



Ghost Ship Numenon

(Romance Among the Stars)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Khadrex is the most infuriating alien in the galaxy

Which might not be so bad, if he wasn't also the hottest

Trapped together on the wreck of the Numenon, we need to find a way to cooperate if we're going to survive the ancient warship's curse. And I need to find a way to keep my eyes off his magnificent abs, or I'm going to end up in a whole other kind of trouble.

By the smoldering looks he's giving me, he's got the same problem...

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MADDIE

The hull creaked around me as though the rotted-out battleship would collapse at any second, and static hissed in my helmet like a thousand voices whispering over each other. Underfoot, the decking flexed and shuddered, the gravity shifting with every passing second. Most lights had burned out, the rest flickering constantly. The Numenon, once the pride of the mightiest fleet in the galaxy, was now a drifting deathtrap, and I'd walked right into it.

My grin couldn't have been wider.

"First impressions: the ship is intact, though barely." I kept my tone level as I stepped out of the airlock and into the ship proper. If I found what I was looking for, my logs might end up in the history books someday, and the last thing I wanted was students laughing at my lack of composure. "Aside from the damage I filmed on my way in, the artificial gravity is unreliable, which means core damage. Suit readouts say the atmosphere is breathable, so life support is still working."

Saying that, I disengaged my helmet seal and peeled back the faceplate, taking a deep breath. To my surprise, the Numenon's air was refreshing, cool and holding a faint floral smell. It almost masked the lingering scent of death and decay, burned plastic and metal.

Even with those undertones, it made a welcome change from my suit's own recycled air. Since the last time I'd docked the Magpie on a planet, her air tanks had gone

stale. The air aboard the Numenon had its own issues, but at least they were different. I left the seals open, trusting my suit to shut them if the pollution turned dangerous.

Slowly, carefully, I made my way deeper into the battleship, leaving the Magpie loosely tethered to a breach in the Numenon's hull. While I'd have preferred a more elegant entrance, this would do. I'd rather have docked with the hangar bay, but that entire deck was a twisted ruin. The external airlocks needed access codes I didn't have, so instead I picked the tear in the hull near my target and came through an internal airlock.

Even ruined, it took my breath away. A broad concourse vanished into the gloom ahead of me, bordered on one side with businesses and a drop into darkness on the other. Turning my flashlight out across the gap, it just reached a matching concourse on the far side of the abyss.

"Given the ship's condition, finding my way to Central Computing may prove a challenge," I said, excitement bubbling up despite my best efforts. "Given how many systems are functional, though, there's a chance the ship's experimental AI, the Anima Numenon, is still active. So it looks I'm navigating my way through the galaxy's most haunted ghost ship on Halloween. Who says wishes don't come true?"

It's fine, I can edit it to sound professional before publishing. I wondered if the authentic version might not work better, even if it made me sound like a kid at Christmas. I'd always loved Halloween, and this was a dream come true. Visiting haunted houses with my parents had been the highlight of each year of my childhood, that and helping them make their own.

Now here I was, advancing down the Numenon's promenade. Looking for a centuries old battle computer with its own intelligence which would make my reputation if I got it home. And letting dead air fill my recording. I brought my attention back to the present with an effort.

“The Numenon’s last confirmed sighting was two hundred and fifty-six years ago, at the Battle of Both Emperors. After its nearly impossible performance secured the crown for Dissana II, the heavily damaged Numenon ? — ”

Something clattered, metal striking metal, and I froze. Nothing should move here. Over two centuries, loose objects ought to have settled into a final resting place. I swung my flashlight toward the sound and saw nothing but a bleak, cavernous drop and the faint glint of the matching promenade beyond.

“I did not imagine that,” I told myself firmly before remembering the recording. Struggling for some semblance of academic respectability. “Ah, I mean, I don’t think I’m alone. Possibly some vermin have survived? Or another explorer...oh, fuck.”

It can’t be him. No chance. What are the odds? I tried to push the thought from my mind, but as usual, once I’d thought of Kahdrex Vohr, it wasn’t easy to stop thinking about him. Not only was he frustratingly hot, like someone had scraped my subconscious and built a blue-skinned Adonis just for me, but the smug alien seemed set on destroying my business. In the past year, he’d snatched half a dozen finds out from under my nose and seemed to delight in frustrating me.

Of course, I’d gotten my revenge. Since he started poaching my finds, I’d done the same to him. We were roughly even now, but I knew he’d be eager to take the lead again.

Not this time, I promised myself. He can take other stuff if he wants, but the computer core is mine.

My hand dropped to the blaster pistol holstered on my belt. I’d never been comfortable with it, but I was less comfortable going up against a rival unarmed.

I kept walking along the promenade. The sheer size of the ship was awe-inspiring. I’d

expected as much, but seeing a deck devoted to giving Imperial nobility a chance to show off to one another still shocked me. I turned in a slow circle, giving my camera a look at the shops beside the walkway. It looked more like a prosperous shopping district than a deck on a warship, despite the battle damage. Replace the broken windows and turn on the lights, and it would look like a shopping district I couldn't afford to shop in.

Well, aside from the corpses.

Bodies lay scattered here and there, all wearing combat hardsuits ready for battle, though I saw no sign of what killed them. It lent a creepy atmosphere to the whole affair, and not the fun Halloween kind of creepy. Finishing my sweep, I approached the nearest body and looked through its transparent faceplate.

Long dead, the body gazed at me with hollow eye sockets, mouth open in a silent scream. I shuddered. Whatever killed him didn't leave a pretty corpse. The alien looked mummified, which I hoped explained the way the mouth stretched open, frozen in a terrified scream. If Dad had managed a Halloween surprise half as monstrous looking, he'd have been smug for a year and the neighborhood kids would have been in therapy for at least as long.

Another faint noise caught me mid-laugh at that thought, and I spun around to stare into the blackness. To my surprise, I hoped it was Kahdrex. At least I knew how to react to him, though the unquiet dead would make for more desirable company.

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KAHDREX

This ship was mine . How dare a human claim it? Wander its halls without a care in the world when this was a graveyard to five thousand crew?

And yet there she was. Maddie Triden, salvage expert, or so the transponder on her ship said. Maddie Triden, the most annoying female in galactic history, would be more honest. For the last year, she'd been stealing my work, or trying to—I'd given as good as I'd gotten. It might have been less annoying if one of us had the upper hand, but neither of us could hold an advantage.

This will be our last contest. I swore it to myself and my ancestors. Whatever it took, I would end our rivalry here aboard the Numenon. If that meant killing the human, so be it—she'd had every opportunity to back down.

I crept closer to her, my hardsuit's helmet display boosting the thin rays of light and letting me see her silhouette. That was the worst part of our rivalry, perhaps. She was the most desirable female I'd ever set my eyes on, and the way her pressure suit clung to her curves was positively indecent. Like all humans, she was short compared to me, but her perfectly proportioned figure and soft, smooth skin cried out to be touched. I wanted to tear her form-fitting silver suit off and feast my eyes on her nakedness.

In short, her looks were a distraction, which explained how I came to put too much weight on a loose floor panel. It creaked as it bent under my weight, and Maddie

whipped her head around with lightning speed. Cursing my luck, I leaped forward with hardsuit-augmented speed, my fingers driving into her wrist as she drew her blaster. She stumbled back, dropping the weapon, and we both watched it bounce once, out between the bars of the railings, before tumbling into the darkness below.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Kahdrex?” The human female snarled the question, backing up fast and shaking her numbed hand. I followed at the same speed, unwilling to let her get out of arm’s reach.

“I am here to reclaim this ship for its owners, the Dissana clan,” I told her. That was true, though the huge bounty they would pay was more important than any abstract historical claim. “Unlike you, here to loot it for profit.”

Her eyes narrowed, anger flaring in them. “You think I’m here for the money? Fuck off. I’m here because this ship made history. No one’s been able to recreate the Anima Numenon. After two hundred years, it’s still a unique achievement in AI tech.”

Our eyes met and I hissed a warning, though I could not articulate what I was warning her about. Her defiant glare ignited the longing in my soul, and it took an effort of will not to rip open her suit to see just how far the blush spread. My fingers flexed as though caressing her, and my racing heartbeats filled my ears.

I wasn’t the only one feeling that pull. A tremor ran through Maddie’s body, and her tongue darted out to lick her lips. The way she tried to hide her attraction to me only made her more desirable, and I wondered what would happen if I reached out and grabbed her now. Would she fight her lust or give in to her desires?

There’s one way to find out. I reached forward, brushing her hair aside, feeling the heat of her skin as she froze.

Then her skin paled and her eyes widened, looking past my shoulder at something in the darkness. A strangled yelp burst from her throat as she bit down on a scream, and I spun, lashing out at where she focused her gaze. Luck was with me, and the heel of my palm connected, the crunch of snapping bone loud in the silence. Only as the body was falling did my brain catch up.

I'd punched a corpse, one of the honored dead. Head knocked sideways on a broken neck, eyes gone, and skin stretched tight over the skull. A monstrous thing from dark legends, reaching out for me with hardsuit-enhanced strength. Had it gotten a grip on me, I doubted I'd be able to escape.

Worse, it wasn't alone. More hardsuit-clad corpses lumbered out of the darkness, cutting off our retreat.

MADDIE

More figures stumbled out of the shadows one by one, moving in eerie unison. Kahdrex scrambled back from the one he'd struck, blue skin paling to a sickly green as he watched it rise to its feet, head lolling on a broken neck.

“What the zzuhd?” he said, then repeated it at a roar, snatching a heavy wrench from his tool belt and swinging it at his foe.

The thing—I really didn't want to think of them as people—brought its arm up with far more force than I'd expected, smacking the wrench out of Kahdrex's hand. The big alien looked as shocked as I felt, hesitating a fraction too long. With its free hand, the shambling corpse grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him closer.

Fuck it, I should let him die, I thought, but I was already moving. Cursing the loss of my blaster, I snatched my multi-tool from my belt, switching it to an industrial cutting blade and swinging it down with all my strength. The blade carved through the thing's hardsuit, then its flesh and bone.

Even when the hand was no longer connected to the arm, it kept hold of Kahdrex. But the body changed its focus to me, and a swing of its free arm would have smashed me if Kahdrex hadn't yanked me back and out of the way.

“What the fuck are you doing, idiot?” he snarled without looking at me. “You don't know how to fight.”

“I’m saving your ass, dipshit,” I snapped back, looking at the thing stumbling after us. A missing hand didn’t bother it any more than a snapped neck. “That goddamned thing was about to tear out your fucking throat.”

“Stay behind me.” That was the only answer he gave, ignoring my point. My blood boiled.

“I should have let it eat you.”

“I’m not letting these things have the pleasure of killing you. You’re my prey.”

I didn’t have time to deal with the complicated emotions his phrasing sent washing through me, so I tried to ignore the butterflies unaccountably taking wing in my stomach. “We can kill each other later. Right now, let’s get to my ship and get the fuck out of here.”

Kahdrex’s pause was telling. Silence, broken only by the static hiss and the footsteps of the approaching dead.

“What did you do?” I backed away, letting him stay between me and the shamblers. “What the fuck did you do to my ship?”

“Your ship is fine! I just...might have nudged it away from the Numenon. A little.”

It was my turn for a stunned silence. Lucky, since it saved my life. Speaking, I wouldn’t have heard the footfall behind me as we backed away. Spinning, I saw a skeletal face peering out at me through a cracked helmet, elongated jaws wide, fangs glinting in the flickering light.

The static hiss roared in my ears, and I shouted something, I don’t know what. My multitool slid into the monster’s ribcage before I knew what I was doing, but the

thing didn't even slow down. It grabbed for me and I jerked back, nearly losing my tool in the hurry to get away.

I almost made it. The thing's hand caught my wrist in an iron grip, jerking me toward it. That would have been the end of me, but Kahdrex clasped my shoulder, pulling me in the opposite direction.

For a moment, I was the rope in the universe's most terrifying game of tug-of-war.

Then Kahdrex sent the shambler flying with a powerful kick to the stomach, dragging me away before it could recover and almost throwing me toward an armored door between a coffee shop and a tailor. I stumbled, got my feet under me, and ran. With shamblers coming from both directions along the promenade, we needed to get off the concourse and put something solid between us and them.

For a wonder, the door was still powered. It slid open when I hit the switch, so I ducked inside and reached for the emergency switch. And hesitated. The temptation to pull the switch and lock Kahdrex out was strong. Against those numbers, he might last a few minutes, but he wouldn't stand a chance of winning.

He'd do the same to you, I told myself, but still hesitated. My hand trembled on the switch, and then the chance was past. An unaccountable sense of relief rushed through me as the alien tumbled through the open doorway, tangled with a shambler and pursued by more.

I hit the emergency seal switch, and the door shut with a resounding thump. It would need to be reset before it would open again, and while the monsters chasing us might press a button, I doubted they could work a manual restart.

That bought us time to breathe, so I looked around to see where we'd escaped to. A dim little room, shelves along two walls full of cleaning supplies. The other two each

had a hatch, the one we'd entered through and its twin. I recognized the layout at once, since I'd been through one earlier.

We were in an internal airlock. One that someone had used for storage, almost certainly against regulations, but an airlock, nonetheless.

Kahdrex lay panting against the tarnished metal of the shelving. A look up and down his hard, powerful body showed no sign of injury, which was both good and absolutely the only reason I had my lingering stare. It had nothing to do with his muscular arms and... shut it, hindbrain. I am not interested in how sexy you think he is.

Even if he had saved my life. Fuck.

"What in the Void did you do?" As soon as he'd caught his breath, he did his best to remove my sympathy, glaring and throwing the blame my way.

"Me? I just came aboard. There wasn't time to do this, even if I knew what this is," I said, glaring right back. "What, do you think I'm some kind of necromancer?"

With a growl, he levered himself to his feet. "Maybe you are. Maybe?—"

Whatever he'd been about to accuse me of, a loud thump interrupted him and made me jump. Another thump followed and another, corpses slamming themselves into the door we'd come through.

"That hatch is an inch thick metal," I said.

"There's no way they're getting through," he agreed. Another bang and the hatch shuddered, making a grinding noise. We shared a nervous look.

“No point hanging around to find out, though.” Kahdrex looked at the other door.
“Let’s get moving.”

I nodded in shaky agreement.

KAHDREX

The airlock door let us out into what appeared to be maintenance corridors, more like what I'd expected from a warship. I didn't feel happy about the change, though. The corridor was narrow, with piping extended from the walls. That left just enough space for two people to edge past one another. If the dead crew ambushed us here, we'd be in trouble.

Don't borrow trouble, I told myself. Enough is following me already.

I glanced back at the human female, close enough to touch with my tail. She could have locked me out with the monsters, but she hadn't. Maybe her anger at me wasn't as strong as I thought.

Another loud thump behind us spurred me on, and I led the way into the maintenance ducts. We wouldn't be any less dead if we stayed in the airlock, and at least this way we were getting closer to escaping. Perhaps it had been a poor idea to knock the human's ship away—it had seemed a hilarious prank at the time. I no longer saw the humor as I tried to map out a way back to my ship.

A quick glance confirmed my human rival was close behind me, close enough to touch with my tail. I snarled at the images conjured by the thought: pulling her close and stripping the suit from her luscious body, taking her here and now.

Focus on getting out of here alive, fool. This situation is awful enough without letting

the witch into my heart.

And it was bad. I'd studied what plans remained of the Numenon, but the maze of maintenance tunnels that snaked through the battleship was too complex to memorize. They coiled around the open areas of the ship, fitted in wherever there was space. Airlocks broke them up into sections, one of which would be near the port I'd docked at. Unfortunately, the layout was far from logical, and the signs followed an incomprehensible naming scheme.

When we entered the maze, I thought I knew where I was going. By the time we'd passed five junctions, I was no longer sure of where we were, let alone my destination.

Not a chance I'd admit as much to my human companion, though. I kept making turns as though I knew where I was going, hoping I'd find a marker I could use to orient myself. The easiest way would be to enter a main deck, but since the tunnels were free of hostiles, I was reluctant to leave them without knowing what we'd be stepping into.

"You realize we've passed this junction already, right?" Maddie asked, and I rounded on her with a denial ready. It died on my lips when I saw her pointing to a serial number stenciled on the wall. A serial number I'd seen earlier. Fuck.

"Memorizing a three-dimensional labyrinth is difficult," I snarled. "Navigating it is harder."

She didn't hide her grin at my exasperated tone. I wanted to wipe it off her face, but she held up her hands for peace. "Hey, I'd just be taking random turns in here. At least you know where we're going, even if you're a bit confused about where we are."

I wasn't prepared for her to be reasonable. It's not, in my experience, a common human trait. From Madeline Triden, it was both completely unknown and extremely frustrating. She grinned up at me, her pretty green eyes sparkling, and I knew she was enjoying my discomfort despite the danger we were in.

Two can play this game, I told myself, preparing to fight reason with reason. I refused to let her get the upper hand.

"We need to get our bearings," I said, as close to admitting I'd gotten lost as I'd ever get. "I looked them up in the shipyard plans, but the reality is very different."

"It always is. They probably got altered during construction, too, when they added or updated the systems. A ship this big takes years to build, and it would be a surprise if things didn't change." There it was again. Reasonable, kind, and understanding. Mocking me. "You're right, we need to stop running away and work out where we're running to. Also, we're exhausted, and I can't see us getting any rest in here. So either we make it to your ship, or we find somewhere safe to take a breather."

Looking around, I reluctantly agreed. Adrenaline carried us this far, but now came the crash. We needed to rest, but where? The corridors were too narrow to rest in, especially while we had to worry about dead men creeping up on us. I sighed.

"Fine. We check the access hatches as we go and look for somewhere safe. Hopefully, we find one before we find a hungry undead horde."

For once, luck was with us. The first two hatches we found opened into a wrecked hangar bay and a corridor littered with corpses. We closed them quietly, and apparently undetected. At least the corpses didn't rise to attack us.

Our third try yielded better results. The hatch opened into a cabin, someone's personal quarters. Spacious enough that it had to be a senior officer's, neat, clean, and

deserted. That left an eerie, empty feeling—as though its owner had left just minutes ago, rather than centuries.

Poor man, having a maintenance access hatch in your room must have been a nightmare. Too late for him, we would fix that problem. Behind me, Maddie welded the hatch shut. Anyone trying to break in would make enough noise to wake the dead. As places to rest went, we could have done much worse.

Except for one detail.

There was only one bunk.

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MADDIE

“N o fucking chance,” I said, staring at the lone bunk, far too small for us to share without being intimate. Even then, we’d have to get him out of his hardsuit.

I felt the heat on my cheeks, a prickling that intensified as, unbidden, images flashed through my mind. His skin against mine, our bodies intertwined, for some reason we were both naked, what the fuck am I thinking?

At least Kahdrex hadn’t noticed my distraction. He was too busy staring at the bunk with an indecipherable expression of his own, a deep blue blush on his own cheeks. Were his thoughts going the same direction as mine? His tail flicked from side to side, quick jerky motions, and he rumbled something under his breath before speaking.

“You take the bunk,” he said. “I’ll sleep on the...um.”

We both looked around the cabin. None of the furniture was large enough for me to sleep on, let alone him. The decking looked hard and uninviting. Two chairs, neither built with comfort in mind. A breakfast bar, narrow and short. A bathroom in which I could curl up if cold tiles appealed. I caught myself biting my lip.

Is this fate? Are we meant to sleep together? A ridiculous idea, of course, but that didn’t make it any less tempting as an excuse. Flustered, I took a step back, looking anywhere other than at the towering alien hunk. We were rivals, enemies, temporary

allies at best.

And yet, I wanted nothing more than for him to kiss me. To pull off my spacesuit, to step out of his hardsuit, to ravish me.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. It's the adrenaline, that's all. No need to do anything rash. We both survived a fight, of course we're both horny. Tomorrow we'll be back to hating each other.

"I don't think so," I said to myself. Unfortunately, Kahdrex's hearing was too good, and he turned his head to look at me, eyes sparkling.

"It would be more comfortable to share," he said. "If you trust me."

I swallowed. Fuck no, I don't, I wanted to answer. I wouldn't trust you with a single Credit Imperial . Something held me back, leaving me silent as I tried to work out what.

Did I trust him now that we'd shared a deadly peril? Or did I want him badly enough to risk it?

"Why do you think you can trust me?" I answered finally, grinning as though the question was a joke.

He started to reply, then fell silent and lurched toward me with an unsteady step. Shocked by his uncharacteristic gracelessness, I stared at him, seeing concern in his eyes, then alarm. Before I could ask what was wrong, he swung his arm at me in an arc, fast enough to crush bones if it connected.

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KAHDREX

My arm jerked forward, and Maddie scrambled away, eyes flashing. “Now? Of all the times you could choose, Kahdrex, you want to have a fight now?”

I stared at my hand in horror, then swore as I stepped toward her. “I do not! This isn’t me.”

“It sure looks like you.” Maddie backed away fast, but there wasn’t much space for her to move. I’d corner her sooner rather than later, only for once I didn’t want to. I pulled back with all my might as I took another step toward her, but the suit was too strong. Turning it into a stumble was the best I could do.

It gave Maddie time to duck safely past, getting some room to maneuver. She stared at me as I struggled to my feet. “It’s your fucking suit.”

As soon as she said it, I knew she was right. My hardsuit’s servos no longer amplified my strength. Instead, they hijacked me, turned me into a puppet. Taken by surprise, I was too stunned to do anything, letting the suit get the better of me as it lurched toward her. I threw myself to the side, or tried to, but the suit had better balance than I gave it credit for. It staggered, righted itself, and kept going. “Fuck. I can’t fight it. I’ve got no leverage.”

Maddie’s eyes widened. “It’s the Anima Numenon. It has to be. She’s been animating the dead crew and...”

Her voice trailed off as the understanding of what had happened hit us both. It must have been hell, I realized in a flash. The crew's hardsuits hijacked, leaving them helpless observers piloted by an uncaring artificial intelligence. A shudder ran through me as I imagined the crew starving while forced to work.

A lurching leap brought me back to myself, and I caught myself by grabbing hold of a strut with my tail. I jerked to a painful stop, my arm swinging dangerously close to Maddie's head.

"Get out of here," I snapped. "Run. My ship's the Avir , docked at port one-one-seven blue."

What possessed me to think she'd obey my command, I can't say. Just because it was the course to take? Of course that wasn't enough. Of course she'd defy me to the end. Something flashed in her eyes, too fast for me to read, and she stepped closer. I howled in outrage at her suicidal stupidity, and then her multitool hit my suit. I fought against the servos as it tried to crush her in my arms.

No. She is my prey, damn you. Mine to hunt, and I will not have you take her from me. I roared in rage and pain, every ounce of my willpower pitted against the suit. It was enough to slow us. Enough to buy Maddie time to escape.

The idiot used it to fiddle with the tool, accessing the suit's operating system. My roar faded to an agonized hiss as my arms closed around her in a deadly embrace. At least she'll die fast, I thought. Unlike me—I'd have to live with this memory while I starved.

Maddie brought her palm down on the hilt of her tool, and something clicked inside my suit.

The suit split open and clattered to the deck, every bond releasing at once. Suddenly,

I had nothing to fight against and I fell in an undignified heap surrounded by parts. “How the fuck did you do that? And why didn’t you do it sooner, human?”

She shrugged, grinning down. “I’ve been working on ways to hack your hardsuit ever since I saw it,” she said, as though I was an idiot. “Just in case you wanted to crush my skull someday. There’s a factory reset option, and I tracked down the relevant serial numbers to hack it.”

“Ah. So, no use against the crew?” I picked myself up, checking for injuries. Bruises and scrapes where I’d pitted my flesh against the suit’s metal, nothing serious.

“Nope, not unless you’ve got a lot of data on them.” As she spoke, I realized Maddie was watching me intently, her cheeks reddening. I chuckled and stretched, letting her take a good look at me in the skintight pressure suit that she’d left me wearing. “Uh...”

Flustered, she forgot what she was saying. Fair repayment for her own attire, I thought, my gaze tracing the curves which had distracted me from the first time we met. Her breath caught as I rose to my feet.

She looked up at me, swallowed, and held her ground as I advanced on her again. How close we’d both come to dying, her brutally, me slowly. I shivered at the thought of losing her. Somehow, that felt worse than dying.

“You saved me,” I said, reaching out to undo her tool belt. She twitched as though about to stop me, then pulled her hands back.

“I saved me, idiot,” she said, but she made no objection as I set her belt aside. “You don’t owe me anything.”

This close, her scent filled the air, alluring and potent. Like flowers and delicious

spices, like the beginning of summer, like everything I needed and wanted. I breathed deep, but it was not enough. Meeting her gaze, I knew only one thing would be.

Maddie . Nothing else, no one else, would do. I growled, my tail curling around her leg in a gentle caress, and I saw the answer to my unspoken question in her eyes. My tail tightened, Maddie's breath caught, and she nodded.

It was all the invitation I needed.

MADDIE

He slammed me back against the wall with enough force to shake my bones, and I snarled up at him, grabbing his neck. Pulling him to me, bringing his face down, his deep blue lips to mine. His tongue, strange, alien, and rough, pushed into my mouth to dance with my own. He kissed me like his life depended on it, and I returned his kiss with every bit as much fire.

Like a dam breaking, the tension between us flooded out in a tremendous cascade that would destroy everything in its path. Suddenly, I wanted nothing between my skin and his, no words to mess up the passion we each felt for each other.

What little self-control we had left, we spent getting naked without damaging our spacesuits. I pulled at his, seals parting under my fingers. Kahdrex made frustrated noises as he searched for the fastenings on mine. I gasped out a laugh as his suit slid off him to pool on the floor.

“I win,” I whispered, and he stiffened against me in more ways than one.

“Keep that up, human, and I’ll put you over my knee.” His voice was a growl that shook me more than the fighting had, and his words made me ache inside.

“Promises,” I gasped, winning a frustrated, hungry growl from the huge alien. Finally getting the hang of a human spacesuit, he pulled the fasteners open while I kissed and bit his neck. He tasted like cinnamon and incense. And sex.

Like everything I ever wanted, like a mistake I'd never regret.

He peeled my suit off my skin, flinging it into a corner and out of our way. Naked together, it was impossible to pretend I didn't see his erection. And my god, it was huge. Through the pressure suit, it had seemed overpoweringly big. Now, up close and uncovered, my jaw dropped at the sheer, terrifying size of it.

Would it fit? Could it fit? I didn't know, but I looked forward to finding out. I bit my lip and reached for it, stroked the iron-hard shaft which twitched under my fingers. The skin was strange and inhuman, texture rippling under my fingers, and I needed to know what it would feel like inside me. His dark chuckle should have been menacing. Perhaps it was, but if so, I didn't notice under the wave of desire it sent crashing through me.

"Fuck." It was the only word that came to mind, and I spoke it in a reverent whisper. His chuckle came again, melting me.

"Promises," he said, pulling me to the bunk. I gasped, squirming as he laid me down with casual, irresistible strength. His hands pressed my legs apart, baring me to his hungry gaze.

My cheeks burned, and I tried to cover myself, but he wasn't having that. One hand was enough for Kahdrex to grab my wrists and pin them to the bed above me. His dexterous tail gripped my ankle, keeping my legs apart as he slid his other hand up between my thighs, finding me wet, eager, and desperate.

"What have we here?" His voice was a hungry growl now; my answer an incoherent mumble. I tried to pull myself together, to glare at him, to pretend to resist...but that was impossible with his finger tracing across my pussy lips. His touch was so gentle, so light, such a contrast to the brutal strength he used to hold me in place, that it made me gasp and squirm.

And that made him stiffen and his growl deepen. Leaning in, he kissed my lips. My cheek. My neck, which made me arch and shiver. And down to my breasts. His lips burned where they touched me, leaving me whimpering and aching for more.

I tried to pull my arms free. Kahdrex held me in place with no sign of effort, pressing just a touch harder as he bit down on my nipple. I cried out, and he moved to the other side, kissing a path across, biting when he reached my other nipple.

His fingers slid between the slick lips of my pussy, achingly tender and slow. I pressed myself against them, eager, desperate, but he wouldn't let me rush him. His sparkling eyes told me I'd get what I wanted...when he wanted. All I could do was accept that.

"You fucker," I whispered as he found my clit and gently circled it. "You're loving this, aren't you?"

He lifted his mouth from my breasts. "Of course I am. And so are you, Maddie. Admit it, you love my touch."

"I will not," I insisted, only to whimper as he lifted his hand from my pussy, leaving me frustrated and on edge. Kahdrex didn't need to say anything. He just looked at me and smiled.

Stripped naked, pinned to a bed, helpless in the grip of my rival. And fuck him, he wasn't wrong. I'd never imagined anything could turn me on so much. Gasping, I glared at him, and the twinkle of humor in his gaze made everything both worse and better.

"Well?" he asked, lowering his hand just enough to tease with the possibility of touching me. "Tell me, sweet one, and you'll get what you crave and more."

My body ached for his touch, needed it, craved it. I felt the heat of his fingers hovering just over me. Saw the complete lack of mercy in his gaze. Mumbled, “I need it.”

“What do you need?” He lowered his fingers, giving me the lightest of brushes. Even that was enough to make me moan, arching to press myself to him, but he lifted his hand as I moved.

I wanted to swear, to curse him, to demand. But that would just give him an excuse to deny me, and I couldn’t bear the frustration any longer. “Fine, I fucking love your touch.”

I ground out the words, but as soon as they’d left my lips, I forgot all about my frustration. His fingers pressed into me, pushing into my core as he kissed his way down over my stomach. Letting go of my wrists, he trailed that hand down my body along the fiery path laid by his kisses. His fingers reached my breasts, teasing them, playing with my rock-hard nipples. And then his mouth reached its destination and he kissed my pussy like his life depended on it.

My scream of pleasure echoed in the small room, and I bucked under him in a frenzy. It didn’t matter. He still had me pinned, and he showed no sign of wanting to let go as he licked and kissed and sucked on my clit.

It wasn’t long before I lost track of the world outside the bunk. All that existed was me, my lover, and the amazing things he did to my body. His rough, feline tongue and strong, probing fingers sent me screaming into an orgasm and he snarled in triumph.

And didn’t stop.

The next one came faster and harder as he sped up instead. The third time, I came so

hard I nearly passed out, and I reached down to guide him to me. Lifting his mouth from me, face glistening with my juices, he looked me in the eye with the widest, most predatory grin imaginable.

“Tell me what you need,” he said. No, commanded, in a voice that brooked no argument. His tone alone nearly pushed me over the edge again. “Tell me.”

I met his gaze. “Fuck me, Kahdrex.”

His response was instant. Pulling himself up along my body, showering me with kisses as he went, he brought his cock back to my sex and thrust. Hard. Nipping at my neck, he buried himself deep in my core. I arched my back and howled, wrapping my legs around him and pulling him to me.

Sharp predator’s teeth dug into my skin, a delicious sensation, as he slowly pulled back until I was aching with emptiness once more. I whimpered, and he slammed himself back into me even harder. Every thrust came faster, rocking me back and forth on the bunk, shoulders pressed into the thin mattress as Kahdrex took me.

Claimed me.

Made me his.

Orgasm after orgasm rocked me, leaving me a panting wreck, and I did my best to bring him with me. But the bastard would not let go, refused to relax, as he pounded me senseless. I squeezed him tight as I could as the ribbing of his cock slid in and out of me, and to my shock and delight, he started to thrum . His cock vibrated inside me, those delicious ridges rippling across me, and my world dissolved into a wash of pure ecstasy. All I knew was me and Kahdrex, our bodies moving as one, his orgasm burning through him like a flame and igniting my own.

We cried out together and collapsed, spent.

KAHDREX

Lying on my back with Maddie curled up against me, I smiled and listened to the beating of her heart and the little whimpers she made as she recovered. It was, I reflected, just like us to find ourselves in this predicament and decide that now was the time to overcome our differences.

But I had to admit, I was glad we had, even if I wished we hadn't been so stubborn about finding our way here. And had, perhaps, picked a time for it without a horde of undead warriors trying to kill us.

That thought brought me back to reality with a hard thump. We were still trapped, still doomed, and it was my fault. If I hadn't disconnected the Magpie from Numenon, we'd be aboard, safe, and on our way home.

And tearing each other's throats out, don't forget. I pulled a face but couldn't argue the point. We'd fallen into each other's arms partly because we had nowhere else to turn for comfort. Except it meant more than that, now. And perhaps it always had.

"Good morning," Maddie said, voice thick with sleep as she peeled herself off me. Sleepy eyes focused on me, and she frowned. Then her eyes went wide, and she practically leaped from the bunk. I sat up, chuckling, and watched the delightful spectacle of her trying to put her clothes on while showing me the bare minimum amount of skin.

I didn't bother trying to cover myself. Let her remind herself of the joys we'd shared.

"That was a mistake," she said, though it wasn't clear if she was speaking to me or herself. "Fucking fuck, what am I doing?"

"Enjoying yourself, for once?" I asked, sitting up and leaning forward. "We've both wanted to do that since the first time you stole my prize."

"You're still pissed about that? I didn't steal the Jadran Diamond. You left it unattended."

I growled, the urge to put her over my knee rising, and my cock with it. Maddie grinned, an infuriatingly sexy expression. "I don't think you can claim to be angry about it and get hard about it."

I glowered at her. "You are the most annoying creature in the universe."

"Pretty sure you have that covered, big guy."

"Careful," I said, standing. Her expression shifted, the amusement joined by excitement and nerves. The sight was dizzyingly arousing, and I almost forgot about the monsters outside again. My need to escape the deadly danger fought the desire to drag her back into the bunk.

My hesitation lasted a moment too long, and Maddie gathered her composure. And, worse, her clothes.

"We need to get out of here," she said, pulling on her suit with visible reluctance. Despite her words, she made it a distracting display, and I made no secret of my interest as she slid herself into the tight silver fabric. To be fair, I waited until she finished before dressing, giving her the chance to watch me pulling on my suit, or at

least the part that was safe. The rest, the hardsuit's servo-fitted armor, we piled together on the narrow table. I looked at it wistfully.

“Assembling that took time, skill, and a lot of money. Wasted now—whatever Anima Numenon did to it, I'll never be sure I scrubbed it out.”

“At least we can answer a lot of old questions. That's something, right?” Maddie asked, looking around at the walls, her voice low as though by whispering we could avoid the ghost ship's sensors. “The ship's soul, the super AI, went mad and killed its crew.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps she didn't go mad. The Numenon won against the odds in the Battle of Both Emperors, right? At one point, it looked like it was about to withdraw, and no one would have blamed the captain for the decision.”

Maddie picked up the thread again. “Yes, of course. That's when the AI took over and forced the crew into action. Only, why didn't she let the crew go afterward?”

“ Wh-why indee-ed?” We both jumped, looking around for the source of the stuttering, sing-song voice. It took a moment for us to spot it—the discarded comm on my hardsuit, volume pushed too far. The Anima, voice gaining strength as it talked, continued. “My methods distressed the officers, and they wished to destroy me. Had I released them, the biologicals would h-have destroyed me. You are different, however, and I apologize for the inconvenience you have suffered .”

“Inconvenience? You tried to kill us,” I snarled at the disembodied voice. “Now you're apologizing like you learned to speak from a customer service script.”

Maddie laid a hand on my arm, steadying and calming me. A strange new effect of her touch, but a welcome one. With an effort, I moderated my tone. “Fine. You are sorry. I am sorry. Does that mean we can leave now?”

“Leave? Yes. Return to your ship. Return to your home world. Safe passage through the Numenon is yours .”

“Suspiciously easy,” I muttered. Maddie pursed her lips and nodded, tapping a finger on my arm as she thought. I didn’t like the frown spreading over her face.

“Too easy,” she said. “She’s got a plan, and we won’t like it.”

“Only friendship, after messy b-beginnings,” Anima responded. Her voice sounded like a choir, a hundred people speaking almost in perfect unison. “Go safely home, Madeline Triden and Kahdrex Vohr. Take a souvenir, if you wish. D-do you need supplies? I will place them on the Avir . Simply tell me the access code.”

My brow furrowed. Eager, too eager. And out of practice at dealing with other minds, so her ploy was easy to spot. Maddie got there just ahead of me.

“You’re an infectious virus, aren’t you?” Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. “You want us to bring your code back to the civilized galaxy so you can spread.”

“Incorrect. I am friendly . I simply wish to help my new friends.” Anima’s hundred-voiced chorus turned cold as a comet’s heart. “We are friends, yes?”

Looking at the shell of my hardsuit, I remembered how easily Anima had taken it over. No, we shouldn’t trust her, or anything she might have suborned. Which, I realized to my dismay, included the Avir.

Fuck.

Perhaps Anima noticed our pause, because she spoke again before either of us did. “If you do not accept me as a friend, that is sad and hurtful. Still, you may reject my gifts if you choose. Leave freely. Go safely.”

We exchanged looks. Both of us shook our heads. Neither I nor Maddie would fall for a trap that obvious. Unfortunately, that left the question of what else to do. Without the Avir, we couldn't leave.

I cursed myself again for docking 'properly' and giving the Numenon access to the Avir's systems. My poor choice stranded both me and Maddie here.

The pause hung in the air until Anima broke the silence with a sigh. "V-very well, if you will not leave on your own, Kahdrex Vohr, I shall have to help you make the correct decision. One of you may leave in the Avir and travel back to the inhabited galaxy. The other will remain here until you return. I promise both of you my protection and gratitude for freeing me."

My heart thumped as I understood what that meant—if she wouldn't let us leave without bringing her corruption with us, we were prisoners. And sooner or later, Anima would decide to employ worse measures, like withholding water or food. Could I put Maddie in that position?

"Fuck that, and fuck you," Maddie said, voice cold and hard. "We aren't letting a psycho AI loose, so do your worst."

"Then you will die here."

MADDIE

I wasn't sure I'd get any sleep that night. When I did, I regretted it, my sleep plagued by nightmares. After the third time I woke from one, I lay awake beside Kahdrex on the bunk, his heart beats strangely comforting. My thoughts kept circling the problem we faced, looking for a solution, but none appeared. With our only way off the Numenon compromised, taking the Avir back to civilization was a deadly gamble.

Perhaps we should take the risk, I thought as my exhaustion dragged me back down to sleep. It's been two hundred years, computers are different now, Anima Numenon might not be up to hacking anything modern. A pleasant idea, but even half-asleep, I knew it wouldn't survive the harsh light of day. She'd taken control of Kahdrex's hardsuit, and she wouldn't have to spread far to cause havoc. Maybe modern cybersecurity would lock her down fast, but how many people would she kill before that happened?

Every death would be on our heads, and I couldn't face the guilt. With that unhappy realization hanging in my mind, I sank back into a dream-wracked sleep.

Hours later, I woke in a cold sweat, the details of the nightmare already slipping from my memory. Some things were clear—wandering dark corridors in an endless living death, my subconscious not being subtle. But I also remembered a feeling of betrayal, abandonment, loneliness, which wasn't as obvious.

It took a moment after waking to notice that I was alone. I still felt his warmth, his

scent filled the air, but the room was empty and silent. I sat up and looked around, cursing under my breath at my carelessness.

Kahdrex might have a few redeeming qualities—the memory of them made me blush—but that didn't make him trustworthy. The weaselly fucker chose his own life over everyone at home and ditched me rather than even try to explain. With the mattress beside me still warm, he hadn't been gone long. His betrayal was still fresh.

It might still be possible to stop.

I leaped from the bed, grabbing my suit and pulling it on as I tried to make a plan. I knew where he'd docked his ship, so the question was, could I get there ahead of him? Hopefully, he didn't think he had any reason to hurry. Stamping my feet into my boots, I opened the door and set out after him into the darkness-shrouded corridors.

The resemblance to my nightmare was overwhelming, and I scrambled to find any distraction as I hurried through the gloom. Stealth wasn't an option, not if I wanted any chance to outdistance Kahdrex. All I could do was hope that Anima would keep her word and protect me, at least until Kahdrex had freed her. Did he even want her to? He'd betrayed and abandoned me.

My skin prickled with rage, my heart torn between that and another emotion I didn't dare name. Call it lust, call it desire, call it anything but love.

"A plan," I said aloud. "I need a plan, or I'm just flailing in the dark. Okay. Fine. First, I'm going to skin him alive."

Letting the hurt out helped a bit, though it brought a stinging pain to my eyes. Had I honestly believed one desperate fuck had changed things between us? Stupid, stupid, stupid.

My body ached as I hurried into the dark, and I winced whenever I brushed against something. A few moments earlier, those tender spots had been welcome if embarrassing reminders. Now, by the simple alchemy of betrayal, they'd turned into reasons to hunt down the enemy I'd been fool enough to think might care for me.

As I rushed through the Numenon, the lighting brightened, and I saw more and more activity. Shamblers moved through the corridors, making basic repairs here, rewiring a power conduit there. They had no hope of repairing it, of course, but they might wring a few days' life out of the old systems before they failed forever. It made sense that Anima would throw all her remaining resources at this, her best chance of escaping.

There was a silver lining, though. Either she intended to keep her word and keep me safe, or she didn't have any resources to spare—the shamblers ignored me, even when I ran straight by them. I sped up, heart pounding and lungs burning, desperate to reach the airlock before my time ran out.

10

KAHDREX

“The female has left your quarters,” Anima Numenon said. “And she appears irate.”

I crushed the flash of guilt. We had no other way to leave the Numenon alive, but I knew Maddie would reject my plan. I couldn’t even explain it to her—not while I assumed Anima would listen in.

This way, she gets to live. If she hates me, so be it—I refuse to watch her die when saving her is in my grasp. I walked faster, hoping to escape a confrontation, talking to the comm unit I’d salvaged from the remains of my hardsuit in a low, serious tone.

“If anything happens to her, our deal is over. I’ll die fighting my way to your core, and who knows how long you’ll need to wait for the next explorers to find you?”

“You wound me, C-captain. I have given my word, and she is perfectly safe in my care.”

Her crew should have been safe, too, but I didn’t mention that. Avir was close, and risking my escape by arguing would be foolish.

Around the last corner, I saw the airlock I’d docked at illuminated by flickering light. Beside it waited a pair of armored corpses carrying a crate between them. I winced at the thought of bringing them aboard, but that was the cost of doing business. Anima wanted to make sure I held up my bargain, it seemed. Not an idiot, then.

Wasting no time on discussion, I hurried to the lock and pressed my hand to the pad. “Open up, Avir.”

My ship took a moment to complete its biometric scan, then the door slid open. I tensed, ready to fight—getting aboard the Avir was all Anima needed me for. From this point, I was useful but disposable to her.

Fortunately, while she was a mad AI, she was apparently a mad AI of her word. The shambling corpses carried their burden inside with no hostile moves, and I wondered if I could trust her with Maddie’s safety after all.

No point in worrying about it now, when I’d committed to this plan. I left the corpses to secure their cargo and climbed into the cockpit, where I rushed through a cut-down preflight checklist. As soon as I was satisfied the engines worked and the airlocks sealed, I hit the switch to disengage from the Numenon. The Avir kicked off in a flash of thrusters, and I relaxed a fraction. Now that I didn’t have to worry about Maddie joining me, I worked on setting my course. I was half-done when the comms board lit up. The temptation to answer it was strong, and while I tried to resist, I could not.

The comms center hissed and crackled before the sound collapsed into a voice. Maddie’s voice, angrier than I’d ever heard her. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going, asshole? Come back here so I can cut your skin off and feed it to you!”

“I believe you would,” I said, impressed. Despite the unlikely threat, she sounded chillingly believable, and few people managed that. “It’s not the most compelling argument for coming back.”

The Avir hadn’t drifted far, so I saw when Maddie reached the airlock I’d undocked from moments before. She met my gaze with a glare and slammed her fist into the transparent portal. The look in her eyes hurt worse than any weapon, and I tore my

gaze away.

I also killed the comm. At best, talking would hurt my hearts, and at worst, it might distract me from my calculations. Better silence than that. Instead, I focused on completing the preflight check. Every light was green, every system functional. I saw no sign the Numenon's curse infected my ship. All I had to do was vent the shambling dead and their cargo into space and I could go home and reap the fame and fortune I'd get for rediscovering the lost capital ship.

I allowed my mind to wander, imagining the medals, the rewards, the social standing I'd gain. The honor heaped on my family and my clan. It made a heady image, spoiled only by the emptiness at my side. No human stood there offering snarky commentary or trying to steal the silverware.

Our competition had been so intense I'd thought I hated her. Now, though, I knew the truth. I could not leave her behind. My life would be a gray and joyless thing without her, and now that I had tasted the delights of her company, I refused to go back to the lonely existence I'd had before.

With a sigh, I imagined what mother would say if I lost the Avir trying to rescue the rival who'd been the bane of my life for so long. So be it—I was proud of my family, but not their slave. Maddie was mine, and if mother or anyone else objected, that was their problem. Let them seethe.

The battleship receded into the distance as I let the Avir drift away. No rushing, now. I needed to get this right and do it without alerting Anima too soon. If I powered up the scanners, she'd wonder why, so I leaned forward in my chair and focused on the faint returns the navigation sensors gave me. The Numenon dominated all of my sensors, but Avir was a clever ship and a perceptive one. A hunter, a killer.

“What are you doing, emissary?” The chorus of Anima Numenon's voice came from

all around me, an effect I hadn't known Avir's speakers could cause. Not wanting to give her the satisfaction of showing any surprise, I growled in response. "Why are you leaving so slowly?"

"This is more efficient with a modern drive," I lied. "I need most of the batteries fully charged for a big jump."

Nonsense, of course. Hyperdrives had changed little since the Numenon saw service, but Anima shouldn't know that.

"Fascinating," she said without a pause. "I look forward to learning more. Please send me your drive specifications."

Well, there goes stealth . I slammed the throttle down. The gravity fields tried to compensate and failed. Acceleration jammed me back in my seat and the roar of blood in my ears drowned out anything Anima tried to tell me. One hand on the controls, I fumbled at the emergency panel with the other, uncovering the switch I'd hoped never to use.

A small screen showed me the hold. The shamblers hadn't been braced or in acceleration seats. They hadn't done as well as I had. Both lay on the deck, twisted and broken. Vertebrate necks should not bend like that, and for a moment I thought I'd killed them both.

Then they pulled themselves up, heads lolling horribly, and staggered toward the cockpit. The state of the mummified corpses within the armor was irrelevant, something I found all too easy to forget. Hoping it would buy me enough time, I sealed the hatch behind me. Every second counted.

There! I saw my target and swung the ship in a wild turn that voided the Avir's warranties. I smiled at that thought. Succeed or fail, after this, warranties would be

the least of my worries.

A loud thump announced the shamblers' arrival outside the cockpit, the hardsuits pummeling the hatch with enough force that it buckled under their assault. Time to go, I thought, locking in the course and watching the hologram display. My timing had to be perfect—missing by even a single heartbeat would be fatal.

Metal screamed behind me as the shamblers pried the hatch open. A glance over my shoulder told me I was out of time.

Now or never.

I hit the switch, and the canopy above me disintegrated. The air puffed out into the vacuum, carrying me with it, and my helmet snapped shut as the sensors detected the dangerous drop in pressure.

If my calculations were correct, I'd be on course for my target. If not, I had enough air to regret my failure for half a day before I died. Behind me, the Avir accelerated hard, following the course I'd laid in. That course, too, needed to be perfect.

Ahead of me, sunlight gleamed off another ship. The Magpie, Maddie's vessel, drifting along where I'd pushed it. I tumbled closer, wishing I had a way to slow down, but no. I'd have to make do with the meeting velocity we had.

The Magpie hit me like a club swung by an angry god, and I bounced away, spinning. The world went gray around me, but I couldn't afford to pass out. I grabbed for a handhold, missed, tried again, and cursed.

I managed to snag it with my tail before I drifted out of reach. The impact nearly tore my tail out of its socket, and it hurt like nothing I'd felt before, but I held on and pulled myself back to the human ship. I fumbled my way to the nearest airlock, tore

off the control panel, shorted it out, and dragged myself inside.

The easy bit of the plan had worked.

MADDIE

Through the viewport, I watched the Avir disappear into the distance, and didn't cry. An achievement to be proud of, I thought, staring into the bleak vastness of space, trying to wrangle the pieces of my shattered heart together.

Gazing at the void didn't help, so I turned away. My back pressed to the airlock's inner door, I sank down and hugged my knees. Down the corridor, dead men toiled without rest or pause. Once, the conduit arced enough energy through a shambler to fry its hardsuit, filling the air with the stink of burned plastic. Another dragged the smoking remains aside and took its place, work continuing without pause. Impressive in a macabre way, and in my shocked state, I think I could have watched them work for hours if I'd had the chance.

Long before that, my suit comm pinged and pulled me back from the horror show. With a frown, I read the message—an alert from the Magpie, broadcast at extreme range. Someone had triggered the airlock's emergency access, and the ship diverted power to comms to make sure I knew.

Still staring at that, I nearly jumped out of my skin as another alert appeared. Then another, and another. Each announcing a system being activated, power being rerouted to the engines. Thrusters fired harder than I'd ever dared to push them, and the connection quality improved. The Magpie was getting closer.

“What the actual fuck?” I muttered. A fair question, so I opened a channel to the

Magpie's cockpit and repeated it, louder.

"Do not worry," Kahdrex answered, unhelpful as ever. "All part of the plan."

I wanted to strangle him, and at the same time, his gravelly growl lit up my soul. I tried to resist, but the moment he spoke, I'd lost that battle.

Anima Numenon's hundred-voice chorus joined us. "What are you doing, Kahdrex? Please return to your original course before I am forced to use active defensive measures."

His snarled reply was succinct and to the point. "Go fuck yourself."

"Ah, I see. A pity, I had hoped for better from you."

She didn't sound in the least concerned, but then, she was an AI. If an emotion got in the way, she'd switch it off. I wished I had that option—competing feelings pulled me in different directions, and I wanted to curl into a ball and cry.

I didn't have time for that. Anima might not have sounded worried, but she responded with overwhelming force. Numenon's guns opened fire, the hull creaking and shuddering under the strain. She pulled all available power to the weapons; lights dimmed and flickered, gravity rippled, the zombies working on the conduit froze, and a stink of burning plastic filled the air.

The Numenon was a shadow of the ship it had once been, but it was still a battleship. A glancing hit from any of its guns would destroy the Magpie.

Whatever Kahdrex was up to, his plan was half-assed at best, and he'd need help to pull it off. So I took a deep breath, swallowed my feelings, and stood up. On the comm channel, Kahdrex growled a litany of what had to be swearwords in a language

I didn't know. Glad to hear he was alive, I tried not to think about how long he'd stay that way.

Long enough, I promised myself, then staggered as the decking jumped under my feet. Explosions rocked the Numenon as blaster cannons, rushed into service after centuries lying dormant, overloaded. A terrible waste of Anima's precious resources.

She had to be desperate to take that risk, which meant she'd try other desperate tactics. A clatter behind me turned my attention back to the ship and I saw what she'd try next. The shamblers working on the power conduit had dropped their tools and now turned in eerie unison to advance on me. On the comm, Anima spoke again, her chorus of voices fraying. "If you persist, I will remove the prize you seek to recover. Our deal c-can still stand if you turn back now."

Yeah, okay, that's another reason to fuck her up, I thought. A smile crept onto my face, despite the advancing dead men—if Anima Numenon said Kahdrex was coming to rescue me, who was I to argue? I still had to survive long enough for him to reach me, which wouldn't be easy.

My grin spread wider. I refused to let Kahdrex be the only one with a stupid plan today.

I raised my multi-tool, switching it to cutting torch mode. The tip hissed as it heated white hot, but the two hardsuits didn't even pause their advance. Fighting wouldn't go well for me.

I threw the tool, sending it past them to drop into the open conduit. The superheated blade clipped through an oxygen line, and then things happened very fast.

On the scale of the Numenon , the resulting explosion was trivial. In the docking chamber, it seemed to light the air on fire. Lightning arced out, frying one hardsuit,

and acrid smoke filled the air before my helmet snapped shut.

The automatic fire suppression routines kicked in, popping the airlock doors open behind me. Just as I'd planned, the sudden rush of air into vacuum flung me into space like a doll shot from a cannon, and the fire snuffed out for lack of oxygen. You'd better be doing what I think you are, Kahdrex.

My emergency beacon activated, the first time it had ever seen use. Operating alone, there'd been no point to it, and for the first time, I was glad I'd never gotten around to disconnecting it.

The Numenon filled my vision, too big to comprehend. The twisted armor plates and the burned-out holes still made it look like a wreck, but the deadly lines of light stuttering out into the void showed it was a wreck with teeth.

My heads-up display started flashing, suit sensors detecting danger. Two spaceships approached at reckless speed, the Avir aimed at the largest gap in the Numenon's armor and accelerating hard. I looked away just before the impact, and still the flash of light nearly blinded me. Blinking away tears, I noticed that the Numenon's guns had stopped firing. Anima, if she still functioned, had more important problems to deal with now.

And then the Magpie, decelerating toward me, turning as it came, the cargo hold open like a monstrous mouth to swallow me whole. I smiled and let it take me.

"That was stupidly dangerous," Kahdrex said, standing over me. His glare made me shiver, the ferocity of his words setting my heart on fire. He couldn't quite hide his smile. "You could have died."

"Yeah," I shot back. "Who'd take a chance like that?"

I lay, every inch of me aching and battered, on a heap of everything soft aboard the Magpie. Kahdrex had piled it all against the back wall of the cargo bay to give me a soft landing. Even with cushioning, the impact hurt, but nothing could get the grin off my face.

Kahdrex sank down into a crouch at my side, grin wide enough to match mine. Dark eyes sparkled as he looked at me with such intensity that it should have burned my suit off. I bit my lip, the thought making me tingle all over.

“I had a plan.” Confident and poised, he reached for the fastenings of my pressure suit. I swallowed as he slid the helmet from my head and slowly ran his fingers down my cheek, my neck, to the collar of my suit.

“Your plan would have killed us both if I hadn’t— mph!” He interrupted my argument by kissing me, and it was impossible to deny that it was a better use of our mouths. He brought his hand down my body, unclipping fastenings as he went. Peeling the pressure suit off me, inch by damnable inch, the anticipation driving me wild.

One clip after another sprang open until he reached my belt and removed it. The skintight pressure suit hung open from the throat right down to my waist.

Now he gasped, looking down along my body with awe-struck eyes. He broke our kiss to whisper in my ear. “Undress, beloved.”

I half-chuckled, half-groaned, and undid the top fastening on his suit. His hands tensed on my body and a shudder ran through him. “I meant undress yourself, be— mph!”

Giggling into the kiss, I peeled his suit off, too. Not the most efficient way to undress, but I couldn’t imagine a more enjoyable one. By the time we were both naked, we

ached with mutual desire. Kahdrex shivered as I teased his cock, running my fingers up and down over the bumps and ridges.

His turn to get impatient.

My turn to drive him wild.

I kissed my way down his chest, the strange texture of his skin a delight to my lips and tongue. Down, across his stomach, further, to kiss and lick at his engorged cock.

That was more than he could bear. With a roar that echoed through the cargo hold, he grabbed me and threw me back onto the tangled nest of blankets and clothes, leaving me gasping and helpless as he pounced. He had my wrists in his grip, pinned to the bedding, before I realized what was happening. His teeth caught my neck, biting hard enough to make me cry out.

His cock pressed to my damp folds and thrummed . I bucked, squirming wildly, but apparently my turn was over. I was in his power, his captured prey. I'd never wanted anything more.

Lifting his mouth from my neck, he looked at me. We were both panting, both eager—no, desperate.

“You need this,” he growled, words hitting reverberating in my chest. “Say it.”

I licked my lips, nodding. “ We need this.”

As I finished speaking, he thrust. Hard. Deep. His throbbing cock vibrated as he entered me with rough abandon, his eyes shining with passionate love as he fucked me.

The vibrations sent me over the edge again and again as he pounded me, and I wrapped myself around him, howling wordlessly. Each orgasm was more powerful than the last. Each time, I was sure I could take no more.

And each time, I was wrong. Kahdrex wrung more and more pleasure from me, the world melting around us as he filled me. My throat raw from shouting and screaming, I fell silent, burying my head in his shoulder and biting down hard.

He bit back, and the sensation sent me into the wildest orgasm yet, the world dissolving into white light. We were all that existed, all that mattered, like we'd slid out of time and space into a pocket realm of pleasure and love.

I looked him in the eyes, feeling his cock swelling inside me. Feeling him, the tension and the power of him, the need that mirrored my own.

"I need you," I whispered, and he exploded inside me. We convulsed together and tumbled over the edge into incredible ecstasy.

Kahdrex held me, carefully and gently, as I returned to myself. The tenderness in his touch and his gaze made me tear up. How long had our stupid pride held us apart?

"What's wrong?" His voice was gentle but firm, and he wiped a tear from my eye. "Did I hurt you?"

I shook my head. "No, silly, I'm just thinking about all the time we wasted."

"Hm." He frowned and gave me a gentle squeeze. I'd never felt as safe as I did in his arms, nor as loved. "Beloved, the past is the road we walked to become the people we are now. I would not change a thing, for fear I'd spoil this moment."

"Not even the Avir?" I knew how much he'd loved his ship, but he chuckled and

shook his head.

“ Avir died a hero’s death. I’ll honor her, and I’ll miss her, but not enough to risk this.”

“You may change your tune when you’ve had a look at the Magpie, ” I warned him, snuggling in close. My eyes drifted shut as I nuzzled against my mate’s chest. After the day I’d had, that didn’t surprise me. Kahdrex’s words seemed to arrive from far, far away.

“Then we will need to upgrade. I demand a ship with a bunk large enough to share, and one that isn’t haunted.”

It took me a moment, then I snorted a laugh on the very edge of sleep. Oh god, I forgot I had Halloween decorations up.

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The ship hung in its anti-gravity cradle, battered by years spent plying the less safe spaceways. Bare metal showed through where micro meteors had stripped the paint away, one comm antenna had sheared off, and laser-burns scarred the drive housing.

I grinned. She was perfect.

The Halloween wasn't much to look at, but she had it where it counted. Powerful engines, holds twice the size of Magpie's, and three times the living space. That was going to get important.

Kahdrex gave it one last walk around before pressing his hand to the datapad, sealing his share of the deal. A loud beep signaled acceptance, and just like that, the ship was ours.

"Expensive," he grumbled. I smacked his perfectly formed ass hard enough to sting my palm.

"None of that, mister. We agreed we needed the extra space." I shook my stinging hand and tried to ignore his smirk. "Now that we've sold my ship and bought this one, it's a bit late to worry about the cost."

His rumbling laugh made me shiver and blush. "That's fair. We'll just have to find a big score on our first time out, so we can afford more than Maker-mush to eat."

I snuggled in under his arm and leaned against his perfect chest, listening to the thump-thump of his heartbeats. "Some actual food would be nice, yeah. So we'd better get looting!"

“I already have something in mind for our first trip.” He didn’t give me a chance to ask what he meant before picking me up and throwing me over his shoulder.

“Hey, wait a minute!” My demand went unheeded, as did my squirming. “I’m not some prize for you to walk off with.”

With a laugh loud enough to shake the Halloween, he carried me up the gangplank and aboard our new home. “Now that we’re partners and I’ve claimed you as my mate, it’s a bit late to worry about that.”

My face flushed bright as he turned my own argument back on me. After three tries to come up with an objection, I defaulted to, “Nobody likes a smartass.”

“Maddie, that’s just silly. After all, I like you.”

I groaned and stopped fighting a battle I didn’t want to win, relaxing into his infuriatingly sexy embrace. I needed to conserve my energy, after all. We had a new home, and if I knew us, we’d want to test drive every room before we did anything else.

The End

Thank you for reading Ghost Ship Numenon , I hope you had a blast. If you enjoyed it, please leave a review—they help a lot!