"Don't get used to it." His smile softens. "But thank you."

"For what?"

"For this. For Leo. For giving me something worth staying still for."

I stretch up to kiss him, my hands finding familiar purchase on his shoulders. "We make quite a pair, don't we? The smuggler and the bounty hunter, playing house."

"Playing? I'll have you know I'm very serious about my domestic duties." He pulls back, mock offense on his face. "I'm going to be the best damn gardener this mountain's ever seen."

"You keep telling yourself that, spacer."

CHAPTER 23

JESSE

The mountain breeze carries the scent of fresh-baked cake through the open windows. Leo bounces on his toes, watching Paraxan put the finishing touches on his masterpiece - a spacecraft-shaped confection complete with tiny edible thrusters.

"Is that my ship?" Leo presses his nose against the counter edge.

"Better." Paraxan's whiskers twitch. "It's a Kaleidian battlecruiser, like the ones your father flew."

"Papa! Look!" Leo tugs at Davin's pants. "Uncle Para made your ship!"

"That's impressive craftsmanship." Davin lifts Leo for a better view. "Though I don't remember the hull being quite so... purple."

"Artist's interpretation," Paraxan says with dignity, though I catch his slight smile.

Rena bursts through the front door, arms laden with wrapped packages. "Sorry I'm late! The local security checkpoint was a nightmare."

"Aunt Rena!" Leo squirms free of Davin's grip and races to hug her legs.

"Careful with those!" Taluk follows behind, juggling more gifts. "Some of them are actually breakable."

"Unlike your last attempt at cargo handling," Rena teases, making Taluk's scales flush darker red.

"That was one time-"

"Three times," I correct, helping him with the packages. "Remember the crystalline sculptures on Fur?"

"Or the liquid nitrogen containers on Entares?" Rena adds.

"Or the-" Paraxan begins.

"Okay, okay!" Taluk throws his hands up. "Can we focus on the birthday boy instead of my past mishaps?"

Leo beams at the attention, already eyeing the pile of presents. "Can I open them now?"

"Cake first," I say firmly. "Then presents."

"But Mama..."

"Listen to your mother," Davin says, ruffling Leo's silver hair. "Trust me, some things are worth waiting for."

The look he gives me makes my chest tight with happiness. Three years ago, I never imagined we'd be here - safe, together, surrounded by family. Different species, different backgrounds, but bound by something stronger than blood.

"Make a wish, little captain," Rena says as we gather around the cake.

Leo screws up his face in concentration, then blows out all three candles in one determined puff.

Smoke curls from the extinguished candles as Taluk leans forward, his scales catching the afternoon light. "So what'd you wish for, little man?"

"Taluk!" Rena swats his arm. "You can't ask that. If he tells us, it won't come true."

"Human superstitions." Paraxan's whiskers twitch as he begins cutting the cake. "On Odex, we believe sharing wishes multiplies their power. The more beings who know, the stronger the intention grows."

"I wished for a real spaceship!" Leo bounces in his seat, silver hair flopping. "Like Papa's, but bigger! With lasers and-and a jump drive and-"

"Whoa there, pilot." Davin's hand settles on Leo's shoulder. "Maybe we start with something smaller. Like a training simulator?"

"But Papa-"

"Your father's right." I catch Leo's disappointed pout. "Besides, what would you do with a whole spaceship?"

"Take everyone on adventures!" Leo spreads his arms wide. "Mama can drive, and Papa can shoot bad guys, and Uncle Para can fix the engine, and Aunt Rena can do the maps, and Uncle Taluk can..." He pauses, scrunching his face. "Uncle Taluk can carry stuff!"

"Hey!" Taluk protests as Rena doubles over laughing.

"At least he knows your strengths," Paraxan says dryly, sliding a piece of cake onto

Leo's plate.

The purple frosting already stains Leo's fingers as he digs in, spaceship dreams temporarily forgotten in favor of sugar. I lean into Davin's side, watching our makeshift family crowd around the table, trading jokes and stories like currency.

My chest tightens as I watch Rena help Leo lick purple frosting off his fingers. The encrypted channels we used to contact them might've been secure, but nothing's truly safe anymore. One slip, one traced communication...

"You're doing that thing again." Davin's voice breaks through my spiral. His blue fingers brush my shoulder.

"What thing?"

"That worry-crease between your eyes." He taps my forehead. "The one that shows up when you're overthinking."

"I'm not-"

"Remember the time Jesse triple-checked the nav computer during that milk run to Sector Four?" Rena cuts in, wiping Leo's sticky face. "Nearly drove me crazy with the recalculations."

"That milk run turned into a chase with three patrol ships," I counter.

"And we lost them." Taluk grins, his scales gleaming. "Because you planned for every contingency."

Paraxan's massive form shifts as he serves another slice of cake. "The Old Ways teach us that family gatherings strengthen the spirit. The risk of coming together is

always worth the reward."

Leo climbs into my lap, smearing frosting on my shirt. "Mama, can Uncle Para tell the story about the time you saved his ship from the pirates?"

"That's not exactly a birthday story, sweetheart."

"Please?" His silver hair tickles my chin as he looks up at me. "Uncle Taluk says it's the best one!"

Watching my old crew - my family - gathered around this tiny table in our hidden home, I realize something. We might be fugitives, but we're fugitives together. The warmth in my heart grows, melting away the ice of paranoia.

"Well," I say, hugging Leo close. "It all started when Uncle Para's navigation system went dark..."

While the others fuss over Leo and a game of Pin the Tail on the Dronkai, Davin and I slip onto the back porch. The mountain air nips at my skin, carrying the sweet scent of night-blooming flowers.

"Mom would've loved this." I lean against the railing. "She always said birthdays needed proper celebrating. Dad would've smuggled in some ridiculously expensive toy from Earth."

"They sound like good people."

"They are. Were. I don't even know anymore." My throat tightens. "Last I heard, they were running cargo through the Badlands. But that was before..." I wave my hand vaguely. "Everything."

Davin's blue fingers cover mine on the railing. "My father died thinking I was just another military drone. Mother remarried, moved to some Ataxian world. Haven't spoken to her in years."

"We're quite the pair, aren't we?" The sounds of laughter drift through the open window - Rena's bright giggle, Leo's squeal of delight, Taluk's deeper chuckle. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm being selfish, keeping them all tied to us like this."

"They chose to be here."

"Did they? Or did I drag them into this mess?"

"The way I remember it," Davin's thumb traces circles on my hand, "you tried to talk them out of coming. Rena threatened to steal your ship if you didn't let her visit."

"True." I can't help smiling. "And Paraxan said something about the Old Ways demanding family bonds transcend physical distance."

"See? They're here because they want to be. Because this-" He gestures toward the window where Taluk is apparently doing some kind of interpretive dance that has Leo howling with laughter. "This is family. Different species, different worlds, but family all the same."

"When did you get so wise?"

"Must be all that purple frosting. Goes straight to the brain."

I snort, leaning into his solid warmth. Inside, our strange, wonderful family continues celebrating, and for now, that's enough.

Leo tears into the wrapping of his first present, purple frosting still smeared across

one cheek. My fingers twitch with the urge to wipe it clean, but I force myself to stay put on the couch.

"A pilot's jacket!" He holds up the miniature leather coat, practically vibrating with excitement. "Like Aunt Rena's!"

"Try it on, squirt." Rena helps him slip his arms through the sleeves. The jacket's a bit big, but he'll grow into it.

"Now you look like a proper spacer," Taluk says, his scales catching the light as he hands Leo another package.

My eyes dart to the windows. The sun's setting, casting long shadows across our living room. Perfect cover for anyone watching-

Davin's hand finds mine, squeezing gently. Right. Focus on the present.

"Mama, look!" Leo brandishes a toy blaster, complete with flashing lights. "Uncle Para made it!"

Paraxan's whiskers twitch with pride. "Carved from mountain oak. The lights run on solar power."

"What do we say?" I prompt.

"Thank you!" Leo launches himself at Paraxan's massive frame, barely reaching the Odex's waist.

"Here's mine." Taluk passes over a lumpy package. "Sorry about the wrapping. Some of us didn't inherit Jesse's smuggler's touch."

"You mean her obsessive need to make everything perfect?" Rena dodges my half-hearted swat.

Leo's gasp draws my attention back. He's holding a model spaceship, each detail meticulously painted. "It's your ship, Mama! The old one!"

"How did you-" I start.

Taluk shrugs, scales darkening slightly. "Had some time between jobs. Thought the kid should know his heritage."

My throat tightens as Leo zooms the model through the air, making engine noises. Maybe our past isn't something to hide from after all.

Leo's curled under the table, silver hair splayed across the floor, clutching his model ship like a teddy bear. Cake crumbs dust his cheeks, and his new pilot's jacket bunches around his shoulders. My heart swells at the sight.

"Remember that run through the Nexus Belt?" Rena's voice drops low as she helps me gather wrapping paper. "When those patrols had us pinned?"

"You mean when you pulled that insane spiral maneuver?" Taluk grins, his scales catching the lamplight. "Thought I was gonna lose my lunch."

"It worked, didn't it?"

"The ship's never been quite the same," Paraxan rumbles, whiskers twitching. "That stress on the port thrusters-"

"Worth it to see those patrol ships crash into each other." I stack plates, trying to ignore the familiar itch in my fingers. The need to wrap them around a control yoke,

feel the thrum of engines beneath my feet.

"We miss you in the captain's chair." Rena touches my arm. "The routes aren't the same without your crazy schemes."

"Things change." My throat tightens as I watch Leo shift in his sleep, the toy ship making soft scraping sounds against the floor. "Some things matter more than a good adrenaline rush."

"Who says you can't have both?" Taluk leans forward, voice eager. "We could-"

"No." Davin's tone brooks no argument. "We discussed this."

"But with proper precautions-"

"The answer's no." I meet each of their eyes in turn. "I appreciate the offer, but Leo needs stability. Safety. Not a life running from port to port, always looking over our shoulders."

"Like we're doing now?" Rena arches an eyebrow.

"That's different." I gesture to Leo's sleeping form. "This is... manageable. Controlled. Out there? One wrong move and..." The words stick in my throat.

Silence falls, broken only by Leo's soft breathing and the distant cry of night birds.

Nothing else needs to be said on the matter.

CHAPTER 24

DAVIN

The crew's off-key singing fills our small living room with warmth. Leo bounces on his toes, trying to catch up with the words. His silver hair, so much like mine, catches the afternoon light streaming through the windows.

"The space whale goes whoosh-whoosh-whoosh," Rena sings, making exaggerated swimming motions.

"Whoosh!" Leo echoes, spinning in circles.

My PerComm vibrates against my wrist. A message notification flashes across the screen.

"Need to check something," I say, stepping away from the group. "Work stuff."

Jesse catches my eye, concern flickering across her face. I give her a reassuring nod.

In the kitchen, I tap the screen. The message opens:

'Remember the explosion that should've killed you? We saved you once. Time to return the favor. The bioweapon data is ours - we know you have it. Bring it to the coordinates below in 48 hours, or we'll finish what we started.'

My throat tightens. The Lightyear gang. The same ones who nursed me back to

health, filled my head with lies about being Tyren. The same ones who turned me against Jesse.

Leo's giggle carries from the other room. "Again, again!"

"Through storm and meteor shower," the crew starts up another verse.

I grip the counter, my knuckles turning pale blue. The life we've built here - Leo's birthday parties, quiet mornings with Jesse, teaching my son to walk - it could all vanish in an instant.

The PerComm buzzes again. A second message appears:

'Don't try running this time. We're closer than you think.'

My fingers dance across the PerComm's interface, running every trace program I learned in the military. The encryption's unlike anything I've encountered - military grade, maybe better. Each attempt hits a dead end, bouncing through relays across three systems.

"Come on," I mutter, trying another backdoor approach.

ACCESS DENIED flashes across my screen.

The singing from the other room grows louder. "The space whale meets his friends..."

I switch tactics, attempting to isolate the transmission's origin point. The signal disperses into quantum noise, impossible to track. Whoever sent this knows their tech.

My PerComm chirps with another message: 'Trying to find us? Cute.'

A cold sweat breaks across my neck. They're monitoring my attempts in real-time. They must have gone out of their way to hire some tech nerd, they sure didn't have this capability when I was there. I shut down the trace programs, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"Papa!" Leo calls from the living room. "More cake!"

"Be right there, buddy." My voice stays steady, practiced from years of ops gone sideways.

I take a deep breath, centering myself. The message could be coming from anywhere - the next system over or the café down the street. The not knowing claws at my gut worse than any certainty would.

"Everything okay in here?" Jesse appears in the doorway, her green eyes searching my face. "You're missing the good part of the party."

"Yeah, just..." I gesture vaguely at my PerComm. "Work stuff."

She raises an eyebrow. "On Leo's birthday?"

"Sorry. I'm done now." I force a smile, but my mind races with contingency plans. We need options, escape routes, safe houses. But first, I need to get through this party without letting on that anything's wrong.

The smell of Paraxan's cooking fills the kitchen - a mix of spices and seared meat that makes my mouth water despite my churning stomach. Through the doorway, I watch Jesse and Rena playing some kind of hand-clapping game with Leo, his squeals of delight piercing through my dark thoughts.

"You've got that look," Taluk says, sidling up next to me. His scales catch the light as

he leans against the counter.

"What look?"

"The one you had back on Jesse's ship. Right before everything went sideways with Xander."

My muscles tense. "Just tired. Leo's parties are exhausting."

"Sure." Taluk's eyes flick to my PerComm. "Lots of messages today?"

The hair on the back of my neck rises. His tone is too casual, too knowing. "Just work stuff."

"Right. Work." He drums his fingers on the counter. "Funny how it always comes up at the worst times."

Before I can respond, Paraxan's furry arm reaches between us with a steaming plate. "Taste this. Need opinion on seasoning."

I grab the offered fork, grateful for the interruption. The meat melts on my tongue, perfectly spiced despite the few stray hairs.

"It's good," I say, but Taluk's already wandered off to join the others, his usual clumsy act back in place as he trips over his own feet.

I watch him interact with Leo, making exaggerated faces that send my son into fits of giggles. Maybe I'm being paranoid. After months years of living like this, seeing threats in every shadow, it's hard to trust anyone. Even old crew mates.

Still, something about his questions nags at me.

I glance at my PerComm again. The nearest store's only an hour away. I could grab some milk, make a detour to those coordinates, handle this mess before it reaches our doorstep.

"We're out of milk," I announce, pushing away from the counter.

Jesse looks up from where she's helping Leo stack blocks. "Already? I just bought some yesterday."

"Papa, look!" Leo holds up his creation. "It's a tower!"

My throat tightens. The tower of blocks wobbles precariously, nothing like a real building, but his face beams with pride.

Three years ago, I disappeared. Jesse thought I was dead. Leo spent the first years of his life without a father. If I slip out now, if something goes wrong...

The memory of my own childhood floods back. My father died in service when I was still young. Mother always said he'd return someday, drowning in denial. I spent years watching the landing pads, hoping each incoming ship would bring him home.

"Actually," I say, "the milk can wait."

Leo tugs at my pants. "Help me make it bigger?"

I sink to the floor beside him, my joints creaking. "Sure, buddy. Let's build the fastest ship in the galaxy."

The message on my PerComm feels like a weight pressing against my chest, but watching Leo's small hands stack blocks with fierce concentration grounds me in what matters. I won't let him grow up wondering if his father abandoned him.

Whatever comes next, we face it together.

After dinner is over and the adults are sufficiently tipsy, I lead Jesse to our small balcony. The night air carries the scent of rain-soaked pavement and distant engine exhaust.

"Something's been eating at you all evening," Jesse says, leaning against the railing. "Spill it."

I pull up the messages on my PerComm, holding it out to her. "They found us."

Her eyes scan the screen, freckles standing out against her paling skin. "The Lightyear gang?"

"Yeah. They want the data we destroyed."

"Which doesn't exist anymore." She pushes away from the railing, pacing the small space. "Perfect timing, showing up on Leo's birthday."

"There's more." I tap through to show her my failed trace attempts. "Their tech's better than before. Military grade, maybe higher. They were watching my every move when I tried to track them."

My fingers brush against the burn scars on my arm, a reminder of the last time I underestimated these people. "We can't run. Not with Leo."

"And we can't fight them alone." She steps closer, resting her hand on my arm. "But we're not alone anymore. The crew-"

"No. I won't put them in danger."

"They're already in danger just by being here today." Her grip tightens. "We need help, Davin. And they're the only ones we can trust."

The truth of her words settles heavy in my gut. "You're right. But we do this smart. No half-measures, no noble sacrifices."

"Agreed." She slides her arms around my waist, pressing close. "Together this time."

"Together," I echo, holding her tight.

Back inside, Leo sprawls across the couch, his head drooping despite his protests. "Not sleepy."

His yawn stretches wide enough to swallow a small moon. Jesse catches my eye, a soft smile playing at her corners of her mouth.

"One more story," Leo pleads, rubbing his eyes. "Please?"

Rena settles next to him, tucking her legs underneath her. "Alright, space cadet. Ever hear about the Crystal Nebula Pirates?"

"No." Leo snuggles closer, his eyes wide with wonder

"Well, there was this crew of space pirates who lived in a nebula made entirely of crystals. Their ship was invisible because the crystals reflected all the colors of space around them."

"Like a chameleon?" Leo's eyes widen.

"Chameleon?" Par asks.

"Earth animal," Jesse explains.

"Exactly. But here's the thing - they weren't mean pirates. They only stole from the meanest, richest merchants in the galaxy."

"Why?"

"To give the crystals to children who needed birthday presents, of course." Rena taps his nose. "In fact, I heard they might've left something special for a certain birthday boy..."

Leo sits up straighter, suddenly more awake. "Where?"

"Can't tell you that. It's a secret pirate hiding spot." Rena lowers her voice to a whisper. "But maybe tomorrow, if you get enough sleep..."

Jesse and I exchange glances. The weight of the messages on my PerComm feels heavier watching this peaceful scene. Tomorrow everything changes, but for now, we let Leo drift off to Rena's tales of crystal ships and noble pirates.

Taluk trips over his own feet heading to the kitchen, still growing into his body. Paraxan quietly cleans dishes, his fur catching the light. We'll tell them soon enough. But not yet. Not while Leo dreams of space pirates and hidden treasures.

CHAPTER 25

JESSE

Leo's head droops against my shoulder, his soft breaths tickling my neck. The sugar crash from birthday cake has finally claimed its victory. Through the doorway, I hear Rena's laughter mixing with the others – a sound that used to mean success after a dangerous job, now just the warmth of friendship and safety.

"Time for bed, little man," I whisper, carrying him down the hallway to his room. His arms hang loose, completely surrendered to sleep.

The nightlight casts star patterns across his ceiling – Davin installed it last week, after spending hours researching what constellations would be visible from Kalei. I lay Leo down, his hair spreading across the pillow. My fingers brush his cheek, tracing the constellation of freckles that mirror my own.

"Mama?" His eyes flutter open for just a moment.

"Shh, go back to sleep."

"Did I say g'night to daddy?"

"You gave him the biggest hug, remember? Right after the cake."

He nods, already drifting off again. I tuck his favorite blanket around him, the one with spaceships that Rena brought him for his first birthday. Back when I was still

alone, still raw from losing Davin. Back when every gift felt like both a blessing and a reminder of what we'd lost.

I stand in the doorway, watching Leo's chest rise and fall. Three years ago, I never imagined this – a home, a family, Davin returned to us. The sound of his deep laugh echoes from the living room, and my heart swells. Even with everything we've been through, all the danger and uncertainty, we've built something real here. Something worth protecting.

Through the window, the moons cast their silver light across Leo's peaceful face. I close his door quietly, letting my hand linger on the frame for just a moment. We've come so far from that cramped ship cabin where I first realized I was pregnant, terrified and alone. Now, I have everything I never knew I wanted.

I just have to protect it, one last time.

I return to the living room where empty cake plates litter the coffee table. Davin catches my eye, and I give him a slight nod. The weight of what's coming is heavy in my bones.

"Hey," Davin clears his throat. "Need to tell you all something."

Rena straightens, her pilot's instincts picking up the shift in mood. "What's wrong?"

"Got a message from the Lightyear gang." Davin pulls out his PerComm, the blue glow highlighting the tension in his face. "They know where we are. Or at least they claim to. Not really willing to take a chance on it, though."

"Those bastards are still after the data?" Taluk leans forward, elbows on his knees.

"But you destroyed it," Rena says.

"They don't believe that." I sink into the chair beside Davin. "Or they don't care. Either way, they're threatening to kill us if we don't hand it over."

"All of us?" Rena's voice carries an edge I haven't heard since our smuggling days.

"The message was pretty clear about including Leo in that threat." Davin's jaw clenches as he says our son's name.

"Over my dead body." The words slip out before I can stop them.

"That's kind of the point, isn't it?" Rena stands, pacing the length of our small living room. "They're not going to believe the data's gone. Not after what it cost them last time."

"You could run again," Paraxan suggests. "Plenty of space to get lost in out there."

I shake my head. "They found us here. They'll find us anywhere."

"So what's the plan?" Rena stops pacing, crossing her arms. "Because I know that look, Jesse. You've got something brewing in that criminal mind of yours."

Taluk shifts in his seat, his scales shining. "Come on, Captain. You always kept backups of everything." His claws tap against his knee. "Remember that job on Gur? Three copies of the cargo manifest, all hidden in different data caches."

"That was different." I lean back, crossing my arms. "This isn't some shipping manifest we're talking about. It's weapons data that could get a lot of people killed."

"But if we just give them what they want?—"

"There is no backup." The words come out sharper than intended. "I destroyed every

trace of it. Every fragment, every temporary file, even the encrypted partitions where it might have left shadows."

Davin's hand finds mine, giving it a light squeeze. His skin is cool against my palm.

"You sure?" Taluk presses. "Maybe in one of your old drives? Or that memory chip you used to wear?"

"The data's gone. All of it." I touch my neck where it used to hang. "Crushed it myself. Nothing but dust in space now. Look, I know you're trying to help, but there's nothing left to give them. Nothing that would satisfy them anyway."

"But—"

"Drop it, Taluk." Rena's voice cuts through his protest. "If Jesse says it's gone, it's gone."

Taluk slumps back, his scales dulling slightly – a sure sign of frustration. "Just trying to find a way out of this mess that doesn't end with all of us dead."

"Actually, we do have a plan already." I lean forward, keeping my voice low. "Davin and I are going to hit them first. Just us."

"Like hell you are." Rena jumps up, her boots scuffing against the floor. "You're not leaving us behind."

"This isn't up for discussion." I glance toward Leo's room. "We need you here."

Taluk's scales flush dark red. "You can't be serious. After everything we've been through?—"

"Someone has to protect Leo," Davin cuts in. "Someone we trust."

"So what, we just sit here while you two get yourselves killed?" Rena's voice rises.

"That's not?—"

"Keep it down." Davin holds up his hand. "The kid's sleeping."

Paraxan's fur bristles. "There are other solutions. We could?—"

"No." I shake my head. "Leo needs protection. Real protection. Not just someone to run with him if things go wrong. He needs people who can fight back if they come here."

"And what happens if you don't come back?" Rena's words hit like a punch to the gut.

"What then?"

"Then Leo has the best family anyone could ask for." I reach for her hand. "People who'd die to protect him. People who know how to disappear if they have to."

"That's not fair." Rena yanks her hand away. "You can't just?—"

"Shh." Davin stands, moving to check the hallway. "Arguments won't change anything. We leave tomorrow night."

The room falls silent except for Taluk's claws drumming against his leg. I watch my old crew – my family – as the weight of our decision settles over them.

"I worked with your parents, and then with you," Paraxan says simply. "I'd be honored to continue working for your son."

My eyes burn as I wrap my arms around Paraxan's furry frame. His warmth envelops

me, and a few of his loose hairs tickle my nose. "You've always been family."

"Come here." Rena's arms circle both of us, her head resting against my shoulder.

"You're both idiots, but you're our idiots."

"This is insane." Taluk's scales flash a deep crimson as he leans forward on the couch. "Two people against the entire Lightyear gang? That's suicide. Hell, any Glimner game that's made a name is too much, these guys have expanded since last time."

"Numbers don't mean much when you know what you're doing." Davin crosses his arms, his blue skin almost luminescent. "I've taken down larger operations with smaller teams."

"In the military, sure. With backup and intel and?—"

"And now I have something better." Davin's eyes meet mine. "A partner who knows every dirty trick in the book, and insider knowledge on how they operate."

"They'll see you coming." Taluk's claws dig into the couch cushion. "They're not stupid."

"No, they're worse." I pull away from the group hug, wiping my eyes. "They're arrogant. They think they've got us cornered, desperate. That's exactly what we need."

"But—"

"You ever wonder why I hired you, Taluk?" I cut him off. "It wasn't for your muscle. It was because you understand how criminals think. You know their weak spots."

His scales ripple, darkening further. "That's different."

"Is it?" Davin steps closer to him. "Because from where I'm standing, it's the same principle. Find the weakness, exploit it, get out clean."

"And what happens when they catch you instead?"

"Then you better be ready to run with my son." The words come out harder than I intend, but I don't take them back. "Because that's your real job here. Not trying to talk us out of this."

Taluk's scales fade to a dull red. "Fine. But when this goes sideways – and it will – I'm getting Leo somewhere they'll never find him."

"That's exactly what I want to hear." I squeeze his shoulder.

Rena steps forward, pulling something from her jacket pocket. Metal glints in the dim light. "Here. You'll need these."

The familiar weight of my old ship keys settles in my palm. The worn metal feels like coming home, complete with the lucky trogan tail keychain I'd stolen from some market when I was ten years old.

"Ship never felt right without you at the helm." Rena shrugs, but her eyes are wet. "She's been waiting for you. Kept her maintained, just in case."

"In case what?"

"In case you needed to be you again." She pulls me into a fierce hug. "The real you. Not this cozy cottage mom act you've been pulling."

"Hey, I rock the cottage life."

"You really don't." She laughs against my shoulder. "But you do rock that captain's chair."

Davin clears his throat. "We should move. Less chance of being spotted if we leave while it's still dark."

I pull back from Rena, wiping my eyes. "Right. Practical as always."

"Someone has to be." He's already checking his weapons, efficient and focused. "Ready?"

The keys warm in my hand as I curl my fingers around them. "Yeah. Let's go remind some gangsters why they should've left us alone."

"Remind them?" Davin raises an eyebrow. "Pretty sure they never knew in the first place."

"Even better."

CHAPTER 26

DAVIN

The landing pad's lights pierce through Glimner's perpetual smog, casting an eerie glow across Jesse's face. My heart clenches at the sight of her – fierce and determined, yet vulnerable. The ship's engines wind down with a familiar whine that echoes across the empty platform.

"You remember the plan?" I brush my thumb across her cheek, memorizing every freckle.

"Yeah, yeah. We've been over it a dozen times." She rolls her eyes, but her hand trembles as she grips my jacket. "Just... don't do anything stupid, okay?"

"Me? Never." I crack a smile, but it doesn't reach my eyes. "Listen, Jesse. Before we go?—"

"Don't." She presses her fingers to my lips. "This isn't goodbye."

"Let me finish." I catch her hand, pressing it against my chest where my heart pounds beneath my skin. "I love you. Not because you're my fated mate, or because of Leo. I love you because you're the most infuriating, brilliant woman I've ever met."

"Infuriating?" A tear slides down her cheek, but she manages a watery laugh. "You're one to talk, Mr. I-Forgot-Who-I-Was."

"Follow the plan." I pull her close, breathing in the scent of her hair. "No matter what happens in there, stick to it."

"I promise."

When our lips meet, it's desperate and deep, a kiss that tastes of fear and hope and everything we might lose. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, and I pour every unspoken word into the way I hold her. The smog swirls around us, and for a moment, we're the only two people in the universe.

She breaks away first, pressing her forehead to mine. "I love you too, you blue idiot."

The factory looms ahead, a hulking mass of corroded metal and broken dreams. My boots crunch over shattered glass as I stick to the shadows, keeping my breath steady like I learned in basic training. The smog works in my favor, cloaking my blue skin in the pale light of Glimmer's moon.

A guard paces the loading dock, his attention fixed on his PerComm. Amateur. Back in my military days, that would've earned him latrine duty for a month. I wait for him to turn, timing my movements with the hiss of steam from a nearby vent.

The back door's lock is child's play – Jesse could crack it in her sleep. The thought of her makes my chest tight, but I push it aside. Focus on the mission. The door slides open with barely a whisper.

Inside, the air reeks of oil and rust. Machinery stands silent, gathering dust like forgotten sentinels. My enhanced vision picks out the security cameras, their red lights blinking lazily. I know their blind spots – used to set up systems just like these.

"Check the perimeter again," echoes a voice from above. "Boss is paranoid about an old friend showing up."

I press against a conveyor belt as footsteps pass overhead. Metal catwalks crisscross the ceiling, perfect for surveillance. Or ambush.

The stairs to the upper level creak, but I time each step with the grinding of distant machinery. Third step's loose – I skip it. The muscle memory from my time as Tyren serves me well, though the thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

A rodent scurries past, its claws clicking against metal. I freeze, but the guards continue their conversation about last night's race results. Their voices guide me deeper into the factory's maze of shadows and steel.

Almost there. The boss's office overlooks the main floor, a testament to his ego. Just like old times – except now, I'm not here as their puppet.

The door's hinges don't make a sound as I push it open, my weapon steady as I step inside. Cold metal presses against the base of my skull, and my spine stiffens. Rookie mistake – I should have checked the blind spot behind the door.

"Tyren, my boy!" The boss's gravelly voice fills the office. He lounges behind his desk, a glass of amber liquid in his hand. "Or should I say Davin? I'm never quite sure these days."

The pressure on my skull increases. "Drop it," a voice commands. The gun clatters to the floor.

"You know," the boss stands, straightening his cuffs, "I had a feeling you'd come back. Sentiment's a funny thing, isn't it? Makes people predictable."

"Funny. I remember you being taller." My mouth runs dry, but I keep my voice steady.

He laughs, the sound echoing off the metal walls. "And I remember you being smarter. Did you really think we wouldn't be watching? That we wouldn't notice you playing house with that pretty smuggler?"

My hands curl into fists. The mention of Jesse makes my blood boil, but I force myself to stay still. The gun barrel hasn't moved an inch.

"Take a seat, Tyren. Let's catch up." He gestures to a chair. "Tell me about your son. Leo, isn't it? Such a strong name."

Ice floods my veins. "Touch them, and?—"

"You'll what?" He takes a sip of his drink. "Kill me? Please. We both know how this works. You're alive because I allowed it. Your family's alive because I allowed it." His PerComm chirps, and he glances at it with a smile.

The boss swirls his drink, ice clinking against glass. "You know, when I first found you in that rubble, barely breathing, I saw potential. Raw material to mold. Tyren was everything I hoped for – efficient, ruthless, loyal."

"Sorry to disappoint." The gun barrel digs deeper into my skull.

"Oh, but that's just it." He sets his glass down, leaning forward. "The real test came later. Finding Jesse? That wasn't about the data. We knew that was a lost cause, anyhow. What moron would keep such incriminating evidence just hanging around? No. That was about you."

My chest tightens. The pieces click into place – the convenient intel about her location, the specific orders to bring her in alive.

"I needed to know if anything of Davin remained before I started grooming you for

leadership." He taps his fingers on the desk. "Even with your memories wiped, something in you recognized her. And that's when Tyren started to crack."

"You used her as bait." The words taste like ash in my mouth.

"Used you both, actually. A perfect little experiment." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "I had such high hopes for Tyren. But the moment you saw her again..." He shakes his head. "Love. It ruins everything."

"If you knew I'd fail, why send me?"

"Insurance. If you stayed Tyren, excellent. If not..." He shrugs. "Well, here we are. Though I must admit, the child was an unexpected variable. Made things more interesting, didn't it?"

The mention of Leo makes my hands shake. All those months as Tyren, all those missions – just tests leading to this moment.

"I suppose I should thank you," I say, keeping my voice steady. "You helped me find my family."

His laugh echoes off the walls. "Family? Oh, Tyren. You really have gone soft. Kill him."

A sharp crack echoes through the office, and warm blood splatters across my neck. The guard crumples behind me, his gun clattering against the metal floor. The boss's eyes go wide, and he bolts from his chair, slipping through a hidden door in the paneling.

I move to follow, but shouts and gunfire erupt outside. I snatch up my fallen weapon and sprint to the catwalks, taking the stairs two at a time. The smog's thinner up here,

and moonlight streams through the broken skylights.

Jesse lies prone on the highest walkway, her rifle trained on the chaos below. Her red hair glows like fire under the artificial lights. She doesn't look up as I approach, keeping her eye pressed to the scope.

"Nice shot." I crouch beside her, scanning the factory floor. Guards scramble for cover as more shots ring out.

"You were taking too long with the dramatic monologuing." She adjusts her aim slightly. "By the way, your ex-boss is a real piece of work."

"Heard all that, did you?"

"Every word." Her finger tightens on the trigger, and another guard falls. "Using me as bait? That's just rude."

"Jesse—"

"We'll talk about it later." She shifts position, tracking movement below. "Right now, we need to catch that bastard before he reaches his ship. Unless you'd rather stay here and discuss your feelings?"

"You're impossible." I can't help but smile, even as bullets ping off the railing beside us.

"That's why you love me." She fires again, and a guard clutching a grenade launcher drops. "Now go get them."

I vault over the railing, using a chain to slide down to ground level. The impact rattles through my boots as I land behind a stack of crates. A bullet whizzes past, splintering

wood near my head.

"Left side!" Jesse's voice crackles through my PerComm. A shot rings out, followed by a thud. "You're welcome."

Two goons rush me from behind machinery. My military training kicks in – duck, weave, strike. The first one's nose crunches under my elbow. The second swings wild, leaving his ribs exposed. One quick jab and he's down.

"Watch the door!" Jesse calls out.

I spin, catching a third man trying to flank me. His weapon clatters across the floor as I slam him into a support beam. "Getting sloppy up there?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Another shot, another body drops. "Did you want to handle all twenty by yourself?"

More guards pour in through the side entrance. I take cover behind an overturned table, trading shots. "Twenty? I count fifteen, max."

"Bet you dinner I'm right."

"Deal." I roll to new cover as bullets pepper my previous position. "But no counting the ones from upstairs."

"Spoilsport."

Three more rush my position. I catch the first with a leg sweep, use his momentum to throw him into his buddy. The third backs up, fumbling with his reload. Amateur. One quick shot ends his participation.

"That's twelve," Jesse announces cheerfully.

"Eleven." I duck under a wild swing, countering with an uppercut. "The big guy counts as two."

"Does not!"

A grenade arcs through the air. I dive behind a pillar as it detonates, showering the area with debris. Through the smoke, I spot movement – the boss making a break for the emergency exit.

"Jesse—"

"I see him." Her rifle cracks. The boss stumbles but keeps running. "Damn, vest. He's all yours, love."

I sprint after him, vaulting over fallen bodies and scattered crates. Behind me, Jesse continues picking off stragglers, covering my pursuit.

One more step, one well aimed shot, and just like that.

It's over.

CHAPTER 27

JESSE

Through my scope, I track Davin as he sprints after the boss. My finger rests steady on the trigger, ready to take out anyone who threatens him. The warehouse echoes with gunfire and shouting.

"Come back here, you coward!" Davin's voice carries across the space.

The boss ducks behind a shipping container. Bad move. Davin's military training shows as he predicts the exact moment the boss will peek out. One clean shot rings out. The boss crumples.

"Nice shot, love," I murmur, sweeping my rifle across the remaining threats. A flash of movement catches my eye – someone trying to flank my position on the catwalk.

The rifle won't work at this range. I drop it, letting it hang by its strap, and draw my pistol in one fluid motion. The goon charges around the corner, weapon raised.

"Surprise," I say, squeezing off two rounds. He staggers back, shock written across his face before he topples over the railing.

"Jesse!" Davin calls out. "Status?"

"Just taking out the trash up here." I scan the warehouse floor through my scope again. "Three more by the south entrance. Want to split them?"

"Ladies first."

I line up my shot. "Such a gentleman."

The rifle kicks against my shoulder as I pick off the first one. Davin's shots take care of the other two before they can even locate our positions.

"Show off," I mutter into my PerComm, but I'm smiling.

"You love it," he replies.

I make my way down from the catwalk, keeping my rifle ready. The metal stairs clang as I descend. The warehouse reeks of gunpowder, plasma, and blood, mixing with the musty industrial smell of oil and metal.

Davin meets me at the bottom. "Clear on your end?"

"Like a summer sky." I tap my PerComm. "Running thermal scan now, just to be thorough."

"Already did. We got them all – every ranking member who showed up for the meeting." He kicks the boss's weapon away from the corpse. "Including our gracious host here."

Something's off about the way he's standing. My eyes narrow as I catch the dark stain spreading across his left shoulder. "You're hit."

"Barely grazed me."

"That's not a graze. Let me see."

"It's nothing." He steps back when I reach for him. "We need to secure the area first."

"The area is secure, you stubborn blue idiot. Now let me look at that shoulder before you bleed all over my nice clean floor."

His lips twitch. "Your floor? Planning on buying this dump?"

"Maybe I am. Could be a nice summer home. Now stop deflecting and hold still."

He sighs but finally lets me examine the wound. The bullet went clean through his shoulder, missing anything vital from what I can tell. Still, the amount of blood concerns me.

"This needs proper medical attention."

"What it needs is a bandage and some whiskey. I've had worse paper cuts."

"Paper cuts? What kind of papers were you handling in the military? Razor blades?"

Davin chuckles, then points behind me. "Down there, if you're so concerned. The supply cache. Should be med supplies in there. I'll meet you back in the boss' office."

I find the medical supplies right where Davin said they'd be, in a dusty first aid station near the loading dock. The kit's well-stocked - seems the boss liked to be prepared for his violent meetings.

Following the sound of clinking glass, I locate Davin in what must be the boss's office. He's already made himself comfortable in a plush leather chair, boots propped on an antique desk worth more than my first ship. A crystal decanter sits open beside him, and the amber liquid in his glass catches the light from the grimy windows.

"Really? Drinking before I patch you up?"

"It's medicinal." He takes another sip. "This is hundred-year-old Glimner whiskey. Would be a crime to let it go to waste."

I drop the medical kit on the desk. "Speaking of crimes, you're bleeding all over this very expensive chair."

"Then you better hurry up and fix me, shouldn't you?"

"Take off your shirt."

He raises an eyebrow. "Normally you at least buy me dinner first."

"I made you breakfast yesterday." I snap on a pair of sterile gloves. "Now strip or I'll cut it off you."

"So aggressive." But he complies, smirking as he peels off the blood-soaked fabric.

The wound looks worse in the better lighting, angry and raw. I clean it thoroughly, trying to be gentle despite his stubborn attempts to act like it doesn't hurt.

"You know," he says, watching me work, "most people would be traumatized after killing a dozen men."

"Most people didn't grow up running contraband through pirate territory." I press a bandage over the exit wound. "Besides, they shot my husband. What was I supposed to do, ask them nicely to stop?"

"Husband?" His free hand catches mine. "When did that happen?"

"Well, technically not yet. But I figure after everything we've been through, you owe me a ring."

The smile that spreads across Davin's blue features makes my heart skip. His silver hair catches the dim light as he tilts his head, studying me.

"A ring?" He takes another sip of whiskey. "Is that all?"

"Well, I suppose you could throw in a proper honeymoon. Somewhere without gunfire and explosions." I squeeze the med gel tube, watching the clear substance ooze onto his wound. "Though knowing our luck, trouble would find us anyway."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a ship."

My hands freeze. "What?"

"This one's nice enough." He gestures vaguely to where mine is docked. "But I've got something better in mind. Military grade. Top of the line. Been sitting in storage since I retired."

"You're telling me you had a fancy ship this whole time and you've been bumming rides on my rust bucket?"

"Your rust bucket has its charms." His muscles tense as I spread the gel, but his voice remains steady. "Besides, I needed to maintain my cover."

I press the bandage into place. "And now?"

"Now I'm thinking it's time to upgrade. That is, if you're interested in co-captaining."

"Co-captaining?" I arch an eyebrow. "Last I checked, I outrank you on maritime

experience."

"True. But I outrank you in actual rank." His free hand catches mine again, thumb tracing circles on my wrist. "Former Commander Davin, at your service."

"Commander?" I snort. "And here I thought you were just some grunt."

"Disappointed?"

"Impressed." I secure the bandage.

I finish taping the last bandage in place. "There. Try not to get shot again for at least a week."

"No promises." Davin's fingers trace the edge of his glass. "But we're not done here."

"What do you mean? The boss is dead, his crew's dead." I peel off the medical gloves. "I'd say that's pretty done."

"The day crew, yes." He leans forward, wincing slightly. "But the Lightyear Gang has chapters all over this sector. This was just their headquarters."

"So? They'll find this mess and get the message. Nobody wants to tangle with whoever took out their leadership."

"You don't know these people like I do." His blue features harden. "They won't back down. They'll hunt us - hunt Leo - until they either succeed or die trying. It's how they maintain their reputation."

My stomach drops at the mention of Leo. "There must be hundreds of them. We can't possibly track them all down ourselves."

"We don't have to."

Davin rummages through the desk drawers, tossing aside papers and data chips until he finds what he's looking for - a sleek black PerComm.

"Got it." His fingers dance across the screen. "The boss kept everything on this. Personnel files, safe house locations, blackmail material."

I lean against the desk. "And you know his password because...?"

"Because he never changed it after I joined as Tyren." Davin's lips curl into a satisfied smirk. "And he's not very good at hiding when he put it in. Not the brightest criminal mastermind."

The PerComm chirps as it syncs with Davin's. Data streams across both screens in a blur of text and images.

"There we are." He scrolls through files. "Everything they had on us. Pictures from the station where they found you, surveillance data, even Leo's description."

My blood runs cold. "They were watching him?"

"Not anymore." Davin's jaw tightens as he systematically deletes each file. "And now every trace of us disappears from their network."

"What about backups?"

"Already thought of that." He taps a few more commands. "Sending a virus through their system. By tomorrow morning, any mention of Jesse or Davin will be corrupted beyond recovery."

"What about Tyren?"

"Him too." Davin's eyes meet mine. "Though I doubt anyone will be looking for a dead man."

The PerComm beeps one final time. Davin drops it on the desk and crushes it under his boot.

"Now," he says, "about the local data..."

I scan the security feeds on my PerComm while Davin collects shell casings from around the dead bodies. "Found the main hub. Looks like they kept everything on a closed system."

"Smart of them." Davin drops a handful of casings into a bag. "Harder to hack remotely."

"But easier to wipe completely." My fingers dance across the interface. "There – uploading the virus now. Should corrupt everything beyond recovery."

"Make sure you get the backup drives too."

"Already on it." I point to a door across the warehouse. "Server room's that way. Want to do the honors?"

"You take care of that. I'll finish collecting evidence here." He straightens with a grunt. "Don't forget to check for offline storage."

The server room hums with cooling fans and blinking lights. I plug my PerComm directly into the main console, watching as the virus tears through their systems. Files corrupt and delete themselves in cascading waves of data.

"Found something interesting," I call out. "They've got a whole network of cameras covering the surrounding streets."

"Wipe them all."

"Already done." I yank the backup drives from their slots. "Let's ditch this place. It smells awful."

Davin meets me in the center and grins, staring down into my eyes.

"You know, you would've made an incredible bounty hunter. Didn't know you could snipe like that." He takes my hand as we walk out of the place.

"Mom wanted her little girl prepared for anything," I say simply.

"You say that like it's braiding hair or sewing a torn skirt"

"Well," I sigh. "She taught me those things too. They just didn't stick as well."

Davin chuckles as we slip back into the foggy streets of Glimner, no more detectable than ghosts.

CHAPTER 28

DAVIN

I tap through the navigation controls, plotting our course through the quieter sectors. My shoulder throbs where the bullet grazed me, but the pain medication Jesse insisted on giving me dulls it to a manageable ache. It's nothing I haven't felt before, and by tomorrow it'll be gone. But I can't stand her worrying, so I'll take what she asks.

"We'll need to swing wide around the Cygnus Belt," I say, adjusting our trajectory. "Too many Alliance patrols there lately."

Jesse leans back in her captain's chair, boots propped on the console. "You're not half bad at this. No Rena, but your routes are solid enough."

"Military training has its perks." I smirk, remembering the endless hours spent memorizing star charts and patrol patterns. "Though I bet she never had to calculate trajectories while bleeding out."

"Oh please, you barely got scratched." Jesse rolls her eyes, but her smile softens. "I've seen Rena plot courses while half-conscious from a concussion."

"Show-off." I input the final coordinates, double-checking our fuel calculations. "We should make it home in about thirty-six hours, assuming we don't run into any unexpected company."

"Thirty-six? Rena could do it in thirty-two."

"Well, Rena isn't the one who just took down a crime syndicate." I gesture to my bandaged shoulder. "Some of us deserve a slightly longer route with better cover."

"Fair enough." Jesse reaches over and squeezes my hand. "Leo will be happy to see us, either way."

The mention of our son makes my chest tighten. "Think he'll forgive us for leaving?"

"He's a toddler. Give him a sweet roll and he'll forget we were ever gone."

Jesse stretches in her chair, arching her back in a way that draws my attention. The lights from the console dance across her freckled skin, and my mouth goes dry.

"Thirty-six hours?" She drums her fingers on the armrest. "However will we pass the time?"

That smirk of hers could melt steel. It's the same one she gave me the first time we met, when I was pretending to be some down-on-his-luck spacer. Now there's no pretense between us, just the quiet hum of the engines and the vast expanse of space ahead.

"I can think of a few ways." I release the controls, letting the nav system take over. My hands find her hips as she settles onto my lap. "Careful. That's my shooting arm."

"Please. I've seen you hit targets with both hands." Her fingers trace the edge of my bandage. "Besides, I wasn't planning on anything too strenuous."

"No?" The word comes out rougher than intended. "What exactly were you planning?"

She leans in close, her breath warm against my ear. "How about, you don't even have

to get up?"

"I think I'd like that," I murmur, my hands sliding up Jesse's thighs, her skin warm and smooth beneath my calloused palms. She leans in, her breath hitching as I trace the curve of her waist, the dip of her spine. Her lips are a whisper away, her green eyes darkened with the same hunger that's been gnawing at me since she stepped into the cockpit.

"Yeah?" She arches a brow, a playful smirk on her lips. "You think, or you know?"

"I know." My voice is rough, barely more than a growl. "But I like to keep you guessing."

She laughs, a husky sound that sends a shiver down my spine. "You do, huh?" She shifts, straddling my hips, her hands braced against the back of my chair. "Well, I happen to like surprises."

"Is that so?" I grip her hips, pulling her closer. Her scent envelops me, a mix of jasmine and something uniquely Jesse. It's intoxicating, and I find myself leaning in, my lips brushing against hers.

"Mm-hmm." She nips at my lower lip, her fingers tangling in my hair. "Especially when they involve you."

I chuckle, the sound rumbling in my chest. "Good to know."

Her mouth finds mine again, hungry and insistent. I meet her kiss for kiss, my hands roaming over her body, reacquainting myself with every curve, every freckle. She grinds against me, a soft moan escaping her lips as she feels the effect she has on me.

She pulls back, just enough to look me in the eye. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips

swollen from our kisses. "We've got thirty-six hours to fill. We can take our time."

"And not a moment to waste." I capture her mouth again, my hands sliding under her shirt, tracing the line of her spine. She arches into my touch, her body pressing against mine, and I can feel her heart pounding in time with my own.

She grinds against me, her hips moving in a rhythm that's driving me crazy. I can feel the heat of her, the friction between us sending sparks of pleasure coursing through my veins. I buck against her, my body responding to hers, our breaths coming in ragged gasps.

Our bodies move in sync, the tension between us building, the cockpit filled with the sound of our ragged breaths, the soft moans that escape our lips.

Jesse abruptly stops, her lips pulling away from mine, a wicked grin spreading across her face. She shifts, sliding off my lap, and kneels between my legs. Her hands, eager and sure, make quick work of my belt, the button, the zipper. I suck in a breath, my heart pounding harder, as she tugs at my pants, freeing me.

She looks up at me, her green eyes dark with desire, that smirk still playing on her lips. "Shh, let me take care of you."

I swallow hard, my body tense with anticipation.

She grins, her eyes never leaving mine as she leans in, her breath hot against me. Then, she takes me into her mouth, and I can't help but groan, my head falling back against the chair. She's slow at first, teasing, her tongue tracing every inch of me. I can feel the vibration of her hum, a sound of pure satisfaction that sends a jolt of pleasure through me.

My hands find their way into her hair, the red strands like silk between my fingers. I

resist the urge to guide her, to rush her. This is her show, and I'm more than happy to let her set the pace. She picks up the rhythm, her head bobbing, her hand working in tandem with her mouth. The sight of her, the feel of her, it's intoxicating.

"Jesse..." Her name escapes my lips like a secret, a whisper of pure need. She responds with a moan, the sound vibrating through me, pushing me closer to the edge. I can feel the tension building, the heat coiling in my gut. My breath comes in ragged gasps, my body tense and aching for release.

She pulls back, just enough to look up at me, her lips swollen and slick. "You taste amazing," she murmurs, her voice husky with desire. Then, she takes me deep, deeper than before, her mouth and throat working in perfect harmony.

I groan, my hips bucking against her, my body trembling with the effort of holding back. "Jesse, I'm close," I warn, my voice a ragged whisper. She responds with a hum, a sound of encouragement that sends me spiraling over the edge. Waves of pleasure crash through me, leaving me breathless and spent.

Jesse pulls back with a single lick, a satisfied smile on her face. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, her eyes never leaving mine. "Well, that was fun," she says, her voice a sultry purr.

I laugh, a breathless sound that echoes through the cockpit. "What a nice appetizer." I stand, getting Jesse back on her feet. "Now let's go try the main course."

Jesse makes a giggling sound as I toss her on the bed. I capture her mouth with mine, a hungry, desperate kiss that leaves us both breathless. Her body arches against mine, her hips grinding against me, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me. I trail kisses down her neck, her collarbone, her skin salty and sweet under my tongue.

She moans, her fingers tangling in my hair, her body writhing beneath me. "Davin,"

she gasps, her voice a ragged whisper. "Please."

I smile against her skin, my hands roaming over her body, tracing every curve, every freckle.

She growls, a sound of pure frustration that sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine. "You know what I want, Davin. Don't make me beg."

I chuckle, my hands sliding under her shirt, tracing the line of her spine. "But I like it when you beg."

She glares up at me, her eyes sparkling with a mix of desire and annoyance. "You're impossible, you know that?"

I grin, my fingers tracing the waistband of her pants. "Impossible to resist, you mean?"

She rolls her eyes, but her lips twitch with a smile. "Something like that."

I capture her mouth again, my body pressing into hers, our breaths coming in ragged gasps. Her hands roam over my body, her touch setting my skin on fire. I can feel the heat of her, the friction between us sending sparks of pleasure coursing through my veins.

She pulls away, her breath hot against my ear. "Davin," she whispers, her voice a husky plea. "I need you. Now."

Her words send a jolt of heat through me. I make quick work of her clothes, then what remains of mine. We're a tangle of limbs and ragged breaths, our bodies pressing together, our hearts pounding in sync.

I sheath myself in her, her heat enveloping me, sending waves of pleasure crashing through me. She moans, her hips bucking against mine, her body meeting me thrust for thrust. Our bodies move in sync, our breaths coming in ragged gasps, our moans filling the air.

"Jesse," I groan, my body tense with the effort of holding back. "You feel amazing."

She smiles up at me, her eyes glazed with desire. Her hands grip my hips, her nails digging into my flesh, urging me on.

I can feel the tension building, the heat coiling in my gut. I reach between us, my fingers finding the spot that sends her spiraling over the edge. She cries out, her body convulsing around me, her nails digging into my skin.

We come together, our screams loud and unheard in the depths of space.

I collapse on top of her, our bodies slick with sweat, our breaths coming in ragged gasps. Her arms wrap around me, holding me close, her heart pounding against mine.

"That was..." she whispers, her voice trailing off.

I smile, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. "Amazing? Incredible? The best you've ever had?"

She laughs, a soft, breathless sound that sends a shiver down my spine. "All of the above." She pauses, her fingers tracing patterns on my back. "I love you, Davin. I never stopped."

Her words send a jolt of warmth through me. I pull back, just enough to look her in the eye. "I love you too, Jesse. More than anything." I press a soft kiss to her lips, a promise of more to come.

CHAPTER 29

DAVIN

The hum of the ship's engines shifts pitch, signaling our approach to the station. I stretch, careful not to disturb Jesse who's still fast asleep beside me. Her red hair fans across the pillow, a few strands catching on her lips with each soft breath.

The sheet slides down as I sit up, exposing the bandage on my chest. The wound throbs, but it's healing well enough. A small price to pay for our freedom.

Through the viewport, stars streak past in brilliant lines of light. We're almost home. Almost back to Leo. My chest tightens at the thought of my son - our son. Three years of memories I'll never get back, but we have time now. Time to make new ones.

Jesse mumbles something in her sleep, her hand reaching out to where I was lying. I brush my fingers across her freckled shoulder, tracing constellations I've memorized over the past few months. She settles, a small smile tugging at her lips.

The nav computer beeps, showing our estimated arrival time: forty-three minutes. Just enough time to let her rest a bit longer. She deserves it after everything - after keeping Leo safe all those years, after helping me remember who I really am.

I lean back against the headboard, watching the rise and fall of her chest. The sheet barely covers her curves, and my mind drifts to last night's activities. A pleasant ache settles in my muscles, reminding me that some things are worth the pain.

The ship's autopilot can handle the approach. For now, I'm content to stay here, guarding Jesse's sleep, counting down the minutes until I can hold our son again. Until we can truly start our life together, free from the shadows of our past.

Jesse's eyes flutter open, and she stretches like a cat beside me. Her hand finds mine under the sheets. "How much longer?"

"About forty minutes."

"Forty min-" She bolts upright, the sheet falling away. "Why didn't you wake me? I look like-" She runs her fingers through her tangled red hair, grimacing at what she finds there.

"You look beautiful." I catch her wrist as she tries to scramble out of bed. "And there's no rush. Leo's with friends, remember?"

"But-"

"He's fine." I pull her back down beside me, and she lands with a soft oof against my chest. The impact makes my wound twinge, but I don't let it show.

"Besides," I trail my fingers down her bare arm, "when was the last time we had a quiet morning?"

"This morning wasn't exactly quiet." Her green eyes sparkle with mischief as she props herself up on an elbow.

"True." I lean in to kiss her, but she dodges away.

"Nope. Not with this morning breath. And I really do need to shower." She slides out of bed, gathering her scattered clothes. "But you're right. There's no rush."

I watch her pad toward the bathroom, admiring the view. "Want company?"

"Didn't you just say there's no rush?"

"Exactly. We have time."

The landing pad hisses as we touch down, hydraulics releasing pressure in a cloud of steam. Jesse's already packed our few belongings into a single bag - old habits die hard. We make our way through the station's winding corridors to the public transport hub, my hand resting on the small of her back.

The transport car we board is nearly empty, just an elderly couple in the front and a teenager absorbed in their holoscreen. The windows stretch from floor to ceiling, offering a panoramic view of the mountainside as we climb higher into the foothills.

Jesse settles into the seat beside me, her warmth pressing against my side. The transport jolts slightly as it navigates a curve, and she shifts closer, resting her head on my shoulder. Her hair tickles my neck, carrying the faint scent of the ship's generic shampoo.

"Do you think we'll actually get to live peacefully now?" Her voice is soft, meant only for me. "No more running, no more looking over our shoulders?"

I watch the landscape scroll past, taking in the snow-capped peaks and the dense forest below. The morning sun catches on the crystalline formations dotting the mountainside, sending rainbow refractions dancing across the transport's interior.

"I hope so." My fingers find hers, intertwining. "We've earned it, don't you think?"

"Mmm." She squeezes my hand. "It's just... I've never really done 'peaceful' before. What if I'm terrible at it?"

"You managed just fine these past few years."

"That wasn't peaceful. That was hiding."

"Well," I press a kiss to the top of her head, "we'll figure it out together."

The transport stops not far from our little place by the mountains. We thank the driver, grab our luggage, and continue the final trek to our home.

To our son.

The lock clicks open under my touch, and something immediately feels off. The air's too still, carrying a metallic tang that sets my teeth on edge. Jesse steps in behind me, her boots silent on the floor.

"Leo?" Her voice wavers. No answer.

The living room light flickers through the doorway, casting uneven shadows. Wrong..

"Stay behind me," I whisper, drawing my sidearm. Jesse's breath catches, but she nods, pulling her own weapon.

We clear the entryway, moving in sync like we've done this a thousand times. The kitchen doorway gapes dark and empty on our right. Living room ahead.

"Oh, no." Jesse's fingers dig into my arm as we round the corner.

Rena's slumped on our couch, zip ties binding her wrists and ankles. A dark bruise spreads across her cheekbone, and blood trickles from her split lip. Her eyes are closed, but her chest rises and falls steadily.

"Rena!" Jesse rushes past me before I can stop her, holstering her weapon to check her friend's pulse.

Movement catches my eye - a flash of fur through the kitchen doorway. I pivot, weapon raised, and my heart sinks. Paraxan lies sprawled across our kitchen floor, his usually pristine fur matted with blood. His chest barely moves.

"Jesse," I call out, keeping my voice low and steady. "Where's Leo?"

The question hangs in the air like a blade.

"He's right here." Taluk's voice cuts through the kitchen doorway, sharp and unfamiliar without its usual fumbling uncertainty.

My blood freezes. Leo dangles from Taluk's left arm, tears streaking his chubby cheeks. His bright hair is matted to his forehead, and his tiny fingers grip Taluk's sleeve. The gun in Taluk's right hand looks massive against Leo's small frame.

"Daddy," Leo whimpers, reaching toward me.

"It's okay, buddy." I keep my voice steady, even as rage burns through my veins. "Everything's going to be fine."

"Weapons down." Taluk jerks his chin toward the floor. "Now."

Jesse's breath catches beside me. Her hand trembles as she slowly lowers her gun.

"You too, Davin." Taluk's scales gleam dully in the kitchen light. "Unless you want to see how fast I can pull this trigger."

The military training screams at me to take the shot - I'm faster, better trained. But

Leo's so close to the barrel, and Taluk's finger's already white-knuckled on the trigger. One wrong move...

My weapon clatters to the floor. Jesse kicks both guns away, her hands raised.

"All this time." Her voice shakes. "You were just waiting for your chance?"

"Not the whole time." Taluk adjusts his grip on Leo, who squirms and starts crying harder. "I followed you at first for a reason. Then I kept watching you make stupid mistake after stupid mistake. If you'd listened to me in the first place, we never would've gotten wrapped up in some genocidal freak's doomsday device. That's all on you, Captain."

A groan from behind catches my attention - Rena stirring on the couch. But Taluk's eyes never leave us, and his aim doesn't waver.

"Shh, Leo." Jesse's voice cracks. "Baby, look at Mommy. It's going to be okay."

"Smart woman." Taluk's scales ripple with something like satisfaction. "Keep telling him that. Makes this easier for everyone."

"What do you want, Taluk?"

"Don't play dumb." He shifts Leo higher on his hip, making my son whimper. "The data. I know Jesse has a backup somewhere. She's too careful not to."

Jesse tenses beside me. "I destroyed it all-"

"Save it." Taluk's scales ripple with irritation. "I've watched you work for years. You always keep insurance. Always have an exit strategy." His eyes narrow. "Where is it?"

The pieces click together in my mind. "You tipped off the Lightyear gang." The words taste bitter on my tongue. "About Xander. About the ship."

"Someone had to profit from that mess." His mouth twists into something between a smirk and a snarl. "You were all so focused on doing the job right, you couldn't see how easily he was going to fleece us. Mett his so called wealthy contact and slip away. He was worth more in their hands."

"Please," Jesse whispers, "he's just a baby. Let him go and we can-"

"The data." Taluk's finger tightens on the trigger. "Now."

Leo hiccups between sobs, reaching for Jesse. "Mama..."

My chest constricts at the fear in my son's voice. Three years of missed moments, and now this. The military trained me for hostage situations, but nothing prepared me for watching my own child at gunpoint.

"Time's running out." Taluk's scales darken with impatience. "Where's the backup, Jesse?"

Jesse's shoulders slump. "Okay."

My jaw clenches as she walks to the hallway closet. This can't be happening. There's no way she kept a secret copy from me. She reaches up to the top shelf, stretching onto her tiptoes to slide aside an old storage container.

"Jesse-" I start, but she shoots me a look that stops me cold. There's something in her eyes I can't quite read.

She returns with a small data stick, rolling it between her fingers. "It's encrypted, but

anyone worth their salt should be able to crack it."

Taluk's scales ripple with satisfaction. "Slide it across the floor."

The data stick skitters across the hardwood, stopping at Taluk's feet. He scoops it up without taking his eyes - or his weapon - off us.

"Smart choice." He nudges Leo forward. "Go to Mommy, kid."

Leo stumbles toward us, his little legs shaking. Jesse drops to her knees, scooping him up and pressing him close to her chest. I wrap my arms around them both, my heart thundering against my ribs.

"Don't follow me," Taluk warns, backing toward the door. "Don't call the authorities. Don't try anything stupid." His scales darken. "You know what I'm capable of now."

The door clicks shut behind him. Through the window, I catch a glimpse of his shadow disappearing down the street.

Leo hiccups against Jesse's shoulder, his tiny fingers tangled in her hair. "Mama..."

"Shh, baby." She rocks him gently. "You're safe now. You're safe."

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CHAPTER 30

JESSE

The kitchen reeks of copper and something burnt. Paraxan lies sprawled near the stove, his gray fur matted with blood around a nasty gash on his temple. Leo's tiny fingers dig into my leg as I kneel beside our mechanic.

"Par?" My hands hover over his chest, unsure where to touch without causing more harm. "Can you hear me?"

His whiskers twitch. One amber eye cracks open, then the other. "Captain..." His voice comes out raspy. "Taluk, he?—"

"Shh, we know. He's gone now." I grab a clean dish towel from the drawer, pressing it gently against his head wound. "That little snake won't hurt anyone else."

"Should've seen..." Paraxan's ears flatten against his skull. "Was making his favorite stew when..."

"None of that now." The towel's already soaking through. "You couldn't have known."

Leo inches closer, his bottom lip trembling. "Is Par-Par gonna be okay?"

"Of course, sweetie." I try to sound more confident than I feel. "Why don't you go play in your room while we help him?"

"No!" Leo wraps his arms around my waist, burying his face in my side. "I don't wanna be alone."

From the living room, I hear Davin cursing at the knots binding Rena. She's giving him detailed instructions on how to untie them, peppered with colorful suggestions about what we should do to Taluk when we catch him.

Paraxan struggles to sit up, his claws scraping against the tile. "Captain, if he gets away, he'll—"

"It's okay," I tell him softly. "It's okay. We're letting him go."

"And why exactly are we letting him go? With the kind of information that could get an entire planet killed?"

Davin storms into the kitchen, his boots leaving dark smears on the tile. "You told me you destroyed that data." His silver hair bristles, skin flushing a deeper blue. "Now I find out you've been carrying it around this whole time?"

I press the towel harder against Paraxan's wound, too focused on helping my friend. Leo's tiny fingers dig deeper into my side.

"Answer me, Jesse." Davin's voice drops low, dangerous. "What game are you playing?"

Rena appears in the doorway behind him, rubbing her raw wrists. "Oh, calm down, big guy. You're scaring your kid."

"I'm scaring—" He cuts himself off, running a hand through his hair. "That data could get us all killed. Could get Leo killed. And you just handed it over to that treacherous?"

"Daddy's really mad," Leo whispers against my hip.

Paraxan's whiskers twitch as he lets out a wheezing laugh. "You've got a lot to learn about your mate, bounty hunter." He winces as he shifts position. "The captain always has a backup plan. Always."

"He's right." Rena leans against the doorframe, arms crossed. "And if you're going to be part of this family, you better get used to it."

I secure the bandage around Paraxan's head with medical tape, my fingers steady despite the tension in the room. "There. That should hold until we can get you proper medical attention."

"So, Jesse." Davin's voice carries that military edge I remember from our first meeting. "What's the backup plan for keeping Taluk from selling a bioweapon to the highest bidder. Because if there isn't one, I have a criminal to chase down."

A laugh bubbles up from my chest, unexpected and slightly hysterical. Leo's grip on my side loosens as he peers up at me, confusion written across his little face.

"Take a deep breath, soldier." I wipe my hands on my pants and stand, scooping Leo up with me. "That data stick? It's got nothing but an old grocery list on it. The real data was destroyed months ago, just like we agreed."

Davin blinks. The muscles in his jaw work as he processes this. "You're telling me?—"

"That Taluk's about to try selling a shopping list to the highest bidder?" Rena snorts. "Oh, I'd pay good money to see that meeting."

"But he seemed so sure..." Davin's expression shifts from anger to bewilderment.

"Because I sold it." I bounce Leo on my hip, earning a tiny giggle. "Come on, you've seen me work. Half of smuggling is confidence. Make them believe what you're selling is worth something, and they'll never question it."

Paraxan's whiskers twitch with amusement. "You even had me fooled. And now he's burned his bridges with both the crew and his potential buyers."

"Exactly." I step closer to Davin, close enough to see the tension bleeding from his shoulders. "I meant what I said about wanting a quiet life. No more weapons, no more data that could get people killed. Just us, our family, and maybe the occasional legitimate cargo run."

Rena doubles over, clutching her sides as laughter echoes through our kitchen. Her split lip starts bleeding again, but she doesn't seem to care. "Oh stars, Jesse. You beautiful, devious woman."

"Care to share the joke?" Davin shifts Leo in his arms, our son playing with the collar of his father's shirt.

"Don't you get it?" Rena wipes tears from her eyes, smearing a bit of blood across her cheek. "Our little Taluk's got two options, and they both end badly for him."

"Three, if you count running," I correct, helping Paraxan into a chair. "But we all know he won't do that. He's too greedy."

"Exactly." Rena's grin turns predatory. "Option one: he goes to a criminal gang. They test the data, find out it's worthless, and—" She draws a finger across her throat.

"And option two?" Davin asks, though I can see understanding dawning in his eyes.

"He tries to turn it in to the Alliance." Rena snorts, setting off another round of

giggles. "Claims he's got proof of bioweapon dealings. They'll throw him in a holding cell while they verify the data. And once they realize he's wasted their time..."

"Bureaucrats hate nothing more than having their time wasted," Paraxan adds, his whiskers twitching despite the pain. "They'll bury him in so much red tape, he'll be lucky to see daylight before he's old and gray."

"Either way," I say, retrieving the first aid kit from under the sink, "he won't be bothering us again. Rena, come here, let me treat that wound."

"Mama's smart," Leo declares proudly, and my heart swells.

"Yes, she is," Davin agrees, pressing a kiss to our son's forehead. "Terrifyingly so."

I sink into a kitchen chair, the adrenaline finally wearing off. The antiseptic stinks as I clean Rena's split lip, but my hands stay steady. "You know what gets me? He really was exactly what he claimed to be – just a kid way over his head."

"A kid who held your son at gunpoint," Davin reminds me, his voice sharp.

"Not defending him." I cap the antiseptic. "Just... remembering how he used to drop things whenever anyone walked in. How he'd stammer through status reports."

Rena winces as I apply the bandage. "That wasn't all an act? Stars, I thought he was playing it up."

"No, that was real." I lean back, reminiscing. "Remember when he tried to help with inventory? Knocked over an entire shelf of protein packs?"

"And then tried to clean it up," Paraxan adds from his chair, "but kept slipping on the powder?"

"Exactly." My chest tightens. "He was genuine in his incompetence. Just like he was genuine in his greed. If he'd just... waited. Learned. Built trust with us..."

"He could've been something," Rena finishes. "Instead, he's about to learn the hard way that patience isn't just a virtue – it's a survival skill."

Leo tugs at my sleeve. "Mama, was Taluk bad all along?"

"No, sweetie." I pull him into my lap. "Sometimes good people make bad choices when they're scared or desperate. They convince themselves there are shortcuts to what they want."

"There aren't," Davin says firmly. "Not ones worth taking."

"No," I agree, running my fingers through Leo's hair. "There aren't."

The kitchen's quiet except for the clink of utensils against plates. Paraxan's stew sits untouched in the pot on the stove – none of us have the heart to eat it after everything. Instead, we're picking at reheated leftovers.

Leo pushes his vegetables around his plate. "Uncle Par Par, your head still hurts?"

"Not so much now, little one." Paraxan's whiskers droop despite his reassuring tone. "Your mother's quite good at patching people up."

"Better than your cooking skills," Rena tries to joke, but it falls flat. She sets down her fork with a sigh. "I keep thinking about all those times he helped me calibrate the nav system."

"Or when he'd volunteer for night watch." My throat tightens. "Remember how he'd bring us drinks during long hauls?"

"Small kindnesses to build trust." Davin's voice carries no judgment, just understanding. "It's a common tactic."

Leo crawls into my lap, abandoning his dinner entirely. "I don't want anymore bad people, Mama."

"Oh, sweetheart." I press my nose into his silver hair, breathing in his clean, baby smell. "I'm so sorry you had to see that."

"He's not eating properly," I whisper to Davin later, after we've cleared the plates. Leo's curled up on the couch with Paraxan, listening to one of the mechanic's rambling stories. "And he flinched when Rena moved too quickly earlier."

Davin's hand finds mine under the table. "He's got Kaleidian blood in him, Jesse. We're built to weather storms."

"Half Kaleidian," I remind him.

"And half you." His thumb traces circles on my palm. "That makes him twice as resilient."

Rena snorts into her drink. "Stars help us all when he's older. Stubborn as a Kaleidian, clever as Jesse – he'll be unstoppable."

"Already is." I watch Leo giggle at something Paraxan says, the first real laugh we've heard from him since the incident. "Look at him. Still a toddler and he's bouncing back."

"Like I said." Davin squeezes my hand. "Resilient."

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CHAPTER 31

DAVIN

The door to Leo's room slides shut with a soft hiss. I lean against the wall, watching Jesse tuck our son into his small bed. The events of the day have left their mark, and exhaustion weighs heavy on her shoulders.

"Another story, Mama?" Leo's voice is small, but determined.

"One more, little star." Jesse perches on the edge of his bed. "Which one?"

"The space pirate one."

I cross my arms, hiding my smile. "You've heard that one three times today."

"Four," Jesse corrects, running her fingers through Leo's silver hair - so much like mine. "But who's counting?"

Paraxan's heavy footsteps echo down the hall, followed by Rena's lighter ones. Through the open door, I catch snippets of their conversation about security protocols and sensor arrays.

"All sealed up for the night," Rena calls out. "We'll take shifts."

"Copy that," I respond, then turn back to find Leo's eyes growing heavy despite his protests.

"But I'm not tired," he mumbles, clutching his stuffed velocitorck closer.

Jesse starts the familiar tale anyway, her voice soft and soothing. "Once upon a time, there was a very clever space pirate..."

I slide down to sit beside her, my hand finding the small of her back. Leo's breathing evens out before she even reaches the part about the treasure map. She lets the story trail off, and we sit in comfortable silence, watching our son sleep.

"He's out cold," I whisper.

"Thank the stars." Jesse leans into me. "Though I can't blame him for being anxious. It's been quite a day."

"We should get some rest too. Rena and Paraxan have first watch."

Jesse nods, but neither of us moves just yet. The soft blue nightlight casts gentle shadows across Leo's peaceful face. After everything that's happened, these quiet moments feel like stolen treasures.

"I need a shower." Jesse walks into our room, her fingers already working the buttons of her shirt. She glances back at me, a smirk playing on her lips. "You coming?"

I raise an eyebrow, leaning against the doorframe. "Do I need an invitation?"

She laughs, a sound that never fails to send a jolt through me. "Not at all. Just didn't want you to miss the hint."

I push off the frame, following her into the room and shutting the door behind me. Her shirt hits the floor, quickly joined by her pants. "Subtlety was never your strong suit."

"And thank the stars for that." She turns to face me, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. "Are you joining me or not, Davin?"

I reach for the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head. "You don't have to ask me twice."

She grins, turning towards the bathroom. The soft glow of the overhead lights illuminates her freckled skin, casting long shadows that dance with each step. I follow her, my eyes tracing the curve of her hips, the line of her spine.

The shower stall is already filled with steam, the glass fogged up. Jesse steps inside, the water cascading over her, turning her red hair a shade darker. I step in after her, the hot water a stark contrast to the cool air of our room.

"You know," she says, turning to face me, "we've been through hell and back, but I don't think we've ever showered together."

I chuckle, reaching for the soap. "I guess we were always too busy running for our lives."

She takes the soap from me, her fingers brushing against mine. "No running tonight."

I watch as she lathers up, her hands moving over her body in a way that makes my mouth go dry. "No," I agree, my voice hoarse. "No running tonight."

The steam swirls around us, the hot water a stark contrast to the cool tiles under our feet. Jesse's hands are braced against the wall, her back arched just enough to drive me wild. I run my hands over her hips, feeling the curve of her, the softness of her skin under the slick soap.

"You're teasing," she murmurs, looking back at me over her shoulder. Her green eyes

are dark, pupils blown wide with desire.

"Am I?" I ask, leaning in to press a kiss to her shoulder. The water cascades over us, washing away the suds as I move my hands up to cup her breasts. She lets out a soft moan, pushing back against me.

"Davin," she whispers, her voice barely audible over the sound of the water. It's a plea, a demand, a promise all rolled into one.

I smile against her skin, letting my teeth graze her neck. "Patience, Jesse."

She huffs out a laugh, the sound echoing off the tiles. "Since when have I ever been patient?"

"True," I concede, sliding one hand down her stomach, feeling the muscles quiver under my touch. "But good things come to those who wait."

She shivers as my fingers dip lower, brushing against her heat. "And what if I don't want to wait?"

I chuckle, the sound low and rough. "Then I guess I'll have to give you what you want."

I grip her hips, positioning myself at her entrance. She pushes back against me, eager, impatient. I slide into her slowly, inch by inch, feeling her stretch around me. She lets out a soft gasp, her fingers curling against the tiles.

"Davin," she breathes, her voice shaking.

I lean over her, pressing my chest against her back. "Right here, Jesse," I murmur, my lips brushing her ear. "Right here with you."

I start to move, slow and steady, feeling her body respond to mine. She meets each thrust, pushing back against me, her breath coming in quick gasps. The steam rises around us, the heat building, the water cascading over us like a waterfall.

Her hand reaches back, her fingers tangling in my hair. She pulls me closer, her mouth finding mine in a desperate, hungry kiss. I can taste the desire on her lips, the need, the love. It's intoxicating, addictive. I can't get enough.

I break away from the kiss, my breath ragged. "Jesse," I whisper, my voice hoarse. "You feel so good."

She smiles, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror. "So do you," she says, her voice soft. "So do you, Davin."

I pick up the pace, my body moving against hers, the sound of our skin slapping together echoing off the tiles. Her breath hitches, her body tensing as she gets closer to the edge. I can feel it too, the pressure building, the need to let go.

"Davin," she gasps, her voice shaking. "I'm close. I'm so close."

I lean over her, my hand finding hers on the tiles. Our fingers intertwine, holding on tight as we chase our release. The water pours over us, the steam swirling around us, the heat building between us.

"Jesse," I whisper, my voice rough. "Let go, Jesse. Let go with me."

She does, her body convulsing around me, her cry of pleasure echoing off the tiles. I follow her over the edge, my body shaking with the force of my release. We cling to each other, our breaths coming in ragged gasps, our hearts pounding in our chests.

The water cascades over us, washing away the sweat and the soap, leaving us clean,

leaving us sated, leaving us whole. I press a kiss to her shoulder, her neck, her cheek, feeling her smile against my lips.

"I love you, Jesse," I murmur, my voice soft.

She turns in my arms, her eyes meeting mine. "I love you too, Davin," she says, her voice steady, her gaze sure. "I love you too."

I wrap Jesse in a towel, rubbing her shoulders to chase away the chill. She leans into me, a soft smile playing on her lips. I scoop her up, cradling her against my chest as I carry her to our bed. She nuzzles into my neck, her breath warm on my skin.

"You know, for a tough guy, you're pretty gentle," she murmurs, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest.

I chuckle, laying her down on the bed before sliding in beside her. "Only with you, Jesse."

She rolls onto her side, facing me, her green eyes sparkling in the starlight. "Only with me, huh? Lucky me."

I brush a damp strand of hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear. "Lucky us."

She hums softly, her hand coming to rest on my cheek. "You're right. Lucky us."

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest. "Jesse, I want you to be mine. Officially."

Her eyebrows shoot up, a laugh bubbling from her lips. "Officially? You mean like a piece of paper and a fancy ceremony?"

I shrug, a smile tugging at my lips. "If that's what you want. I don't have that ring you asked for, but?—"

She presses a finger to my lips, silencing me. "Davin, we've done everything backwards. Why stop now?"

I kiss her finger, then gently move her hand away. "Is that a yes?"

She grins, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Yes, Davin. Yes, after already having your baby and moving in with you, yes. I'll be your mate."

I pull her close, my lips finding hers in a soft, slow kiss. She melts into me, her body fitting perfectly against mine. When we pull away, her eyes are shining with unshed tears.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I ask, cupping her cheek.

She shakes her head, a small smile playing on her lips. "Nothing's wrong. It's just... I never thought I'd be this happy. After everything we've been through, I didn't think we'd get here."

I wipe away a tear that spills over, my thumb gently brushing her skin. "We're here, Jesse. And I promise, I'm not going anywhere."

She sniffs, her smile widening. "Good. Because I don't think I could handle losing you again."

I press a kiss to her forehead, my arms tightening around her. "You won't. You're stuck with me, remember?"

She laughs, the sound soft and warm. "I remember. And I wouldn't have it any other

way."

We gently fall asleep, Jesse's breaths coming soft against my skin. If Rena and Paraxan ever intended for us to take a watch shift, they never came by to wake us for it.

The night stayed peaceful, and everyone was safe.

CHAPTER 32

JESSE

The scent of Rena's perfume mingles with the wine as we sprawl across my living room floor, surrounded by scattered datapads and empty bottles. My ceremonial dress hangs by the window, catching the light from the setting sun.

"Remember when we first met?" Rena tops off my glass. "You were trying to hotwire a junker on that satellite."

"And you caught me red-handed." I take a sip, letting the sweet burn coat my tongue. "Then helped me steal it anyway."

"Look at you now. Getting mated to a Kaleidian." She shakes her head, blonde hair swaying. "A former bounty hunter, no less. The universe has a sick sense of humor."

"Speaking of settling down..." I nudge her with my foot. "When's it your turn?"

"Please." She rolls her eyes. "You know me better than that."

"Come on, there must be someone who catches your eye. That mechanic, what was his name...?"

"The one with the cybernetic arm? Pass." Rena stretches out on the floor, glass balanced on her stomach. "Some of us prefer the freedom of being perpetually single."

"You can't run forever."

"Watch me." She grins. "Someone has to keep your old ship running while you play happy families."

"I don't know if I'd call this playing." I gesture at the dress. "This is pretty permanent."

"Good. After everything you two went through?" She props herself up on an elbow. "If anyone deserves their happy ending, it's you."

"What about you? Don't you want-"

"Nope." She pops the 'p' sound. "I've got the stars, a fast ship, and the occasional exciting job. That's all I need."

The wine warms my chest as I look at my oldest friend. "I wouldn't have made it through these past few years without you."

"Don't get sappy on me now." But her smile is genuine. "Save it for tomorrow."

"No, I'm going to get sappy, and you're going to deal with it." I sit up, wine sloshing dangerously close to the rim of my glass. "You and Paraxan kept me sane when Davin vanished. You helped me raise Leo. Hell, you've saved my life more times than I can count."

"That's what family does." Rena's cheeks flush pink from the wine.

"Remember when Paraxan made that soup for me during morning sickness?"

"The one with his fur floating in it?" She wrinkles her nose. "You ate three bowls."

"It worked, didn't it? And when Leo was colicky, he'd purr him to sleep."

"That old furball loves that kid more than his ship engines, and that's saying something."

My vision blurs with tears. "I never thought I'd have this. A real family. Not just blood relatives running cons together."

"Hey." Rena reaches over and squeezes my hand. "You deserve every bit of happiness coming your way. Even if it came packaged as a stupidly handsome bounty hunter who tried to con you."

"Life's funny that way, isn't it?"

"Hilarious." She tops off our glasses again. "But watching you two together? It's like those old stories about fate and destiny actually mean something. Plus, Leo needs someone to teach him how to shoot straight, because we both know your aim is terrible."

"My aim is fine! I took out half a warehouse full of mafia cronies!"

"Tell that to the cargo container you hit instead of that pirate."

I throw a cushion at her head. She dodges, laughing, and raises her glass. "To unexpected happy endings."

"To family," I counter, clinking my glass against hers.

My dress whispers against the wooden floor as I approach Davin. The setting sun streams through the windows of the small temple, casting his blue skin in shades of purple and gold. His silver hair catches the light, making him look ethereal. Our eyes

meet, and my heart skips – just like that first time in my ship's kitchen.

The priestess, her elaborate robes adorned with traditional Kaleidian symbols, stands between us. Leo squirms in Rena's arms behind me, but settles when Paraxan starts his gentle purring.

"The path that brought you here," the priestess begins, her voice carrying through the small space, "was not straight, nor was it easy. But that is the beauty of fated bonds – they persist through the storms."

Davin's lips quirk up at the corner, and I know he's thinking of our first meeting, when he infiltrated my crew. The priestess raises her hands, palms facing outward.

"In our tradition, we believe souls recognize each other across lifetimes. They dance around each other until the moment is right, until both are ready to complete their journey together." She looks between us. "Sometimes, that recognition comes in the midst of chaos. Sometimes, it comes despite our best efforts to deny it."

My fingers twitch, remembering that rainy alley where we first kissed, when everything was complicated and nothing made sense except the way he looked at me.

"You've already created life together," the priestess continues, nodding toward Leo. "You've faced death together. You've lost and found each other across the stars themselves. Today, we merely make official what the universe has already decreed."

Davin reaches for my hand, his skin cool against mine. His thumb traces my knuckles, and in that simple touch, I feel everything we've been through. Every fight, every laugh, every moment of desperate fear and overwhelming joy.

The priestess raises her hands, palms facing upward. "Let us begin the mating ceremony. Please take your positions."

Davin's fingers slip from mine as we step apart, then face each other across the sacred circle etched into the temple floor. The dying sunlight catches the silver threads in his ceremonial tunic, making them shimmer like starlight.

"Why's everyone so quiet?" Leo's voice pipes up from behind me. "This is boring."

My lips curl into a small smile, but I keep my eyes locked with Davin's. His expression mirrors mine – that mixture of amusement and solemnity that seems to define our relationship.

"Shh," Rena whispers to Leo. "Remember what we practiced?"

"But-"

Paraxan's soft purr grows louder, and Leo's protests fade into giggles. The sound echoes off the temple's high ceiling, breaking through the reverent silence.

The priestess begins tracing symbols in the air between us, her movements fluid and precise. The incense burns stronger, filling my lungs with the sweet-spicy scent of ceremonial herbs. Davin's gaze holds mine, steady and unwavering, just like that first night in my ship's kitchen when neither of us knew what we were starting.

"Mama, your dress is pretty," Leo stage-whispers.

A few quiet chuckles ripple through our small gathering. I bite my lip to keep from breaking into a full grin, maintaining the ceremony's required silence. Davin's eyes crinkle at the corners – the closest he'll come to laughing during this sacred moment.

The sunlight paints patterns across the floor between us, and I focus on breathing, on this moment, on the man before me who started as my greatest deception and became my truest truth.

The last rays of sunlight fade from the temple windows as the priestess's hands trace the final symbols in the air. My skin tingles where the ceremonial markings wrap around my wrists, matching the ones on Davin's arms.

"By the ancient laws of Kalei, and the powers vested in me, I pronounce you bonded mates." The priestess lowers her hands. "May your souls continue their dance through this lifetime and beyond."

We stand. Davin steps forward, closing the space between us. His fingers brush my cheek, cool against my flushed skin. When his lips meet mine, the world narrows to just this moment - this kiss that tastes of promises and new beginnings.

"Is it over?" Leo's voice breaks through. "Can I hug them now?"

I break away laughing as tiny footsteps thunder across the temple floor. Leo crashes into our legs, and Davin scoops him up with one arm, keeping his other hand firmly in mine.

"What do you think, little one?" Davin asks. "Should we keep her?"

Leo nods vigorously. "Forever and ever."

"Good answer." I reach up to ruffle Leo's silver hair, so like his father's. "Because you're stuck with both of us now."

Leo's eyes go wide. "That's awesome!"

We stand there, the three of us, as our friends approach with congratulations and embraces. The setting sun paints the temple in deep purples and golds, and for once in my life, I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

The smell of Paraxan's cooking fills our small home as music plays softly in the background. Leo dances with Rena, standing on her feet as she guides him through the steps. My ceremonial dress rustles as I brace myself against the kitchen counter, watching my family celebrate.

Davin's cool fingers brush my arm. "Come with me for a moment?"

He leads me onto the small balcony under the light of the stars. The night air carries the scent of night-blooming flowers from the garden below.

"I know it wasn't a human ceremony," he says, reaching into his pocket. "I did some research though."

"Research?"

He opens his palm, revealing a simple silver ring with a small blue stone that matches his skin. "I found this in that market in town. The merchant said it was Earth-made."

"It's perfect." My throat tightens as he slides it onto my finger. "But you didn't have to-"

"I wanted to." His thumb traces over the ring. "I've seen you reading those old Earth novels. The ones where they exchange rings."

"Those are just stories." I twist the ring, watching it catch the city lights. "I wouldn't know a proper human ceremony if it bit me in the ass. My family wasn't exactly traditional."

"No?" His lips quirk up. "You mean smugglers don't have elaborate wedding traditions?"

"Unless you count shotgun weddings in dingy spaceports." I lean into him, breathing in his familiar scent. "This was perfect. All of it."

Through the window, I see Leo attempting to teach Paraxan a dance move that mostly involves spinning in circles until he falls over. Rena catches him before he hits the ground, all three of them laughing.

"Look at what we made." I gesture to our mismatched family inside. "Who needs tradition when we have this?"

Davin's arms wrap around me from behind, his chin resting on my head. "Still, I wanted you to have something from your heritage."

"My heritage is right there." I point to where Leo has now convinced Paraxan to spin with him. "Family isn't about blood or ceremonies. It's about who stays."

CHAPTER 33

DAVIN

The door to the honeymoon suite slides open with a soft hiss. Jesse steps in first, her ceremonial dress trailing behind her. The fabric catches the light, making the red shimmer like liquid fire. I follow, loosening the stiff collar of my formal attire.

"Well, look at this place." Jesse whistles, running her fingers along the sleek furniture. "You really went all out."

"Had to make up for lost time." I wrap my arms around her waist from behind, breathing in the scent of her hair. "Though I think Rena's more excited about watching Leo than we are about this fancy room."

"She practically shoved us out the door." Jesse laughs, leaning back against my chest. "I've never seen someone so eager to babysit."

"Our son has that effect on people." The words still feel new on my tongue. Our son. My family. After everything we've been through, it seems surreal to be here.

Jesse turns in my arms, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. "You know what else this fancy room has?" She jerks her thumb toward the expansive viewport dominating one wall. "Best view of the meteor shower tonight."

"Is that what you want to watch?" I raise an eyebrow, earning a playful swat.

"Don't be smug." She kicks off her shoes, padding across the plush carpet. "Come here and help me figure out how this automated bar works. I want to toast to our new beginning."

"You mean you want me to hack it so we don't have to pay the ridiculous prices."

"See? This is why I married you." She grins, already poking at the control panel. "Smart and resourceful."

I join her at the bar, watching her fingers dance across the interface. Some things never change – and I wouldn't want them to.

Jesse's fingers fly across the control panel, her brow furrowing in concentration. "This encryption is ridiculous. Who needs this much security on a minibar?"

"Having trouble?" I lean against the counter, watching her work.

"Please. I once broke into a maximum security vault on Glimner." She taps another sequence, only to be met with a harsh buzzing sound. "Okay, maybe I'm a little rusty."

"Or maybe they've upgraded their systems since your smuggling days."

"Since when are you the voice of reason?" She steps back, crossing her arms. "Look at these prices. Thirty credits for synthetic champagne? That's highway robbery."

I reach past her and press my thumb to the scanner, authorizing the payment. "Good thing I've got credits to spare."

"Show off." But there's no heat in her words, just affection as the machine whirs to life.

The champagne pours into crystal flutes, bubbles dancing up the sides. I hand one to Jesse, watching the way the amber liquid catches the light of the meteor shower starting outside our window.

"To our family," I raise my glass. "And to never having to pretend to be someone else again."

"To Leo," Jesse adds, her eyes soft. "And to finding each other twice."

The glasses clink together, the sound pure and clear. The champagne might be synthetic, but this moment – this is real. This is everything I never knew I wanted until I met her.

The meteor shower paints streaks of light across the night sky, each one reflected in Jesse's eyes. She leans against the window, her breath fogging up the glass. I stand behind her, close enough to feel her warmth, to catch the scent of her hair.

"You know, I've seen a lot of stars," I murmur, tracing a line from her shoulder down to her wrist. "But none as beautiful as the ones in your eyes."

She turns, a smirk playing on her lips. "Cheesy, Davin. Really cheesy."

"Maybe." I shrug, stepping closer. "But it's true."

Her eyes meet mine, the green darkening like the forests of Kalei. "You're lucky you're charming."

"Is that all I am?" My hand cups her cheek, thumb brushing against her skin. Her freckles stand out, constellations of their own.

"No." Her voice is barely a whisper. "You're more than that."

Our lips meet, a soft brush at first, then deeper. Her hands fist in my shirt, pulling me closer. The taste of her, the feel of her pressed against me - it's intoxicating. My heart pounds, echoing the rhythm of the universe outside.

"Davin," she breathes, her fingers trailing down my chest. "The window..."

I glance back, seeing our reflections against the backdrop of the meteor shower. Anyone could look up and see us, but right now, I don't care. I want her, all of her, under the stars and the streaking lights.

"Let them watch," I growl, scooping her up. Her legs wrap around my waist, her lips finding mine again. We stumble back into the suite, leaving the stars behind, creating our own heat.

I set Jesse down on the bed, her red hair fanning out against the crisp white sheets. Her green eyes, flecked with gold, meet mine, and there's a softness there, a vulnerability she only shows me.

"You're not going to make another cheesy line about the stars in my eyes, are you?" She smirks, but her voice is barely a whisper.

"Wouldn't dream of it." I brush a strand of hair from her face, my fingers lingering on her cheek. Her skin is warm, inviting. "I'd rather show you what I see."

Her breath hitches as I lean in, capturing her lips with mine. She tastes like champagne and something uniquely Jesse, a taste I've craved for years. Her hands find their way to my shoulders, pulling me closer.

"Davin," she murmurs against my lips, her voice a husky plea. "Too many clothes."

I chuckle, a low rumble in my chest. "Impatient, aren't we?"

She grins, her fingers already working on the buttons of my shirt. "Always."

I help her, shrugging out of the shirt and tossing it aside. Her eyes roam over my chest, tracing the scars and muscles earned from years in the military. She reaches out, her touch gentle as she explores each ridge and valley.

"You're beautiful," she says, her voice barely audible.

"That's my line." I capture her hand, pressing a kiss to her fingertips. Her eyes flutter closed, a soft sigh escaping her lips.

I reach for the zipper of her dress, slowly pulling it down. The fabric parts, revealing creamy skin and freckles that beg to be kissed. I oblige, trailing my lips down her neck, across her collarbone, tasting each one like it's a sacred ground.

Jesse shivers, her hands gripping my shoulders. "Davin," she gasps, her voice a mix of pleasure and need.

"Right here, love." I whisper against her skin, my hands exploring her curves. She's soft and warm, a haven in the cold expanse of the universe.

She pulls me down, her lips finding mine again. This time, the kiss is deeper, hungrier. Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me closer, until there's nothing between us but heat and desire.

I break away, just long enough to look into her eyes. "I love you, Jesse." The words escape me like a secret, whispered into her skin.

Her eyes soften, her fingers tracing the line of my jaw. "I love you too, Davin. More than the stars."

And then there are no more words, only the language of our bodies, the rhythm of our hearts beating as one. The universe outside fades away, leaving only us, only this moment, only our love.

Jesse's fingers dig into the sheets, her breath coming in short gasps. I trail kisses down her throat, feeling the shiver that runs through her. "Davin," she murmurs, her voice a husky plea.

"Right here, love." I whisper against her skin, my hands exploring her curves. She presses back against me, a soft moan escaping her lips.

I flip her around, a swift movement that has her gasping. Her hair cascades over her shoulder, a waterfall of red against her freckled skin. I run my hands down her sides, feeling the heat of her body, the desperation in her touch.

"You're teasing me," she accuses, but there's a smile in her voice.

"Am I?" I lean in, capturing her earlobe between my teeth. She shivers, her breath hitching. "Or am I just taking my time?"

She lets out a soft laugh, a sound that goes straight to my heart. "Since when do you take your time with anything?"

"Since I found something worth savoring." I press a kiss to her neck, feeling her pulse race under my lips.

She reaches back, her hand finding my hip, pulling me closer. "Less talking," she demands, her voice a breathy whisper. "More action."

"As you wish."

I take her from behind, a deep groan escaping me as I feel her heat envelop me. She gasps, her fingers gripping the sheets tighter. "Davin," she breathes, her voice a mix of pleasure and need.

"I've got you, love." I murmur, my hands finding her hips, guiding her movements. She matches my rhythm, our bodies moving in sync.

The room fills with our shared breaths, our moans, the sound of our bodies coming together. The universe outside fades away, leaving only us, only this moment, only our love.

I feel her tense, her body coiling like a spring ready to snap. I lean in, my lips finding her ear. "Let go, Jesse," I whisper. "I've got you."

And she does. Her body convulses, a cry escaping her lips as she finds her release. I follow her over the edge, a deep groan escaping me as I climax, our bodies shaking with the force of our shared pleasure.

We collapse onto the bed, a tangle of limbs and shared breaths. I pull her close, her back to my chest, my arms wrapped around her. She fits perfectly, her body molding to mine like we were made for each other.

"I love you, Jesse," I murmur, pressing a kiss to her shoulder.

She turns her head, her green eyes meeting mine. A soft smile plays on her lips. "I love you too, Davin." She pauses, a mischievous glint in her eye. "But don't think this means you can slack off next time."

I laugh, a sound that echoes through the room, a sound that feels like home. "Wouldn't dream of it, love." I pull her closer, our bodies still entwined, our hearts still beating as one. "Wouldn't dream of it."

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The gleaming white corridors of the Star Princess stretch endlessly before us as we make our way to our suite. Leo bounces between Davin and me, his little hands clutching both of ours as he skips along.

"Mama, look! The ceiling has stars!" Leo points up at the holographic display above us, showing the current star field we're passing through.

"Those aren't real stars, kiddo," Davin says, adjusting our carry-on bag over his shoulder. "Wait until we get to the observation deck."

"Can we go now?" Leo tugs on Davin's hand. "Please, Papa?"

My heart swells hearing Leo call Davin that. It's still relatively new, but it feels so right.

"Room first," I say, checking the numbers on the doors. "Then we can explore everything."

"Everything?" Leo's eyes go wide.

"Well, maybe not the engine room." I wink at Davin. "Though I bet your father would love to show you how the propulsion systems work."

"Don't give him ideas," Davin mutters, but there's a smile playing at his lips.

We reach our suite, and Leo runs straight to the window, pressing his face against the transparent material. The suite itself is larger than our entire living room back home,

with plush furniture and subtle lighting that adjusts to our presence.

"Fishies!" Leo squeals, pointing at the aquarium built into one wall. "Blue ones like Papa!"

"Those are Kaleidian moon fish," Davin explains, crouching beside him. "They change color based on the water temperature."

"Can I feed them?"

"Let's unpack first," I say, but Leo's already dragging Davin toward the aquarium control panel.

"Just one feeding," Davin says, giving me that look that means he can't resist our son's enthusiasm. "Then we'll get settled properly."

I shake my head, smiling. "You're getting soft in your old age, bounty hunter."

"Only for my family." He pulls me close with his free arm, kissing my temple while Leo chatters excitedly about the fish food dispenser.

Leo presses his nose against the aquarium glass, his silver hair catching the blue glow. "That one's called a Moonspinner! It eats tiny shrimp and—and plankton."

"That's right." I ruffle his hair, amazed at how he's already memorizing the information from the plaques. "How did you know that?"

"It says right there, Mama." He points to the holographic text floating beside the tank. "And this one's from Papa's home planet!"

Davin sprinkles another pinch of food into the tank. "Most of these are. Though they've been bred in captivity for generations."

"He's reading so fast." I lean against Davin's shoulder. "I couldn't read half this well at his age."

"Kaleidian children develop quickly." His arm slides around my waist. "Our brains form neural pathways more efficiently in early development. Makes up for how long it takes us to get gray hair."

"So that's why you're still so pretty?" I tease.

"Papa's not pretty," Leo says, not looking away from the fish. "He's handsome. Like in the stories."

"Can't argue with that logic." I watch as Leo traces the path of a particularly sparkly fish with his finger. "I just wonder sometimes... about him being the first."

"First what?" Leo asks.

"First hybrid child I've ever met," I say. "It's not common, is it?"

"No." Davin's voice softens. "But that just makes him special. Like his mother."

"The fish changed color!" Leo bounces on his toes. "Did you see? It was blue and now it's purple!"

"That means the temperature dropped," Davin explains.

My concerns fade as I watch them together, both equally fascinated by the simple wonder of color-changing fish.

The dining room of the Star Princess sparkles with crystalline chandeliers and polished silverware. I adjust Leo's collar as he squirms in the high chair between Davin and me.

"Sit still, sweetie. Your napkin's falling."

"But I'm hungry," Leo whines, reaching for the bread basket.

"Just a minute." I tuck the cloth napkin back into his shirt. "We need to order first."

The waiter approaches our table, carrying a bottle on a silver tray. "Compliments of a friend." He presents an emerald-colored bottle with an intricate gold label. "A '42 Centaurian Red."

My jaw drops. I pick up the bottle, examining the seal, and the small note attached to it.

"It says 'Cheers. Par.' He really, really shouldn't have."

"That old furball?" Davin whistles low. "This vintage costs more than our suite."

"What's Cen-tau-rian?" Leo sounds out the word carefully.

"It's wine from a very special place," I explain, still stunned by the gesture. "And your Uncle Par must have saved up for months to afford this."

"Or won big at cards again," Davin suggests, accepting the waiter's offer to uncork the bottle.

"He doesn't gamble anymore. Not since that incident with the twins. Well, we'll need to save this for dinner tonight," I say, placing the bottle aside. For now, I need some water. With lemon. "I'll tell him he's crazy later."

"And thank him," Davin adds with a knowing look.

"And thank him," I agree, raising my bread. "To old friends who spoil us rotten."

Leo lifts his water glass. "To Uncle Par Par!"

After lunch, we head to the observation deck. It bustles with passengers eager to watch the departure. Leo perches on Davin's shoulders, his tiny hands gripping his father's silver hair.

"Higher, Papa! I want to see everything!"

"Any higher and you'll bump the oxygen shield," I say, reaching up to steady Leo as he wobbles.

A shimmer of blue energy ripples above us, keeping the artificial atmosphere contained while allowing an unobstructed view of space. The shield hums with a soft vibration I can feel in my teeth.

"Look, there goes the docking arm!" Leo points as the massive mechanical structure retracts from the ship's hull.

"Watch this part carefully," Davin says. "The initial thrust is quite something."

The deck trembles beneath our feet as the engines power up. Stars streak past us, first slowly, then faster as we pick up speed. Leo gasps, his grip tightening on Davin's hair.

"Ow, easy there, kiddo."

"Sorry Papa! But look! The stars are dancing!"

He's right. Through the shield, the stars blur into ribbons of light as we accelerate. Other passengers crowd the railing, snapping photos and recording videos. A small girl nearby waves goodbye to the space station we're leaving, even though it's already disappeared from view.

"Remember when we used to do this kind of thing for a living?" I nudge Davin's side.

"Slightly different circumstances." He shifts Leo to a more comfortable position.

"Less luxury, more cargo holds."

"And more running from authorities."

"Mama, what's authorities?"

"Nothing you need to worry about," Davin and I say in unison.

The ship's horn sounds, deep and resonant, signaling we've reached cruising speed. The star trails stabilize into a steady stream of light, creating a tunnel effect through space.

"Pretty," Leo whispers, reaching up as if he could touch the shield. His attention is then quickly grabbed by the large pool a few feet away. "Can we play in there?!" he cries with glee.

"I don't see why not," I say, wrapping my arms around both my boys. "Then it's dinner time."

The pool's climate-controlled environment feels perfect against my skin as I dangle my feet in the water. Leo splashes with two other children his age, their laughter echoing off the curved ceiling.

"Look at me!" Leo calls out, doggy-paddling toward a floating toy spaceship.

"I see you, baby." I wave, then turn to Davin stretched out on a lounge behind me. I stand, stretch, and take my place on the one next to his. "Remember when the most exciting part of our day was dodging Alliance patrols?"

"Well, for me, it was tracking down marks across three systems." Davin's fingers trace lazy patterns on my arm. "Though I have to admit, watching him learn to swim is more satisfying than any bounty I've caught."

"Even that one drug lord who tried to bribe you with his yacht?"

"The yacht was tempting." He smirks. "But I already had my eye on a better prize."

"Smooth talker. My parents would be shocked to see me now. They always said I'd be an even better smuggler than they were. Real family business franchise I was raised for."

"Running contraband through the Athenaverse?"

"Among other things. Dad used to say there was no greater thrill than outmaneuvering a customs frigate."

"Papa!" Leo waves frantically. "Watch this!"

We both sit up as Leo attempts an awkward somersault in the shallow end. He comes up sputtering but grinning.

"That's my boy," Davin calls out proudly.

"You know what's funny? I used to think that life was everything. The excitement, the danger, the cash. But now? I wouldn't trade this for all the successful smuggling runs in the galaxy."

"Not even for that cache of diamonds you always wanted to steal?"

"Please. Those diamonds would've been fence fodder anyway." I watch as Leo shows his new friends how to make whirlpools by spinning in circles. "This is worth more."

Davin's fingers pause their tracing on my arm. "You sure about that? You sound a bit wistful."

"Maybe a little." I watch Leo splash with his new friends. "I mean, sometimes I miss the thrill. The planning, the quick thinking, the satisfaction of a perfect run."

"We could always go back to it." His chest rumbles against my back. "Once Leo's older."

"It'd be complicated though." I shift in my lounge. "Especially with two small children."

The rhythmic motion of his fingers stops completely. His palm flattens against my stomach. "Two?"

Heat rises to my cheeks as I realize what I've let slip. "Well... surprise?"

"Jesse." His voice catches. "Are you...?"

"Found out just before we left." I turn to face him, catching the wonder spreading across his features. "I was going to tell you tonight at dinner. You know, with the fancy wine and everything that I really can't drink."

"That's why you didn't want any at lunch." His eyes search mine. "How long?"

"About five weeks." I bite my lip. "Are you happy?"

Instead of answering, he pulls me closer, pressing his forehead to mine. His skin feels cool against my sun-warmed face. "Another one," he whispers. "Another perfect blend of us."

"Mama!" Leo's voice breaks through our moment. "Look what I can do!"

"Just a second, baby!" I call back, then lower my voice. "We should probably wait to tell him. Let him enjoy being the center of attention for a bit longer."

"Agreed." Davin's hand hasn't moved from my stomach. I take his hand and squeeze it.

This...this is the only adventure I need.

For now.