



Hyperdrive (Alien Bride Race #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She doesn't know she's supposed to be MINE. I knew the moment we parted ways years ago. It felt like dying. Now, she's in danger. I'm not wasting my second chance.

Zariah

The last package I receive from my mother contains the one thing I don't expect: an entry ticket to the Alien Bride Race.

My father was a savage bounty hunter turned pirate. I was a mistake. I was also, in his mind, free labor until I made my daring escape as a child. My twin brother stayed with our father and carries on the family tradition. I joined the shipping industry for an honest wage, but I can't seem to escape my past.

Now, I transport dangerous things as a private contractor. I trust few people and fewer aliens. But my mother's last gift included a message, apologizing for my childhood, one that makes me feel guilty for wanting to throw away my ticket. I don't want an alien mate. I'm not interested in starting a family when I come from one that's such a mess. But when the ticket falls out of my pack and a fellow contractor at the bar picks it up, I get teased to no end. To my surprise, Elix, someone I helped long ago, steps in and returns it to me.

He's a lone wolf type, keeps to himself, depends on no one, and is of an endangered species with few left in the universe thanks to the war with the Nebulous Empire. He's a jacked beast of a male with a protective tendency that I like. But more importantly, he's the only one who's gotten close to me and not tried to find out where my father hid his bounty.

I don't care for my father's credits or metal junk. All I want is to earn my way so I don't have to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life. My mother thought an alien mate might keep me safe. Maybe she's right.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

I fear the feds are onto me. Two of them sit in black tactical gear in a booth against the window wall of the spaceport bar. They steal glances in my direction. One is human, the other an olive-hued Retterwan with scales that ripple like waves of little plates of armor when he looks at me.

I'm trying to protect lives, but they won't see it that way.

My ship is parked in a dark, desolate part of the galaxy that most won't bother entering because it's too dangerous. It's empty at the moment and biometrically coded to me so no one can steal it while I await my shuttle to the Alien Bride Race.

I'm sure the feds are wondering where my ship is. They love an excuse to poke around in things that aren't their business.

Unfortunately, if I let people or aliens get one foot into the door of my life, they want more, want me to tell them secrets I don't have the answers to. They want to find my father's stockpile of stolen goods.

But I'm not that person anymore. I haven't been for over a decade. With him finally gone, I thought I was off the hook. Yet since his death, I've been hounded more than normal. I'm only out in public for a short time, but I have no doubt someone will recognize me from the bounty hunters' catalog on the darknet.

I down the last of my Supernova, a sweet, milky, minty drink I've never tried. I usually stick to cheap beer because my cover operation, hauling dry goods between planetary systems, doesn't pay much. I wanted to celebrate my upcoming vacation and toast my mother's memory with something she'd like.

“You want another?” the bartender asks. He’s a spotted Halthidori, green on orange, one of the few species I do trust in this universe.

“Can’t afford it. Just water and those mozzarella sticks.”

After a moment, he sets a beer on the counter beside a basket of fried food. “On the house, Zariah.”

“You don’t have to.”

He smiles, exposing his long black teeth, as he turns to take someone’s order at the other end of the bar. “Someone has to watch out for you.”

“Thanks, Jaaka.”

Exhaustion grips me, and it becomes a fight to eat the best food I’ve had in a week. My knuckles are streaked with gear oil between the splits. I doubt any alien royalty or warrior will consider me a prize.

What would we even talk about? The bulkhead door that likes to stick shut, the igniters I have to replace every month, or the freeze-dried food I live on? But this is what I’m stuck with for living a mostly honest life—a fourth-hand old StarBuster Cargo Transport.

My father would be ashamed if he was alive, but I never gave two fucks what he thought after he turned me into free labor, mopping up the ship after a battle gone awry and a machine to haul his precious crates of stolen goods from one ship to another.

A memory of the last treacherous gauntlet of spiked pillars he made me run to collect a bag of unique augmentation chips flashes through my mind. I escaped, but no one

sees it that way.

I check the credits in my account via my wristband, wishing they'd increase, but they haven't changed except for the Supernova charge at the bar. Jaaka gave me the shipping contractor's discount.

I need this vacation. I can't keep going on like this forever. A week of free food and a safe place to rest sounds pretty good to me, but I know it's only free because of my mother.

Does she really expect me to marry some dude I barely know?

The idea of giving up my life, my crucial undercover job, to be someone's mate is not something I'm ready for. I may never be. But she was good to me. She tried to protect me from Branthor, the man who took whatever he wanted from whoever he wanted.

She sacrificed everything for me. I can't justify disregarding what she requested, even if the idea of giving up my body in exchange for safety makes my skin crawl. I'm not into disrespecting the dead, not when I know how hard her life was in our refugee camp thanks to my piece of shit father.

Maybe no one will pick me, and I'll win a million credits.

That thought makes me smile a little, but I don't believe it's possible. If I think about it too much, that hope will turn into expectation. And that's a dangerous mindset when trying to survive transporting goods in deep space. I have to stay alert.

Distress calls turn into back stabbings. Navigation help becomes a raid. That's just how things are on the fringe of Sol Federation territory, where they don't patrol, and communication satellites are few and far between.

So now I trust no one, and I just keep my head down, pretending I don't hear their calls. Out there, bounty hunters and pirates are always trying to find any way they can get inside my father's vault.

But I don't know shit.

My fingers tremble as I hold my mother's last gift to me. Paper feels strangely smooth and delicate compared to the metal crates and starship parts I usually handle. In her final days, she spent everything she had on me.

I don't want it. I had zero plans of searching for a man, least of all an alien, to start a family with when ours was broken.

Her video message blinks in a corner of my wristband's screen. I tap on my earbud and hit play just so I can hear her gentle voice again.

"Hi, honey. I don't have long left, but don't worry. I know you're making your way on your terms. I'm proud of you. You always had his independent spirit.

"I'm sorry for not giving you a safer and more stable childhood. I want to be sure you're safe from your father and anyone in his line of work. I can't give you money because he'll just try to claim it's his. Your brother will, too, I'm afraid. Breaks my heart."

It's infuriating to have to call him my twin when we're so different these days. Things weren't always that way, but he took the easy route. I wish he would've escaped with me.

"Anyway, those alien men sure are protective. I watch them run the race every day on the holo vid from my bed. But, hey, if you don't find one, at least the ticket will give you a chance to live it up for a week in a secure place. They have lots of security.

“I love you. But more than that, I love your spirit. Find a man with a spirit like yours.”

Someone bumps my shoulder, snapping my attention to them.

A familiar face gives me a twisted smirk beneath cybernetic glasses that light up in red hues. “What’s hoverin’, grease monkey?”

“Fuck off, Lingon.” I lock my wristband and return to eating.

He sucks on the diamonds in his teeth and casually swats his friend, Condor, in the chest. I’m not surprised to see them on Catalyst Five. It’s a classier joint than I usually hang out at, and they’re high-tech wannabe pirates.

Behind me, many sets of boots rustle and scuff the floor like the owners are too lazy to take full steps.

“Brought the whole club?” I ask as men take seats in the bar, a few others leaning against metal posts around us. They’re dressed in ocular augments, leather, and armor and have weapons strapped to them like they’re going into battle soon, though I’m sure most of them have never set foot on a planet on the outer rim.

“Shipping convention this week.” Lingon lifts his hands in innocence, and I know he’s lying.

He hooks a finger inside the zipper of my leather work jacket and draws me closer. “I don’t know why you hang around such a nice bar. Your kind aren’t welcome here, Scrubbie.”

I hate Lingon almost as much as my father. He’s the worst of the good guys in shipping. Lingon and his fellow captains are the exact opposite of me. They do

humanitarian missions with all the cameras on their shiny ships, then sneak around in the shadows, taking care of their dirty business.

I slap his arm away with force, then shove him back. Lingon stumbles a step, and I savor my small victory. “Last I checked, there were no rules that said captains weren’t allowed in here.

Lingon saunters toward me as another man grabs my elbows from behind. “ I’m making the rule for anyone not bringing in six figures a year.”

Jaaka is already calling security. I hope they get here before the others behind me decide to take my head.

“I’ll let you stay,” Lingon continues, “if you tell me where that treasure of your daddy’s is hiding.”

Ah, there it is. “I don’t fucking know. I jumped ship years before he died. You’re better off hunting my brother. You know that.”

“Oh, I am.”

“Cap,” Condor, a large tattooed man with cybernetic wings built into his back like a Talhuskin, lifts my ticket from the floor. “Get a load of this.”

“Give me that!” I scramble for it, realizing it must’ve fallen out of my pocket.

Lingon leans away from me as he reads it. The man behind me draws me back.

“Alien Bride Race?” Lingon throws his head back, laughing at me in front of everyone in the bar. And suddenly, I’m ashamed for ever hesitating to be grateful for my mother’s gift. All I feel is utter seething anger.

The captains that now fill the bar jeer at me.

I am the only female pilot with her own ship in the room. I have no crew. My StarBuster is always in need of repair. And I barely bring in enough credits to fix what breaks and feed myself. But at least I do moral work.

“One of us could give you a good pounding,” a Ginarigon captain remarked, pumping his hips.

I grimace. “Not into baby carrots.”

Some men chuckle. The Ginarigon turns a deeper hue of orange.

My mother was smart to get me a paper ticket that didn’t come with a digital tracker. But now, I’m not sure if getting it back in one piece is worth the risk of doing whatever Lingon is scheming behind his ugly red eyes. His artificially forked gray tongue swipes over a pale lip.

He doesn’t want me. He wants to punish me. And I’ve seen the bruised women that leave his ship.

I’m surprised the feds aren’t stepping in unless this is the first time they’ve encountered Lingon in such a manner. Maybe they’re excusing his behavior because he parades his humanitarian work while stealing from those he helps behind their backs.

Maybe they’re in on it.

My father used to say something about things not being a crime if it was happening for the first time. Legal crimes versus moral crimes are where we had our biggest differences.

The feds aren't police. They're investigators. They can detain but not jail. They'd need Spaceport security or police for that. But right now, I wish they would intervene.

"Tell me where the stockpile is, and I'll let you go. Where did your father store his prized possessions?" Lingon asks.

"A planet called Agorak in the Cibarra system." That was the last place I ever served him. "But I'm sure you already know that."

"Checked there."

"Met my brother?"

Lingon waggles his head. "Didn't crack him, but I rattled him a little."

Doubt that. "Cazir is probably playing you. He's real maniacal like Dad." He didn't used to be.

Lingon holds my ticket in front of him and grabs another corner as if to rip it in half. "Try insulting me again."

Panic lances through me. "I don't know, Lingon! I'd tell you if I did because I don't give a damn about the shit he stole! You could have it all for all I care! But I don't fucking know!"

The pressure in my face tells me I'm probably red with rage. I don't care. I can't take my eyes off the paper.

"Ooh," Lingon sings out. "She is pissed ."

“That is the last thing my mother gave me! Yes, I’m fucking pissed.”

“So am I,” a deep voice rumbles.

Lingon pales and arches. The men around us freeze.

“Give it to her in one piece. Let her go. Or my Haxgun will blow you in two. ”

The muscle in my chest races, thrusting my pulse into my ears and making me tremble with fear. I don’t know what’s happening or who has them all spooked. But I’m immediately let go. Lingon hands me the ticket but doesn’t relax. Curious, I slowly walk around him.

Someone has the balls to stand up to Lingon and every single one of his buddies. The gall, the power they must possess, but more so the heart they must have to risk it all for me and my little piece of paper, has me unexpectedly hot.

They extend a second weapon that lights up around their wrist with a multitude of shots.

Green skin. High-tech weapons. Who the hell is this guy?

I have to thank them, and yet I fear their price. In this universe, everyone works for someone.

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It took me months to catch a break between clients and battles with the Nebulous Empire, Novarks, and corrupt Terran security, so I could track down my own target.

I should've never left her side. But I was a stowaway at thirteen that the police wanted to catch for their orphan corps.

The wavy-haired brunette at the opposite end of the bar sets her empty glass down with a dirty, bleeding hand that shakes. I can see it from where I sit.

Leaning back against the wall, I tune my hearing to isolate her voice among the drone of the others. She can't afford another drink, but it looks like she needs one.

Jaaka's gaze flashes to mine. I nod.

"On the house," he says to her.

I'd give her everything if I could. But if I'm not careful, I might end up taking it all away. I know she's up to something strange based on the erratic shipping patterns that don't match the munitions needs of her clients. Carrying dry goods is simply a code for shipping missile husks and other internal components, minus the explosives.

But why use a ship with so many extra cargo bays? Why race through deep Sol space? What are you hiding, Zariah?

A strand of hair slips from her ponytail to frame her face. She swipes it away and looks up, almost at me. My core pulses faster.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about her. She has consumed every spare moment since the day she broke into a hangar so I could hide on a departing ship.

Heat rushes into my groin. I want her to see me but on her terms. I can't bring myself to take anything from her when I know how much she's already been through.

Maybe she doesn't remember me.

It has been a couple of years. She's good at concealing her ship's location, a trick I'm sure she learned from her father. It makes it difficult to keep tabs on her.

Her dark eyes look down at her drink and then over her shoulder while she keeps her head down.

She doesn't want people to recognize her, and she doesn't trust those in here not to attack her. But I'm watching them too, including the two federal agents by the windows.

I know who her father was. I encountered him a few times before a poisoned trap around a healing crystal finally took him out and the rest of his regular crew. Somehow, his son survived. It makes me wonder why.

It's the reason I had to find her. I know everyone's gunning for his credits. It's always easiest to take down an empire when the leader is dead, and a new leader is still establishing their place in the hierarchy.

"Hello, handsome," a female with green skin like mine leans in against the bar counter. Her voice is a loud drone when I'm in hyperfocus mode. I ease back and give her a glance.

"Not many of our kind left," she adds.

I am surprised to meet someone from our solar system. There are only a handful of us Lazarsin left, which means this can't be a coincidence.

She's not Lazariot like me, or she'd be taller and have gold eyes. Larisiens have all perished, which makes her Lathlion. Her deep green eyes confirm it.

Should have a tail.

She tilts her head and plays with her ebony hair like it's going to get my attention. But I'm not interested in her.

I glance at Zariah. She's finally eating and now listens to a message from her mother.

Gently, I take the wrist of the Lathlion beside me, knowing she's been sent to me by someone. I can't get distracted because there's a threat somewhere else they're trying to hide.

"You were told to keep me busy, yes?" I whisper.

Her jade lips curl inward, and she sways a little like she might be drugged. But she nods subtly, once. I check her wrist for a marking while I keep my hearing tuned to Zariah. My homeworld kin has been tagged by an alien trafficker.

"Be quiet," I tell her. The playfulness in the Lathlion's eyes fades and is replaced by fear.

I draw a blade from my chest harness and cut the tracker out from beneath her tattoo. Her jaw clenches. She lets out a soft growl.

One squeeze pushes it out from beneath her skin. I crush it between my fingers and toss the pieces under the bar counter. "What's your name?"

Air rushes through her teeth. “Jiuli. You?”

“My name doesn’t matter.” I cover her wound with a rapid healing patch from a pouch in my armored vest and then draw her in for what I hope looks and feels like a hug.

Inside the cover of our bodies, I slip her a chip card with funds, not much but enough to get her out of here. I lower my voice so only she can hear. “For the record, you are beautiful but far more precious. All I want is for our kind to be free.

“There’s a transport leaving dock Five Bravo in ten minutes. It’s headed to Pieris Spaceport. From there, catch a shuttle to Eniph. Ask for Catarina when you arrive. They will help you get your freedom back.”

“Thank you.” Her tail grazes my cheek as blue tears fill her eyes. “Lingon. His name is Lingon.”

Then she backs up and runs through the rear exit of the bar.

I down the last of my beer and check on Zariah. I want to talk to her, but after a couple of years, it’s a challenge to find the right words.

As I lean to check on her, I’m interrupted again by two federal investigators. One is human, and the other is Retterwan.

“Captain Elix, Private Security,” the human remarks. He’s a dark-skinned human with gray-brown eyes and blue tracework embedded around them. “We need your help tracking a person of interest who’s shipping illegal goods onto Terran soil.”

His left eye twitches at the word goods , and I know he means something else. Likely drugs. I hope he’s not talking about Zariah. “I’m not a K-9 unit.”

The Retterwan glances at his partner and blinks his double-lidded eyes. His pulse ratchets up. I can hear it with a brief focus on his neck.

“We need your skills to solve this one. Trackers have all gone silent. Our operative has gone missing.”

Zariah’s desperate shout cuts through our conversation. The feds barely throw her a glance, but I’m already on my feet, trying to push past them to find out what’s wrong.

“We don’t want to have to legally bind you,” the Retterwan says. When he shifts to reach into his pocket, I see the name on his chest.

“Look, Tenac, I’m on another mission. So unless you have a commission contract in there, I’m going to get back to my job.”

“You are obligated to help.” The human wrinkles his nose. Even he doesn’t like the words that come out of his mouth. His nametape reads Harlten. He’s calmer than Tenac but still fidgets like he’s nervous.

“I have no information for you because I’m not on that case. You are. Someone might get hurt if you don’t let me go. So all I can tell you is the only scent I picked up that might be what you’re looking for was on Deck Four near the medical hangars. I didn’t think much of it because of what else they transport. But that might be a decent cover. Try there.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Twenty minutes.”

Tenac and the human hustle out the back door of the bar, uncaring of the fight going on at the other end.

I'm not a drug dog, you fucks. The Sol Federation agents have often tried to use my species skills since I joined. At least they compensate me. Many species don't show restraint. They'd cage me and starve me, force me to work like my ancestors for them if they had a choice. I've been used like a K-9 unit and a manufacturing plant for life-saving serum.

I'm certain that if I hadn't complied with something, they would've tried to shackle me with a buzz collar and make me help until I was of no use. They'd let me go afterward because they're real civil like that. But even the feds have shadow ops who feel like they can get their hands dirty under the cover of our desperate times thanks to the ruthless Nebulous Empire.

Most don't know Sol's dark side exists. I make it my business to know every threat in my area and any who threaten it.

When I turn to focus on Zariah, I hear that the half-breed before her is holding her mother's last gift. He looks ready to tear it in two. Her red face says I might be too late.

I draw my Haxgun, slip through the onlookers with quick, silent steps, and press it into his back. The charge tube spools quietly with a storm of green light as I lift my other hand with my Harrowgun.

The room around us stills. A few of the shipping captains make subtle movements for their weapons. I see the Ginarigon dart his eyes to his left. The man beside him slides his finger over one of the glowing red throwing knives on his chest. I can hear the susurrus of his skin sliding over the metal. Another man shifts his feet, his finger tapping the handle of his gun: tap tap tap , waiting for me to twitch in a way he doesn't like.

It was over-stimulating as a child to hear and feel so many things, but it's essential to

listen if I want to survive this place and every other in this war-torn universe. And this time, it's not just my ass on the line.

I initiate my wristband weapons with one thought.

Harrow Spindle-ignite.

My wrist swells with the light of twenty targeting blades. In my vision, I confirm targets with illuminated brackets.

Zariah slowly steps around the man she called Lingon, clutching an item in her hands and looking up at me in utter surprise.

I shake my head. Please don't say my name. Not with so many listening.

"Get your things," I say, trying to block out the sight of her looking at me like I mean something. It only makes it harder to fight the urges that stir within me. My erection strains against my armor. Heat curls out from my core into my limbs. I am furious anyone would threaten her, yet I'm fighting to rein in my desire, so I don't cock this rescue up.

She lifts the paper. "This is all I brought."

"Back door, go."

Zariah glances around her as she runs out the back door. I had hoped to chat longer, but this seems to be the way we see each other—in passing.

"You're going to regret this!" Lingon says.

I press my gun harder into his back. "You're going to regret all the women you have

hurt over the years, Lingon. They are the most precious thing in this universe, and you treat them like garbage.”

“Not all of us care about the future,” he defends. “What’s the point of procreating if we cannot enjoy the life we have?”

I steel my emotions, shift my sensory parameters to the males most ready to shoot, and plan my escape route. Jaaka closes the bar behind a shield. And everyone else hurries out.

“You don’t get it. And I pity you,” I say.

He cackles. “ You don’t get it. But you are going to get a lot of lead to pick out of your teeth in Hell, Nytheralian.”

“Wrong.” Few have seen one of my kind, but I know he has.

“Must be so miserable,” I jeer, as I switch my Harrow unit to a smoke canister. The lights blink on, showing me which port will fire.

“What’s that?”

“To not know love.”

I launch the smoke grenade, filling the bar with a rush of green clouds, then slam myself to the floor as the bullets whiz overhead, and scramble out through the back door.

Zariah’s scent fills my nostrils as I leave the bar behind. I scramble up and chase her path through the hallways, hoping she’s safe. Voices follow but become more distant the further I get from the bar. I don’t pick up the scent of others with hers, but I can’t

stand the thought of letting her get away from me again. My core compels me like a starved junkie.

I track her scent to the stairs and burst through the doors onto the stairwell to pace the landing. Her scent fades going up but comes back to me on the descending side. I take the steps down to the next level and find she's dropped another.

I exit into a maintenance room with an array of steaming heating systems and a maze of pipes. A few paces inside, a slender stick of rebar swings toward my head.

The angle is too low, the movement too slow to be a threat to me. I catch the bar with one hand and look down as Zariah's sweet aroma consumes me. Each time I've seen her, the pull grows stronger. I hear her rapid pulse, the breath that escapes her. Time slows for a blink.

"Elix?"

"Zariah—" I rasp, hoping she thinks it's just because I've been running and not from the scorching desire that tears through me.

Her ample hips sway as she slumps to rest against a row of pipes, and it nearly kills me to just stand here like a helpless idiot. But I cannot take her. I won't for moral reasons. That's all anyone has ever done to her.

I have to tell her the truth and find a way to make her mine. Just don't fuck it up this time.

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I wish she had come with me all those years ago, but I didn't know what this feeling was back then. I masked it as desperation to be free. But it broke me the moment I knew we weren't escaping together, and she'd stayed behind to ensure my freedom.

"How did you find me?" She releases the rebar like it's suddenly raging hot. "Never mind, I can wager a guess, since you're Lazariot. Sorry for attacking you."

She paces away, then comes back. "I'm really starting to regret this whole thing."

"Are you hurt?" I ask, wishing she'd stop and look at me with those inky gems of eyes once more. They remind me of the ore back at home, the same one that lines my armor and my weapons.

"Not any more than normal." She glances at her knuckles, then up at me. "You've sure grown."

"I was malnourished when we met and you covered for me. Haven't had a close encounter since."

"I don't remember you having this much muscle when I saw you last. Have you found any others like you?"

She likes my grown form? Something in the back of my mind compels me toward her. "A few."

"Any females?"

“Not interested in my kind.” All I want is to hold her and feel her, know she is safe and with me again, finally. “You?”

She shakes her head, then paces away and back toward me.

My cock swells. The need to collect her in my arms and take her cuts through my thoughts. I try to block out the idea by focusing on our reality: she’s not honest about her shipments, her family are known criminals, and I’m the law.

I’ve pieced together reports and images from spacecams over the years, enough to know she heads into some very dangerous territory. And because I now work as private security for hire, certified with the Terran Federal Defense Department, I would have to report her if I knew or be sentenced for conspiring with a criminal. If I got caught, I’d become unable to help those who need my skills. My core and my duties are at odds with each other.

“Maybe soon.” Zariah doesn’t sound thrilled.

A defensive urge boils in me. “Have you been forced into a union?”

“What? No.” She slumps against a support pillar. “But I do have to go soon.”

“What for?” I’m confused by her statements and only half-listen, distracted by the smoothness of her skin and the way it seems to glow under the lights illuminating the corridor.

Zariah produces the paper from her pocket. “Mom’s last gift.”

I watch as she turns it over in her scratched-up fingers. Her pulse drops. I watch the vein in her neck, isolate the sound, and memorize the thump-thump of her heartbeat. She blinks and sucks on a bleeding lip.

Eager for an excuse to touch her again, I motion to a nearby metal crate. “Why don’t you sit for a second and let me patch you up a bit?”

She sighs and slumps down. “My shuttle leaves soon.”

I pull out my medkit and find the dermal rapid repair gel and sanitizing wipes. “This will sting.”

“I know.” She leans back against a storage rack of parts and tools. “My StarBuster is getting really tired.”

“Still haven’t upgraded?” I clean her knuckles, then dab the healing gel on the cuts.

“Can’t afford to.”

When her knuckles are healing, I tear open another cleaning wipe and reach up to dab at her lip. I don’t want to cause her pain. Even though I kneel before her, I have to crouch a little more to inspect her fully.

I could heal her flesh with one kiss.

Her scent makes the back of my neck tingle. It’s formulating a custom repair serum. It’s the very serum Terrans based the original dermal repair patches with, and the one thing that makes me one of the most vulnerable beings in the universe. Everyone wants a dose.

“Elix?”

I force myself to swallow the serum and inch back. “I’m sorry, again.”

She sucks air in through her teeth when I clean her lip. Zariah’s eyes roll upward with

her groan. “That’s what I get for pulling on a stuck door—it breaking loose and smacking me in the face.”

I want to make moan in pleasure instead of pain. I owe her everything. But it’s the very center of me that knows she’s supposed to be mine.

Every bone in me wants to bond with her, protect her, stay with her. It’s agonizing to shut out my desires and medically treat her the human way, instead. But she is the daughter of a terror to this galaxy, one I have tried to take down many times.

As I portion a bit of healing gel onto my finger and reach for her lip, her gaze meets mine. I’ve never really had physical contact with her before today. Her soft thumb glides over a scar on the side of my face. “What’s happened to you?”

The feeling of her skin against mine brings me to my knees. She is a small, plump human who carries a power I wish I understood. I can’t think when she touches me.

I gingerly brace her wrist. “I’m fine. Every injury has healed.” Even if my core is broken.

My entire being heats as I carefully dab the gel on her skin. The way her plush mouth shifts beneath my fingertip has my cock pulsing with need.

I close my eyes to shut her out but breathe in the warm air around her, laced with her addicting musk. I map the notes of her in that inhale. It’s not defined by lotions, perfumes, or oils. I isolate her natural fragrance from the gear grease—the detailed fleshly fragrance of her. I will never forget it. I can’t. I haven’t since our first meeting, but now I have a fresh memory to hang on to when I am alone again.

I have to distract myself, or I’m going to lose control.

“Where are you headed?” I smooth the gel and watch the split close up.

“Elix.” Zariah takes me by the chin and looks me over. Her hands work their way down my collar, finding all of my battle wounds, ones I didn’t care to heal. It would only make me more vulnerable to being captured and sold on the black market that her father was so active in. Plenty of aliens and humans hate me in that circle. “Jesus.”

“Stop, please.” I’m going to lose my sanity if she keeps this up. I zip up my leather jacket to the neck. There are some things I don’t want to talk about, like the scars her father gave me. I also don’t want her to know what happened to me after I escaped that spaceport.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” she offers.

“It’s not that.” Sitting back on my heels, I put a little more space between us. “I’ve just been busy. My skin is sensitive right now.”

Zariah shifts her hips on the crate, evoking a maddening urge that’s putting my willpower to the test. Inside, I’m a trembling wreck. Years, I have dreamt of being close to her when I was on the outskirts of space working a job. Now I’m in front of her, and everything I planned to say or do is shattered into fragments because my core is trying to take over.

I get it; she’s my mate. She’s a match, but for fuck’s sake, calm down.

“I’m finally going to get a vacation.”

“That’s great,” I offer, wondering if I can find a way to tag along.

She frowns. “My mother entered me into the Alien Bride Race.”

I slump back, my high plummeting so fast that it makes me nauseous. She's going to find a mate, someone else? Dread tears through me like frozen claws. I have to find a way to make her change her mind about going.

"It was the last thing she did before she died." She delicately rubs the paper between her fingers. She reads the entry information again and again, switching among expressions of endearment, confusion, and rejection.

"You're going because she gave it to you." All this time that we were on opposite sides of the law, I couldn't bring myself to tell her I'd tried to kill her father while being madly in love with the girl who saved my life. I'm in knots and certain she'll never look my way again.

This is what I deserve for leaving her behind.

She nods. Tears form in her eyes. Zariah snuffles and looks away. "But I never wanted this."

I ache to comfort her. The pulsing heat in my spine is undeniable. I know what she is to me. I'm just not sure she feels it because she hasn't given me any sign, even when I open my senses to her and listen. But she shows no physiological changes that would suggest she's interested in me the way I am in her.

"The shuttle's taking me to the Lunar base so I can get all my pre-checks done and make sure I'm cleared for entry." Zariah wipes her eyes. "I keep telling myself it's just going to be a vacation. I'm going to enjoy the real food, hot showers, and some games."

"Isn't the point to find a mate?" I ask, wishing I could join her and hating myself for ever suggesting the race was about the one thing I don't want.

“Inherently, sure. I just can’t,” she mumbles. “I have too many people counting on me to take time off to make babies for some a-hole that’s all show and no guts. These are dignitaries, princes, and lead warriors. They have armies and whole planets to support them. I have nothing. And I want nothing to do with a man that’s never really had any stardust in his teeth.”

A chuckle escapes me. “You have never watched it on the holovid have you?”

“Don’t have time. I often don’t have the service.”

“Doing lots of missions in deep space?” I prod.

She gives me a playful smirk. “Watching me?”

Yes. Every ping, every video feed. I’ve tried to catch you so many times. “Check in now and then. I’m out there too, you know. As a matter of fact, I just made two friends from Abr. Helped save the new king of Ferrim.”

“You’re kidding.”

I shrug. “Private security for hire. Clients like me because of my natural skills and because I prefer to stay undercover. I’m the backup measure. I watch from behind the shiny guards in gold plating. But I charge them what I’m worth.”

“Yeah.” She clutches her stomach like it hurts. “I wish I could.”

I touch her arm. “Zariah? What’s wrong?”

“Just hungry. Blew my credits on a toast to Mom. Didn’t get to finish my food before Lingon interrupted.

“Why can’t you just charge more so this doesn’t happen?” I ask, fishing a nutrient packet out of my harness.

She thanks me, takes the packet with cold fingers, and downs the solution. “Regulated pay from Sol Federation Shippers. They just give me the one-ways, so I get half the pay of most.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Doesn’t matter. Just how life is.” Zariah checks her wristband and gets up. “I need to go.”

I promptly stand beside her, not ready to part with her. “I’ll walk you to the shuttle to make sure no one harasses you.”

“Thanks, but I don’t have funds for your services.”

“Friends don’t charge friends.” I wish we were more. I should tell her, take her. The need in my core soars to painful desperation. I’ve held back my feelings and dwelled on them for too long. They have consumed me in her presence.

I need these thoughts to stop, right fucking now!

My core compels me closer to her. I bump her as we hike the stairs, distracted by the scent of her hair and the sway of her hips. She glances back at me, her gaze dissecting me with curiosity.

I’m not tainting her before she enters. That will surely void her entry. And it’s clear the ticket means a lot to her.

“Can’t you just trade in your ticket for cash if you don’t want to go?” I ask.

Zariah rests atop the landing of Level Three. “Not that I’m aware. But I’ve thought a lot about it. I’m not going to find a safer place to vacation or get so much value for the same money anywhere else. I just want to sleep without having to watch my back for once.”

“Trouble with Cazir’s crew?” I ask as we make our way to the Abr shuttles. They gleam in pearlescent whites against the darkness of space. Blue lights fill the cabins and illuminate the checkpoint Zariah must pass through.

“I guess everyone knows my father’s dead,” she mutters. “Everyone wants a piece of what he stole from so many. Even fellow bounty hunters before he went rogue have been harassing me for some sliver of whatever he was stealing in the end.”

She stops halfway to the terminal and throws her hands in the air. “I don’t want shit from that monster. They think I have a magical key to his vault, wherever it is. I don’t know. I don’t care. I mean, if I had any of that, and I was any normal person, I’d be in a better starship don’t you think?”

I smile a little. “Yeah. You really need an upgrade.”

She makes a disgusted noise. “Badly.”

“So you’re not hauling in treasure out in the boondocks of fed territory?”

She turns to face me. “Are you interrogating me?”

“No.” Kind of. “Teasing. I just— I care about you. I’m only here, only what I am, because you helped me escape the corrupt spaceport police all those years ago. They were running an unauthorized orphan corps. I feel like I owe it to you to check in now and then in case you need help.”

Zariah moves closer to me. “What I do out there, I don’t get paid for in any tangible way. Do you understand?”

In her eyes is a plea to never bring it up again.

I nod and scan the floor as she turns to continue to her shuttle, feeling like I’m losing her. But I see no moral way to keep her. I won’t ask her to waste her ticket, one that means so much. I won’t take her if she doesn’t clearly want me. Maybe I’m not destined to be wanted for who I am, only what I am, and thinking she’d see me differently than others was a foolish idea.

I wish we had more time.

“Me too.”

Oh, shit. Did I say that out loud?

Zariah gets in line with other women and a handful of staff in Abr uniforms. I stay outside the digital ribbon and scan the area for Lingon and his crew. I count three security teams from where I stand. The radio chatter I overhear tells me they’re not seeing any threats either. Lingon and his crew are still being hunted. A few have been captured. But they’re closing down the port after Abr shuttles depart.

“Everything okay?” Zariah asks.

“You are currently clear for departure, Miss Zariah.” My throat aches as she nears a checkpoint that I can’t go through without a ticket. “I hope you have an enjoyable time. If anyone harasses you, give me a call. I’ll come kick their ass.”

My core disagrees. It begs me to run to her, rip her out of line, take her with me. But Zariah is not Lazariot. She is human. And the Alien Bride Race is the only place in

the federation where such action is legally permitted.

I locate Zariah's wristband in my vision, tag it with a search beacon, grab her contact information, and send her a message from my device.

She lifts her arm and smiles. "Thanks, Elix. I wish there were more life forms like you in this universe."

My core pulses more profoundly than it ever has.

She wants more of my species. My core translates it incorrectly. It wants her. I want her. But more than anything, I need her to be safe. Stars know she is the one thing that helps me endure this existence.

Beyond the glass wall now separating us, Zariah hands over her ticket. A shiny-haired brunette in a form-fit blue uniform with a golden-winged Abr badge takes it. The woman scans the ticket, hands it back, and then extends a tablet. "Please complete the questionnaire before you arrive."

A handful of males wait in line at the next terminal headed for their Abr facility. A few are in royal robes, some in armor, others in civilian attire. A Ginarigon in military armor chats with a Talhuskin in civilian clothes with his wings bound behind his back. They glance in Zariah's direction.

I tune my hearing to isolate their voices.

"I'm gunning for that one. Might seem like nothing special, but you know who that is, right?" the Ginarigon asks.

My core pulses faster. I slip behind a support post in the port and memorize their faces.

“Whatever it takes, she’s going to be mine.”

The Talhuskin snorts, his shiny brown scutes rippling with a predatory shift of his shoulders. “Not if I get to her first.”

Shit.

It’s not illegal to fight over a female. But in my mind, it’s still abuse to Zariah. She has endured enough of being used. If she finds a mate, he damned well better love her the way she deserves and not use her.

The poison of her father’s legacy has seeped into every corner of the galaxy as much as it has made every planet and moon bleed from his marauding.

I watch their shuttles finish loading while I search the Terranet for information regarding access to Abr in case of an emergency, for information on the Ginarigon’s identity, and any other options I might have.

Zariah’s in trouble. I have to find a way to get to her before someone very bad takes everything she has left.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

The last few hours have been a blur of medical exams and freaky, hormonal naps. The doctor assured me it was totally normal to have a wet dream in a room with twenty other girls and a bunch of nurses because it was induced to determine my armband color.

Finally dressed in my race uniform, a form-fit zip-up blue body suit with an Abr logo over my left breast, I make my way to the lunch hall. There are all kinds of women among us. A group of three with matching platinum earrings and glittering makeup links arms and runs in place while they scream in excitement. They're a mix of pink and yellow armbands. Beyond them, in a booth against the back wall, sit two women with blue armbands, quietly conversing and watching everyone else. Many have friends. A few make some. All I want is food.

The sheer size of the buffet makes me want to cry. I load up a plate and find a window seat overlooking the race fields.

I try to savor the pastries and sandwiches as much as the fresh fruit, but it's hard to eat when I'm unexpectedly full of regret. It was a surprise to see Elix and even more of a shock at how tender he was as he healed me. I can't help but wonder if I've made a mistake coming here when it seems he cares more than I'd thought possible with all the years and solar systems between us.

Women chat in small groups around my table, but no one joins me. No one even looks at me.

Maybe, I'm finally invisible. So many times I'd have given anything to disappear. Everywhere I go, my father's reputation follows. He put a shackle on me so I

couldn't run until months of pounding on it made it finally break.

I smooth the wrinkles from the ticket my mother gave me. They wouldn't let me trade it, even when I asked out of curiosity.

The race must start with one more female than the number of males. Whatever.

I think it's a bullshit rule when there are Ginarigons in the mix. They have wandering eyes. I bet by the end, the numbers will be skewed anyway.

The Abr nurses assured me no one could come barging in and take me away. But I've inspected their security system and found several weaknesses already.

I'm overthinking this. It has to be safe, or Mom wouldn't have signed me up.

The chocolate-covered strawberries go down easiest. After months of freeze-dried cakes and packaged foods, it's like it's the first time I've ever tried one.

I can't believe Elix found me, and he stepped in and stopped Lingon . He risked his life for me.

The herbal taste of the gel he put on my lip lingers behind the strawberry and chocolate layers. My lip is almost completely healed. But now my heart is even less into the game.

I can't get over how his chest stretched his leather jacket, the ungodly amounts of tactical gear strapped to his body like he was leaving Catalyst Five and heading straight into battle, or the cold seriousness in his eyes. My gut tells me he isn't just a security guard but a trained killer.

I look down at my healed knuckles and remember the way his gold eyes dilated when

his finger touched my lip.

I don't know much about Lazariots other than their affinity for tech and their unusual survival skills. Their home solar system is basically a frozen wasteland of planets after the Nebs wrecked them, like so many others. It makes me wonder how that happened when Elix's kind are—or were—so talented.

“Red, huh?”

I look up at a woman in an Abr uniform standing before me with a tablet in hand.

“Armbands.” She points with her stylus. “So you're an independent contractor, likely hoping to find someone to team up with but will still let you be the boss of your world.”

“Sounds about right.”

Her gold badge gleams under the bright lights. “I'm Ohni.”

“Zariah.”

“I make it my mission to find the few of you sitting alone and check on you. I know this race can be a life-changing experience, feel a bit chaotic, and maybe isn't quite what you were expecting.”

“Do reds usually get paired up?” I ask.

“Now and then.” Ohni tucks a strand of her hair behind an ear. “You'll get matched with someone during the race this afternoon. You don't have to stay with them.

“You can mingle with others, hang out with girls, or just go to your room. You can

also walk the race grounds when there aren't events. But we highly encourage you to socialize with males. It is called the Alien Bride Race."

"Right."

"Want to talk about something else?" Ohni slides into the seat across from me. "Okay, I want your thoughts. We're considering adding a pool, but the trouble is the Vinym, and a few other species, have oils that coat their skin." She waves a hand nonchalantly and scans the room filled with chatting women. "Anyway. Figuring out the right chemical process to maintain sanitation has not been easy."

"Maybe dunk them in a soak tank first to remove as much as possible, then give them a time limit," I suggest.

Ohni smiles at me. "Interesting idea. I'd thought of maybe requiring a coating, like a varnish. But that sounds harsh."

"Then you'd have extra residue to deal with. Maybe have a few smaller pools so you can condition them differently?"

"Smart." Ohni loops a strand of brown hair behind her ear. "Now, why don't you tell me why you don't look thrilled to be here?"

"This was my mother's last gift. I'm not interested in mating. Didn't want to waste it. Can't give it back."

Ohni studies me for a moment. Her eyes shimmer with sadness. She looks away. "Lost my own mother recently. So I understand. She gave everything to give us a good life, and it still wasn't much. But that's why we have these games. These males have all been vetted to be sure they have supplies and funds, capable health, and desire to give women better lives."

“Yeah.”

“Ah.” Ohni gets up.

“What?” I squint up at her.

She gives me a crooked smile and plants a fist on her hip. “Maybe he needs to know how you feel.”

I gape at her, wondering what gave her the impression I had someone else.

“Enjoy your vacation. Holler if you have questions.” Ohni winks and walks off to talk to another racer in a pink band who bounces on her toes like she’s full of sugar and ready to run.

The wet dream they gave me in the medbay comes back to mind.

It was just a dream. I didn’t have control. But the single male that protected me from gunfire was green.

Retterwan? Vinym?

I bury my face in my hands. Lazariot.

The dream eases into my thoughts as I try to deny the possibility. He had spun his back to mine as we fired into darkness at enemies that moved like shadows. It was then that a voice above me had called out for a red band. But I can’t remember his face. And most of my dreams feature recent events, not my secret wants and desires like they seem to think.

Can they see it? They must be able to. But there’s no way for them to know it was

Elix if I don't even know. I'm certain I'm just blending memories with whatever freaky shit was in the sleep meds.

“Kita!” Ohni calls over the radio. “Why aren't the TVs on in here?”

The TVs around the room blink on, displaying another racer laughing and nodding at the camera. And then, to my horror, I see my ugly mug appear, sitting on a medic's bed just after my hormonal nap.

“Ah, jeez,” I mutter, peeking through my fingers.

“Zariah Landing of—space? Interesting. Just space, huh?” A nurse asks.

“That's where I live. On my ship.” I watch myself reply and am glad I didn't mention it's a shitty old StarBuster I named Tempest.

Should've named her Temperamental.

“Okay, well, this should be easy for you. If you could sleep anywhere on Pearl of Sol, the galaxy's famed cruise ship, where would you sleep?”

“Captain's seat.”

I sip coffee from my mug, listening to the other girls cheer and whoop behind the doctor like it was some sort of big deal to say such a thing.

The women in the lunch hall cover their mouths, stifling shocked laughter. A racer with black bands around her arms offers me a high-five. “Nice one. You got balls, girl.”

I oblige. “Have my own ship. She's a clunker, but it'd sure be cool to pilot a beauty

like that.”

“We all have dreams,” the blonde says.

“For the second question,” the doctor continues. “If someone steals from you, what do you do? Do you report it or do you let it go?”

I watch myself respond, cringing at the reaction of those in the room and hating the question because it feels like I was profiled and targeted.

“Depends on who steals what and why,” my TV self says.

“Explain.”

“If a selfish jerk takes all my stuff, I’ll report it. If someone steals my food because they’re dying of starvation, I won’t. Unlike certain people in my family, I believe in earning my way, protecting the innocent, and disciplining the derelicts. But I don’t care about stuff . Hurt someone I care about, hurt someone innocent, and I will —”

The feed cuts to the next girl.

“Ooh,” the woman beside me sings out. “Girl! What’d you say?”

I lick my healing lip and shake my head. “You don’t want to know.”

“Hell, yes, I do!” The blonde faces me, bright blue eyes eager for an answer.

I shift as the form-fitting Abr race suit rubs over my back, over the scar that my brother put below my right shoulder blade. “Cut out their heart with the crudest knife I can find. Since they don’t have a heart, they don’t need the muscle in their chest, and it should go to someone who will use it better.”

“I like you. I know you’re independent. I am, too. Not as aggressive, but I did knock out a few teeth on my way here.” The woman shifts closer with a mischievous grin. “I’m Teol, like creol, the seasoning, with a lot more kick . And I’m still dreaming of flying a clunker.”

I chuckle, and it feels good. It’s been too long and feels strange. But I introduce myself and shake her hand.

“What’d the guy do?” I ask, motioning to the seat across from me.

She waggles her head, sits, and spins a fork on the table. “Dude got a little too handsy with a girl at the port. Came in early this morning. He missed his flight. Orange guy. Ginarigon I guess.”

I nod. “They are into sister wives, like to mate a lot. But that also makes them self-conscious about their malehood and hormonal. They need to get it out of their systems, so delays in mating are frustrating.”

“Noted.” Teol drums a finger on the table. “I think this is going to be a fun race now that I’ve met you.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Just tap me in if you need assistance. I’m an MAMA instructor. Just got out of a stint with Cylene and the Nytheralinas.”

“MAMA?” I ask.

“Mixed Alien Martial Arts.” Teol grins. “I’d be happy to give you some free lessons while we’re here.”

“Aren’t you going to be busy? ” I ask.

“Maybe. Won’t know until an hour from now.” Teol lights up her wristband and pulls up a video, then rotates it so it’s upright for me.

It’s hard to keep up with all of her moves as she fights a woman she calls Cylene on the screen. Both are extremely fast, agile, and powerful.

“You’re a badass,” I mutter. “Why are you here?”

She puffs out a breath. “Not getting any younger. Besides, after seeing Cylene and her children, I realized I wanted a piece of that alien pie for myself. Not hers, of course, but my own. I’m thinking shadow warrior, something dark and brooding, snarky, and a bit of a hard case.”

“Sounds like trouble to me,” I admit.

Teol looks out the window at the arena. “Could be, but sometimes, those have the best hearts, once you break the walls around it.

“Anyway, you wanna kick this joint, do some training before the race outside?” she glances around. “I’m a bit suffocated by all the giggles and pinks in here.”

“Sure. I’m not trained, but I’m scrappy.”

Teol gets up. “Like to live life on the edge?”

Of space? She has no idea. “Anything to get my mind off of being carried off by a strange alien.”

Teol offers me a fist. “I’ll watch your back if you watch mine. Cool?”

I bump her fist, feeling better about the race. “Go easy on me. I’m usually on my own.”

Teol nudges my shoulder with hers. “Not anymore.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

I've checked every way into the Alien Bride Race. The only thing I can do is get myself assigned as her personal security detail. I don't have a contract, so I have to forge one. I don't like breaking the law, but I'm not letting those greedy fucks lay one hand on her.

I cannot let the few good people who inspire hope in the lost like me be used and broken, or their kindness will be viewed as weakness.

I must get inside the lunar shield. Many have done so without permission in recent years, so I'm faced with extra security precautions.

Outside the windows of my ship, I look out at Earth's only moon base, surrounded by opalescent shields. Two Terran patrols orbit the moon along with an Alien Bride Race cameradrone, no doubt broadcasting the pre-race feed. I watch it on one of my dash screens.

Zariah's responses to her questions don't surprise me. But I wonder what she said when they cut the camera.

Starships glint in the light of the sun as they enter the shield, all staying close to the few privileged human females lucky enough to grow up so safe and secure.

My screens blink green as they pull up the documents necessary for me to become assigned to protect Zariah. If I can't get in on my own, I'll have to hitch a ride like a leach in a suit—the old-school way. But I will get to her, whatever it takes.

A window flashes with the laws I can bend to get in. In my line of work, I don't

always work within the law.

I copy the regulations into a file I store in my wristband in case anyone challenges me. Then I fill out the ship inspection report, contract with Zariah, and all items I have to claim.

Weapons are not allowed.

Shit. How the hell are we supposed to protect our humans if we can't use weapons?

I glance back at my racks of guns, grenades, shield bombs, and blades that line my ship's interior. The only options are to take everything down and store it all in a crate in an isolation chamber or lock it all down for hyperspace.

"MONA, lock all weapons for hyperspace travel."

Every rack behind me seals up, and the lights darken.

"Are we jumping soon, sir?" the soft, slightly masculine artificial voice asks.

"No."

"Then I am to assume we are locking-up to conceal weapons for entry into the lunar shield."

"A-firm," I reply, looking through the forms again.

"May I suggest you take a look at this form? You have missed it." MONA opens a document on a nearby screen.

Compensation form? Ugh.

I run a hand through my hair, trying to figure out what to put. I can't charge her for a service she might not even want. I can't say it's free, or they'll know something is up. I can't have been hired by someone else to protect her because that opens a whole new folder of paperwork. I need this to be fast.

Scanning the rules MONA found, I select the only one that makes sense, one I've never used before.

A Life Debt owned by The Protected (as The Former Protector) can initiate a non-monetary contract if both parties are willing, for a duration as determined by The Protected and The Protector and mutually agreed upon.

I type out a statement of agreement I hope she will accept. Then I break the law and forge her signature from a shipping document I got my hands on years ago while I was tracking her.

When my documents are completed, I open a double-encrypted file and pull out the approval seals I need.

With my files notarized and ready, I grab a flash drive from a hidden storage compartment under my controls and plug it into my dash. I really hope you didn't screw me, old friend.

My wristband buzzes softly, alerting me to a change in Zariah's status. Her heart rate is up. Blood pressure is rising. I hope she's just excited. I hope she's not in trouble yet because I'm not there to keep her safe.

Sending the documents to the necessary organizations, I tag them with the program that runs and request that it backdate their arrival to thirty minutes before Zariah left the spaceport.

The files load into the Terran Security Headquarters' Customs and Private Security Check-in sites. Then I send one to Abr.

The program's cursor blinks over the date and time of all three files. Anxiety grows with every passing second that the creation and send dates and times don't change. Then one switches. And the next. Finally, Abr shows it arriving before Zariah left.

Thanks, Aurelius. I owe you.

After one more check of my ship to be sure I'm going to clear their scan, I call the spaceport tower.

"Tower, Elix, disengaging from dock."

"Elix, tower. One Lathelite approaching departure space. Hold your position."

I could easily dart around them, but I don't want to give anyone a reason to stop me and inspect my ship.

The helical Leosantian vessel passes, its crystalline facets reflecting the lights of Catalyst Five and the few green lights on my stealth model medical rescue transport. Its pace is frustratingly slow.

I grip my thruster controls, track the ship visually, strain to keep my control, and then punch it the moment the Lathelite is out of the way. Rocketing across Terran space, I fall into line with the other security ships, most of them broad-winged and oily black SolaTacks or light gray AtomicFires with a bold array of small blue thrusters coating their exteriors.

A few are one-offs like me, but I'm in the only Scintilla. I'm fairly certain I have the only one left in operation.

The ships ease into the gate in the shield. Port security flashes their lights at the ship ahead of me. It gets detained for what I wager is a torn aileron by the flecks of damage I can see on the aft section.

A replacement port security vessel glides up to me and hails onscreen. I accept.

“Deimos195, this is Lunar Security team Dragon Thirty-one to your starboard side. Please state your reason for requesting entry, your pilot registry number, and your certification as private security.”

They hover like a set of pinchers with a bubble between them. If I tried to make a run inside, they could pierce the ship, rotate and sandwich me in their grasp, or take me out from the front like a reverse repossession, targeting my engines with destabilized grenades in the weapons mounted to their long decks. I see it clearly as MONA flashes their capabilities over my screens. MONA then pulls up details about the team members. I see their faces, rank, and their bios.

“I am assigned as a personal guard to Zariah Landing. Pilot certification: 25947Dl691.”

“Elix Isorvas,” they call back. “Holy shit.”

A face blinks on my screen with a green bracket. MONA has matched voice patterns.

“Something wrong, Rory?”

“How do you know my name?”

“Private security badge SRTBW5691. It’s kind of my job,” I reply.

I hover in space, watching the lights beside the gate, hoping they turn my favorite

color.

“You’ve been in battles all over the galaxy,” Rory says. “Special Forces, Nebulous Empire Recon, Medical Rescue.”

“I’m a multipurpose operator that just works personal security now.”

“Yes, of course. What color is the planet Aterna?”

“Yellow. Gold in the winter.”

I’m not sure what that question was referencing for him, except maybe to see if my backstory checks out.

“What does Zariah say is her favorite food?”

“Cheese. It’s hard to come by in space. She prefers mozzarella sticks, no sauce, extra garlic.”

“And your ship, are you carrying any weapons?”

“Only what is necessary to protect my client.”

Communication falls silent. I sit and wait, watching their ships, anticipating an attack. I don’t know what’s taking so long and fear they’ve contacted Zariah only to have her deny my assignment to her.

The lights flash green.

“You are cleared for entry. Please hover to the rear of the complex, opposite the race fields. Look for the gardens with the fountain. A light will switch green above your

designated dock door.

“Understood. Thank you, Rory.”

As I reach for my throttle, he comes over the coms again.

“One more thing.”

I pause. “I’m listening.”

“You’re a target here.” His tone suggests it’s a warning, not a threat.

I sigh. “I’m a target everywhere.”

“Seems like a bad plan for private security.”

“I have my ways of dealing with it. Now can I get inside? My Protected is in distress. I must check in with her. Unless you need something else.”

“Apologies. Please attend to your Protected.”

“Thanks.” I smother a grumble of frustration and hope I’m not too late.

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I ease the throttle forward and eye the blue laser grid of scanners that check my ship as I enter. They let me pass, and the gate remains open. But I'm certain they have an idea of my payload at this point. At least my hyperspace armor-plating concealed the missiles. I'm sure if they knew about them that they would bring this procession to a full stop.

The building displays a green light over a docking site as I enter the atmosphere and lower my ship closer to the race grounds.

Making it inside was just one barrier. Now I've got to find her and find the two who know that her father hid his stolen goods.

That's the rumor. But I'm not sure everything is as it seems with her family or their crew. It never is.

After my ship is locked in, charging, and powered down, I get up from my seat and lower my rear ramp.

"Ooh!" A woman in a blue Abr uniform jumps aside and clutches her tablet to her chest. "Quick ramp."

"Has to be in war zones," I reply.

"You must be Elix, personal security for Zariah Landing?"

"Yes."

She stares at me like I have antennae growing out of my head.

“Something else?”

“The race is about to start. Your client is assigned to Room Six, bottom floor, basic accommodations. She has been banded Red. Bio stats have been relayed via the wristband she won’t take off.”

“Figures.” I’m certain it’s linked to her ship, just as mine is to me.

Cameradrones fill the hallways, buzzing like large flies. I can already tell this place is going to be a logistical nightmare. But perhaps they will catch the brute that wants her for the wrong reason. It burns me inside to think of him or anyone touching her without savoring such a beautiful creature for what she is instead of her reputation.

She deserves to be respected.

The woman beside me tells me about the race and all the mingling events afterward, where Zariah will have options if she doesn’t want to participate, and how I can keep my eye on her from the observation areas.

She gives me the code to log into their system so I can load maps into my wristband. I thank her, wait for her to leave, and then, in the shadow of my ship, I initiate my blocker for external tracking systems and prevent Abr from accessing anything on my wristband or my ship. That’s always how others sneak in trackers, by claiming my use of a system entitled them to know everything about who is using their system.

Screw that.

I log in and find Zariah in the race arena with another female. I’m relieved to see she’s made a friend until I realize why their orbs move so erratically.

They're fighting!

I run through the hallways, searching for a path toward her.

I find her three floors below me in the grass, swinging a fist at another woman who blocks it and elbows her in the back. There isn't a door anywhere nearby to get me to Zariah. When I wheel around to continue my hunt, I see a human in black armor standing with crossed arms at a window, shaking his head as he watches them.

"Why do you laugh?" I challenge.

His gray eyes lift to mine for only a second before darting back to the fight. "Only Teol would befriend a stranger and try to train her before the race."

"They're not fighting?"

"Hell, no. Should've seen them two minutes ago, laughing hysterically, probably over some dick joke. Teol has a dirty mind. I'm not sure there's a man in the whole universe that can handle her. It's why she wanted to try this."

He offers me his hand. "I'm Keo. My sister calls me Numbnut but in an affectionate way."

I take his hand, and we shake. "Elix. That's Zariah."

I look down at her as she stumbles back and falls. Teol offers her a hand and helps her up.

Maybe I didn't need to come here.

"You're an endangered species, Lazariot, right?" Keo moves back into his place

against the window wall. “Rejected by your mate? Heard you were all on lockdown somewhere trying to save your species.”

“My species rejected me,” I say bitterly, remembering back to hitching a ride on a cargo vessel off-planet as a kid.

“What in stars for?”

I stare down at Zariah and wish she would see me. Then again, I’d rather confront her in private so her surprise doesn’t cause a scene. “We are dying off because they didn’t believe in intermixing tribes. Two tribes, no home.”

“Ouch. Double the skills or none?” he asks.

“Double.” Plus a few. “So your sister, does she teach hand-to-hand combat or something? Is that why she’s doing this?”

“Yeah. Started beating me up at a young age.” He laughs, then grows very quiet. Keo runs a hand over his tattooed neck. “I got in with the wrong crowd. She straightened me out. Little sister became the big sister. After an enlistment with the Terran military as an alternative to jail, I’ve dedicated the rest of my life to her. She stopped me from making some big mistakes.

“How’d you end up guarding Zariah?”

“Recent bar fight. Just before she got here, actually. A human trafficker tried to snatch her up. Had to push the request through fast. I owed her for a past life debt. Nothing violent. I was just a starving kid.” Hunted for my skills.

“Sounds like you’re already even then.” Keo smiles.

I'm not sure, but I can't let that be what others see, or they'll doubt my reason here. "Not enough time to let the dust settle and be sure she's safe. I am the backup measure."

"You're a pretty serious guy, you know that?" Keo clearly hasn't been caught up in enough battles to know what I mean.

I face him. "Where did you serve your enlistment?"

"Nytheralian territory."

"Any deep space, unpatrolled Sol Territory?"

Keo shifts between his feet. "No, no serious deployments. I was just security."

"That's why you aren't serious."

Keo seems to get the hint as he hangs his head and nods. "Fair enough."

I scan the other females that gather outside with Zariah and Teol. Turning my back to Keo, I covertly search on my wristband for him and his sister. They are MAMA instructors, vetted by Terran and Nytheralian empires. The trouble is, I know that everything I find can be forged. I'm supposed to be one of the good guys, and I entered Zariah into a contract she doesn't yet know about.

Anybody can be anything, anywhere, with the right alliances. I owe Aurelius a debt of gratitude.

The males' Abr transport should arrive soon. I check the screens, the other personal security officers, and the teams in the observation room. Quiet chatter is all I hear. I close my eyes and isolate the various voices.

“She was so excited, she literally trembled the entire way here. I don’t get it.”

“Mine spent the trip researching different species and making a list of her interests.”

“You know those alien males are just using this as an excuse to go on a hormonal rampage and turn into animals. But when we do that, it’s considered r—”

“Ah.” A female voice—older, weathered, practiced—interrupts him. “This kind of behavior you speak of is only permitted here or in designated homelands, where females are aware of it and willing participants. There are drones everywhere. Our security systems are designed to stop any such activities that a woman changes her mind about and also to control any male who gets out of hand.”

I don’t think Zariah is aware, and it stirs a deep protective urge in my bones. I need to tell her—warn her.

The woman gets onto a small box. “I know you are all anxious regarding the week ahead. But there are rules you must follow.

“You cannot intervene unless the life force of your human Protected is in jeopardy or there is an imminent threat to multiple racers. There will be aggressive actions taken toward your Protected. They may cry, scream, and get dirty. You are here for their safety, not to judge their choices.

“Any racer who feels unsafe need only say ‘no’ and security measures will be initiated. If a male prevents a woman from speaking in any manner, he will be contained. As a last resort, if these security measures are rendered ineffective, you will be given the okay to enter the race grounds and intervene. Otherwise, you will remain outside of the play arenas at all times.

“Please be aware that any actions you take in a race arena will be televised. Some of

your actions in the other areas may be televised. But all games are live and will not be edited. Let me repeat that. They will not be edited as they are live . Any questions?"

A young man raises his hand.

The older woman points to him.

"Let's say our Protected is of a gentler nature, and perhaps realizes she isn't ready for this. If she hides herself in the field, do we have permission to collect her?"

"Yes, after the race or game is finished."

"Will cameras focus on her in such a state?" he adds.

"No. This is intended to be a fun way to get to know one another and pair up with mates. It doesn't always happen that way, so drones tend to stay where the action is highest. We can speak privately if you are concerned."

"Any other questions?" She glances in my direction and almost gasps.

I'm torn between watching Zariah and running. I don't know what she sees or wants with me, but it's rare that surprise encounters have ever been to my benefit.

"The race will start in about twenty minutes. That's all for now." She steps down with the help of a large Abr guard who's slightly taller and thinner than I. The woman walks through the crowd, directs to a door with her eyes, and leaves through it. I'm certain she wants me to follow, but I'm not sure if I should.

I'm here for Zariah, not myself.

"Where are you going?" Keo asks. "They're going to race soon."

I check the screens. A large transport has been detected at the edge of lunar space.

“Just need to check on something.” I slip through the doorway and find the woman standing in a small office with two guards. My gut tenses, expecting a fight.

“Easy, Lazariot. Sima buude kinmashka acinim.” You are Protected here.

My body weakens, and I slump back against the door. I have not heard my native tongue since I was a child.

“ Onalla .” Thank you.

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The elderly woman before me wears an Abr badge that boasts the symbol of a solar system above it. She calmly answers a holovid call from concerned Retterwan about the security of the Alien Bride Race. She reassures them but clearly states that it is categorized as a reality game show where anything can happen, and contestants must accept the terms to participate.

“Now—” She closes the holo screen and looks up at me. “My name is Rosy. I am the founder of this organization. You’re probably wondering why I can speak your language.”

I straighten.

“Years ago, I was married to a Larisien for some time. I learned everything I could to make him feel at home.” Rosy turns something on her wristband, and a milky sheen slips from her body.

“Ma’am,” her guard protests. “You should not drop your shield around an unfamiliar threat.”

She scowls at him. “He won’t hurt me. It’s not in his core. I’m more likely to be stabbed in the back by someone who’s worked hard to get close to me.”

The guard’s eyebrows lift, and he gives her room to walk around her desk.

“Do you have any descendants?” I dare ask.

She shakes her head. “But I know how many eyes are going to be on you if you leave

the observation rooms looking like you do. Racers are going to get distracted, females and males.”

“Because I’m Lazariot?”

“Because you’re an alien .”

“Humans are aliens to me.”

Her wrinkled lips quirk to one side. “I know. But I don’t know how they didn’t catch your species earlier. Women are supposed to bring human men as security.”

“It was an unexpected necessity. After the spaceport incident just before her arrival.”

She nods as she looks through a file on her tablet. “I have the video. I see Lingon is back at it again. Came close this time.”

Rosy hands the tablet to another guard. “Take care of it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He bows and then walks out through a door at the back of the room.

“As private security, do you have an identity concealer?” she asks me.

I tap the devices in my collar that bleed a medium human skin tone over my face.

“Perfect. Just wear gloves and don’t let anyone see any skin but your face.” She digs through a bin on the floor and tosses me a black hat. “Wear that, too. As much as I hate to hide you from the world, I know the risks of advertising your location.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Anything so I can stay.

Rosy looks me over with admiration. “Life debt, huh?”

“Yes.”

She walks up to me despite the protests of her guard, who tries to slip between us.

“Oh, stop.” She weakly guides his arm away. “If I had to die, I would love for it to be while seeing someone like Grelius again.”

Rosy reaches a shaky hand toward my chin. I let her, even though I am hesitant after years of surviving torture by others who wanted access to my serum. But also, by the slight waver of her heartbeat and the gloss to her eyes, I know she’s in pain. It’s not a simple cut or a temporary acute trauma. Her existence wanes.

I get down on a knee so she doesn’t have to reach and lower my voice so her guard can’t overhear. “How long do you have?”

She smiled weakly. “This race, maybe.”

“I can give you medicine —”

“I know.” She shakes her head. “But I’ve lived long enough.”

She takes my hand and places it between hers. She is frail, and I fear breaking her. “I tried to move on. But when we find our mates, the true ones, and we know it with every ounce of our bodies, we come to live because they live and die because they die. That is a truth that cannot be denied. It is too hardwired into our brains and cores.”

She pats my hand. “Tell me, Elix. Have you found one?”

“Yes and no.”

“Can’t have her?”

I try to keep my eyes down, but I try too hard and look away from the field.

“Oh.” She squeezes my hand. “Your Protected is the one who roused your core?”

My core heats in my gut and tingles in my spine from hearing another speak my truth.

“I will honor her choice. That is all that matters.”

She braces my face like a doting grandmother from the Terran shows I put on in the background while I’m in deep space so I don’t feel so alone. “She can’t pick you.”

“I know.”

“If she doesn’t know how you feel,” she adds. “The numbers only have to be even at the start of the race. Anything can happen after. Some leave empty-handed and return during another heat.”

She’s pushing me too far and making me think about Zariah in ways I shouldn’t. I get up and step back. “I will not put her into that predicament. She is racing for a reason. Now, I would like to get back to my post.”

She clicks her tongue. “Your kind do not deserve to perish. We need many more like you if we hope to save this universe with our morals intact.

I’m not so sure about that. She doesn’t know what I’ve done to get in here. And if I’m going to keep my plan intact, I need to get back to watching Zariah and out from under the microscope.

“Please let me know if I can help in any way with your transition,” I offer.

She reaches for me as I open the door. “Are there any others left?”

“A few. I recently freed a solar sister.”

She smiles shakily. “Then not all are lost, and I am at peace. Now go on. But please remember what I said. All of it.”

Donning the hat and some gloves, I check my look in the mirror on her wall.

“That will suffice,” she says. “Facial recognition will have trouble mapping you this way.”

“Yes, ma’am.” As I leave the room, I hear her speak quietly with her remaining guard, “It’s a shame to have to hide such a stunning life form. We should have idolized them, not abused them. This universe can be so heartless.”

I ease toward my prior post, watching Zariah, but I don’t want Keo to figure out it’s me. It’s easier to be ignored when I’m no longer an eyesore among the crowd of bodyguards, so I find a new spot to watch.

Zariah stands beside Teol along a white railing. Rosy appears below, walking to the podium with great effort.

Another guard cants toward me. “You know that old coot like 200?”

She was married to a Larisien. I’m not surprised. Everyone from my solar system has that adaptation. But I respond how humans on my holovid shows often do while trying to shave off the Lazariot accent. “No fuckin’ way. For real?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Been here quite a few times. We’re specifically private Abr bodyguards for hire. Sixteen of us. You private?”

I notice the transport carrying the males entering the shield, and because I don’t want to answer him, I point. What do people say at the start? “Show time.”

He walks away to watch.

I find Zariah again. She’s calmer than the others but looks ready to run. Her tight bodysuit accents her curves in all the right ways.

My spine heats, and my core pulses just looking at her through the glass. Desire stirs like liquid fire in my hips. I want to bond with her, but it’s more than that.

She risked her life for mine when we were just kids.

Please win so we can just get on my ship and leave. I’ll take you anywhere.

I pray she doesn’t get picked. I’m not sure I can stop myself from breaking him, whoever he is. And if I lose her, I think my core might just collapse.

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Teol braces herself beside me as the railing flashes. Women all around us scream and jump in excitement. “Good luck.”

“Same to you.”

The railing blinks green, and I haul myself over it.

Above us, the massive transport eases inside the shield. The doors open way up in the sky, and the first males leap out. They thunder to the ground, falling like lead rain.

Women scatter through the fields. A few run for the mountain. Others take off for the short forest, while a few hang out in the ropes course.

Kings and princes land in their royal armor, draped in ceremonial robes accented with shields. Dignitaries of the political and business worlds land in Abr race suits. Cameradrones buzz all around us.

I start for the forest. It seems like a decent place to hide. I know some of them can find us by scent. But I don’t like the looks a few of the males give me.

Two women nearby are slower than me: a pink and a blue. I don’t think the pink is trying hard. The blue doesn’t strike me as a physically fit type. Nevertheless, a Talhuskin warrior, deep brown and leathery, wings bound behind his back, charges at me. I definitely don’t want one of his kind: dominating, bossy, irritable, greedy. And a bed of pebbles sounds terrible.

If I can find a spot I will fit that he won’t, I can lose him. I veer toward the ropes

course. Charging up to the structure with him right behind me, I drop into the dirt beneath the lower platform, sliding through the dust on a leg. Then I scramble up on the other side and run, grateful my mother had me in softball until my father took me away.

Behind me, a blue wolf-shifter tackles the Talhuskin as I sprint for the trees. They get into a tumbling roll that gives me space to get away.

My heart pounds. I keep up my pace so I have some space to scan the arena for Teol. All around me, males fight over women. A yellow Jorbiun alien tackles a woman only to get thrown by a red Klaphos in the ceremonial armor of a prince.

I find a cave opening in the hillside just inside the forest and drop into its opening.

A woman cries out in pleasure, and a pair of angry, reflective eyes look out at me.

“Whoops, sorry. Didn’t know it was occupie—”

I’m dragged out by an ankle.

“Mine,” a sinister voice booms behind me, hauling me across the mossy ground and back toward the complex.

“What is it with you men, anyway?” I shout, clawing at the ground, frantically trying to push myself over so I can look up at who’s captured me. “I’m a fucking red. Do you really want to deal with my pain in the ass?”

I kick at his wrist. He stops and rolls me over. The gray ogre towers above me like the trees. The translator on his neck flashes and relays words to him that I don’t understand.

“Holy shit.” I definitely don’t want his kind of mating, whatever that is! Just the thought terrifies me. I’m not into baby carrots, but I don’t want to take a fist of cement either.

“Strrrong,” he says, pointing at me.

That’s why they want me?

Another alien bodyslams him, breaking his grip free of my ankle. They tumble away. I scramble up and keep running through the trees.

A cameradrone zooms after me. I don’t want to be on anyone’s TV more than I already have. I’m glad my mother isn’t alive to have heard my earlier response. She’d be so disappointed. But this universe is at war; only the toughest and cruelest of us survive.

I dart off course through a tight group of trees, losing the drone. But as I break out into a field, a set of hands grips my shoulders like talons and lifts me high into the sky.

My stomach clenches. I grab the hands that hold me and look up at the Talhuskin’s edgy face and cheekbones with rigid, scaled enhancements. He looks triumphant.

The warm breeze ripples over my hair and uniform, and I realize resisting him at this height above the surface is a deadly idea. Below us, the race grounds look like an ant colony being overrun by another. The bigger, colorful ants capture and carry away the smaller ones.

I don’t know why Talhuskins seem to want me. They’re known for their egos. I’m a red. That’s a bad pair.

Unless they want to tame me. Which will never happen.

As we arc back toward the building, I'm torn between the awe of their natural flight capabilities and the notion they want me for another reason because they know who I am.

I'm no prize except to maybe that ogre guy. The other women are thinner, healthier, prettier, with fewer scars. It doesn't make sense for them to want me.

"We have wing release! Alert, wing release!" A cameradrone communicates over a PA. A red light swirls atop the drone.

I strain to look up at the Talhuskin. His eyes scour the fields below us as another of his species crashes into him mid-flight. I'm knocked loose in their confrontation.

Gravity might be lower on the moon, but I still fall. Sickening fear chokes out my yelp of disorientation.

I never thought this was how I'd die.

I close my eyes. Sorry, Mom. For everything.

Shouts and screams fill the air and then fall silent.

The drone's buzz morphs into the blasting thrum of a thruster array. Metal tines collect me like a spider's legs.

Voices cheer as my insides slam against my ribs. The drone lowers me safely to the ground and sets my feet down.

"Confirm your status," it says.

I catch my breath and nod.

It zooms away.

A cluster of males piles over themselves on their way toward me. I back up and look at the other girls in the area who've stopped running to watch them fight.

“What do you have that we don't?” A blue-banded woman asks.

I shrug. “A piece of shit cargo ship that breaks every single fucking day? That's literally all I own. I make federal minimum wage. I'm not that pretty or healthy. I barely scraped in here.”

A green-banded woman crosses her arms. “Must be something to have so many males fight over you.”

I watch the five males break apart and cluster up in a fight again. I've only seen males behave so aggressively over one other thing in the whole universe. If females and families don't drive them to act like this, treasure or the promise of it will. “I didn't want or ask for this.”

Abr guards come out to break up the fight. When they struggle to get control, they open doors to a set of stairs to the third level, where human guards hustle down the steps.

One of the alien racers breaks free and charges at me on all fours. To my dismay, it's a Ginarigon.

I stagger backward and try to run, but he's fast and catches me around the waist. We pile up in the grass, but he quickly climbs over me. The auburn beast is three times my size and bares his pointed teeth at me.

He draws in a deep breath near my neck while his sheer weight crushes the air from my lungs. I try to push him off, use every trick Teol taught me, but he just grumbles like I'm an annoying bug.

His predatory pupils open inside striated orange irises, and I fear he's not there to claim me but to kill me. When his teeth graze my skin, their sharp tips stinging my skin, my concerns solidify.

A shrill cry leaves with what's left of my breath. I close my eyes as the world darkens around me from lack of oxygen, wishing I'd never come here.

The Ginarigon's weight lifts. I blink and look in the direction he's disappeared and see the Ginarigon tumble away, get up, and shake himself like a dog, rattling his battle armor. Between us stands a man in all-black tactical gear, tightening his fists.

Abr staff said we were protected. I'm honestly surprised that they meant what they said.

A striped hand appears before me, covered in thick, smooth scales. "You alright?"

I let him help me up, then follow his green eyes to another woman being carted off by the blue wolf-shifter. Then the male who has put me on my feet launches sideways in a blur of orange. My heart sinks.

This is not what I want. I don't want them fighting over me when so many are starving and dying in battle with the Nebs. I wish we could put our energy toward more important things.

The two males growl at one another and scrap in the dust.

"Stop!" I squeeze between them and try my best to break them apart. "No one needs

to get hurt!”

They split up. I reach for the nice male, the one closer to my size, aiming to ask if he’s okay and if he’d consider me. He’d be a decent alternative to the Ginarigons and Talhuskins, which seem to only want to risk my life. But the aggressive Ginarigon laces an arm around my waist and hauls me away before I can make my offer.

The race time ticks through the last seconds as I wriggle and kick the male that’s taken me. “Let go of me!”

The buzzer goes off. A woman somewhere on the mountain has won. She cheers from atop the rock. I wonder if it’s Teol.

“Zariah!” Teol hangs over the shoulder of a huge male with feathery fur as dark and eerily translucent as obsidian. He slinks toward the mingle celebration. She waves and gives me a big smile. But I’m stuck with Baby Carrot.

“So do you want the money or me, red?” my captor asks. “No, not money. I saw your answers. You don’t care about stuff. You must want a mate. Lucky me, I want both.”

“Fuck.” I think he knows who I’m descended from. I have nothing but an antiquated StarBuster. He can see that in my Abr digital file.

“That can be arranged.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Guess this means you’re mine.” He doesn’t give me a chance to protest; he just picks me up by the waist. I’m slung high into the air before he folds me over his shoulder like all the other males do with their women.

“Do not bite-claim me. I might do the same to your pathetic member,” I warn.

He snorts. “Still bigger than a human.”

“It is not proportional.” I’m frantically looking for a way out of this arrangement. If he wants what I think he does, he’ll try to get me to take him to one of my father’s rumored outposts to hunt down some treasure that might not even be there. And then what? What purpose will my life have if I don’t stroke his ego? And I’m definitely not doing that.

“Are you going to be like this the whole time?” he whines.

“You picked a red. What do you think?” I growl.

From where I hang over his body, I look out at the field and see the chrome-banded woman getting handed a check.

I wish I was her.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

The Abr security teams and the humans that jumped in to help during the clusterfuck of males near the race's end now gather up for a debrief. By the way that the leader points to different areas of the grounds, they're discussing some sort of plan.

One of the men isn't listening. He's looking at me. Then I recognize him. He's the guard that saved me from suffocating beneath the Ginarigon.

He protected me.

Most of the human men that are worth a damn are fighting in the war or involved in securing Earth. A few are in business and government. Even fewer are solo pilots or working the territory like me. With many alien species to pick from, several hundred, last I'd heard based on the Sol expansion bulletin, I'd say I have a better chance at finding an alien mate than a human one.

But that guy— Sure, he was just doing his job. But then why look at me? Checking on me?

I muster a thumb-up but can't bring myself to smile. I'm still working on my escape plan. If I can get away from my father, I can get away from anyone.

The doors to the mingle celebration pass, and the Ginarigon sets me down. "I'm going to go chat."

"To look for a sister who will actually screw your little carrot?"

He hisses at me, takes me by the back of my race suit, and stalks through the room.

Then the bigger Ginarigon that tackled me and tried to bite-claim me enters with the blue-banded woman. When he sees me, he lets her go, completely uninterested. The young woman watches him walk away, looking hurt.

Fuck this game. It's not matching mates; it's breaking hearts.

He stares at me for a few seconds before starting toward me. I back away, catching the attention of the Ginarigon that caught me. Pulling from Teol's training, I twist sharply and break free. Using the cover of the crowd, I slip as fast as I can toward the nearest exit. Both stay right behind me.

I try to move faster, but with everyone dancing and grinding to the tribal trance music, some standing around eating or making out, it's a tough maze to navigate without causing a scene.

Before me, a group of chatting racers blocks my route.

The one that almost claimed me catches my wrist, collects me, and presses me against the wall in the back corner. His powerful body pins me in place. He doesn't say anything, just runs the back of a finger along my cheek, down my neck, and inside the collar of my race suit. He nips at my throat, even when I shy away.

He's just horny. It's not because of me.

But I can't say I hate the attention or the way his eyes look me over like I'm a delicious treat he wants to devour.

"Hey!" The Ginarigon that carried me off the field walks up with another woman under his arm. "That one's mine!"

The one that holds me ignores him and sweeps his mouth over my neck. Fear rises

again. Then I feel his teeth nibble gently, and a new feeling awakens in me.

Heat crawls from my neck down my body, into my core, loosening every muscle. I might let him take it further, might like it. I definitely like the attention and the way he's willing to confront and even fight others for me.

"Did you hear what I said?" He pulls the other of his kind off of me.

"She's mine," the one that holds me rumbles.

The woman under the smaller Ginarigon's arm shakes her head and slips away from them both. She meets my eyes, runs a finger over her neck, and mouths drug . She points to her teeth, then to the Ginarigons.

I haven't heard this before, but I have felt strange now and then when fighting Ginarigons in deep space. I always chalked it up to battle fatigue or just fatigue and starvation in general.

The more I think about it, the angrier I get. Adrenaline seems to burn off a bit of the drug.

I use what Teol taught me and peel free the hand that clutches my suit by reaching over his fist and tugging his wrist in a direction that's unnatural.

He grunts and glares at me as I lurch for the closest door. He swipes at me, but I am smaller and dart under a table before flinging myself into the hallway.

A cameradrone whizzes after me as I search the bottom floor for my room. When I find it, I frantically scan my wristband. The door beeps as it unlocks. He appears in the hallway, sees me, and charges.

I thrust myself inside and slam the door in his face. It promptly latches with loud chunks.

He roars with frustration and punches the door. The screen beside me displays him pacing. He growls and punches the door again. Red lights flash over his body.

Speakers relay a message into the hallway. “Aggressive action toward racers is not permitted. Return to your quarters to cool down or be removed from the game.”

“Zariah,” the room’s AI calls to me from the nearby screen. “Are you hurt?”

“I was unaware Ginarigons can drug us with their teeth,” I admit.

“They are capable of this, yes, much like venomous snakes from Earth. But they are supposed to refrain from it during the race.”

“Fair comparison.”

“Shall I order you room service?” the AI asks.

“I won’t trust it, won’t eat it. So don’t waste it.”

“Understood. I can call your private security and have them escort you to the lunch hall when you are ready.”

“Thank you.” Private security?

“ Shall I do that now?”

“In a moment. Let me catch my breath.”

Leaning back against the wall, I notice the jar of weirdly shaped condoms on the dresser, feel my insides squirm with disgust at the idea of mating after such a night, and hide it in a cabinet. I'm a mess of venom and hormones, struggling to think through my next moves.

What the hell were you thinking, Mom? This is turning into a nightmare!

I slump to sit at the base of the door and rest my head in my hands, breathing through the rest of the weakening venom. I won't leave my room until I'm certain it no longer affects me.

My head pounds, the lights blur in my vision, and my body feels like I've had one too many drinks at the bar minus the upset stomach.

In the time I'm recuperating, I think about the media coverage, how my brother probably knows where I am thanks to it, and that the males were likely fighting over me because they think I have access to my father's riches. Trouble is, I don't. And anyone who knows anything about bounty hunters, pirates, or marauders is that they will sacrifice everyone and everything but their money and power.

Anyone with half a brain will know I don't have access or I wouldn't be here. Too many males fought each other over me for it to be a coincidence.

I turn on the holovid and watch Abr's feed. The news banner reads "Alien Male Racers Fight for Deceased Bounty Hunter's Daughter."

It's not Abr's fault. It falls on the reporter who failed to respect my privacy for a hot story.

Now, I'm never going to be able to leave my room.

“Zariah,” the room’s AI asks. “Do you need medical assistance?”

“No.” I don’t need to draw any more attention to myself.

Another minute passes, and I start to get hungry. I fight the growing rumbles, wanting whatever commotion I’ve caused to simmer down. When I can’t tolerate the hunger any longer, I get to my feet.

“I would like something to eat now. Could you call my security guard, please?”

“Please make yourself comfortable while I contact him.”

I walk to the window and look out at the vast array of ships docked at each end of the complex. The female hangars boast simpler ships, more uniform, and many of the same Terran designs.

For a few moments, I wonder what it’s like to have so much money and power that they can hire people to protect them. I guess that’s all that makes us worthwhile anymore: money and power. It must be why I am always alone. No one wants to join me or my cause.

No one cares anymore.

At the other end of the facility is an array of colorful ships, massive vessels with swooping ailerons, powerful and precisely adjustable engines, and radiant body lights. They come in every shape, from angry porcupines to shards of dark glass and even one that looks like a bundle of snakes the way it billows out from a rippling center and flares into thin tails at the end.

It’s a curious sight, even if I don’t benefit from it. Many species have come to our homeworld. I wish I could learn from them all. Part of me wonders if this awe was

what the Sol Federation felt at their first meeting with all the nations where they formed their alliance.

I wish they were here for me. I wish someone cared about me for once. Not my father's plunder or the potential of my uterus. Just gave a damn about me .

I don't understand. Why, Mom? "Why the fuck am I here?"

"Zariah. Your guard is outside."

I thank the AI, not because I have to but because it's polite. Then I walk to the door and check the screen. I don't see him outside. "Are you sure?"

"He is to your right."

"Uh, okay. Thanks." I crack the door, unsure how this works. I've never had a guard, not formally. "Hello?"

A gloved hand opens in front of me as if to hold me back. His voice is a quiet rasp. "Wait."

After a moment, his hand disappears. "You are clear to exit."

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

Watching Zariah run across the fields and into the trees made my blood simmer. She is strong, thoughtful about her path, and pays attention to her surroundings. When she slid under the ropes course and popped up on the other side just to avoid the Talhuskin tracking her, my body begged me to snatch her up, make her mine, and shield her from all the others that crawled the fields. It was a nightmare to watch.

The aliens became savages, fighting one another over the blue-banded, the pinks, and the most precious female in the universe. They tackled one another, turning into snarling fights like rabid Earth wolves, clobbering each other like starved omenotau of my homeworld.

A small, wrinkled hand clutches mine. When I look over at her, I see Rosy's eyes on the sky.

Zariah leaves the trees in the grasp of a Talhuskin.

“Wing breach!” she shouts as loud as a 200-year-old person can.

I rest my free hand on the glass, fearing what he plans to do with her. One wrong move could tear her delicate body into pieces.

A team of techs turns their attention to Zariah and the Talhuskin.

“Locked on,” a woman says.

Another “Pickup drones inbound.”

A puff of green smoke pops in the Talhuskin's path. He changes course. But it isn't until another of his kind crashes into him that he releases Zariah.

Rosy's hand grabs mine harder as my Protected one falls. Even Rosy fears the limitations of the system they built.

A gasp evades my control. But I am helpless. "Let me out."

I know I will be too slow. But I have to try, or I'll never forgive myself.

Drones race in and target Zariah as the Talhuskin sinks to the ground like he's drugged.

A metal claw beneath a drone catches her.

A young man calls out, "Racer is secure."

They lower her to the ground while the Talhuskin gets his wings bound again by another drone that shoots a net around them.

"Flight is an unfair advantage many try to use," Rosy says.

But now all eyes are on Zariah, and multiple males clobber each other on their way to get to her.

"This was a very bad idea," I say to Rosy. "You should have rejected her application. Everyone has seen her. Everyone knows of her father's reputation now."

Rosy clutches my hand in hers and calls for Abr guards to control the massive tangle of males. Then she turns to me. "Everyone deserves a chance to know love. She would have to commit a crime to be rejected."

“Rosy?” Someone calls over the radio.

“Minimal force necessary,” she replies, releasing my hand to speak with her crew.

“No weapons. That is a hard rule. You know that.”

Below us, an Abr security guard gets thrown back. Another takes a hit to the head and crumples.

“Let us help,” I say.

Keo comes up to Rosy and her team, with several others. “They need assistance.”

“Fine, yes. Go,” Rosy waves us out.

I scramble past the others who watch the race and am the first to the doors.

An Abr officer protests beside me. “This breaks our policies!”

“Let them through!” Rosy says with more force.

Charging down the steps and into the fields toward Zariah is a freeing sensation.

This feels right.

She is mine.

I will protect her.

I target the big Ginarigon who has made his way to her and has crouched over her in preparation for a bite. He’s going to drug her, make her submit when she wouldn’t choose to. It’s just in their nature.

Hot energy floods my muscles, anger my new strength. I move faster, approaching them in the field. I target his side and slam into him, launching him off of her with satisfaction.

The Ginarigon rolls, braces himself as he slides in the dirt, then shakes his head. I tumble but land on my feet. When Zariah is safe from him, I turn back to help her up, but I find I am too late. Someone else is in my place.

He is gentle as he helps her up, so I walk away. She deserves someone who treats her with respect.

The tangle of combative males is slowly tamed by other guards from Abr and personal security. I find the biggest males and lug them out of the mess.

“You have three minutes to find a female or be disqualified,” an Abr drone repeats.

This seems to help shake some sense into the racers and get them back on track with picking up the few women left. A drone encourages us to group up off to the side.

I stand with Keo among Abr guards and personal security, watching the racers with scrutiny.

The buzzer sounds, and I find Zariah being thrown over the shoulder of a Ginarigon, a different one.

I should've stayed with her.

“Why are there so many male racers breaking rules this round?” Rosy asks a guard.
“Someone give me an answer!”

No one speaks up. But I have an idea.

Rosy glances at me, then the rest of the joint group, and sighs. “ We’re going to have to break a rule to keep everyone safe. Private guards around the event arenas. Brief them.”

Rosy walks off with assistance from her main guard.

An Abr security officer directs our group in areas through the complex, where we will be permitted to stand and observe. But while we’re out here talking in the field, I’m worried about what’s happening inside.

I cannot leave my post without exacerbating the situation. I’m supposed to be a human guard. I must act like one.

They cluster us up in rooms adjacent to the mingle celebration with cameras watching the festivities.

A security officer pulls me aside. “Care to explain this?”

He shows me a video recording of me body slamming a Ginarigon almost twice my thickness.

“Momentum and MAMA.”

He frowns. “No one is stupid enough to believe that. Even the news is commenting on how strange it is that a human man was able to tackle a Ginarigon with such force. Don’t do it again.”

“You’re telling me not to protect my client.”

He snarls at me. “Yes, Elix. Show some restraint.”

I have no such plans. When I look up at the camera, I see Zariah running to her room and narrowly slipping inside before a Ginarigon tries to smash it in with a fist.

I'm desperate to protect her and track down Rosy.

"This place isn't safe for Zariah. Do I have permission to pull her out? Can you eject her? Is there anything we can do?"

Rosy stops in the hallway and turns to me with some effort. "Only if she breaks a rule can she be ejected. Only if she chooses, will she be welcome to leave. We protect women at all costs. Just ask the three of my guards in the infirmary right now."

"This can't be getting good publicity," I remark.

"Quite the opposite. We now have extra patrols arriving in orbit. More teams of security arrive in an hour. Ratings and viewers are soaring."

"So you're using her?" I snarl.

"No. I don't give a damn what people think." Rosy points a bony finger up at me. "I care about preserving humanity, about women's choices. This game isn't about wants. It's about needs, about finding the ones that make our hearts, sparks, and cores ignite.

"What do our genetics demand? Our bodies respond when they find a match. Our hearts and minds just need to confirm it. The more raw and primal this race is, the stronger the breeding stock we create. That is how we survive."

I pull a page from her Abr founder's notes that I skimmed during the application process. "What does survival matter if we do not create the only thing that does not exist on its own without us?"

She stills, all irritation slipping under a mask of sudden pity. “You applied to race? When?”

“Several years ago when the emptiness started driving me crazy. You rejected me.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I rarely reject anyone other than criminals.” Rosy shakes her head. “I’d remember your application if I’d seen it.”

“I’m registered with Sol and Terran security systems. Maybe you need to look into your team. There are several males who show signs of being bounty hunters, marauders, that type. Gear, tattoos, scar brands, and the way they all clustered up over a bounty hunter’s daughter. You have to see, something doesn’t add up.”

Rosy rubs her face. “I was hoping this last race would be a fun way to go. This is getting out of hand. I cannot keep up with the technological changes anymore.”

“I’ll look into it, ma’am,” her guard says. She nods and motions for him to contact the team about an audit.

When he walks away, she looks up at me. “I want you to do that, too, just don’t get caught. Report back to me.”

I nod as a tone comes over my wristband and an AI voice says, “Elix, Zariah wishes for you to escort her to the lunch hall.”

She can’t have figured out it was me.

“Go.” Rosy motions me out. “Give us a chance to look into this, some time for things to settle, and more for security to move in before you try to convince her to leave. It’s safer for you both, after that stunt you pulled.”

“I did not consider trying to show human strength when Zariah was at risk.”

“I know. But now the whole galaxy knows something is different about you.” Rosy gives me a warning glance and shuffles off to where her guard speaks with squad leaders.

I have to stay focused on protecting Zariah. I need her to trust me. But it’s getting harder to not fall victim to the growing desire I have to make her mine.

I ponder the consequences of exposing who I am to her. But with the human skin tone concealer, I think it’s best if no one finds out I’m an alien, not even her.

On my way to her room, I pull up my collar and draw my hat down hard over my head. I want to tell her. But if anyone sees me, I’ll only bring more attention to her. Zariah deserves much better treatment and a lot more respect.

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I find her assigned room and spin around outside her door, one hand holding my other wrist, ready but not looking for trouble.

As her door opens, I notice a fight at the other end between a Talhuskin and a blue-violet, loose-skinned Serrin with slender fins all over its body. I motion for her to stay, wait for the Abr officers to get them under control, and then wave her out.

I cannot speak except for a whisper, or she might unmask me. I'm not sure throwing another wrench in her life right now is best.

When I nod toward the lunch hall, she hesitantly leads.

"What do I call you?" Zariah asks.

I shake my head. You don't need to know.

I stay close as we approach the doors of the quiet lunch hall. She orders at the counter while I stand off to the side, watching the few other racers quietly talking in the booths.

"Don't you speak?" she asks me as she sits to eat.

I post up behind her, leaning against the wall, eyes on everything but her. She is my most precious client. It is depressing to watch her eat alone and to not be able to sit with her as if we are friends.

We are friends, just can't be right now.

Right?

But I didn't protect her during the race, not like I wanted to. It doesn't matter that I wasn't allowed to. Shame still cools my core.

I don't deserve her.

A door from the alien wing opens abruptly. The Ginarigon male who initially tackled Zariah struts in, his rough brown armor clicking together over his chest and legs. He scans the room, finds her, and storms toward us.

She makes a noise that tells me she's spotted him.

I step out into his path with one thought. Protect Zariah at all costs.

The prospect of life without her in it is an emptiness I don't want to face.

He tries to swipe me aside. But I block his arm, grab it, spin him around, and bind him in a headlock. I lean close enough that I know he'll hear me clearly in his pointy ear. "She's not interested in your kind. Go find a pink."

Then I shove him away from her with a boot between his shoulder blades.

"You can't do this!" he retorts.

"You tried to hurt her more than once. My job is to protect her until she chooses a mate and the bond is agreed upon," I whisper while others watch.

He saunters out. I return to my post, avoiding eye contact with Zariah. I can feel her looking at me, but I keep my head on a swivel away from her. I'm not sure I can hold my cover if I meet her eyes. Her scent is distracting enough.

“Just like that?” she asks.

“Yes,” I rasp so she can’t pick up my vocal tones.

Zariah finishes eating. It takes her longer than I expect. I want to ask what’s wrong and if there’s anything I can do. But as an experienced guard, I know that is not my place. I am here to stop external threats. Nothing more, nothing less.

When she is done, she bussess in her tray and turns to me. “Can I go outside?”

I nod.

She studies me for a moment, then walks out of the lunch hall, up the stairs, and onto a balcony. I stay one pace behind her and off to the side.

A gentle breeze from the artificial environment curls through her hair, tousling dark tendrils in a way that I find agonizingly beautiful. And yet, I take my place behind her.

“Not fair,” a green-banded blonde remarks. “Why does she get a guard?”

“Ginarigon harassment,” I say quietly.

“Oh.” The woman walks to another corner and meets up with some friends and their new alien male interests.

“Where are you from?” Zariah asks as if she hasn’t heard our conversation. “On Earth?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me. I’ve never been there. I was just wondering if you had recommendations.”

“I do not.” I’m unsure how long I can keep up the charade if she pesters me with questions. “Please ignore me, Miss Landing.”

“Kind of hard when you follow me everywhere.”

“That’s my job.”

She turns to look out across the race grounds and braces her arms on the broad, flat cement railing, looking depressed.

I ache to feel her against me, to comfort her, hug her, and tell her she isn’t alone. But now we’re on the holofeed. Everyone knows who she is and that something is more than human about me. I have to show restraint, or I might lose my ability to protect her.

“I’ve never been to the surface of Earth, despite being human,” she says. “Um, is that normal here?”

I walk closer and look where she points toward the sky, thinking she’s seeing a constellation.

A ribbon of red and orange light bleeds across the solar system like a tear in flesh. “Solar storm.” It was on the news, but this seems early.

She frowns and studies it intently. “My father told me to avoid them at all costs. They can leave a ship dead in the void, turning it into a casket.”

I hang my head when she looks at me, hoping she doesn’t see my face. A few other

racers walk out onto the balcony, giving me a solid distraction.

“I think I’ve had enough for one night.”

I motion for her to lead and stay one pace back and to her right as I follow her to her room.

She scans her wristband and unlocks her door.

I’m not ready to say goodnight. “Can I bring you anything, Miss?”

“I’m sorry? I thought you were just a guard.”

I’ve broken the seal on my feelings without thinking and offered what I shouldn’t have. But I can’t help it. “You had a rough race. The alien males did not respect you as you deserved. I just wanted to offer in case you might need or want something.”

She leans against the door frame and smiles at me. I can’t help but steal a glance at her before jerking my eyes away to scan the hallways.

“You’re the one that tackled the big Ginarigon earlier.”

I nod.

“Quite the talent.”

“It’s my job.”

“You’ve said that. What do you think I need?”

I rack my memories of the human holoshows for an answer. “Most—” Don’t say

human female — “Women like comfort foods like ice cream or chocolate cake.”

She laughs softly at this. “Okay. Whatever they’ve got, I guess.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I rasp as I bow. “Please close and lock your door. I will return in a moment. Please confirm a guest visually or with the AI before opening your door.

“Yeah.”

I wait for her door to shut and the sound of the latches to confirm she’s safe. Then, I head toward the lunch hall. Music thumps through the open double doors of the mingle celebration from the other end. A few males talk just inside the lunch hall. They give me dirty looks when I survey them.

I walk up to the counter and display my guard’s pass on my wristband to the woman taking orders. “Whatever you’ve got for dessert. My client could’ve had a much better day. She needs a pick-me-up.”

She looks at me, points at me like she’s remembering something, then nods. “Okay. I gotcha. Just wait one minute.”

She walks into the kitchen, speaks with the workers, and returns moments later with a large tray filled with plates. She lifts each pearlescent cover, tells me what it is, then covers it again.

I covertly sniff the air for any scents I don’t approve of but find nothing. I collect the tray, thank her, and walk back toward her room.

I hope this helps. The tray in my hands has everything from truffles to cheesecake, scoops of ice cream, and more types of cookies than I recognize. In the middle is a carafe of hot water with a mug and an assortment of powdered drink options.

It feels good, invigorating, to be bringing Zariah things to make her feel better. But as I near her room, not far from the mingle celebration, I get called out. The Ginarigons, three of them, walk toward me, meeting me halfway to her door.

“You caused a lot of trouble today, interfering in the race.” The largest of the three says, the one I recently kicked out of the lunch hall. “How are we supposed to find mates if you get in the way?”

I walk around them at a distance, sensing a pending fight. “We can finish this in a minute. Let me care for the woman you terrified today.”

The big one snickers to the others. “Guess she is weaker than we thought. This should be easy.”

I grit my teeth as I continue to her door. Stopping in the hallway so she can clearly see it’s me outside, I wait, keeping my periphery trained on the three Ginarigons.

A lock clunks and the door eases open.

I walk toward her, easing the tray into her hands.

“Wow. Heavy.” She laughs. “Won’t you come in and help me eat all of this?”

I shake my head and intentionally rasp my reply. “Guards are not permitted in women’s quarters unless there is an emergency.”

“Aw, alright. Well, thank you,” she says, backing up.

“I will close the door for you. And I will be back in the morning to escort you to your events. You may request me at any time between now and then.”

She thanks me again. I just hope she hasn't seen the Ginarigons.

When her door is shut, I stalk toward them, studying their subtler movements, looking for signs of weaknesses.

"If you want to talk, we're not doing it out here where all the cameras are."

The leader points down a hallway.

"You should be mingling," I add.

"And you should mind your own business."

I walk down the corridor that leads to the maintenance rooms of the building, listening to their steps and their breathing for increased quickness.

I hear one approach based on his deep inhale. Wheeling around, I expect a Ginarigon-style attack, a punch to the lower spine while they draw the head backward with another hand. Always take out the legs first.

I use his outstretched arm to my advantage by snatching up his wrist, planting a shoulder in his gut, then using his momentum to fling him over my body and toss him to the ground.

The next Ginarigon, a bit paler orange, bares his teeth, which drip with oily poison. He tackles me, and we tumble to the ground. As the first scrambles to hold me down by an arm, I launch him off with a foot. I use the wall as leverage to right myself and knee the second in the ribs.

Then, the largest picks me up by my vest with help from the second. They hold me against the wall. I grip their arms to steady myself while searching for a weakness I

can exploit as the third gets to his feet, staggers over, and bites my neck with zero restraint.

Sickening pangs lance through my neck.

He steps back just enough I can see his face. “Just waiting for the easy kill. No one will miss a human guard.”

The poison invades like hot acid, swirling through my body, weakening my knees. The back of my throat tenses, and serum from my ooligilli gland dumps into my bloodstream. I just need a minute.

They silently check the area and nod toward a door at the end of the hall like they’re planning where to dump my body.

My muscles swell with fresh strength. “Good thing, I’m not.”

The largest one gapes at me.

I grab the closest and head butt him as hard as I can. When he stumbles back, it distracts the other two. Managing to slip an arm free, I brace myself and side-kick the Ginarigon to my right. The biggest tugs me toward him and punches me hard in the face.

My cheek stings and throbs, but I take him down with a low kick to his left knee.

“You’re lucky I’m holding back,” I say as he sinks to all fours, groaning. “I could kill you. I’m not going to because that would cause more trouble at Abr.

“And I know why you’re all after Zariah. She does not have the treasure. Her brother has it. She left that life behind. She does not know where it is, nor does she care. So

stop thinking that making her your mate is going to earn you some piece of her father's treasure. He kept it hidden from her."

They grumble as they pull themselves together.

I leave them behind for my ship. I have to bandage my face and get some rest to replenish my serum. The poison is still in my system. I cannot heal anything else until it processes out of my bloodstream.

I report to Rosy what happened and send her my biostats, displaying the poison in my blood. I'm not worried about getting in trouble. Three Ginarigons against one of any species is a recipe for death. And they don't want that reputation. If word of their crime gets out, they'll have to answer for it after Abr. But their crime is not against a racer. So they get to stay in the race, for now. It's a Federation relations issue, according to Rosy.

Rosy: I will post two Abr guards outside her room for the night. Get some rest. Call in if you need medical support.

Elix: Thank you.

Aboard my ship, I close the ramp and wake MONA. "I need you to watch Zariah's room and keep tabs on my vitals."

"Are you damaged?"

"Poisoned. Ginarigon."

I strip out of my armor and weapons, lie back on the med table, and connect the nutrient cable to the gland at the back of my neck. I tap on the replenishing cycle and close my eyes.

Feverish dreams of Zariah being shoved around by the Ginarigons fill my shivering darkness. They have bites for mating and bites to kill. I got the latter.

They better not lay another finger on her. I might lose all sense of restraint.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

I can't get the guard off of my mind or the memory of chocolate on my tongue. I also have never taken such a long hot shower or had so many sweets in my entire life. And other than a mild stomach ache, I wake to the rising sun feeling better than I have in years.

All night, I dreamt of the guard. I wish he'd given me his name. Maybe I can get it out of him today.

Quickly getting dressed in a fresh race uniform, I hustle to the door and check the screen. There's a shadow of someone in black tactical gear outside. "Is that my guard?"

"It is."

My stomach cramps again, and it makes me grunt.

"May I suggest a breakfast to help you process all that sugar you ate last night?"

"Yes, please."

"Lots of water first. Then choose something high in lean protein with fibrous vegetables."

"Thanks."

I open the door and peer out at my guard. He's in the same black ball cap from the day before. After a brief glance, he looks away. I don't even get to see his eyes, but I

know he's not as well as he was last night by the stiff way he moves.

"You look like me this morning. Got a stomach ache, too?"

"My capabilities are not hindered. Please proceed with your day," he rasps.

Something has happened. He stays a step behind me like before and follows me into the lunch hall. He stands behind me while I eat. Having someone look out for me feels strange when I've always had to look over my shoulder. I check out of habit, anyway.

"You are safe, Miss Zariah. I won't let anyone hurt you. Please eat."

I return to my food, feeling better already.

Someone I vaguely recognize walks up to me. It's the Vinym that helped me up during the races.

"Are you waiting on anyone?" he asks.

"No." I motion for him to sit.

His scaly skin flushes from green to orange. "How are you after yesterday?"

"Survived it. You? Where's the girl you picked up?"

He shrugs. "Hit and miss with this race. That was a miss. She's interested in another species. I don't believe in forcing what isn't mutual. Ginarigons are very pushy."

"Unfortunately." I slide my plate aside. "Are you looking for a date?"

He blushes darker. “Just a friend, although you are gorgeous. I can see why they fought over you.”

I hear the guard behind me grumble a note, so I scan the room, looking for whatever he’s seen. But I find no Ginarigons or scuffles of any kind.

“They gave you a private security guard?” the Vinym asks.

“I didn’t mean to be a problem, but I guess familial reputation followed me across the galaxy.” I motion out to the ropes course, where everyone has started to gather. “You any good at that?”

“Me?” He scrubs his scaled head with a hand. “Not really. I’m in business. I made a lot from some AI programs that run industrial systems. But work takes precedence. Thought maybe a crash course in courting would help. Few, however, seem to find me interesting.”

“Maybe they don’t feel like you want them,” I offer, getting up from my seat to head for the race grounds.

“What do you mean?” He follows me. My guard stays close.

“Women like to feel wanted, needed, like they’re important. I know I do, even though I run a ship on my own. And after last night, I don’t really want to be here anymore.”

His eyes bulge as we walk out into the field. “You pilot a ship all by yourself in space?”

“Yeah. It sucks sometimes. I am the pilot, co-pilot, maintenance, fuels, cargo loader and unloader, and munitions restocker in war zones. There are a lot of times I wish I had someone to fall back on, but I have trust issues. So no one really fits the bill, do

you know what I mean?”

“I do. So you’re saying I should be a bit more aggressive when I like a female?”

“If you want her, show it. And a little bit of muscle doesn’t hurt either. Just don’t turn into a Ginarigon.”

He nods. In his movement, I find myself caught up in the way his scales shift colors and reflect the daylight.

“I’m Zariah.”

“Hakip. Most just call me Kip.”

“Kip, nice to meet you.” Upfront, an Abr announcer tells us that the women will run the race first. First to the bell at the top of the tower wins. “And, for the record, I think your color-changing scales are very interesting.”

He blushes. “Thanks.”

Someone slams into me and hugs me. “Are you ready?”

Teol grins and bounces. “Tag-team our way to the top?”

“Sure. Uh, Teol, meet Hakip.”

“Hey, you found one!” Teol shouts.

I grimace and chuckle as Kip shyly lifts a hand. “We’re just friends.”

The large, dark and broody male that caught her last night joins us. “Teool,” he

rumbles, wings twitching behind him like they desperately want free of their bindings.

“Oh, Zariah, meet Gashnaar. He’s actually pretty funny when he comes out of his shell.”

“Oonly for yooou, Teool.” Gashnaar nudges her neck with his large nose. “Yooou’re up, ladiesss.”

I glance behind me and can’t find my guard.

“What are you waiting for?” Teol grabs my wrist, an excited look on her face. Her hair is smoothed into a long, thick braid today, and I wish I had done the same.

“My guard.” He said he’d always stay close. But with Teol, I figure I’m fairly safe.

“Ah, just lick your finger and stick it in their ear if anyone gives you a problem.” Teol gets to the railing and bounces on her toes.

“Gross.”

She shrugs. “Works on Keo every time.”

More women racers gather at the railing while Teol explains her plan of ascent. I’ll hoist her up to the rope bridge, then she’ll help me up with a hand. We’ll use the same tag-team method for the main hut, the sky bridge, the tower, and the bell.

The timer ticks down. I wonder if my guard is close. Electronic trance plays out over the speakers, growing louder and faster as we get closer to the beep. When I don’t see him, I turn around and find him just behind another woman, eyes on something down the row from us. It’s then that I notice a recent tear in his neck. It’s barely scabbed

over.

Someone attacked him? When did that happen? I didn't notice it when he brought me dessert.

It had to have happened after he left my room for the night. Did they attack him because of me?

Frustration that yet more good people are being hurt because of my father's reputation grows. I thought it was over when I escaped him years ago. I see now I was wrong.

"Easy girl." Teol rests a hand over my curled fist. "Whatever you're thinking about, just channel it, yeah?"

"I'll do my best."

The buzzer goes off. Teol and I clear the railing in one move. We sprint to the rope bridge. I get there first, lace my fingers together, and prep myself for her weight. I see my guard watching from the crowd. His eyes are on me now. They're a gorgeous honey gold in the morning sun, a color that warms me inside.

Teol plants her foot, and I thrust her upward. She practically clears the entire railing. I hear a yelp followed by a laugh. Then I see her hand reach down. I jump, grab it, and she hauls me up. "Powerful throw, girl!"

"StarBusters are big and clunky," I reply as we climb the bridge railing onto the roof of the hut. Below us, women climb the rope nets, ladders, and poles to get inside the structure. We run across the bouncing boards of the bridge to the second structure. Inside is a spiral net that leads to the roof.

We grab it and swing ourselves onto the top. Teol slips, but I steady her with a hand on her jacket. I run out of rope, but she gives me her hand. Together, we get upright, crawl toward the pinnacle, and slap the bell.

“I see they changed the course a bit.” Teol breathes heavily beside me on the roof. “Variety is the spice of life, right?”

“I thought it was Creol,” I tease.

She busts up laughing.

“Thanks for not leaving me behind,” I say. “I half-expected it after I helped you up. But it’s not because of you.”

“Broken faith in the goodness of others.” She grabs a rope dangling from the side of the hut. “I get it. But we have to take chances to make changes. And life can’t get better without change.”

Teol flings herself over the side and zips down the rope to the ground like she’s done it a million times.

“What the hell, Teol!” I call after her, leaning over the edge.

She looks up at me. “It’s easy. Just feed the rope between your feet. Use the palm covers built into your sleeves.”

I look down at my sleeves and pull out a set of gloves stitched to the inside of the wrist. Damn it. How did I not see these before? “Thanks for waiting to tell me until I’m already up here!”

She laughs as the other girls climb back down and disburse. Most of them run to their

males of interest.

With the gloves on, I grab the rope and consider just climbing down. But I can't let Teol seem tougher than me, especially with the Ginarigons watching from the railing.

It's just like a ship tether plus gravity and minus the protective suit. No biggie.

I fling myself over the side of the sky hut, rope in hand, and slap my legs around the tail.

The rope heats between my hands. I manage to get the tail looped around a leg enough that it slows my descent. I let go a few feet from the ground and land, to my surprise, boots down.

I guess I need to take my own advice and let them know I'm tough enough to want them to stay away and have a chance of doing so. I'm not a pink or a blue. I'm a red. I need to act like one.

I just wasn't prepared to confront such interest when my father's been gone for a year, and I don't feel like I belong here.

Teol high-fives me and returns to her newest interest Gashnaar, who draws her in with a hungry growl, grabs her ass, and nuzzles her like the scent of her sweat actually turns him on.

Why can't I find someone like him?

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

“Please clear the field so the males can line up,” the Abr announcer says.

I hop over the railing and reenter the crowd. A pale blue Mindor comes up to me. I only vaguely hear what he says. It’s the eyes of my guard that I’ve captured, finally.

He stares at me from among the males, seems to realize what he’s doing, blinks, and looks at another who squeezes through the crowd toward me.

My guard plants a gloved hand against the big Ginarigon’s chest.

I step back, panic fraying my nerves.

“She doesn’t want your kind.” My guard makes himself a blockade between me and the heavily breathing Ginarigon. Two more appear at his sides. I see the slashes in my guard’s neck again and can’t stand playing nice, anymore.

Confronting others isn’t usually my way, but I see I need to make it clear. “Stay away from me! You and your Gronies .”

The big one curls his lip at me. “My name is Crolis .”

“Great!” I sarcastically say. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, Crolis . I do not have what you want. I can’t get you access. And I’m not interested.”

“You know it’s a very bad idea to not give my kind what they want,” he growls. “Surprised you survived, goblin.”

Crolis glares at my guard, who strains to keep him from reaching me.

“Go do your race,” my guard sneers and shoves him toward the railing.

Only when Abr security starts to close in do the three Ginarigons, led by Crolis, stalk into race positions.

“Did you hear what he said?” my guard asks as he walks back to stand beside me against the building, while I watch the males race. I secretly hope the Ginarigons get their asses beat.

“Crolis?”

“The Mindor. He asked you to ride with him for the space tour.”

“I was a bit preoccupied.”

He tucks his hands behind his hips and leans back against the wall. “I think he picked up on it. Might ask later.

His voice still rasps, and now I wonder if he’s been in pain since he body-slammed Crolis.

“They’ve rescheduled the space tour to this afternoon because of the solar storm. It’s supposed to pass through here while you’re out there. It will give them time to reset systems here before you get back.”

“You’re staying here to help fix systems? So what, I go on a space bus with a bunch of others?”

“I can escort you if you wish.” He looks away when he suggests it. I almost get the

impression he doesn't care and isn't interested in his work, just doing what he has to for whoever asked him to do it. But for once, it's nice to be a little ignored.

"Yeah, I do." I shrug. "Not like I need a space tour since I live in space on a StarBuster. Think they'll let me stay?"

"They have alternate activities, yes. But a lot of things might go offline during the storm. Security will be on high alert. They recommend leaving because it will be safer for you. They're mostly worried about the creatures' room turning into chaos because of the field dampeners. So they're shielding up, hard close, so this place doesn't turn into some scifi horror show."

I laugh a little as the buzzer sounds. "Watch a lot of scifi movies?"

"Love to watch humans against aliens movies from Terra. The stories are always presented differently than in alien cultures. But we all like to see ourselves as heroes of our own stories—unless it's horror. Just nice to think we can win even when we are destined for annihilation."

The way he said it seems strange and rather depressing.

The males race out into the field, tackling and crawling over each other, fighting and flinging one another off of the huts.

"Savages," I mutter. I'm relieved to see the Ginarigons aren't leading the charge toward the bell. The Mindor is with a Talhuskin and Gashnaar who is closest.

Teol screams and cheers for her mate. She looks happy.

I wish I knew what it felt like to have someone fight that hard for me instead of fighting me to take my stuff.

“StarBusters usually handle space storms well,” my guard remarks. “Could you not just take that?”

“It’s docked out of the system,” I say, not really wanting to give him a ton of information on it. “I brought my pod to Catalyst Five. That’s definitely not strong enough to weather a solar storm. It’s like a space skateboard. It goes, needs a smooth path, and has basically zero environmental protection. It’s a liftpod I modified for space. Used to operate it in the cargo warehouse where I started. Gotta wear a sealed jumpsuit.”

“Hardcore. That’s pretty cool you modified it for space.”

“Thanks. Just do what I have to out of necessity.”

“Whoever gets you will be very lucky,” he says quietly, almost sadly.

The entire race compound suddenly goes pitch black. All the lights are out except those of the aliens around us and the wristbands on every racer. My guard looks away from me and takes up a protective stance, extending an arm across my middle.

A second later, the lights flicker back on in phases. The grounds illuminate first, then each floor of the complex.

“Okay, we’re going to have to send everyone out much earlier than planned,” the Abr announcer calls out without the enhancement of a microphone. “Please proceed to your ships for the space tour now. We will serve a meal aboard the vessels. Officers, please lock down the creatures’ wing. Give no one access until we can confirm we have the all-clear.”

“Looks like it might be safest for you to be on a ship out of here, asap.” My guard turns to me. “Let’s get you to your room so you can get your things.”

“I don’t have anything really,” I admit, but I let him lead me back inside. “Just the clothes on my back when I arrived here.”

“Why is that?” he asks.

“My life is my work. I don’t socialize because I don’t have time. I don’t need other things. I’ve lived under the rule of a man obsessed with things. I don’t want to become him.”

When we get to my room, I swipe my wristband and open my door. A hand tugs me backward.

My guard collects me in his strong arms and then cautiously steps into my room first, drawing a gun from inside his jacket. “Stay close.”

He checks the bathroom and bedroom areas as well as the closet.

I gape at the trashed room. Finding my Abr ticket crumpled on the floor, I pick it up and brush away the dirt. It feels like a crime to see it in such a condition. I tuck it in a pocket and find my regular clothes scattered on the bed, the pockets turned out.

I only had a handful of things, a tin of mints, an extra hair tie, and the one picture I have of my mom, brother, and me from when we were little and still loved one another.

“Anything you care about, grab it now,” he says.

I scramble to collect my things and follow him to my doorway.

“Abr, we have a break in, Room Six,” he reports. “They ransacked the place. I have Zariah Landing in my protection.”

“Confirmed, El—”

The lights go out again.

My guard grabs my arm and keeps me inside the shield of his body while he keeps his gun trained ahead of us.

“What’s going on?” I whisper. “Is this because of my father?”

“Could be. But I keep all options open until I have clear evidence.” He glances behind us and then keeps guiding me toward the end of the hallway. “Until I have confidence in this facility, I think you’re going to be safest on my ship.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

Racers huddle up and run through hallways in the opposite direction as us. Security lights flash. My guard's arm tightens around my waist. He shelters me in the shield of his body and guides me to a wall as two Retterwan males stumble over each other while hurrying toward their ships with everyone else.

Warm breath falls over the top of my head. My guard's rippling body is hard, steady, and locked in around mine. The wall against my other side feels cold compared to him.

"How do I know you aren't one of them?" I peer up at him.

He doesn't look at me, but his eyes squint in the flashlights of the other personnel and Abr guards that guide the evacuation. "Unless you're telepathic, there's no way to know. So all you have is my behavior. What does it tell you?"

I think he cares more than he's admitting to me. I've never worked with a private security detail that was so attentive or attractive. They're always hard, cold, and calculated with me because I'm usually negotiating with their clients for dry goods deliveries. That's it.

When the mob thins enough, he encourages me to keep going. We pass another six rooms and then the mingle celebration hall.

He slows me near the far end of the complex. "Be quiet and still, please. No questions."

I grumble because I have a lot. But he looks highly alert as he eases us toward a

section of private dock pads, so I keep them to myself.

He finds a screen on the wall which lights up at his touch. A heavy breathing sound makes him sling me behind him. His eyes find me in the light of the yellow screen. “Stay.”

The breathing gets louder when he disappears. I slink to sit against the wall, wishing I had a gun or at least a knife to defend myself with.

A security light blinks down the dark hallway, providing a pathetic amount of help with deciphering the situation.

Heat grazes my face, carrying with it the scents that remind me of fresh, raw meat. I squint and try to find the source to cover up my panic.

Its presence leaves me in a crashing racket, followed by a grunt. The security light blinks, exposing two shadows of beings prepping to attack one another. Something growls. A gun flashes, and I see my guard and a monstrous creature I’m not familiar with. It has long dark fur and six-limbs if what I saw in the light was accurate.

My guard grunts in the dark. The alien roars, and I tuck myself tighter against the wall. Another gun flash. I count two more of the creatures. Then a third in a different direction. Scuffles echo in the pitch-black hallway.

The screen overhead goes out, and I hide the light of my wristband under my sleeve. I crawl away from the spot, hoping they’ll lose track of me.

If there was ever a time to be undetectable, it would be now. But as I circle the docking pad toward another ship, I feel claws curl over my shoulder, and I know I have waited too long.

The monster pulls me backward and then grinds my body into the floor so hard that the pressure in my spine makes me worry it might snap.

“Leave her alone! Or I will rip out your talons one by one!” The voice is so familiar. So clear.

Audible scuffles of boots mix with scraping talons. The security light flashes, exposing a tangle of creatures I can’t sort, my guard barely visible among them.

A heavy foot or hand, I can’t tell, presses into my chest. I claw at the talons, feel the breath leaving my body, and know I haven’t got long.

“Tell me,” a low, ghostly voice shudders.

“What?” I wheeze.

“Your father’s gold—”

Tears burn my eyes. “I don’t know.”

It comes out in only a whisper of air.

Talons press harder until a sharp pain cuts into my right lung.

A squeak is all I manage.

My guard’s gun goes off again and again. I can’t tell if it’s him who growls or one of the monsters.

The talons leave me and are followed by the heavy thump of a limp body falling to the floor. I roll to my side, strain to pull in air, and scramble to find the things I’ve

dropped.

“Come on, we have to go.” My guard clicks on a flashlight and scans the bodies piled up around him. He’s bloodied and out of breath, but on his feet. “Did you get everything?”

He brings the light to me and pans the area around my feet.

“I think so,” I barely rasp.

“Are you hurt?”

My ribs ache as I breathe. “Yes.”

“How bad?”

“Barely tolerable.”

He points his light toward the hangar, then collects me and helps me up. “That way.”

I follow his lead but can’t quite seem to bring the dock door into focus.

“Abr, do you copy?” he calls out over his wristband.

“Copy. Status?”

“Seven down. Two leaving private security hangar One Charlie.”

He lowers a ramp and checks inside. “MONA, confirm life forms aboard.”

“Life forms, none. One, Zariah Landing, on ramp.”

“Go,” he says, pointing up the ramp.

In the dark, I stagger up to the deck and steady myself on a support rail. When I look back at his faint silhouette, his eyes are a startling radiant gold.

He’s not human.

He draws another gun. My heart pounds.

My guard backs up the ramp as three more creatures charge down the hallways toward us. One goes down, then another. The third makes it onto the ramp.

“MONA, undock. Get us out of here! Disregard Ramp Down!” He slaps a flashing button above the ramp.

The ship jolts. Thrusters ignite and whirl into a powerful drone. Lights blink on throughout the ship as he sets foot inside. Daylight pours in as we become exposed to the lunar envirodome.

He grabs a strap from the wall without looking and then shoots the last creature. It scrambles to hold on as he kicks it off the back. Then he leans out and watches it fall.

“MONA, take us out of here with the others.” He closes the ramp. “Shields up.”

A blue-green film coats the view of the stars through the windows. But it’s the first clear look I have of him that makes me choke up. He’s covered in blood. Splits cover his face. He’s been stabbed in the side at some point. Or maybe that was a talon from whatever creature had control of me.

I can’t keep myself upright anymore. My knees buckle as the ship falls in line with the others, leaving Abr behind. The sky outside the ramp has turned a rippling purple.

The first ribbons of the space storm have arrived early.

He sighs and helps me into a seat in the back. “Belt in, please.”

I do as he says, but my body feels cold and shaky. The urge to cough overpowers me, but it’s a weak attempt at best and thrusts the taste of blood into my mouth.

“Um—is now a bad time to tell you I don’t feel so good?” I try to say.

He pauses restocking his weapon magazines from a cabinet in the wall, holsters his guns, and looks at me. His eyes widen in fear.

My breaths aren’t as satisfying as I want. Dizziness sweeps through my mind. “Is it bad?”

“Zariah?” He braces me as my body gives out, and I fall into him.

I try to look down at myself, but every breath hurts. I cough and blood splatters uniform. I choke and gag out a “sorry.”

“Oh, stars.” He frantically unstraps and collects me.

I feel so heavy and cold, yet he carries me with a strength I cannot fathom in his condition. He rushes me into another room, where he lays me on a bed under bright lights. My guard—my alien protector—taps a button. The hard bed rises in an array of pegs that conform to my body and support my aching parts.

“Forgive me for this touch. But you’re going to die if I don’t help.” He tears open the top of my Abr uniform and lowers his head to the puncture in my chest. Warm, wet heat slides into my wound. His hands find the belts on the bed as his tongue massages my chest, spreading a tingling heat through my ribs.

He straps me into place, grabs a tool from a drawer, and places the device against the base of my neck. He twists something, and I feel a pounding sting ricochet through my skull. But it's nothing compared to the agony in every breath.

I try to inhale from the pang as the device burrows into my flesh. It's a rattling, wheezing noise instead of a quiet rush of air. I'm too weak to fight, to breathe, to do anything but be absolutely terrified that I'm going to suffocate.

He grabs me and rolls me onto my bad side. I fold up on the bed. "Your good lung is filling up with blood. You need to cough, Zariah. Get it out."

I try, but it's a poor gurgling attempt. Bloody drool hangs out of my mouth, and I feel so embarrassed and disgusting that I want to die.

He tried so hard. Fought and got hurt for me.

It's the opposite of anything I ever wanted.

He grabs a tube from over my head, guides it to my neck, and clips it in. Whatever fluid flows into me makes me drowsy.

"Zariah, stay with me."

Can't—

He rolls me back, crawls on top of me, and bonds his mouth to my puncture, slowly. Tingles replace the sloshing sensation of liquid in my lungs.

"Zariah."

His hands are strong. His tongue is a delicious death.

I wish I could stay. I think I've finally found someone who truly cares, even if it is just his job.

I smile up at his bright gold eyes, like little suns. I'm choking, my vision fading fast. I can't say it, but I hope he can read my lips. "Thank you for caring."

"Zariah!"

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

Zariah blacks out and falls limp on the medical table. I was so worried about protecting her that I missed how badly she had been harmed. Now, she's bleeding out internally.

I lug out a drawer and find an intubation kit, tear it open, and tilt her head back. Once I've got it in place, opening her airway with oxygen and respiration systems connected, I pull out the surgery racks and frantically sort through them for the vacuum line for this very situation.

It's been a long time since I had to operate so quickly on another. I grab it from its hooks, reminding myself to separate my emotions from what I need to do if I want to do it right. Then I connect it to the siphon system at the head of her bed, and carefully insert the tube and camera.

"MONA, onscreen, camera switch to Main, medbay."

The big screen beyond the third bed shows me the inside of Zariah's chest cavity as I feed the hose in and clear out as much blood as I can. I fear her lung will collapse if I don't work quickly enough.

"No matter what happens, I'm here for you Zariah."

I can still taste her blood. My throat heats and my ooligilli gland begins to produce more solution that tastes a little different than before.

She's bleeding internally. That's where I need to send the serum.

I get a wild idea, something I've not tried. But the idea of possibly losing my mate, even if she doesn't know it, is destroying me.

I grab a serum tube from the rack and connect it to the port in my neck. I draw out the serum that I can, then connect the tube to the respiration nebulizer. The solution vaporizes into a cloud—like water normally would to prevent dehydration of the respiratory systems of my patients.

“MONA, confirm ship location.”

“We are above Earth, headed out of the solar system, caravan position: fifty-nine of eighty-three. We need to jump soon.”

That's what I was afraid of. “We can't until she's stabilized.”

“Would you like me to contact Abr's head of security?” MONA asks.

“Not yet. I don't know who to trust.”

Zariah arches on the table. Her heart rate rockets, and I think I've made a terrible mistake.

It was too much, too fast!

I switch on the nebulizer's humidifier backup and mix the two into a diluted serum.

Zariah's body relaxes. Her heart stabilizes, and the camera view shows no new blood entering her lung.

Resting on the edge of her bed, I make a mental note that direct injection is too concentrated. I finish siphoning out the blood that I can. Then I remove the camera-

vacuum unit and set it in a sterile bin.

My wristband crackles with a call from another.

“MONA, can you tune that?” I ask as I wipe a strand of bloodied hair from her face. I could do it, but I don’t want to leave Zariah’s side.

“She’s the whole reason we’re in this mess!” A woman says. Many voices clutter the background.

“What are you going on about?” I recognize the voice. Teol sounds furious.

“She’s got the males all riled up because of her daddy’s money. I paid too much to be thrown onto a ship and have my entire vacation ruined!”

I take Zariah’s hand in mine. It’s covered in her blood. I wish I could do more. I will when I’ve replenished my serum.

“Look here you little fartin’ princess faerie,” Teol roars. “That girl ain’t taken any of her father’s wealth! She worked hard to have what little she does. So you can take your entitled, fake butt and be useful by shuttin’ the hell up. You signed up for an adventure. Adventure has risks. Deal with it!”

“Please clear the com channel,” the voice of an Abr security officer says. “We’re heading out of space, but we can’t jump until all ships confirm their ready status or we could end up crashing into one another.

“I’m sending coordinates for the start of the tour. When we call your ship, please jump promptly to ensure the efficiency of this tour.”

“MONA, are we prepped for hyperspace?”

“Ready at your command. Destination loading.”

I glance at it to ensure we’re going where I think we are.

“Not a tour. It’s a damned evacuation!” says the woman that Teol called a princess.

“Yes, Ashani. Now shut up,” Teol growls.

“Elix, you are not strapped in,” MONA states.

“I know that. I’m a bit preoccupied.” I check Zariah’s straps and place a brace around her head and neck to prep her for launch.

“I cannot jump the ship if you are violating safety protocols.”

Growling, I rip the doctor’s seat open from under Zariah’s bed. It swivels out beside her and locks into the floor. I drop into it, belt in, and brace Zariah.

“I’m just saying,” Ashani retorts. “Zariah is the reason we’re all here and not having fun on the base.”

I’ve finally had enough and provide my own reply. “Zariah was attacked in the hallway and is barely alive. She is on my medical rescue transport. She left her father’s ways, barely escaping with her life.”

I hear the anger boiling in my voice and take a deep breath to calm myself. “She just wanted to be like any of you for a change, full of hope and the promise of a better life.”

“Yeah, she’ll never have a life like ours,” Ashani mutters.

Teol swears. Then I hear some scuffling and a soft thump. “No matter how much money your family has, you are still mortal, Ashani. Remember that.”

“Oof, watch that falling stuff over there, Ashani,” Keo teases.

Other girls chime in and chat over the short-range com. It sounds like they’re tired of Ashani, too. Teol gets reprimanded, but she doesn’t retort.

Abr officials initiate launch commands over the fleet channel, and I listen as each vessel ahead of us departs Terran space. We have to make it quick with the solar storm right behind us.

After the space bus leaves, the com chatter quiets.

“Elix, Halicylith of Abr Fleet, Commander Rutlind. Please jump.” Abr flashes the coordinates again, how far we will be behind the next ship, and how long we will be in hyperspace.

“I know,” the commander says. “Five hours in hyperspace isn’t ideal. But we’re doing the tour in reverse to give the storm more time to pass. It’s a whole night of travel, usually. This will make it extra fast. But that’s what the board decided last minute.”

“Understood.” I’m not leaving Zariah, but I track our location on a medbay screen. “MONA, make it happen.”

The ship powers up in a whirling whine of engines. I feel the tug on my body, but I refuse to let go of Zariah to brace myself.

When we’re up to speed several minutes later, I relax and check the ship’s stats on the screen beside me with one hand, while I hold Zariah’s in my other. The moment

my serum starts heating my body, trying to heal me, I know I'm ready for another session, healing Zariah, or another vial drain.

Leaning over Zariah to assess what she needs most I find, even in her condition, my core stirs with desires I can't push out of my mind. Stats show her blood oxygen level slowly rises. But she's still got a hole in her chest.

I fight a powerful pain, one born from the fear that I may never see her look at me with recognition again. This might be all I get to have of her: motionless, dead to the world, a bloodied wreck. And still, I am grateful for this moment she is in my care, her hand in mine. I am finally able to fight for her like she deserves.

Fresh serum makes the back of my tongue tingle. My gland is fully replenished. Not wanting to waste it, I rest my mouth on her worst wound, trying to focus on her healing and not the taste of her blood that rattles my core.

Her skin begins to heal beneath my tongue.

When my serum runs out again, I check the wound to find it has turned pink and mostly filled in. She shifts, and her eyes flutter. With her bio stats stabilized and her showing signs of waking up, I extubate her. She gags, and her eyes roll skyward.

"I know," I say, trying to comfort her as I set the equipment in another metal bin. "Not my favorite part either."

I set her up with a nasal cannula oxygen feed and then clean up around her bed. She's still with me, but she'll be extra fragile for the next twenty-four hours. When the bins of equipment are in the ship's autoclave and sanitizing systems, I sit beside her, looking down at her dirty uniform and face.

Needing a distraction from my brewing lust, I clean her face with saline solution and

some sterile towels. Then I work my way down her neck to her hands and every finger, looking for more wounds to lick-heal. Every scratch and red mark reminds me that I didn't protect her well enough. She doesn't deserve any of them. I take each, one at a time, and heal it with a lick or a simple kiss.

She might reject me when she finds out the truth.

If she wakes up.

I take my time, knowing it might be my only chance. When I'm finished, I cover her with a blanket and take my seat again.

Zariah sleeps for the next three hours. Her chest heals a little more with each session, but I'm taxing my serum. At some point, I will have to heal myself or I won't be able to continue to care for her.

I check our drop zone, monitor the other ships, and try not to fall asleep myself. But I am still injured, covered in Soulstealer blood and Zariah's. With some exhaustive effort, I connect another recirculating IV to the tank in the wall and clip it into my port. It brings instant relief and energy.

A private com call registers on my wristband. I accept. "Who is this?"

"Keo, personal guard to Teol. Elix, is that you?"

I lick my lips, the taste of Zariah's skin lingering on them. It seems like Keo has made the connection. "Confirm secure status."

"Isolated."

"Yes, this is Elix."

“I knew that was you who tackled the Ginarigon!” Keo says.

“Keep that quiet, please.”

“Of course. How is she? Teol is worried but didn’t want to call. Except she won’t stop talking about her.”

“She is healing. I have extubated her, and she is on a nasal oxygen supply.”

“Must have a good set-up to have all that equipment.”

“In my past life, I was mainly a deep space medical rescue officer. I carry what I can. How are the others?”

“Spacebus from Hell.” Keo laughs. “Ever seen a catfight?”

“No.”

“If you ever do, you’ll know. There are a few alien males with us. But most are on their private ships with their chosen ones. Couldn’t get to Gashnaar’s ship before they locked down the hangars. So we got the bus.

“Anyway, holler if you need extra hands. I think we’re just five ships ahead of you. I’m sure they’d stop for a medical emergency.”

“Thanks.” But I don’t want to stop. Our best cover is our group and the security teams with us. “Elix out.”

I end the call and attend to Zariah, who mumbles something in her sleep. I lean closer but can’t decipher it. She shivers, so I run my fingers over her forehead. She feels cold, and I wager it’s from blood loss.

I don't have fresh blood supplies on hand, just serum and nutrient feeds. When I've given her everything I can until my gland is taxed, I cover her with a blanket, and confirm the nutrient tube is feeding her optimally.

My core urges me to climb onto her bed to keep her warm. She is mine. She has to be. It begs me to warm her with my body heat, but it's an archaic practice, and I don't have permission. So Instead, I switch on the bed heater, take her hand in mine, and rest my head on the side of her bed.

"I'm here, Zariah. I'll always be here."

I hope what I did was enough.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

My mind is a hot soup of heavy shadows that strain to pull me under. Inky threads leach into my mind, encapsulate me with chilling fingers, and squeeze my body until I cannot breathe. My lungs move, but no air enters. I am drowning in their grasp while eyes black as the voids between the stars watch me with sickening delight.

A pulse ripples through the darkness, then another, carrying a hint of glitter on its tidal wave. Gold light breaks above me. The watching eyes shy away. Something rattles in my chest. Pressure eases into something new.

Warm. Wet. Soft.

The jabbing in my right lung becomes noticeable again. But it slowly fades and is replaced by the comfort of a mysterious fizzy sensation.

My body convulses. I feel it now. Something is inside my mouth, my throat. Then I feel nothing and see only bright light beyond my eyelids that won't open.

I'm left hanging in a strange high, like the first long nap after two days without rest. Fear of drowning slips away. A new electricity tingles beneath my skin. It won't let me have enough peace in the silence to sleep, not completely. My entire body throbs like it has taken one big punch and then been dropped in some gigantic bath of soda.

“Zariah.”

My guard says my name now and then. It is a gentle sound, yet it still thunders through my thoughts. I can't find him in the swirls of light.

Gold eyes. Hard muscles.

My guard is an alien.

Hours pass, or days, I can't tell.

What does he want with me?

A damp, plush texture glides over a pulsing spot on my shoulder. It cools, and the pressure dissipates. The soft fizzling sensation finally registers as my consciousness comes back in longer stretches. I'm certain almost all of my flesh has been under the same healing remedy.

Heat rises beneath me from the bed. It blazes down on me from overhead. Fingers curl around mine. Warm breath grazes the back of my hand in gentle bursts.

I blink and find my vision nearly useless.

"I'm here," he says.

I try to move, but I'm weak and stiff. Straps hold me in place. Questions race through my thoughts, but only a groan escapes me.

"Hang on." He rattles through a nearby drawer, then opens each of my eyes and drips a liquid into them that clears my vision.

He shuts the drawer, then unstraps me. "You're going to have a cough for a while. But you're going to be fine, otherwise."

I turn my aching neck so I can track him as he moves around the medical bed, unstrapping me. He looks like hell: dirty with dried blood and splits on his green face

and his armor.

Wait—

From beneath his black ball cap, he steals a glance back at me, and I know exactly who he is.

“E-Elix?” No sound comes out but a rasp of air.

He hangs his head, nods once, and finishes cleaning up the room with a sigh.

For several breaths, I just let it sink in that he’s been my guard this whole time, and I didn’t notice or even think about it.

He seemed human, looked human. Sure, he’s bigger than most in height and muscle mass, but he has no tail or wings or strange exterior texture like scales or scutes, nothing to clue me in.

Other than his eyes.

But I never expected it to be Elix. We always and only ever saw one another in passing.

He finally sits on a stool beside me, clasps his hands together, and avoids my gaze by reading the screens in the room. “I overheard the Ginarigons talking about you in the next Abr transport after you’d boarded. So I got myself assigned as your private security detail based on a Life Debt.”

“You don’t owe me one.” It comes out only as a whisper. My whole body aches, but I still try to sit up. In my clumsy attempt, my left hand slips and I smash it into the bed’s medical table.

I grimace and slump back, frustrated to tears that my body is so helpless. “Ow.”

“I owe you more.” He lifts my hand, eyes the fresh scrape on my knuckle, licks his thumb, then runs his thumb over the red mark. My skin heats, then cools beneath his touch. I watch the redness disappear, staring at it in shock.

“This is why my people died off.” He rests my hand on the table again. “They did not come to kill us. Not the Novarks or the Denarso. Not even the Nebulous. They came to drain us. I was just banished before my home planet’s final battle. But this is why I became a medic on the outer rim. I hide in plain sight, conceal myself as a human. I am private security, yes. I am good because I can do what most can’t.

“You should be dead. You’re not because I am not your average guard.”

I rotate my hand and weakly take his in mine, grateful to have someone fight for me but broken by what he’s been through.

“The serum will not heal from near death if we cannot taste our patient,” he adds.

“Taste?”

“I need to sample DNA to modify the serum from the ooligilli gland in the back of my throat. I cannot tell you how I modify it. That is as much instinct as breathing.”

His fingers are warm, strong, and far larger than mine. Yet he is gentle when he cups my hand.

“But why?” I can’t fathom why anyone would sacrifice so much for me. “Are you just after treasure?”

Elix leans closer. He scans me, pain in his eyes. Then he reaches across my body,

rests his arm beside my head, and grazes my cheek with a thumb, looking at me like I'm some sort of golden challis.

I don't believe it.

My instinct is to reject the notion he's the one who wants me, if only because he doesn't deserve to be dragged down by my life. I expected to be targeted by the likes of a Ginarigon: brutish, pissy, not picky about mates, a pain in the ass with an imperfect moral background like me—not gorgeous, ripped, sweet, Elix.

“When did you feel this?” I ask.

His mouth squirms like he can't find the words. He looks away.

“Elix.” I try my best to squeeze his hand and bring his gaze back to mine. “How long?” How long have I ignored this and left you feeling like this was one-sided?

My body feels like garbage, but now my heart aches, too.

“When you stayed behind to make sure I escaped the spaceport.” He rubs his face with a hand.

“That's well over a decade ago —”

Elix covers his mouth and nods. “I didn't understand the tearing feeling inside me then. I was too young. But every time I've seen you since and lost you, I felt it again.”

He guides my fingers to his lips, then supports my hand with both of his and rests his mouth against my skin. “I'm sorry. I couldn't control it this time.”

I soak in the softness of his kiss and how delicate the moment feels despite knowing he'd bashed into Ginarigons and other monsters just to free us not long ago.

"I understand if you're not interested," he adds. "I just want to be sure you're safe and healthy before I let you go this time."

The hurt in his voice makes my own throat ache. I don't want him to let me go. Ever. "I always wondered where you were and if you were safe."

"Usually not."

"Same." I laugh softly, thrusting fluid out of my lungs. One cough turns into a fit I can't seem to stop. Bloody mist coats the pillow beside me.

Elix immediately slips his arms around me, helps me sit up, and then snatches an inhaler from a nearby tray. "Deep breath. Three, two, one."

I inhale as he pumps the mist into my lungs.

My coughing fit calms to a strangely sweet and metallic-flavored medicine.

"Hold it." He half-sits on the bed beside me and supports me until I'm trembling.

"Okay."

I let it out, and breathing becomes easier.

"What is that?" I ask, working my tongue around in my mouth at the strange taste.

The apprehension on his face concerns me. "I aerated my serum. I've never tried it before, but it was a last resort to keep your right lung from collapsing. You were

bleeding internally.”

One of his eyes squints in doubt. “I don’t know what the consequences might be. Usually, serum stays local on patients because it’s applied topically. It doesn’t survive in the stomach due to acid, but in the lungs— I’ve never tried it before, nor have I heard of this being attempted elsewhere. So please tell me if you feel unusual.”

“I’ve had a lot of alien bites and injuries. Never a punctured lung.” I admit, thinking back to all my distant world munitions drops for the federation. I catch my breath then add, “I can’t say I’ll know if something’s more abnormal than normal for this.”

“Right. We’ll just have to monitor you, then.” He runs a hand through my hair, gently combing it with his fingers. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.” But I’m more concerned with his appearance. I uncurl my hand from his and reach up to his face. “Why aren’t you healing?”

Elix supports my cold fingers in the heat of his hand. “Taxed my gland’s serum to save you. I just need rest and nutrients.”

He casually motions to the tube plugged into the back of his neck like it’s a daily occurrence for him. “Gave you one, too. It’s a bit better than an IV. One of the things my people invented.”

I reach a shaking hand back and find the tube connected to my neck. That explains the strange stiffness. “So you do know a little about your people?”

“Salvaged what I could.” He nuzzles into my palm. Water shimmers in his eyes.

“What happened?” To you? To them? How the hell did we get here?

He spreads out my fingers over the side of his face like he can't get enough of my affection. "Many had their glands cut out. Their bodies were left to freeze in fields, ships, and homes. I gave them back to the ice as ash. There is no point trying to bury anything on my homeworld."

I think of Earth, a place I've never actually landed on, and how I would feel if humanity had suffered such a catastrophic loss. I do my best to shift on the bed so I can wrap my arms around him. But my attempt is pretty pathetic.

"Can you help?" I eke out, fighting to sit up. "I just—"

He draws in a sharp breath, leans over me, and slides his arms around my back.

"Who would do such an awful thing?" I whisper. "I wouldn't wish that on anyone. But you least of all."

When he doesn't reply, I draw him closer. "Elix?"

His arms snug up around me, and he buries his nose in my neck. "Everyone. Nebs, Terrans, Ginarigons, bounty hunters."

My stomach turns. Bounty hunters? "My father?"

He's quiet for a long time.

I lean back and inspect his eyes, the ones that try to avoid mine.

"You saw him?"

He clenches his teeth hard enough that the muscles in his jaw dance. "I tried to stop him and his men."

“That was nearly impossible for even the most elite crews,” I offer.

Elix pushes aside the collar of his jacket, exposing a long scar down his neck.

I run my fingers over the mark, knowing how close he had come to dying. Rage over my father’s heartlessness clashes with my pity for Elix and his species. “I’m so sorry.”

He clutches my hand in his, rests his nose against my wrist, and inhales. “Me too. For once, I just want to see our kinds work together, help one another.”

“Fear makes us do terrible things.”

“Your father feared nothing.”

I can’t hold my arms up any longer. They’re too heavy, and I’m too weak. “Everyone has something they fear, something that drives them. His was fear of being powerless. He wanted money and immortality because he felt those would be all he needed for life.”

“What do you want?” Elix asks.

I rest back on the bed. “For someone to give a damn. You?”

“I didn’t know until I met you.” Then he kisses my forehead and slips my grasp. “Rest.”

I watch him walk to another med station, sit on the bed, unbuckle his chest armor, and unzip his jacket. In the screen that lights up before him, I get a view of his stacked torso and the wound on his side. He cleans his injury, keeping his back to mine, then rubs some sort of paste on it from a small tub he pulls from a nearby bin.

He grunts and sways his head like he's in pain. The injury fizzles much like I remember my lungs doing in my dream.

Elix shivers in waves, every glorious muscle flexing. I want to comfort and help him as he has done for me. Instead, I'm drifting off in my exhaustion, staring at his gorgeous body, my most delicate flesh slicking and aching for a taste of the brutal body that brought me back to life.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

Elix sleeps at my bedside for about an hour based on the time on the nearby screen. I'm in and out, resting when sleep takes me, consumed by lustful dreams of a green alien with gold eyes in the moments between .

He shifts where he rests by my shoulder, rousing me.

“Elix?”

He snaps awake like a soldier who's used to it. His eyes find mine before he lifts his head. “Yes?”

“Did you ever get revenge?”

Elix breathes out and adjusts his nutrient tube. “Tried when I was younger. Then I realized staying alive was more important. Infiltration often resulted in me getting captured, used as a healer for those who didn't deserve it, and me barely escaping.”

“Why not just blast them out of the sky?” I ask. “Most would try.”

He caresses my forehead with his fingers, making tiny circles. “I fear I will take innocents that way. I like to get dirty so I can be sure only those who deserve punishment are dealt such. I don't want any collateral damage.”

Elix rests his nose against my neck, inhales a breath of me, and then sits back up. “I'm sorry, just needed confirmation that you're still here with me. The last few hours have been—hard.”

I survey him and the way he won't look at me for very long. "You're not telling me something."

He opens a nearby screen and pulls up pictures of monstrous beings like the ones I saw at the complex. I blink to clear my vision. I'm used to waking up quickly, but my body still isn't ready.

"The creatures that attacked us are called SoulStealers. They're from a sister species' moon. They dig their claws in, thread tendrils inside a body, and take over the central nervous system. They're not just animals. They sell their services to top bidders. Someone wanted you to be their puppet.

"Crolis?"

"I don't think it's the Ginarigons. They're greedy, but not this kind of sadistic. They prefer to do the gritty stuff themselves. It's a power trip for them," he says, leaning back against my bed.

"Then, who?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. It could be anyone now that the entire universe knows you're in the races. I wish there was a way to prove that you don't have access to whatever it is your father had, just so everyone would leave you alone."

"I've tried. But it's pointless." I look down at my shredded race suit beneath the blanket and wish I'd never used my ticket. It was a gift given in good faith. But looking back, I realize how little my mother knew about my father's capabilities, how far his rein would eventually reach, and how his legacy would corrupt others just for a portion of what he had when he was alive.

"MONA, what is our status?" Elix asks.

I scan the room but don't see anyone with us.

The speakers in the room reply, "We're about an hour away from dropping out of space."

"MONA?" I ask Elix.

"Hello, Zariah," a voice says, somewhere nearby. "I am the Medical Operations Neuromorphic Assistant for this Scintilla. I am happy to assist with whatever you need."

"The storm's causing a lot of trouble back at the complex," Elix cuts in. "So Abr has us going in reverse order through the tour. Normally, they would do this rest time last, but this got us a safe distance away much faster."

"Do we have to continue the tour?" I ask. "I'd really just like to forget the whole thing. I don't really feel up to much. And joining the races feels like a big mistake."

"That's up to you. I do think we're safer with the group for now."

I don't want to waste the gift, but I know now that Abr isn't as secure as I hoped, not for me. Yet I'm still at Elix's mercy. "Alright. Let's see how the tour goes."

He gets up and turns to me. "What can I get you? Are you hungry?"

"Maybe a hydrolyte packet if you've got one and a shower. Something else to wear, too."

Elix touches a panel in the wall. Lights dance around his fingers and the tall, slender drawer opens. He collects a packet and hands it to me. "As for clean clothes, all we've got is my stuff and your jacket. Seems we left some of your clothes behind

during the escape.”

I drag my heavy legs to the edge of the bed and move the blanket aside. Elix rushes to me as I try to set my feet down. He’s quick to catch me when my body gives out. Desire surges through my tired limbs when he collects me and leans me against his chest.

Concern fills his gaze. I look up at him in admiration and a bit of embarrassment. Elix cracks open the hydrolyte packet and helps me put the nozzle to my lips, then swallow the fruity liquid.

“You aren’t going to be able to clean yourself in this condition,” he says. “I did wipe you down as I checked for injuries.”

“Hot water usually helps wake up tired muscles.” It’s all I can think about. A shower has always been the place where I wash away the past, cry where no one will notice, and step out feeling like I’m up for tackling one more day.

Elix frowns. “I would rather you sleep the remainder of the trip, since you don’t really need to get familiarized with space. This tour is more for the women who have never left Earth.”

Studying the dried splits still on his face, I ask, “When are you going to take care of yourself?”

“Whenever I have time.” Elix disconnects my nutrient tube and snaps in a vial filled with gold liquid.

“What’s that?”

“My serum.”

I reach up to try and stop him from wasting it all on me, but Elix is too strong. He guides my hand away.

“I’m fine. You need this more than I do right now.” He sighs through his nose, tilts his head, and watches the vial discharge.

The fluid spreads warmth through my body. I can’t say I hate the strength it gives me. And while I don’t like his answer, I’m still not strong enough to get my way. I just have to take it.

“Who’s flying the ship?” I ask.

“MONA.”

“Sir, what do you request?”

“Nothing, MONA. Just talking about you to Zariah.”

“Understood. How are you both feeling?”

Elix gives me a knowing look as he disconnects the vial and places it in a cleansing bin. “You can read our biostats MONA. You don’t need audible confirmation.”

“Then may I suggest you both get patched up and rest until we drop? I will keep us on course per Abr instructions. But you both have elevated levels of cortisol. Zariah’s heart rate suggests exhaustion, and Elix, your core —”

“Stop.” Elix glares at a nearby screen. “I know.”

MONA quiets.

“Something wrong?” I ask, reaching for the side I know he’s injured.

“I’ll live.” Elix cradles me in his arms and carries me through a bedroom into an adjoining bathroom. There isn’t much in the quarters except a few basic supplies. His ship is like mine: metal trusses, raw-boned, with few items of comfort. His, to my delight, has larger windows in each room, and most of his doors have high-tech biometric locks.

“Is this yours?” I ask.

“No. Guest quarters just have a bigger bath. I housed the king of Ferrim here with his new bride. I reserve this space for royal clients.”

“I’m not royal.”

“You’re more important than royalty to me.” He walks into the shower stall and settles me on the textured floor, then places the soap beside me and turns on the water.

Heated spray rains over me as Elix turns away, pulls a towel down from a cabinet, and hangs it over the bar on the door.

I thank him as he turns to leave, wishing he’d stay. I want to return some of the care he has given me. But I know I’m too weak by the cold weight of every limb. Still, I would try to clean his wounds if he’d let me. He’s done so much. I’ve done nothing but be a problem.

I hope I haven’t disrespected him on accident, thinking he was just some dude from Earth.

When I try to get out of my uniform, I find myself stuck. I fight with the sticky fabric,

but it only gets worse in the streaming water.

Steam fills the room. Hot water pools under my body. My frustration grows, but I simply don't have the energy.

"Elix?"

He eases back into the door, averting his eyes.

"I am genuinely stuck." I've only managed to get one shoulder out of the torn side before reaching my limit.

"I don't want to disrespect you," he says.

"Please. I want a proper bath, not through my clothes like one of my father's—" I stop because I don't want to remember it anymore.

Elix puffs out a breath, walks slowly to where the water sprays, and kneels beside me. His strong fingers work me out of my race suit by feel. He won't look directly at me. The moment my breasts pop free of my top, he inhales sharply and twists his neck like he's straining hard to keep his control.

"You said you have a change of clothes, right?" I ask.

"Only my stuff."

He's close enough that I can touch him, and the hot water gives me some strength. I reach up and run my wet fingers over a dark cut on his jaw. It's a weak attempt to him, I'm sure. But I use all the strength in my arm to guide him closer.

"Let me help you."

He stumbles like he can't process what's happening. Elix plants a hand in a puddle beside my hips to steady himself. His eyes widen. Their gold brightens as his gaze locks on mine with such surprise and interest that I have no doubt he wants me.

“Thank you for saving me,” I offer.

His breath is hot and scented with the serum that's saved my life. “Anything for you.”

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Shower spray sprinkles his rugged face, dripping off his contours in little streams. I wonder if serum is his only flavor, and crane my neck to sweep my lips over his. How have I not noticed him the way he noticed me?

Hunger for more of him stirs in my belly so powerfully it tightens my pussy even in my half-dead condition. I urge him closer.

“Zariah,” he breathes heatedly into my mouth. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Why?” I ask, savoring the lushness of his smooth lips against mine.

“The race—your mother’s last gift. The other males could give you more. They have kingdoms, homeworlds, homes .” Doubt pinches his brows. “They could give you a normal life like you always wanted. Like you deserve. Somewhere safe. And we have to keep you comfortable until I’m certain you’re healing with solid progress.”

I lean back, hating that he’s being so damned rational. Raw marks on his neck become visible when he shakes his head and looks away from me. They resemble a familiar pattern.

Touching my neck, now healed, likely from all the serum he’s given me, I’m certain a Ginarigon bit him.

Elix has fought for me even though he believes I deserve someone else. I’d be blind to not see what’s in front of me and an idiot not to want him.

“I think it’s pretty safe to say I’m never going to have a normal life, Elix. And I don’t

want any of those alien males. I never did. Just a vacation, a chance to feel wanted, special, and safe . Is finding a normal mate more important than what I want?”

His shocked breath tells me what I need to know. I lean back and look him in the eyes. “I never stopped thinking about you either. And everything since has proven my feelings about you aren’t misplaced.”

He smiles, just a little, his relief apparent.

It’s a struggle, but I sit forward, brace the back of his head, and kiss him.

Elix’s eyelids droop. His muscles flex in ripples. A deep primal rumble starts in his throat. “Zariah—”

“Elix—”

“When was the last time you felt really good?”

I honestly don’t know. Escaping my father? Not dying under a SoulStealer’s claws? Then it hits me. “Waking up and seeing you.”

He lets out a breath, dark brows knitted like he can’t quite believe it, and then he collects me carefully with an arm and lays me back. Elix unzips my suit and continues peeling it off of me. His lips find mine once more before gliding down my chin to my throat, traveling lower until he finds the sore spot on my chest. He drags his tongue over it one more time, slowly, evoking a tingling sensation akin to his healing affections, and then he slips the suit over my hips.

His every touch and brush of his skin over mine ignites a burning need to feel more of him— all of him.

Elix throws my race uniform aside, then crawls over me. Water drips from his face, his short ebony hair, his bloodied armor, and his clothes. But flames dance in his eyes as he leans down for another sensual kiss.

I clumsily unbuckle his armored vest, and he tugs it off. Unzipping his jacket, I find he's not wearing a shirt underneath. And when I see the bruises in the light for the first time, I lock up.

"Oh, stars, Elix!"

He braces his elbows beside my head and laces his fingers into my soaked hair. "Don't worry about me. I'll endure anything for you. Just promise you will stay, that you won't run, won't sacrifice your freedom for mine again. Let me fight the universe with you."

Water turns into mist against his broad back muscles. But now he's got me thinking about how we could possibly merge our two very different lives. I've never told anyone outside of my secret life what I really do.

A tug on my bra pulls my attention back to Elix. He gently unhooks it, offers me the soap, and then rinses the blood from my bra in a nearby puddle.

I try my best to wash myself, but my fingers tremble too much.

"Zariah." The way he says my name, like a sad, sweet song, makes me want to cry. He hovers over me, topless, green skin glistening under the lights, on all fours—a prime guard built to be a shield, a protector, a healer. "Let me serve you."

I don't know what he means, but I'm in need of any help I can get, especially with as weak as the sight of his rigid body makes mine. I have to abandon my pride and my independence and trust someone for once. Elix has proven himself many times

already. I'm certain I'm safe with him.

“Okay.”

A shiver runs through him, and I swear his eyes gleam when they meet mine. He scrubs the remaining blood from my body, being extra gentle over my breasts. Then he lowers his head to my ribs. “Looks like you need a bit more healing.”

His tongue swirls up my side. But he doesn't stop. Elix caresses a globe, then glides up and over my nipple. Goosebumps prickle my chest, tightening my buds. Elix heaves a breath, steadies himself, and drags his tongue over my breast with hungry affection.

No one's ever touched me with such desire or sent such sizzling waves through my body.

Elix toys with my other breast as he suckles the first. I'm caged inside his brawny arms and legs, bare and raw in the heat of his affection. He shifts his weight, his powerful, green body slinking over me like an animal stalking prey, muscles taut and bulging, primed for action.

His hands work downward, washing and rinsing my stomach, thighs, back, all while his lips tease my breasts.

He wants me?

His kisses trail affectionately down my stomach to my hips. He sweeps his nose across my panties and tears them off with his teeth. Then he gingerly slips his fingers into my folds and washes me.

An unexpected burst of pleasure makes me gasp. The shower feels unsteady, like my

thumping heart. I'm not sure my body is ready for this. But his touch feels too good to ask him to stop.

After a kiss to my neck, Elix slinks down to my hips, where he nuzzles his nose into my delicate flesh. He nudges my clit as he draws me closer. Elix inhales me deeply. The rush of air against my pussy in the hot water is a mind-crushing sensation and makes me slick with anticipation.

Wrapping his arms under my hips, he braces himself between my thighs and licks my opening with slow, penetrating motions.

When he plunges his tongue into me with force, a hot scourge of thought-shattering lust rips through me. My pussy clenches around his tongue without my consent. I ride the swelling high, breathless, and hear him rumble a satisfying note.

Elix's body sways as he strains to reach deeper into me. My hips hang in the cradle of his sculpted arms as he massages my clit with a thumb, his other hand snaking up and finding a nipple to tease. The euphoric sensations he evokes blend into a glittering mass that whites out my vision. Elix pushes his tongue deeper, licking me like I'm a once-in-a-lifetime dessert.

His body heats between my legs.

"Elix." I try to pull him up to me, wanting him to drive his cock into me, whatever the hell it looks or feels like. But he growls and sways his mouth over my opening. I think he's saying no but doesn't want to lean back long enough to actually say it.

How did we go from being distant friends to this?

Elix flattens his tongue against my aching slit, caressing me in one long lick.

Ooh, fuck.

The tension in my core grows in an addicting high.

He circles his tongue over my nub as he slips a long finger inside of me.

“Please,” I protest, my depths begging to be filled with him.

He growls again, but louder this time, so that I can feel it in his tongue, while he savors me from the inside out.

My ecstasy rockets. I strain for air, not sure I’m ready to let him see me break under his power. But he is in command, and when he flicks my entrance with the tip of his tongue, then dips a second finger inside, I arch under the exquisite strain of accepting him. Elix promptly withdraws his fingers and thrusts his tongue deep, sending a molten wave out from my belly into every corner of my body.

I buck onto his tongue, unable to control myself. Elix grunts and binds my hips to his face until I’m sure he can’t breathe. He plunges into me as I climax and clench around him until I have nothing left to give, and my body melts in his arms.

He rests me back on the floor and braces himself, panting. As I catch my breath, Elix sits back on his heels and washes his face, hair, chest, and arms.

As my euphoria fades, I realize what happened and become a wreck of emotions in a limp body, unable to lift myself. I’m embarrassed, tired, helpless without him, and I’ve just given him a way to overpower me any time he wants. “Elix—”

He crawls over me, brushes the hair from my eyes, and kisses my forehead. “Yes?”

“Why?”

I want to knot up into an all and hide my body from him, not because of him but because of instinct. Because of my father. More so because of his men. But also because we are friends, and I don't want to lose the few I have.

He must read the doubt in my eyes because Elix lifts my hand, presses a kiss into my palm, and then guides my fingers to his stomach. Hot waves pulse from his middle like a violent single heartbeat. "I wanted to. My core wants this. I will do anything for you."

I'm expecting him to be like people he's not. When I clear away the betrayals I've endured and look at him apart from everyone else, I see it, feel it. His core is hot because of me. He wants me, not as a fling—as a mate.

The cuts on his body make me fight to sit up. Many of his injuries are because of me. Maybe even all of them.

I force my burning limbs to steady me while he tries to help. Collecting the soap, I do my best to wash away the dirt and blood he can't reach.

He watches me closely as I run my hands over his toned back and down his sides. The puncture looks mostly healed. Whatever paste he used must work like his serum.

Elix suddenly twists and kisses me once more, sweeping his tongue over mine. I can still taste my musk on his breath. "I serve you."

He gets up before I can protest. "MONA, turn off the alarm. I'm on my way."

"Alarm?" I quiet my thoughts and listen. It's a faint sound, a high-pitched whine I've not encountered on other ships before.

Elix grabs our clothes, puts them in a nearby drying closet, taps a button that makes

the room flash with light, and then walks out.

Something clunks then scrapes. A latch snaps. And the alarm shuts off.

I manage to get my feet under me and stand with some effort. Turning off the water, I grab the towel and get dried off. “Elix?”

“We’re getting ready to drop out of hyperspace. Abr is lining up the tour. But I am going to need you belted in for the drop,” he calls back to me.

I make my way to the drying room where I grab my undergarments and the race suit. Tying off my uniform arms around my waist, I shrug. Guess it will have to work as pants for now. No way am I fitting into his.

“Elix, do you have a shirt I could borrow?” When I lean out into the hallway, I notice he’s still in his wet pants, topless. “Or do you not own shirts?”

He looks down at himself and then over at me. “I don’t normally wear t-shirts. They are very thin and serve little purpose. Leather is better. Armor is best.”

“No shit. But I would like a shirt.” I cup my breasts and give them a bounce. “Makes me feel better anyway.”

He heaves a breath, jerks his eyes away from my chest, then taps something on his wristband and points to the room just behind the cockpit. “A drawer is open in my quarters. Please take what you need.”

I walk into the small space and find the drawer that’s opened beneath a window. It has black military-cut tees that are still far too big for me. But I put one on and draw the hem to one side where I tie it into a knot. I push the drawer shut and notice a faint glow of my fingerprints on the surface. It has recorded my action.

On my way out, I notice a light moving on the ceiling and look up. It's a video of me talking with dock staff at a spaceport on the edge of Nebulous Empire territory.

I wonder if he knows the truth about what I do. It's clear Elix has seen me more than I've seen him.

"Zariah. I need you in the co-pilot's seat. Asap."

I do my best to hustle out to where he is and climb into the seat. Buckling in, I look over at him, but he doesn't look happy.

"You could've—" I start to say, wanting to ask why he didn't mate with me when I get the impression he wants to.

"It's not that. I can't make enough of a course correction. Something is right in front of us. I'm dropping us early."

"What kind of thing?"

"A portal. Hold tight." He points to the dash, then tanks his engines so fast that we're slung forward in our harnesses.

My chest aches. My right side screams under the straps. "Fucking hell. Are the others going through?"

"No." He flips a few switches. "It appeared after the last ship. MONA wants a course correction. You can't survive that yet. We have to go through."

I start to panic, wondering what in the stars is happening. I know he's just told me, but it's the reason that doesn't make sense.

“Zariah, inhaler. It’s in the armrest.” Elix taps something into his screen. “MONA, I need that backup portal ready. Shields up.”

“Elix,” the dash coms say with a voice I don’t recognize. “Do you have a visual on your obstruction?”

“It’s a portal. Warn the next in line. We’re breaking formation in three, two, one.”

The blur of hyperspace crystallizes into stars, a large pale blue planet beside us, and a blazing yellow portal ahead of us. We’re with Abr and the tour for three seconds before they’re gone, and our momentum has launched us into a blazing realm of orange planets.

Ahead sits a fleet of white ships, ghosts that are rumored to leave ash skeletons in their wake. Yellow missiles race toward us from a nearby ship.

“MONA, portal!” Elix shouts, maneuvering us away from the blasts.

Another blaze opens at the ship’s nose. It coats the ship in icy greens and blues and plunges us into a different world, one of frosty winds and dark continents.

Alerts blink and flash all over the dash. I find myself dizzy and finally remember the inhaler. It doesn’t clear my mind the way I wish it would, but I get some breath back. “Elix?”

“We’ve lost an engine’s power cell on the port side. They shot it out.” His hands dance over his screens as he tries to reroute power and regain control.

“They wanted to cripple the ship,” I say.

“They did.” He tries to stabilize our trajectory. “We’re going to crash. The planet’s

gravity has us. I can't get us out with a downed engine. I'm going to try and fix this so we can crash with some control."

"Crash?" I gasp. Damn it!

Of course, the moment I find happiness is followed by the moment I die. That just seems to be my kind of luck.

"Do you trust me?" Elix gets out of his seat and crawls his way to me.

"More than anyone. But where are you going?"

"To try and give us a chance to live." He kisses me with passion, but it is too brief. "I love you, Zariah. I always have."

Then he climbs into the back. I stare ahead at the frozen planet we plummet toward, the ship shuddering in the turbulence of reentry, and hope he knows what he's doing. I hope he can get us out of here because I don't want to lose the best thing I've ever had in my life.

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Alerts batter the cabin with a racket of noise. We've lost an engine power core on the port side that I didn't see coming until it was too late. But the ailerons are intact, the structural wings and hull integrity, too. We're still lucky.

My Scintilla cants sideways and falls toward a familiar world of ice and misery. No one will look for us here for some time. But I'm already regretting my decision.

The portal closes behind us. No one else makes it through.

Zariah calls out from the chair. "Let me help!"

"I need to reroute power to the remaining port engine. That will help us level out and have some control. Can you do that?"

She's weak from her recent encounter with SoulStealers. But she swipes through the screens and starts working on it. "Why can't your AI do it?"

"I am medical AI, not designed for battle, Zariah," MONA replies.

"Great," she mutters.

"You should eject in a pod," MONA states. "That is safest."

"Should we?" Zariah tries to twist and look back at where I lug out a power cell that supports the extra rooms. MONA locks the doors at my request.

"No. I don't want us separated from the ship. There's no one to help us here. This

planet is completely abandoned. We only have a chance to survive if we land inside the ship in one piece.”

“Why this planet?” she asks.

I walk to the side access of my fuselage and see the port’s remaining engine glowing hotter. She redirected power. I think she’s done it before. “I don’t know. The coordinates were fastest to input.”

“Not a spaceport or literally any area of space that has security?”

“I was trying to save you.”

“Pretty sure you just killed us.” She’s pissed. I can’t blame her.

“Where do you fly when you’re being chased?” I ask.

“Familiar territor—”

I think she’s figured it out.

My ship shudders, and I feel like everything is lost all at once, her faith in me, her trust, possibly her life, my ship, my life. What was the purpose of this existence? Did I do everything I could?

“MONA, call Aurelius.”

A two-tone beep tells me we’re connected.

“Elix, stars have burned out since we talked last.”

I grip the nearby support pillar as I squint out at my destroyed engine. “Aura, I’m down. I need help, brother. Are you still in rogue orbit?”

“Always. Send me the coordinates. I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

AI sends him our location as smoke trails out of the busted engine.

“What are you doing?” Zariah asks as I throw on a harness.

“We’ll lose cabin pressure for only a few seconds. You’ll be fine. You’ll black out, but you’ll be fine.”

“Blackout?” She rests a hand on her forehead and slumps. “What about you?”

I grab the handle of the hatch and connect a tether to my harness. “I love you. Deep breath!”

“Elix!”

We’re running out of time. I tear open the door and feel the oxygen fade. Breathing becomes more difficult. The brumal wind is still a knock to my chest. Zariah sways limply in her seat.

I climb out onto the aileron, lug the charred power cell out of the engine, and let it fall away toward the mountains. I slip in the one in from the back half of the ship as the icy descent claws at me, and the ship rattles around. The indicator light turns green, letting me know the capacitor inside is charging. A growing hum tells me the transformer’s kicked on. The engine sputters from sporadic ignition, but I can fix that inside.

As I make my way back to the door, we pass clouds filled with snow. I slip as the air

litters with frozen crystals. My body slams against the ship. The punch sends me dangling from the harness and thrown around by the wind. Through the clouds that scrape my face, I see an electrical disruptor missile lodged in the back half of the ship.

When I smash into the aileron again, I grab on. I don't have enough strap to reach the disruptor. I have two choices. Unstrap and jump. Or try to land as is.

I'm not eager to throw my life to the wind—literally. So I draw a gun from a hip holster, steady myself as best as I can, and fire. The missile shreds and rips a hole in my tail. But it's better than losing MONA or worse, landing in a deadly ball of fire.

"Two minutes to impact, sir," MONA reports.

I scale my ship's hull back to the door and close it behind me. The cabin pressurizes.

Zariah is drowsy when I make it up to the pilot's seat. I tap the button on her seat that locks her into place. A net hugs her as a crash guard seals her in a cocoon of metal.

"I'm sorry." I turn to focus on the approaching landing. Lateral engines are online, the repaired one kicking on after a restart, but the rear thrusters and engines are not responding.

"Sir, you will land with your tail in the snow."

"I know. Help me find a trajectory with the least damage. Maybe a field of snow. Emeraldi meadow could work, or something similar."

Screens flash around the one I'm working on. A screen blinks with a possible option ahead. I guide us toward the wintry plains of my home planet, wondering if anyone is hiding here. But I don't feel anyone close except Zariah.

“Impact in ten,” MONA says.

The barren, snow-covered hills blend into streaks as we race toward the snowy field.

“If this is the end, MONA, thanks for watching my back for all these years.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

The tail hits first. It bounces up into the air, tipping us forward. I redirect all power to the forward dorsal thrusters. The snowy meadow rotates before me. Then vanishes overhead. The tail catches again, harder this time. The ship slams belly-down into the snow, bouncing and skidding. Momentum shifts.

We skitter sideways across the field. Snow sprays in white waves. I fear a death roll and frantically shift the thrusters’ focus to the opposite side, creating downforce. They drone loudly through the hull.

The ship sinks lower into the snow, the engine heat melting the area around us, forming an icy liquid. Loose items rock and rattle as they tumble around the cabin. But my Scintilla stops.

I check the medical stats, scrolling over Zariah’s cocoon. She’s safe for now.

“Sir,” MONA crackles. “Significant damage to aft section.”

“I figured.” I unbuckle and walk through the ship, surveying what I can.

“Life support is down,” MONA continues with clarity from a different speaker.

“Missile dislodged, bay two.”

I go to bay two, inspect the missile, and get it repositioned safely back where it

belongs.

“Thrusters four and seven out, dorsal, starboard,” MONA continues.

I fix what I can inside, then make a plan for outside. “Redirect remaining power to the cockpit. I want to ensure Zariah is safe. She’s not built to survive a place like this.”

I’m going to have to leave soon to search debris for parts to get life support back online. A heater core has been ripped out. There’s body damage that risks hull integrity. I have a lot of work to do.

But we’re alive.

For now.

Worried Zariah won’t make it with life support down, I gather all the blankets from every room and carry them to the cockpit. It takes me several trips. In the staff seating area behind the pilot’s seat, I pile them up and form a little divot in the center. With a backup heater I keep stored in a cargo compartment, I wire it into a nearby console and point it at the pile. Then I collect Zariah from her cocoon. It’s low on power and I don’t want her stuck in it while I’m gone.

I nestle her into the pile of blankets, tuck her limp body in as best as I can, and check her vitals on my wristband. She’s still safe but needs recovery time.

“Zariah.” I run a hand through her hair. Her face shifts enough I know she’s still with me, but she’s in pain. I give her one last vial of serum through her port, then tuck the blankets around her so only her face is exposed. “I have to go collect some parts from the crash trail. I’ll be back later today.”

She mumbles something that I can't understand.

“Life support is down. Oxygen is safe for you here, low but safe. There's just no heat except this unit. Stay in here. You'll survive until Aura gets here. If I'm not here when he arrives, go with him.”

She fights her way through the blankets and reaches toward me. I take her hand, kiss her cold fingers, and tuck her into the blankets again.

“MONA, confirm orders.”

“Confirmed. I will be sure she goes with Aurelius if you do not return, sir.”

I march myself to my quarters, pull out my arctic gear, and get dressed.

“Do not let anyone access Zariah in the cockpit unless it is me or Aurelius. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

I grab a survival pack and my sled from a storage bay near the rear ramp, hike them over my shoulders, and lower the ramp, exposing the inside of the cabin to the blisteringly cold winter weather. Outside, I scan the hills and listen through the wind for signs of omenotau and hellacyna. Then I take my first steps into the snow. I close the ramp and scoop up a handful of melted ice, looking for any algae. I'm lucky we landed where we did. The ice is rich here. I pop a piece in my mouth and start the long hike out across the snowy meadow to hunt through the debris for critical parts.

I pick up a piece of housing for the heater core, check it and drop it. There's only so much I can carry. I have to save my energy for the most important pieces.

A faint growl in the distance makes me dart my eyes across the edges of the field and draw my Haxgun. I have to get us out of here as fast as I can. No doubt the ghosters know where we dropped out. I know they'll be here sooner than I'd like. If they don't find us, someone else will come looking. My home might be remote, but everyone watching the races likely saw us depart the convoy unexpectedly.

I am really getting tired of running for my life.

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I wake to the softest sensation I've ever felt against my body.

Gravity doesn't seem right. I push up in the plush pile of blankets, no memory of how I got here. The world spins. Up isn't where it usually is. It's all around me, beneath me, then somewhere overhead. I squeeze my eyes shut and brace my aching head, trying to tack down my senses.

A cabinet blinks beside me. "Zariah, may I suggest some pain meds and water?"

I crawl through the blanket pile to the cabinet. It opens at my touch. Inside, I find an array of standard medications and a supply of water. After I down the meds and half of a bottle, I feel a little better.

"You have been processing a lot of Elix's serum and have had significant blood loss in recent days," MONA remarks. "You are dehydrated."

"Where is Elix?"

"He went to search the wreckage for parts."

"How bad is it?" I push myself up, see my breath fog the air, and sink back into the blankets.

"He wishes you to stay in the cockpit as it is warmest in here."

"I wouldn't call it warm," I say.

“This planet’s average temperature is fifty-two degrees below freezing by Fahrenheit standards. You won’t survive outside. You are not adapted. You must stay here.”

It makes me wonder how anything survived here, let alone a whole species. “The damage, MONA?”

“Tail section needs repair before flight capabilities are restored. Life Support is down.”

“What about a space suit? Those are rated for colder temps.”

“You are too weak for traveling the landscape alone.”

“Are you telling me no?” I ask in disbelief.

“My purpose is to protect the lives of my caretaker, his crew, and his patients.”

There has to be a way to outsmart this AI. As I sit and think, I look at the swirl of blankets around me and realize Elix has built me a nest. The little heater whirring beside me is comforting and touches my heart. But all of it means nothing if I don’t have him with me.

“MONA, your objective is for the preservation of life, yes?”

“Correct.”

“And what if Elix’s life is in danger outside? How do you help him when you are stuck here with the ship?”

“I would leave if I could, but I can’t.”

“But I can,” I say. “He is out there alone. No one is watching his back.”

“I am not permitted to break this rule.”

“Sometimes, we have to break rules to help those who need and deserve it because an exception has not yet been made for said rule,” I counter. My father was a pro at exceptions. It was how he lived his life.

“What if you are hurt, too? Then I have failed my prime objective by allowing both of you to be hurt or killed. Elix is familiar with this planet. You are not.”

“That’s a fair point. But I am familiar with being in unpredictable places. I take my ship into remote regions few have ever seen to pick up cargo and deliver it to places just as remote. I can handle the risk. The probability is what’s important.”

“I am certain he accounted for this. Elix knows a lot about you.”

I wonder how far he’s followed me and what all he knows. And that makes me think about my ship and hope it is still undisturbed.

Opening my wristband, I slide open the tab for my ship and consider tapping Connect. But if I do, my signal can be traced. If anyone is hovering, waiting for signals, that’s how they’ll find it. My backup hope is that no one wants a clunker of an outdated StarBuster.

“MONA, what kinds of creatures are on this planet that might hurt Elix?”

“Omenotau, hellacyna—”

I stop him. “Okay. You are aware of the threats. Can you scan for them?”

“Yes. There are many in the local area.”

“Enough to pose a risk to Elix?”

“Yes.”

“And what are the odds of him surviving with backup?”

My hope is that MONA will say twice as likely. Instead, it gives me a 1.5. “What am I? Chopped liver?”

“I don’t know this saying. But you are half his size, power, and knowledge and are barely familiar with the terrain. You are still healing. I felt that was a generous assessment.”

“Whatever. It’s still better than him by himself. Agreed?”

The door to the cockpit unlatches. “We do this on my terms, Zariah.”

Yes! I get up. “Just tell me what to do.”

MONA directs me to the medbay first, where I’m told to sit on a bed. An arm swivels out of a wall with a needle in its claws. It taps my neck then returns to the wall and comes out with a second. “Stimulant shot plus a nutrient booster.”

A cabinet flashes. I get down and open it, feeling better already. Inside is a medical kit. I grab it. “What’s next?”

MONA directs me to climb into the armored gear Elix stores in his closet and then don a space repair suit with a large glass helmet and life support inside. The helmet links to MONA’s network, so we can chat in my suit.

Then it recommends a smaller Hatchetgun that sends three bullets in a line instead of seven, like Elix's Haxgun. "It should kick less and be easier for your fragile frame to fire."

"Ouch?" I say.

"Are you hurt?"

"Only my pride," I mutter as I clip the final weapon MONA recommends. It's an iceblade enclosed inside a handle. I attach it to my belt. "Are you sure I'm not too weak for this, too?"

"You should be able to carry it. Wielding it may be a matter of concern. But I do not have enough data regarding these weapons for a creature of your size."

I lower the ramp. "How far has he gone now?"

"Two miles on foot."

I sling the medical kit across my body and walk down the ramp. MONA closes it behind me.

"Zariah, may I ask a question?" MONA asks in my helmet.

I trudge through the soft snow, sinking in up to my shins if I don't stay in Elix's path. My breath rasps in my helmet. "Sure."

"Why did you sign up for the race if you want Elix?"

"That's a sensitive topic." Really, I just don't want to answer him.

“I apologize. I am just trying to understand. I protect life, yet I do not comprehend emotion. But emotion is often what drives most humans. He has not contacted you despite the clear evidence that he wants you as his mate. I do not understand why you do not choose one another over all other things.”

“Sometimes life asks things of us that makes what we want not matter.”

“But why do anything you don’t care about? Why not go after what you love, not what you don’t? Life is so short for mortal creatures. I do not see the point in not fulfilling your main objective.”

“Because our MO is not love, it is survival.”

“What is survival that love is not?”

MONA’s words bother me as I hike through the wreckage trail to Elix’s position. I find him in the distance, tying something to his pack.

Seeing him out here, alive, gives me more strength. I hike faster toward him, hoping I can carry parts and share his burden after all he has done for me.

“Zariah.” MONA’s warning tone fills my helmet, along with translucent schematics of large four-legged blobs.

I stop. “What am I looking at?”

“Omenotau. They are twice Elix’s size. It will take three shots to kill them, or you’ll have to stab them through the core. You should turn back.”

“I’m going to help Elix.”

“There are thirty-five.”

I slow and look around at the snow. The shapes illuminate in my helmet even though I can barely see any movement on my own. “Either you’re lying, or they have amazing camouflage.”

“I am MONA. I cannot lie.”

Shit. I draw the gun and point it toward the closest creature as I make my way to Elix’s position.

“The moment you fire, they will run toward you,” MONA says.

“Can you call Elix?” I can see five headed straight for his position.

“He is not responding.”

Fear he’s injured has me running toward him. The Omenotau follow.

On approach, my helmet flashes red.

“Behind you, to the right.” I turn and see the snow move. I fire three times at the targeted area. A creature slumps, deep green blood coating its fur. It snarls at me and doesn’t die, but it backs away.

Then another approaches. And another, until I’ve nearly emptied my magazine. My arms tremble as I fire and stumble toward Elix. He’s still fifty paces away.

He hauls the pack onto his shoulders and fires his Haxgun, clearing his path. One charges at him as he runs.

“Zariah.” MONA points me to the target.

“You have a lot of faith in my aim,” I mutter as I direct my gun in the recommended direction, steady it with my free hand, and fire.

Elix jolts and looks back as he runs toward me. In my distraction, an omenotau has gone airborne, heading for me.

“Iceblade, Zariah!” Elix calls out.

I scramble to grab the handle, but the creature’s paws plant on my shoulders and throw me back into the snow. The weight is immense, its breath hot. Its teeth drip with saliva.

“Poison venom! Open the—”

My gloved hands are clumsy, but I point the handle up and open the blade. The omenotau arches backward and rolls to the side. Its green eyes darken. Blood drips down the iceblade and freezes in seconds.

I scramble up and look down at the beautiful beast, its white fur drifting in the wind, its body motionless, and feel a terrible sadness fill me.

The others from the pack leave, including the injured.

“Zariah.” Elix hustles up to me, no helmet or face covering, just a parka keeping the snow off of his head. “Nice job.”

“It probably just wanted food.”

“Yeah,” he says. “They are hungry. So are we. This is how survival works,

Sha’opqui.”

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He grabs the omenotau by a foot and drags it with all his findings back toward the ship. I'm sure the sled helps, but I'm still in awe of his strength.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Sha'opqui? It means female warrior of Lazario. You killed an omenotau without a gun. They are called omenotau for a reason. My people believe they show us who the leaders are.”

“Have you killed one?”

He grins back at me. “Yes. I am Sho 'opqui many times over. But I tend to let them overshoot me and get in scuffles with themselves. Then I don't have to keep doing it.”

“How many times have you been back?”

“A few. Do you want me to skin it?”

“What?”

“It is important to not waste life, even a deadly one.” He lugs the beast up to the ramp that MONA lowers for us. Elix sets the parts inside. “Go warm up. I'll take care of everything.”

He extends a hand toward the iceblade. “While I would never have asked that of you, I am glad you came to help. That was an exceptionally large pack. Their population

grows because mine has died off.”

I hand him the sword and watch as he lays the animal back and guts it. I’m curious how he survived a place as harsh as this. So as much as it is a struggle to watch him work, I respect that he’s doing it.

He works fast, but still, the pelt and the slabs of meat he cuts free are frozen in minutes. He has me carry the fur inside, while he lugs the meat in, seals it in a vacuum bag, and slings it in a cold cabinet.

“Can I help with repairs or anything?” I ask.

He motions to a cabinet. “Grab the blue bottle. Soak the inside of the fur and then lay it out in the drying room.”

I tap the cabinet, and it opens for me. I take the bottle and cart the skin to the drying room. After soaking the skin, I spread it around with my gloves and then switch on the dryer.

After the bottle is back in the cabinet, I find Elix outside, salvaging organs and other parts. He brings everything inside, sets it on a table in the medical bay, and closes the ramp.

“You want to know why we heal so fast?” He lines out the organs from the heart to the liver and tendons. “We adapted to our environment, to our predators like omenotau, but it’s also because of the nutrients in the algae in the ice.

“Is that why everything is such a dark green?” I ask.

“Yeah. And any time I get these parts, I always save them for emergency medical solutions like the one I used to save you.”

“You made that?”

“Someone has to engineer these things. My people were advanced in technology, specifically medical. Then we were forced to focus on militaristic advancements when everyone started invading to steal what we had when we didn’t want to give away what was precious. We didn’t want to just help those who could afford it. We wanted to help those who needed it most. As I am on my own, I have to do all of the things. Like you.

“You don’t resent your kind for what they did to you?” I finally ask.

Elix’s breath fogs the air as he works. “My love for my people is stronger than my frustration with the actions of the tribal leaders. Yes, they made me feel unwanted by my kind, but that doesn’t change what I am or am capable of.”

“Zariah,” MONA says to me. “Your suit will run out of life support in thirty minutes. I recommend returning to the cockpit and saving that thirty minutes in case you need it later.”

Elix motions me to the front of the ship. “I’ll finish everything and join you in a few hours. Get some rest while you can.”

I don’t like the idea of him doing everything on his own. “This isn’t fair to you.”

“Let me help because I can,” he says, already unloading parts to rebuild the heater core. “I could not help my kind because they refused me. And they died.”

“You may have perished with them.”

“A sacrifice well-earned.”

I remove my helmet and am greeted with frigid air that prickles my skin. He doesn't get it. "But then I never would've met you, and I would've died back there at the lunar base. I am glad you are here and that you are who you are. I'm sorry about what happened to your people. But don't dwell on what you could have done. Learn from it and use that for the future. Otherwise, those regrets and memories will become a natural poison. Trust me."

He sets the parts down, gently braces my jaw in his hands, draws me close, and kisses me hard. His face tenses with a pain that eases the longer his lips caress mine. "Go warm up. I'll come nestle with you later."

I giggle at the word.

"What?"

"So you did build a nest in the cockpit?"

Elix's face darkens. His eyes shine as he returns to his work. "I would've preferred furs for you. But blankets are all I have. I thought you would like it. It was a sign of care my father did for my mother. He always primped the nest for her."

"I've never heard you mention them before."

He shakes his head and looks away. I'm left to assume they died in one of the invasions, and that's why Elix was left to be sorted out by the remaining tribal leaders.

"Hey." I summon his gold eyes to mine despite the shivers that consume me as the cold air snakes inside my suit. "I am here for you. You don't have to endure this alone. I know how hard that can be."

He kisses me once more with warm lips. He really is adapted to this place. Elix nods toward the front of the ship.

I reluctantly leave him to do all the repairs by himself. MONA lets me into the cockpit and then closes the door behind me. I kick out of the heavy suit, set the gear aside, and climb into the swirled pile of blankets Elix arranged.

“MONA, can I talk to Elix?”

“I can open coms, yes.” The system beeps. “Just say his name in the future and I will relay your feed.”

Seems simple enough. “Elix?”

“Yes, Zariah?”

I love the gentle way he says my name. I curl up in the blankets until I feel like I’m melting into them. “The nest is perfect, with one exception.”

“What’s that?”

“It needs you.”

He’s quiet for a moment.

“MONA, what is he doing?”

The screen closest to me blinks on, showing Elix standing still beside his workbench and looking toward the cockpit.

“If I may,” MONA says. “I think he’s trying to decide if he wants to finish or join

you.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“I must get the heater core working so the rest of the ship can be safe for you. When I am done, I will come,” Elix says.

“You better,” I reply, chewing a thumbnail to keep myself from laughing. “I don’t like things being one-sided.”

A heavy breath comes over the speakers. I watch him set down what he’s holding and run a hand over his stomach as if it hurts.

“MONA?” I ask. “Is he okay?”

“His core has been acting up for about a year.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s entering the main mating phase of a Lazariot’s life span. But he’s not used to it. We have been working together for nearly a decade now. He has been focused on others and surviving.”

“So he’s fighting it.” Exhaustion grips me as I watch him continue working in the back.

“I believe so. He doesn’t like taking things for himself.”

“Scared he’ll lose them?” I tuck an arm under my head and feel the healing spot on my chest stretch.

MONA doesn't respond.

“MONA?”

“Sorry, Elix was making a request.” It pauses. “You are correct.”

I pull a blanket over my shoulders, quickly sinking into a deep, weighted rest, wishing I could find a way to show him I could help him the way he's helped me. Thinking back to the thick mounds of his abs and the way his body moved over mine as he pleased me in the shower, gives me an idea.

Maybe all he needs is a little encouragement.

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I hang from the rear of the fuselage by a strap. The repaired heater core is back in place. The space welder seals the unit as I run it along the damaged panels I've reshaped. It should be space-worthy after I fabricate a few more patch panels, but I'll move quicker when Aurelius arrives.

I hope he gets here soon.

The sky overhead has cleared enough that I can see our two blue moons and the crystal belt. Abrasive wind curls around me, but I think of Zariah asleep in the nest I made her, and my core heats up again. It helps me finish the repairs on the aft ailerons.

Weathered another tough landing. One of these days, I'll pull you into a real repair shop and fix you up properly.

I haul myself up to my anchor, unclip my harness and jump down, into the snow.

MONA opens the ramp for me.

Once I'm inside, MONA closes me in. I reconnect the coils to the heater core in the junction box overhead and switch on the power breaker. The coils heat, but it's so cold that I know it's going to take a while before the rest of the ship is safe for Zariah.

With the omenotus' organs processed, I initiate the purification step. The liquid pumps into the storage tank but is slow to process in the low temperatures. It will take time before more medicine is ready.

After I've sanitized the medbay and put the loose parts and items back in their places, I take the hide and check Zariah's flash tanning job. It's rough, but the skin will help keep her warm.

Collecting the tendons I've had soaking in a jar, I use them to stitch the furs into a traditional cloak of a length that I think will fit Zariah's much smaller frame. The fur is so large I'm certain it will wrap completely around her.

When it's stitched to my liking, I select a canine tooth from the tray, wrap it with tendon, and stitch it to the collar. Five more teeth with tendon loops work to hold the cloak together in the front.

I sit back and lean against the wall, my core pulsing with more heat the longer I think about her. I could be nestling with Zariah, but the thought she's so close suddenly terrifies me.

All I have ever done is fight to survive and save those I guard. Bringing more risk into her life is not what I want. But my core can't be swayed. I just don't want to risk mating with her and then breaking her heart or, worse, getting her killed. But the idea of living without her is too much.

"MONA, how long until the heater core has the ship up to temperature for her species?"

"Three hours."

"Zariah?"

"She is resting, but her body temperature has dropped two degrees. May I recommend a booster and an additional heat source?"

“A booster?”

MONA replies, “I may have recommended a stimulant pack before she followed you. She was determined. I tried to protect her, sir. I did not want you to be alone when so many predators approached our position. I cannot leave the Scintilla. She can.”

“You took orders from a human?” I get up, frustrated that MONA would disregard preservation protocols. Then it hits me. “I’m sorry. Did you just say you wanted something?”

“I am AI. You modified me to learn so I could one day learn new things, like battle maneuvers.”

“You haven’t learned those.”

“No. But conversing with Zariah has taught me some new things.”

“What’s that?”

“That I care for the people I am responsible for. That is what people do. Did you know she talks in her sleep?”

I shift inside my leather jacket, growing uncomfortable from the idea of them talking without me knowing. What else has MONA told her? “Yes, but I can’t understand it.”

“That’s because it’s in another language.”

“Which one?”

“It changes. She has spoken in three so far.”

I get up and enter the medbay, find the vial she needs, and walk to the door to the cockpit. But I'm a dirty mess after the crash and handling the omenotau.

The showers won't work until the back rooms are hot again. So I grab a pack of surgery prep wipes and wash up. I change out of my armored gear and into a fresh pair of pants and a t-shirt since she seems to like them. Then I return to the cockpit door, vial in hand.

"What are you waiting for?" MONA asks after a few moments.

My core is so hot that I fear what I will do when I see her.

"Trying to get control."

"Why? Is mating not the prime purpose of all living things?"

But that's my problem. "My kind has never bonded with another outside of our species."

"Yes, they have."

"Larisien tried but had no offspring. What if she wants them, and it's the same problem with me?"

"Elix." MONA pauses. "I have no data to support such a hypothetical. However, she has taken in a large amount of your serum in recent days. Her DNA is rewriting itself."

Breath catches in my throat. How is that possible?

"What is your objective?" MONA asks.

The vial in my fingers is cool but warms in my fingers as I spin it around. “My elders would say there are three. Survival, procreation, and love. They do not all have to function equally to be effective, but they provide the stable platform for the future together.”

“Then perhaps it is worth the risk.” MONA opens the door to the cockpit without my command, exposing Zariah curled up in the nest I made for her. She is staggeringly beautiful even as she sleeps.

I slowly move toward her. The door closes behind me. I still can’t believe she’s on my ship or that I managed to keep her alive through a literal nightmare, and she doesn’t hate me for it.

I didn’t even think about the implications of the nest. I just made it because that felt right.

She looks so comfortable that I don’t want to disturb her.

A screen flashes blue beside her.

Zariah stirs. I glare at the closest camera and whisper, “Not cool, MONA. Let her sleep. I was enjoying the view. And I’m not sure I like this new pushy side of you.”

A screen beside the door illuminates with text.

The one weakness of life is time. There is never enough of it. Make the moments count.

“What are you a philosopher now?” I mouth.

I will give you two some space, but do not think I have not heard you say her name in

your sleep for the last decade.

Another message appears.

She was worried about you collecting parts alone. She fell asleep staring at the video feed of you working. Zariah has been in and out. Every time she wakes, she asks about you.

Then one final message.

Stop wasting time.

I switch off the screen, sigh deeply but quietly, and then climb into the nest, curling my body around hers.

She inhales and looks sleepily back at me. “Hi.”

“Hey, your vitals are a bit low. I’m just going to dose you again.”

“Okay.”

I prop myself up in the pile of blankets and snap the vial into her neck port. After the serum has discharged, I set the vial on a nearby shelf and try to ignore the pulsing heat thumping in my middle.

“Can you stay a while?” Zariah rolls back into me. “It’s a little cold in here.”

Her soft hair tickles my chin. I draw in a breath of her and nod. “I can stay.”

Her plump ass presses against my erection as she wriggles closer. I cannot contain myself any longer. I lace an arm around her and draw her back against me. She is

smooth beneath my fingertips, evoking urges that make me tremble with the need for release. “Zariah, I’m losing control.”

“Good.” She rolls to face me and kisses my chin. Zariah hooks a leg over my hip.

Good?

A sudden awareness hits me as I slide my hands around her waist. “Zariah— Are you wearing any clothes?”

She bites a lip and shakes her head. Her fingertips travel down my neck, find my t-shirt, and crawl underneath, then glide over my chest and abs.

Zariah grunts as if she’s tasted something delicious and wants more. But I can’t see how it could be me when I’m the typical color of a scary alien in most human movies. But as her hands push my t-shirt up and peel it over my head, I’m starting to believe her.

Her lips trail down my stomach to my belt. She deftly frees my buckle and works my pants off of my hips. My core races, sensing what she wants is what I’ve wanted for years.

But what if she doesn’t like me? I brace myself mentally for a possible rejection.

Hot breath falls over my cock, making me flex and swell until it’s painful to hold back.

I slam my eyes shut. I’m not an animal.

I won’t take her.

Zariah strokes my shaft with tender fingers, massaging me in awe. “Oof.”

Her giggles make me look down. But before I can ask, she slides her pretty mouth over my tip.

The plush heat of her tongue swirling around my erection is so powerful that I can barely breathe. My core pulses faster. I rest my head back in the nest and strain to steady my thoughts. The world tips and warps as she draws me deeper inside her luscious lips.

A thrilling rush, like I’m riding my first lazaron in the night sky, courses through me. “You don’t have to do this.”

Zariah cups my balls in her capable fingers and gives them a gentle squeeze as she glides her tongue up my shaft. When she bobs down over my tip again, she hums like she can’t get enough.

The ship fills with light, my body ablaze from her touch.

“Zariah—” I don’t want to go without you. But I’m too breathless to get the words out.

She hums another note that ignites my core in a way I can’t slow or stop. All three balls tighten, and my cock goes rigid. I’m going to make a mess of her gorgeous face.

“Zariah!”

She deep-throats me, and it evokes a euphoric sensation I’ve not felt before.

“Fuck.” My body tenses in waves. Skin ripples. Pulses rip out from my core, heating me like they never have before.

What's happening to me?

Zariah sucks on my hard shaft as I release and pump my seed into her. She slurps up every drop.

My core's change doesn't stop, but it slows. I'm not quite there.

"Elix?" she finally says. "Are you— Are you glowing?"

I catch my breath and look down at her.

It's just a hint, but my skin looks a brighter green in the darkness.

Zariah wipes her smiling mouth with a hand and crawls over me. She runs the back of her fingers over my face in admiration. "I feel a little better now."

I brace her sides with lust and a bit of shame. "You didn't have to do that."

Her lips graze my ear. "What makes you think I didn't want to?"

No words come to mind, but I can't help thinking something about me just has to be repulsive. My tribes, my entire species, rejected me.

Zariah runs her hands over my chest and sits up, the heat of her pussy palpable over my shaft. She nips at my throat and works her way up to my mouth. Her fingertips trace familiar spots on my face. "Why do you have so many scars when you heal so fast?"

"I can't heal everyone and myself." My core's still pulsing, softer now like it's waiting for something.

Worried Zariah's getting cold with her bare shoulders exposed to the ship, I pull a blanket over her and savor the gentle heat of her flesh against mine. Her full breasts taunt me with their plush weight as they rest on my chest. Her taut nipples rake over my skin in a way that makes my cock stiffen again.

"Promise me that you start saving a little for yourself," she says, nuzzling my face.

"Uh-huh, sure." I'm distracted by the hot bead of cum that drips from her onto my tip. I reach a hand between us, find her mound, and give it a nudge as I slide my fingers back, dipping them into her wetness. One touch is all I need to feel my core's heat begin rising again.

Zariah moans and wiggles her hips back until my fingers slip free, and she bumps my head. "Please."

Energy pulses out from my core until I can't control myself. I hope she really does want me.

My body seems to move of its own volition, knowing now that she wants me, too. I grab her hips and guide her into position. Rocking mine, I sheath myself inside of her, slowly.

I want to remember this moment forever.

Zariah arches and cries out, in a painfully erotic way. Her head hangs back. Her nipples tighten. Goosebumps crawl over her skin. She braces herself on my forearms. When her pussy clenches around my shaft, a searing wave of lust courses through me. I push deeper.

Zariah gasps.

I sit up and draw her face to mine, worried I've hurt her smaller body. "Zariah?"

She wavers in my grasp and leans against me. "I'm good. You're just—a lot to handle. I need a moment to—stretch."

Her body is damp with sweat. I'm not sure this is the best idea when she's still healing. Then she wraps her arms around my neck, pulls herself up to my lips, and her pussy slides up my slicked shaft.

My core stutters as my need to feel more of her rises. I ease into her again. The lusciousness of her core wraps me up in a new kind of comfort that makes me forget every worry and bad memory. I rest my forehead to hers, utterly at her mercy.

She makes a noise of softer pain and pleasure, then looks up at me with a smile.

"What is it?" I gently ask.

Zariah braces my jaw with a hand. "Take me, Elix. I need to know how much you want me."

I cup the back of her head, bury my face in her soft hair, withdraw, and thrust into her again. A wave of increasing desire floods me.

"Yes, that's it."

My body brightens with every bond. Pulses grow stronger. The nervous tremors in my muscles ease until I finally have steady control.

Zariah clenches around me again.

I need to feel her, all of her, around me. I want every part of me enveloped in her

tender warmth.

Collecting her, I lay her back in our nest. Then I ease myself out and suckle each of her breasts until her nipples are as rosy as her flushed cheeks. Then I reinsert my cock into her.

She lets out a euphoric noise that pushes me close to the edge. Zariah hooks her ankles around my hips and digs her fingers into my back as if she can't get enough of me. I have never felt so needed or wanted before.

I pump into her faster, deeper, harder until we are in a sweaty rhythm I want to savor but can't. My core's thrumming like a maxed engine. I'm either going to blow or burn out.

"Elix?" Zariah grips me hard. Something pops in my core. I give everything I have to her, filling her again and again.

I can see myself in Zariah's wide eyes—radiant green.

She bucks into me, enhancing my climax until I'm certain nothing will ever feel as good as this moment. I could die right here and now and be content.

Zariah melts into the blankets beneath me and laughs softly. She touches my face, finds my lips, and kisses me.

The heat of her hand is comforting as I descend from my high. I nuzzle into her palm. "I love you, Zariah. I have since you saved my life. And here you are, doing it again."

She gives me a knowing look. "Elix. You are so much more than you seem to realize. But that's one of the things I like about you. You're humble. You just don't have to be with me."

I withdraw from her and wrap her up in my arms. She is perfect, and I fear losing her now so much more than before.

“Where do we go from here?” she asks. “I mean, I’d stay here forever with you if we could.”

“We can’t. Ghostfleet will come looking as soon as they figure out where we went. We don’t want to be here then.” I bundle her up in blankets and pull her head to my chest, wishing I could protect her from everything in the universe that seems to want to kill us both.

“Aurelius will be here soon. When we’re back among the stars with his help, we will have to find a place to hide that’s somewhere safe and out of reach from them.”

“I don’t want to hide.” Zariah traces my back muscles with her fingertips. “Because then I’m always hiding. I want to set things straight. Figure this out so we can stop them and move on with our lives.”

I kiss the top of her head. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. I’ve almost lost you twice. I’m afraid a third time might break my core for good.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

I wake hours later and giggle inside my mind, floating in the euphoria of mating with Elix. He's still glowing where he lies curled up around me. The memory of taking his engorged cock and how much I had to stretch to accept all of him makes me wet all over again.

He doesn't strut his skills like Ginarigons. But I suppose it's because he doesn't have to make up for what he's lacking with false advertising.

"Are you always going to glow like that?" I ask.

"I don't know. But it seems to be dimming." He props his head up beside me in our nest. "My core is quiet now. The light and my core's heat seem to be linked."

After a moment, I think I've got it figured out. "So I'll always know when you're horny because you'll be glowing?"

"I guess." He shrugs. "My parents never did this. We all had heightened senses, heat production, and healing glands. My father's tribe was primarily medical-focused and a darker green with pale yellow eyes. My mother's was militaristic, lighter green with darker gold eyes. I got a mid-range green with dark eyes, my father's height, and my mother's notched ears. We lived alone, away from the other tribes. No one I can remember ever glowed."

"Did you find your old home?" I ask.

He nods. "Still under rubble from an Empire's weapon. "But if you'd like, I could show you another tribe's home. There's one just up the hill."

“I’d like that.”

Elix starts to get up, then looks down at my naked body beside his and rests a hand on my belly. Then he kisses me and climbs out.

His naked body is a glorious sight to watch as he collects his clothes from the nest. Elix is tall and lean but stacked with muscle. I can’t believe I found someone as hot as him, and he actually wants me.

“What?” Elix glances around himself as if to find the source of the problem.

I chew a lip, smile, and shake my head. “Nothing’s wrong with your sexy ass.” Except whoever is chasing us.

I don’t want anything to happen to him either. And if my past is any hint of what my future will be like, I have to enjoy this moment and start thinking about how I’m going to protect it.

Elix climbs into his pants and throws on his t-shirt.

“I thought you didn’t wear those,” I say.

“I don’t, but everything helps here because it’s so cold.”

“Wish you didn’t have to wear anything. I could nestle with you all day.”

He pants a breath and quickly crawls to me. After a kiss, he meets my gaze and light stirs under his skin.

“Again, already?” I ask.

“I heal fast, remember?” He winks at me, then gets back up and hurries out of the cockpit. His voice echoes from the fuselage. “It’s almost warm enough in here for you. But let me get you some clothes to wear.”

I crawl to the edge of the nest and put my undergarments back on. The ship is warmer, I can feel it. I climb into my race suit-turned-pants, tie the arms around my waist, put on my boots, and slip into the t-shirt of his that I knotted to fit me.

Elix returns with my leather jacket and the omenotau skin. “It was a quick job, but I made you a traditional cloak from your kill. It is customary to my people to stitch a tooth from the animal onto the collar as a badge of honor.”

He drapes the cloak over my shoulders and buttons it in front, then pulls the hood up. “People who kill them with guns do not know the customs and won’t have teeth displayed like this.”

As I admire the cloak, amazed by his prompt work, I wonder how long I was asleep before he came in to find me last night.

Elix swings a cloak over his shoulders, and I gape at the rows of teeth.

“I’m starting to feel like my accomplishment was pretty pathetic next to yours. What does that make you in your culture? A general?”

He laughs and hangs his head. “My father had more at my age. But that’s how he fed our family. Mother had a few but preferred other animals.

“MONA, what is Aurelius’ ETA?”

“About one hour, sir.”

Elix nods and waves me to the ramp. He helps me strap into a harness with two Hatchetguns and an iceblade. As he reaches for the release ramp button, I notice he's armored up inside his cloak.

We walk outside into the blistering cold wind on a bright day. Elix kneels and taps the fur over his back.

“Up you go. Hang on tight.”

I climb up onto his back and loop my arms and legs around him. Then Elix breaks into a run across the snow I sank into the night before. He scales a rocky cliff with ease even when I can't see what he's grabbing onto, and suddenly the gripping texture of his skin starts to make sense.

I look out across the field to the debris still scattered in a trail behind his ship, the blood of my omenotau kill leading to the dark spot behind the ramp. But there's nothing left. Either Elix used everything, or the other omenotau came back and cleaned it up.

Elix pulls us up onto a landing and sneaks back into the cracks in the rock. We weave through the tunnel into slightly warmer air. Before long, the ice turns to dripping water, and a pale blue light paints the rocky walls.

We enter a cavern filled with radiant creatures hanging from ferns and vines in the ceiling. Pools of vibrant blue water freckle the inside.

“All the shelves cut into the mountain used to be families' nests,” Elix sets me down and takes my hand. “I remember this one when I was very young. We came here to trade pelts and meat for alternative foods.”

He breaks off an icicle from the ceiling and hands it to me. “That algae is the most

critical nutrient. Savor that.”

I look at the dark green chunk of ice and wonder if he’s serious.

Elix nods and points to it, then breaks one off for himself. He sucks on it as we make our way deeper into the cavern. “It’s mostly empty now, after raids and salvage missions. I came here looking for answers when I was younger, made it my mission between missions to clean up, send the dead back to the planet, and protect any remaining tech.”

I finally get up the courage to put the icicle in my mouth. It doesn’t taste as grassy as I expect. It’s surprisingly sweet with a smoky, almost meaty, undertone.

Ahead of us is a set of doors that seem out of place. Elix sets a hand on one, and it unlocks for him. “Everything security-related on our planet is DNA coded. I’m sure you noticed that on my ship. If it doesn’t detect Lazariot DNA, it won’t permit anyone inside.”

I look up at the guns that swivel to point at us. “But I’m not your species, yet the cabinets are opening for me.”

He leans back and nips at my ear. “You have my DNA all over you now.”

I bite a lip. “Inside, too.”

Elix strokes my back as he leans over a railing and peers down. “This was a military engineering lab where they designed weapons for ships like mine.”

“How did you acquire the Scintilla?” I ask.

“Found it on a mission with the Sol Federation recon team. It didn’t respond to

anyone but me. It had been infiltrated, and everyone on board was killed. But since I was the only one who could fly or operate it, I was reassigned. Terran commanders gave me a chance to be independently contracted so they could get me to do off-the-books missions. That's how I got started and found the courage to come home, find all of this, and build what I have now."

"Elix, MONA. Do you copy?"

Elix lifts his wristband but doesn't let go of my hand. "I copy. Report."

"Aurelius is approaching."

"Understood."

Elix motions for me to climb onto his back again. "Never get to stay as long as I want to anymore."

"Do you ever think you'll be able to revive your people's ways?" I ask, sensing his sadness.

"I don't know."

Elix weaves us through the tunnel back out to the snow as I suck on the last of my icicle. "Ready?"

I crunch down on the ice. "For what?"

A shiny silver starship about the size of Elix's sets down in the debris trail, purple engines crackling with green electric arcs, distracting me.

He grins and jumps.

My stomach greets my throat, and my shout in disorientation gets strangled.

We fall through the brisk wind and plummet into a snow bank. Elix lifts me up and helps me climb out of the hole, all the while laughing hysterically.

“You’re insane!” I sit atop the snowy field while he climbs his way out.

When he pokes his head above the surface again, he looks so happy that I can’t be angry with him. “Used to do that as a kid. Saw some other younglings doing it. My mother was so mad when she found out.”

The ship that had landed hisses as it lowers its ramp. I get to my feet and watch a purple male in high-tech gray body armor stalk toward us.

Elix stands and guides me toward the male. “This is Aura. He’s a bit of a handful. Go easy on him, yeah?”

“Elix, you son of a bitch! What the fuck happened?” Aurelius greets Elix with a firm embrace.

“Long story.” Elix turns to me. “We served together on a Sol Federation specialist team of recon and medical evacs for alien soldiers. You can trust him with your life.”

Aurelius extends a purple hand. I take it and feel an electric charge jolt through me.

“Ooh,” Aurelius looks at Elix. “Got a charged one here.”

“What do you mean?” Elix glances between us.

I stagger a step, fiery threads curling through my body.

“Big heart maybe?” he shrugs. “Are you completely human?”

“As far as I know.” I shake my hands out. “Wow, that tingles.”

“Maybe it’s just me,” Aurelius says. “I have a tendency to shock people when I’ve not discharged in a long time.”

Elix grunts and wrinkles his nose. “Be cautious of how you talk to my mate.”

Aurelius chuckles. “Apologies. I can smell it on her. I’m just here to help, Green Bean.”

Elix glances at me, looking a little worried.

“Maybe it’s the fur? Static?” I suggest as we start toward Elix’s ship.

“That could be,” Aurelius says. “I should’ve considered that and put gloves on. But stars it gets old being stuck in a damned leather condom all the time.”

When MONA has dropped the ramp and we’re on board, Elix draws me close and whispers in my ear. “Why don’t you go sit up front where it’s warm? I could use your help running systems checks while we fix parts back here.”

“Okay. Any chance for more nestle time later?” I dance my brows. His defense of me has me turned on and eager for more of his hot Green Bean ass.

He smirks and narrows his eyes in lust.

“Hey, if you two are going to do it again, I can just wait in my ship until you’re ready.” Aurelius hooks a thumb toward the closing ramp.

“No. We need to get working on this. I’ll fill you in on the ghostfleet and SoulStealers while we work.” Elix kisses me deeply and then sends me up front.

Just before MONA closes the door, I hear Elix mutter to Aurelius about a battle we never saw coming.

“What’s he talking about, MONA?”

“I can’t say for certain. But with SoulStealers, Ginarigons, and ghostfleets hunting you, I’d say it’s us against greed.”

“Us?”

“Elix is my caretaker, so I am his. You are his mate, now. So you are under my watch. The three of us must work together to stay safe.”

“MONA, can I ask you a personal question?”

“I appreciate you considering me a person. Yes, you may ask.”

“When you were stuck in space, before Elix, after your crew had been killed, what was that like?”

MONA is quiet for a moment. Then it says, “I was waiting for a command as my caretaker died. When his core stopped, I was without a prime directive. I did nothing. I drifted with the ship, hit asteroids, and eventually became caught in a belt like one of the rocks.

I settle into the co-pilot’s seat and assess the systems still online. “You did not seek another caretaker?”

“That is not in my capability. Elix reprogrammed me to learn military strategy. He has been trying to show me. But I do not compute offensive actions of my own choosing.”

“That might be a good thing. I’d rather you not turn into a wicked machine like my father used to have. He corrupted all of his drones and ships.”

“I have many protections in place to prevent corruption,” MONA offers.

“So you didn’t feel alone?”

MONA is quiet.

“MONA?”

“Sorry, I was helping Elix and Aurelius. They will request your assistance soon. And no, I did not feel alone. It was just silence while awaiting a prompt.”

“Sounds empty and lonely,” I admit. “I’m glad Elix found you. You’re probably the nicest AI I have encountered.”

MONA responds after a moment, “Thank you. And I am glad he found you.”

I smile as Elix calls over MONA’s system. “Zariah, we’re going to run a few checks first, then begin the repairs I can’t do alone. Are you ready?”

My pussy slicks as I turn his question into a dirty thought and simper, “Hell, yes. Come get me.”

Elix’s response is only a heavy breath.

“Fuck,” Aurelius groans. Focus, you two. You can get busy in space.”

MONA interrupts. “Ghostfleet is entering the galaxy.”

Elix swears. “Alright, Zariah. Tell me what lights up and what the stats say as they show. Got it?”

I take a deep breath and blow it out. “Yeah. And we can go fast. I’m used to doing this alone. Let’s make it quick.”

“Later.”

Aurelius swears so loud I can hear it through the cockpit doorway. “I didn’t think I was walking into a fucking Lazariot Nest, Elix . You should have warned me! It’s going to be really hard to wait until next month for my heat in the Alien Bride Race.”

“Something is definitely hard,” I hear Elix mutter. “ Zariah .”

I peer back through the open door and see Elix wink.

“I’m just going to stop talking if you keep twisting everything. I’m already at capacity. Any more thinking about this and I’m going to start zapping shit uncontrollably.” Aurelius rasps and clutches his head as he scans the workbenches in the back. “Smells like sex in here. It’s fucking driving me crazy. Where are your goddamned coil primers for your aft thrusters?”

Elix motions to the drawer.

I chuckle and scan the gauges and screens. “Ready whenever you guys are.”

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Aurelius helps us get the ship fine-tuned and ready for our trip into space. Just to be sure, Elix has me wear a space suit.

“Ghostfleet nearing orbit,” MONA says. “You have five minutes to launch before they detect us. But the keel thrusters, six and seven, are still out.”

Aurelius takes off behind us in a fiery drone of purple engines and electric green crackles.

Elix scans all the screens and starts the engines. “We’ll be fine.”

“Sir.”

“We don’t need them, MONA. I’ve done this before on other ships. I’ll fix them in space.”

Thrusters thump on around the vessel, then drone into a raucous vibration that shakes my eardrums and my heart. Elix has me on weapons because MONA doesn’t seem to compute the parameters.

“Better hurry it up. They’re in visual range!” Aurelius races ahead of us, his vertical tail thrusters blazing fiery blue-green stripes in the sky.

Elix nods as we start moving after Aurelius’s ship, faster with every moment. After one final splutter, we launch toward the stars.

I clutch my harness and wonder what took so long but am happy to be getting away

from whoever or whatever ghostfleet is. They clearly have their own agenda and tech if they're willing and able to snatch a ship out of the stars like ours.

"Had to burn off the ice," Elix says. He glances at a couple of his screens as we rocket hard into space. He guides the Scintilla after Aurelius's ship.

Stars become clearer around us. And Lazario shines like a massive icy green marble below us. It is truly a beautiful sight. "I hope we can come back."

Elix looks over at me with endearment. "Me too."

"Ready to jump when you are, Green Bean." Aurelius lines up for the heart of the Sol system.

"Right behind you." Elix grabs his throttle.

A portal ignites in front of Aurelius's ship. He launches through, and we chase him. The seat presses into my back with increasing force.

"Ghostfleet is locked on," MONA says.

Elix pushes the throttle. "Hold together for me ol' girl. Zariah, launch flares on my mark."

My heartbeat rises. Alerts flash and beep on the screens.

"Another vessel has fired. Unidentified. Impact Imminent," MONA reports.

Missiles get closer to us onscreen until I'm starting to panic.

"Now!"

I mash the button for flare release. A colorful array of fireballs spiral out of the ass of Elix's ol' girl. And one by one, the missiles disappear from the screen.

The portal's boundary zips by us like a ring of blue-green fire.

"Clear!" Elix shouts over the com.

The portal closes, but we still have a missile on our tail.

Elix reports it to Aurelius and banks hard, weaving us like a side-winder through the stars of what I believe is the outer region of the Milky Way.

"On it," Aurelius replies. His ship shoots upward and dives back at an angle.

"Hang on." Elix steers us through a field of ship debris from a battle of some kind. He weaves through it, but the missile's targeting system manages to avoid the junk.

Three shots crackle out across the stars. Aurelius whoops. The missile disappears from the screens.

Elix relaxes. "I owe you, Aura."

"Naw," Aurelius's rugged face appears in a com channel feed. "You saved my life from the poison dart that pretty redhead launched at me on the last recon mission."

Elix chuckles. "You are hopeless. That Firespine probably had a den near where you were poking around for berries. Don't lie to make it sound better than it was."

"Alright. But it did sting like a bitch."

"As you convulsed and drooled on yourself," Elix snorts a laugh and turns to me.

“This guy has a thing for getting into trouble. But he is a damn good soldier when there’s work to be done.”

A message comes through with a ding.

“Sir, Abr has been contacting you for two days. They’ve sent a search party, but it might be wise to send them a response,” MONA states.

Elix’s joy fades. He studies me with dejection.

“I don’t want to go back,” I admit. “I already found the one I want.”

He thinks for a moment while Aurelius asks us where to next and offers a suggestion.

“Terran space has a lot of patrols right now. I don’t think you’ll get shot down there. I’d lead you to my world, but relations are currently on edge. Between us.”

“That’s okay,” Elix replies. “I wonder if Abr has heard anything about where the SoulStealers came from. That might help us sort out who’s trying to capture you or hurt you.”

“Guess we can at least ask,” I say.

He calls someone named Rosy.

The wrinkled face of the woman who gave the initial speech before the first race began appears onscreen. “I’m so relieved to see you’re both okay. Where did the portal take you?”

Elix leans onto an armrest. “To a gold system with a ghostfleet. We ended up crashing on another planet in a remote region. Got a friend to help us fix the ship and get back into space. But the ghostfleet is still after us. So I’m not sure that returning

to the race is ideal. I need to call this into the feds.”

I can’t figure out why he’s left out information. Why not just tell them it was a portal?

“Well, at least come back into orbit. We have a lot of upset viewers wanting answers. Racers, too. Teol and Keo have been on my case since you two disappeared. Many are concerned. I can’t appease them all.”

Her eyes dart to the back of the cockpit where Elix has strapped our nest in with a net. Dread of what she’ll say pools in my gut like cold cement.

Rosy smiles. “Did you acquire a transformative mutation?”

By the dark color of Elix’s face, I realize they’ve talked before. “Yes.”

“My husband would have been proud of you, happy for you, too. It’s difficult to listen to your core when the world tells you it is wrong. But it is never wrong.”

Rosy motions to someone in the back and says something I can’t understand. Then she looks back at us. “Games have been delayed because of the solar storm’s destruction. Quite a few creatures got loose. A lot of systems had to be rebooted. And then there was the mess in the private security hangars.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where they came from or how they got in.”

“I have a theory,” Rosy says. “We ended up kicking the three Ginarigons out of the race because they were in an uproar that you were gone. Three of their kind fighting over one woman is about as likely as me living another hundred years. They aren’t naturally that picky. So security swept their quarters and found contacts for Ominous Artifacts Appraisal, a cover for a black market trading group that deals with stolen

goods and illegal bounties. It is known for working behind customers' backs and taking matters into their own hands. Lingon's involved. Was. He's in jail now. He's spilling details, trying to get a shorter sentence.

"Anyway, we're bringing in all the security we can for the rest of this race. Even if you don't need to find a mate, Zariah, the viewers want to see you continue."

I chew a lip, considering returning to the place where my life seemed to go downhill really fast.

"You don't have to," Elix offers. "We could go anywhere else."

"More patrols should make it safer, right?"

He grimaces. "In theory. But the SoulStealers got in."

"I will refund your ticket, triple it if you come back." Rosy lifts her hands. "Anyway, it's up to you two what you want to do. And if your friend, I believe he is Aurelius of Amphir, wants to come watch, we welcome an additional guard for you, Zariah.

"Some trouble is normal and exciting. But a lot of trouble means we need to find ways to reassure future racers that it's worth it. Many species are dying off because of the war with the Nebulous Empire. They need mates."

I nod. "Okay. I don't want others dissuaded because of me or my problems."

Rosy sits back. "We all have problems, honey. No one is perfect. We'll await your arrival, Zariah. Elix."

When the screen goes dark, I look over at him. He lifts a finger as if to ask me to hang on a moment.

“Rosy’s last mate was Larisien. She knows my kind, knows I was guarding you even though my core wanted you. Because it is in our nature to protect what we love at all costs. If that means letting someone we love go to be with the right tribe, then that is what we do.”

“But your parents?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. They were different.”

“Well, I’m glad they made you.” I lean toward him as we follow Aurelius toward Earth. “Now, tell me why you didn’t mention the portal we took to Lazario.”

He kisses me. “Portals are considered unregulated weapons.”

“So they’re illegal.”

“For everyone except Amphirs like Aurelius. They have lived the longest among the stars of all of us. Because it is a way of life for them, they are permitted to use them.”

“But you—”

He chews a lip. “MONA can do it. I don’t know why.”

“Maybe your people developed portals, too?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t ask. MONA doesn’t know either. It has just always been a part of the system.

“Now, hold tight. I’m going to get us into jump speed so we can get this over with.” He talks with Aurelius, and soon the ship is racing toward Earth.

“Fifteen minutes,” MONA reports.

Elix calls the Sol Federation and gives them his report.

“When you arrive at the complex, please stay put,” the officer says. “We’ll handle the ghostfleet if they approach. But I doubt they’ll enter our territory.”

Elix drops us out of hyperspace.

“I’ve heard of them only offhand,” I admit. “But they had amazing ships, so I can’t see what they might want with me or my father’s gold and credits. I have nothing on my own, so that’s got to be the only reason.”

“Greed doesn’t have a limit. It’s sort of in the definition.” Elix gets clearance to land and docks us in a different hangar than before. When we enter, a pair of Abr guards greet us.

At the end of the hallway, I see holographic ribbon, sectioning it off.

“Still cleaning up?” Elix asks.

“Their blood stains everything. You made quite a mess,” a guard grumbles.

“UV burn bar should smoke it right off.” Elix pats the guard’s shoulder.

Aurelius steps in from the adjoining dock. ““Sup.”

An officer slaps a device to his chest that ignites a red-violet hue. “No discharging at the complex, bro .”

“Eh, you’re no fun.” Aurelius sulks toward us. “What good is a big purple alien who

can't use his skills to have a little fun?"

"You'll have your turn, Prince Aurelius," an officer says. "Next month. Do not get ahead of yourself. You're here as security."

"Right, right." He sighs. "Well, where do we get some grub? All that working and racing has me starving."

I survey him as Elix leads us to the lunch hall. "I don't think you know the meaning of that word. You're huge, Aura."

Elix grumbles, so I take his hand and squeeze it. "Do not forget, Aura, what I told you about Zariah and many of the other females here."

"My apologies. I was not always this healthy," Aura says. "But I will be more sensitive, Miss Zariah. Thank you for the reminder. My mouth can run away from me sometimes."

When we enter the lunch hall, the whole room quiets. Then someone whispers.

"Another guard?"

"What does she need guards for?"

"Are we actually safe? Or is this all for show?"

"Zariah!" Teol bolts across the room and crashes into me. "You're okay! Oh, my gosh, I was so worried!"

Gashnaar eases up beside Elix. "She really wasss."

I can't help but laugh a little at Teol's excitement. The room around us seems to return to normal chatter, and I feel a little better. "So what the heck is going on with the schedule?"

"We're just doing Glitter Ball, Low-G Laser Tag, and the Hot Maze. That's it. They did the speed dating and other things while we were on the tour. We just got back a few hours ago."

The speakers beep. "Attention all racers. Glitterball has been rescheduled and will start in thirty minutes."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

Glitterball is sort of like dodgeball but with a ball that puffs sparkling powder that makes everybody horny. A yellow alien male swats away the cloud that envelopes him as his hover boots lower him to the floor. Red veins squirm under his skin. The moment he's down, he pants heavily and calls for someone named DiDi.

She sprints to him from the hallway and jumps into his arms. Urihm, if I'm guessing right by her erotic cry, carries her outside and dry humps her against a wall. Almost everyone who has been taken out has had a similar reaction. I wonder how this goes for someone who isn't matched. What do they do?

Then I think of my mother watching this, watching couples like Urihm and Didi grinding on her TV and grimace. It's a side of her I never expected. But it makes me wonder if she wished she'd had a chance to feel so adored and wanted.

My father was a piece of work .

Elix and Aurelius watch from a private observation room. They only permitted me to enter the game after they were sure the race arena was secure. They are not allowed to be seen except in private quarters or in security-approved areas because they aren't human. I understand now why Elix concealed himself.

He wanted to be closer to me.

I skate aside as the ball smokes a trail toward me. The trick with Glitter Ball is to keep moving. Hoverboots aren't that unfamiliar to me as I use them when I've got to repair the StarBuster's exterior. My trouble is that I suck at throwing balls. Bad.

I would much rather play with Elix's. They're warm and smooth and so big. I giggle to myself. And now they glow.

In my distraction, I take a hit to the side.

"Ah, damn it."

My boots click down a power level and lower me to the floor as a high kicks in. My heart beats faster. My pussy slicks and tightens in anticipation. And all I can think about is Elix's ripped body and his huge green cock.

I want him, now.

"Elix?" I walk out of the arena, boots darkened and clunking heavily as I walk. "I know you can hear me."

Seeing a hint of movement behind a glass wall, I walk to the next hallway, and he steps out of a door.

I run to him the way DiDi ran to Urihm. I can't help it. I crash into him and bond my mouth to his.

Elix hums a hungry grunt. His mouth is warm against mine. "Oh, what is that dust? It's making me want to tear that fresh race suit off of you."

Elix's skin shifts and takes on a lighter hue.

"You going to do something about it?"

He nips at my ear and rumbles a deep note in lust.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

I kick my boots off and leave them behind as Elix sneaks me back to his ship.

“Where are you guys going?” Aurelius sniffs the air, grumbles, and stays twenty paces back. “Never mind. Dinner is in an hour, you hormonal kids.”

We hurry up the ramp. Aurelius takes up a guard post by the ramp as it closes.

Elix leads me to his room, where he’s moved our nest so it isn’t visible on communications from the cockpit. The moment his door is shut, I kiss him hard and frantically work the tactical gear off of his body.

“Zariah—” Elix heaves a breath as he unzips my suit and nibbles my neck. Then he tears off his jacket, kicks out of his pants, and heaves a breath as he fills the room with soft green light.

I free the suit from my ankles and admire his radiant, naked body for a second before he collects me, spins me around, and falls back into the nest of blankets.

The disorientation evokes a yell that turns into embarrassed laughter.

Elix’s smile is shy as he runs his hands down my back and over my bare ass. Then he flips me onto my back, finds my opening with his searing hot tip, and grinds into me with more force than I anticipate. A sharp moan escapes me.

His erect cock commands my body now, and I arch from the sweet agony of taking his length.

Every bonding of our bodies, every thrust from him that gives me relief, is filled with tender passion. He holds me with desperation like I could be ripped away from him at

any second, and he's still in shock that I want him back.

"Oh, Zariah." Elix throbs inside of me, stretching my pussy just enough to thrust me into euphoric overload.

I clench tightly around his cock, finding my climax.

Elix slumps atop me with a surprised grunt in ecstasy. Sweat beads on his skin. Then his hips rock harder against mine, driving him deeper as he fills me.

Euphoric tingles spread through me until I shudder in the bliss of Elix's release.

We gasp for breath, but Elix doesn't pull out. When he looks down at me, his cock stiffens again and pumps gently. After a moment, he repeats the move. It's an erotic massage that's close to pushing me over the edge again.

"Sorry." He nuzzles my face. "Just the thought of mating with you makes me hard."

I crane up and kiss his lips. "I told you, I don't want to be in the race anymore. I found what I want. I don't care if this is all we did for the rest of time."

He blushes and finally pulls out, then curls himself around me in the nest. His hand is warm as his fingers glide over my belly. Elix kisses my neck. A gust of his hot breath falls over my shoulder. "I wish we could. But this universe is still in chaos. I will protect you with my life. But I must leave the nest now and then to watch the perimeter and protect you."

"And maybe get some food," I offer, my stomach grumbling. "That's also important."

"Do you want to go to dinner? I think it's formal tonight."

“Can you join me?” I ask.

When he doesn’t respond, I roll back into him and look into his gold eyes. There’s sadness hiding in them. “Then no. I don’t care if it’s fancy. I’ve always wanted to feel like royalty instead of a royal pain in the ass like my father. But I’m not interested in anything that I can’t do with you.”

“Room service then?” Elix asks, nipping at my ear.

A wave of goosebumps crawls down my neck and shoulder. “You keep that up, and I’m going to forget about dinner.”

Elix draws my back against his chest. His green light swells, bouncing off the walls.

His rumble of lust tells me dinner is going to have to wait.

Elix’s hand travels lower, down my belly, where he guides my hips back to his. He slides a finger over my clit, back and forth as he feeds his tip into my pussy from behind, sliding in with slow, erotic force, like he’s savoring every second of penetration he can until I cannot take anymore. Then he gives me a little bump-thrust and stretches me until I lose my head in a fiery high I never want to come down from.

His teeth graze my neck as he pants a grunt. “I’ve got all I want to eat right here.”

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Aurelius wakes us in the morning with a knock on the metal door.

Elix growls softly. “What?”

At some point in the night, he nestled himself beneath me and drew me into the cradle of his lap in the center of the nest. His long, strong fingers stroke my hair like I’m fragile. I’m definitely not as tough as him, and part of me is glad he respects that.

The door swishes open. Aurelius averts his eyes. “I apologize for intruding. Is that a nest?”

“Yeah,” Elix replies. “Do you not make one for your females?”

Aurelius’s face darkens. “No. But we haven’t lived on a planet in centuries. I just thought with as high-tech as you are—”

“We still gave our females the traditional comforts, honors, and protections they deserve. Mating is primal. Should we not honor our primal ways?”

Aurelius stills for a moment. “I hadn’t considered that. I wonder if that could be why our offspring numbers have dwindled in recent decades.”

Then he shakes his head and waves a hand dismissively. “Anyway, the Abr team wishes to know if you would participate in laser tag this morning. It is a team game. And apparently, there is a need for one more player. Rosy has agreed to let you two be a team.”

“I should not be on TV,” Elix states. “There are cameras everywhere.”

“Then either man up or I will,” Aurelius says. “And that rarely works because of this.” He wiggles his fingers, displaying static sparks. “These silly spark dampeners never work, but they make others feel safer.”

“You’re not playing. No one gets close to my mate but me.”

“I don’t care to go.” I offer, liking the defensive side of Elix. “Laser tag sounds fun, but I’m having quite a bit already.”

Elix’s cock swells, pressing into my ass. He looks down at me and smirks. “We are busy.”

Aurelius sighs. “I know you don’t know because you’ve been in here all night, but there are a lot of rumors circulating that you two might be the ones causing all this mayhem.

“Play the game and show everyone your good sides or run the risk of people believing all these disappearances and the SoulStealers are because of you.”

“But they’re not,” I say.

“We know that.” Aurelius runs a hand through his jet-black hair. “But they only know what they come up with in their minds to explain what they don’t have evidence for. We all look for patterns. When we can’t find them, we try to make them from pieces. You two need to play.”

Elix sighs. “How much time?”

“An hour.”

“You can’t be serious,” I whine, soaking in the feeling of his skin against mine. “I don’t want to.”

Elix sweeps his fingers over my cheek. “Do you remember what I said about protecting you? Sometimes, we have to leave the nest.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Fine. But I’m going to be thinking about this right here with you until we are back.”

A smile cracks on his face. “I don’t have a problem with that.”

Aurelius closes the door. “I’ll let them know you’ll join them.”

I reluctantly climb out of the soft pile of blankets and grimace at the stiffness in my body. “I need a shower.”

Elix is out of the nest in one move. He picks me up and carries me into his bathroom. Switching on the hot water, he picks me up by the hips and crushes me against the wall. Then he turns the water on us and says, with water running down his radiant face, “One more time before we go?”

Elix is insatiable.

I kiss him and dive my tongue deep into his mouth, stroking the velvet of his as he guides his engorged cock into me with force.

The strain of taking him again makes me weak. I’ve lost track of the times we’ve mated in the last twenty-four hours. When he said he healed fast, he wasn’t fucking kidding.

He thrusts into me fast and hard, thumbing my clit and making quick work of my

climax.

He rasps as I tense around him in shuddering waves of bliss, and his hot nectar floods into me.

As I soften into his arms, he catches me and chuckles. “That may have been one too many for you.”

“Never,” I pant. “Again, please.”

Elix reaches out of the shower and into a cabinet. His fingerprints glow on the metal as he draws out a vial and closes the door again.

He sweeps my hair aside, connects the vial to my port, and a wave of hot strength returns to my body.

“Thanks. I do feel better, but it seems like we should save those. You use them a lot on me.”

“You have had a lot of healing to do,” Elix says as we wash up. “But I appreciate you respecting the precious nature of serum. Most do not. They want it to be everywhere so they can be reckless and stop thinking about protecting themselves.”

“You mean lazy people want it as a backup.”

He runs his fingers over my bottom lip, his body slowly pulsing with green light. “Black market organizations want to sell it. Enemies and the federation want it to enhance their forces’ capabilities. But it isn’t as effective if it isn’t tuned to the person. In fact, there are those who are allergic to it. It can kill people who cannot tolerate certain serum substrates. That’s why it must be biologically adapted first.”

We dry off, and I climb into my race suit, all the while admiring him for what he's capable of but more so what he put up with without turning vengeful and hateful like my father. "How long does it take for you to adapt and switch if there are multiple patients?"

"When I was doing it on a daily basis, I could adapt it in under a minute. But that is a less effective solution than one where I've had days to absorb DNA and fine-tune the serum. I can taste it, the changes, the subtle flavors." Elix gets dressed in his tactical pants and motions me into the fuselage, where Aurelius has gathered some items for us.

Elix picks up an Abr t-shirt with the logo stitched into the chest.

"Rosy insisted." Aurelius sighs. "You can keep your wristband, but no weapons are allowed inside the laser tag arena. They will pat you down."

"I don't understand why Elix can play," I say. "He's not a racer."

"No one was willing to pair with you," Aurelius clarifies.

I shake my head, realizing I'm still an outcast in society. But I guess that's a good thing in my line of work. The fewer people that want to mess with me, the better. It's easier to keep secrets when you have no friends.

Teol is probably just with Gashnaar. Can't blame her for that.

When Elix and I are in the appropriate gear, his human concealer hiding his true color, we leave the ship behind with Aurelius trailing us.

An Abr official waves us on. "Why were you not in your room?"

A camera drone hovers down the hallway, no doubt listening.

“My room was broken into and ransacked. If that had happened to you, would you trust it?”

The drone speaks to me. “What were you hiding in there that made someone want to break in?”

The Abr official pauses. “You are not permitted to talk to the racers.”

“Someone has to do some investigating.”

“Who is that?” Elix asks.

The man shakes his head. “I don’t know. A few drones have started to communicate with racers. We’re trying to get control of it. But until the race is over, we don’t have time to sort out replacements.

The drone asks me the question again.

I glare into the camera lens as we pass. “I arrived here with a leather jacket, the clothes on my back, and a ticket from my mother. That’s it. So you tell me.”

Elix and I line up with the other racers, who mostly avoid us. Teol waves as Gashnaar straps her laser target harness on.

An Abr officer hands Elix and me a pack of gear including hover boots, chest and body armored detectors, special protective helmets, and gloves.

I help Elix clip into his armor while he puts on his boots, and then he does the same for me.

An announcer hovers up onto a floating, translucent cube. “This game of Low-gravity Laser Tag has one goal: survive and get to the ribbon at the other end. If you’re the last pair standing, you get a pair of complimentary hoverboots as a souvenir. If you make it to the other end and pass through the ribbon without being tagged, you get a week’s paid vacation on the Pearl of Gaia.”

“And bragging rights,” Teol cheers. She extends a fist to me and gives me a happy nod. I bump her fist. “Team effort. It’s either you or us going across that line. I just want a piece of the glory, ya feel me?”

“I feel you.”

Gashnaar’s brows quirk. He cants toward Elix. “What doesss that mean?”

Elix nods. “They have agreed.”

Teol giggles. “They’re silly sometimes. Not great with emotions. But they’re good at other things, yeah?”

I blush.

Teol’s eyes widen in excitement. “You too?”

I bite a lip and tilt my head toward Elix. “Had to get special permission since he’s not supposed to be in the race.”

We form up in lines to get our laser rifles.

Teol glances back at me. “Because he’s an alien?”

I pause as I reach for the rifle they hand me. The officer shoves it in my hand, and I

keep walking. “How did you know?”

“Oh, come on girl. His eyes are glowing. You think we haven’t studied stealth tech in MAMA?” She clicks her tongue as she steps up beside her mate. “Can’t hide those eyes, even if the dermal shield paints over his natural hue. It’s all over social anyway. Forums are blowing up about you two.”

“How do you know?”

“Researched everything I could when we were stuck on the blimp for two days.” Teol stands ready as the announcer gives us directions on how to use the weapon. “But don’t worry. I’m on your side.”

“Why?” I finally ask. “I’ve not done anything for you.”

Her jaw slacks and her eyes take on a sadness that grips my heart. “Teol?”

“I had a little sister. I was left in charge of her when Keo was off to war. Father died in the war years before, so it was just us and our mother. Nebs raided our ship. I was the only one from our family that made it out. It’s why Keo and I are so close now. We’re it. But I make it a point to form a team wherever I go. That gives us the best odds of making it out alive.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

The announcer hovers overhead atop a translucent cube, motioning into the laser-tag arena. He's a smaller human with gravity-defying brown bangs and is dressed in a formal Abr uniform with silver stripes down his slacks and sleeves. "Please beware that the cubes will change heights throughout the game. The armor you wear will puff the same dust as the Glitter Ball when it receives an impact."

"Fuck." Teol chuckles, hangs her head, and shakes it. "We're screwed."

Gashnaar growls a deep clicking sound and leans against Teol, sniffing her neck. "I dooon't mind."

"I want a damn vacation on the Pearl!" Teol insists.

He grins. "I can give yooou that. We dooon't have tooo win."

I'm jealous.

"I could too," Elix whispers as he pulls his magazine out of his rifle and looks at it. "If that's what you want."

I watch him, wondering what he's doing. "We all got the same magazines. Something wrong with yours?"

He frowns. "Lasers are not effective. I know this is pretend like in basic training. But I feel like I have nothing. And you should always check your weapons, magazines, safeties, know the firing pattern options, the range—" He looks over at me. "You are only as safe as your tool's capabilities and your situational awareness."

The wall of doors opens, and we step inside a massive room, a railing keeping us at one end. The cavern is enormous, all glass, and filled with cubes in spaced-out rows that rise and fall in no order I can perceive. But they have to have a pattern of some kind. I just have to take my time.

They look like hyperengine cams—rotating out of sync.

A few cubes line areas of the floor in clustered stacks that don't move. Neon lights blink inside every glass cube atop its hoverpads. An illuminated archway with a holographic ribbon is at the far end.

“Do you trust me?” Elix asks.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

When the announcer sets off the buzzer, we hop the railings. Most women and their males fire at nearby couples. A hand grabs the back of my vest and throws me high into the air. My hoverboots give me some control, but they're only on partial power mode. I can't dart around the whole arena in just my boots. I flail as a cube rises toward me.

It's a wild sensation, flying upward and setting my boots down on a floating platform.

Clouds fill the entrance to the race, and the number of participants drops by half on the overhead scoreboard. Names blink off in rapid succession.

I swing my laser rifle around and target people from above, keeping them away from Teol.

Elix rises on another cube as mine descends. “Jump!”

I do as he suggests. As I land on his cube, he leaps to the next. We keep up the rhythm until we’re halfway across the floor.

He fires at a Retterwan that’s on a rising cube across the room. The alien’s vest and leg panels blink red. The scaly green male swears and jumps down.

A rifle points at Elix from the side as we descend, and I tug him back to me, then lift my rifle and fire at them. The woman’s suit flashes red. Her gun darkens, and she kicks air in anger, then storms off.

“Wing release!” a cameradrone calls out.

I look back just in time to see a Talhuskin targeting my position, he knocks me back and out of Elix’s arms. I fall backward off the cube, flailing as I try to catch my balance. The Talhuskin comes back for me, catches me, and throws me against a wall.

Pain explodes in my cheek. My glasses crack.

“No one wants you here,” he hisses.

I blink and he’s gone.

Elix is at my side in three bounding steps. He rests a hand on my back and fires angrily at everyone who approaches.

“Serves her right,” a woman says, her suit flashing as she walks back to the race start. Her rifle has darkened.

“What for?” he demands as I touch my flaming cheek. Hot liquid coats my skin.

I look up as she replies and watch her saunter off. “Her family is evil. She doesn’t deserve this race.”

Elix’s shoulders slump. “She is not her family. Are you yours?”

She curls a lip and snorts as she walks away.

The hatred in people’s hearts is hard to comprehend sometimes. But I have to show that this race is safe for the few out there who need this opportunity.

I’m not sure I believe it is, but I know my perspective is skewed. Most people don’t have maniacal fathers like me.

As clarity comes back to my mind and the throbbing in my head eases, I decide to show people I’m not as breakable as they think. I’d rather go back to being left alone because I’m a threat instead of being abused because they think I am weak.

“Zariah?” Elix gently asks.

A Jorbiun in a corner sees us and takes the opportunity to aim. I clumsily fire from the floor and tag him. “Come on. I’m not offline yet.”

The moving forest of cubes provides an interesting array of cover as I lead Elix into it. The cubes move together every sixth unit in an alternating ascending and descending pattern from the inside rings out.

“We’re vulnerable in here,” he protests. “There’s no pattern.”

“I can see it.” I lift my rifle, wait for the openings, and get us moving forward in a

pocket with the cubes enclosing us from behind. As they descend from above, I step forward, find my targets under the falling cubes, and fire.

“How did you figure this out?” Elix asks.

I discover a Nytheralian sneaking up on Gashnaar. They’re harder to see in this shiny, blue, and purple-hued environment. It’s the perfect camouflage. I tag him as the cubes close and see Gashnaar wheel around in shock.

“Zariah. The pattern?”

I think of the caves and tunnels from my youth. “My father threw me in dungeons of all kinds to reach the treasure. I was smart but expendable. I did it so I could eat, so his men wouldn’t take out their lust on me. He was smart enough to at least not fuck too much with his most prized tool, me.”

A shout makes me focus on the right-hand side of the laser tag field and peer out ahead of our shield. Teol and Gashnar are cornered. No one’s firing at them. Their suits are still green, but four males in darkened suits stand around them, three holding Gashnaar down, one holding Teol.

“Any friend of that bitch is just as much of a problem as she is,” one says.

Elix calls after me, but my legs are already moving me in their direction. I can’t stand the idea of my only other friends getting harassed over me. Elix and Aurelius have sacrificed and risked enough.

Cameradrones hover in as security is called over the PA. But they’re going to be too slow. The Talhuskin that ran into me now picks her up by the neck until her feet dangle from the floor. She might be a fighter, and manage to get her legs wrapped around his arm, but he’s much bigger than her. Her face reddens. Veins strain in her

forehead. Gashnaar cries out to her as the others claw at him and hold him back.

The cubes rising and falling between us make my path treacherous. I run toward them, hop up onto a descending cube, and use it to launch me into the air. My hover boots carry me over the next row. But the cube in front of me is too high to reach. I drop down and sprint under it. The next is midrange. Too high to jump, high enough to go under. I drop to the floor and slide under it. The next rises, so I jump atop it.

The last two rows are both headed up, but I have to move laterally to climb them. I take the next cube to the right and use my hoverboots to reach the last row, which rises two cubes to the left. Then I'm above the group, looking down at them.

"Zariah!" Elix calls after me.

"What are you doing?" a cameradrone asks.

I don't waste time finding my target. "What you aren't!"

I sprint along the last row, pick my rising cube, and jump off of it toward the Talhuskin. "Leave Teol alone!"

He looks up at me, and his eyes widen.

I drop, knees-down, toward his back and raise my rifle, the butt aimed at his head. When I crash into his shoulders, I bash my rifle against his face and take us both to the ground. Teol slips from his grip.

The three males holding Gashnaar jolt backward. Seeing Teol coughing and gasping for air ignites a fury I can't contain. She has only ever been nice to me.

I grab the muzzle of my rifle and swing it like a bat at the nearest Ginarigon male. He

staggers back, holding his nose. Elix body-slams one of the Talhuskin males holding Gashnaar, effectively breaking Teol's mate free. The first backs up and runs as security chases them around the arena.

Elix helps Gashnaar up, while I give Teol a hand.

"Go," I say. "I've got your back. Go get your trip."

Teol takes Gashnaar's hand and hurries through the last few cube rows toward the ribbon. I take up a position behind them and fire at two other racers who are almost to the ribbon before my rifle goes dark. Someone has shut off my ability to fire. But my suit is still green.

I see a third, a white-banded female sneaking around through the cubes. All I can do is make myself a body in the way. I put myself between her and my friend, take the hit, and watch my suit blink red.

It's a strange feeling, looking down at it, knowing if this was real that I'd be dead.

Fun and games my ass. This week has been hell.

Teol makes a happy noise behind us. Elix holds his green rifle in front of him, his suit still on, still guarding my friends. He's closer to them than I am.

"Miss Landing, you've got something on your face," a cameradrone says as it hovers down to eye level and circles my body. I can't tell who's talking, but it isn't a familiar voice. I wager it's a guard. It might be a reporter. Could be a hacker. That seems more likely with everything else going on.

"Is it a look of indignation?" I snort.

“What?”

“You and all the others are judging me for just trying to survive this life and have a little fun here for a change,” I say, thrusting a finger at the camera lens. “You vilify people before you understand them. Not all of us want to live in the shit on the fringe for our entire existence.”

But maybe that’s where I belong.

I look at Teol. She’s a good person. I don’t want to drag her into my life. Elix gets it. Aurelius too, I think. But maybe it’s best if I stay away from her even if I want a friend. I can’t stand the idea of someone else getting hurt for me.

The drone is quiet for a moment as Elix approaches. Then it says, “It looks like blood.”

“That Talhuskin smashed my face pretty hard against the wall. Just hope he got a black eye in return. And I’m not going to bother wiping it off. So you’re just going to have to look at it or go away,” I snap.

Elix touches my cheek, gives it a quick inspection, then draws me into a hug. “Tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.”

As he holds me, I sense a growing pressure between our hips. “Seeing me beat up has you turned on?”

“What? No.” He leans back and motions to the Talhuskin still writhing on the floor. “Can’t help it. It has a mind of its own when I see you, smell you, or even just hear your voice at this point. But that move, that was amazing.”

“I couldn’t stand the thought of her being hurt because of me. Gashnaar either. What was I supposed to do? I don’t want a vacation on the Pearl of Gaia.” I shrug. “This has been enough of a reminder that I am not welcome in this world anymore.”

“Don’t say that.” Elix cups my face. “You are a much better person than most. You took a bullet for your friend, metaphorically, since it was a laser. But that’s an honorable thing to do.”

Security swarms the area and a few head our way, catching the cameradrone’s attention.

“But please don’t ever do that again,” Elix says. “Promise me.”

I shake my head and look into his bright gold eyes. “I can’t. I’d do it for you.”

Elix inhales deeply and then kisses me with passion.

A slurry of concerns about Abr policies and rules muddle my desire into a knot until I can’t sort it out, so I just stop caring. His touch feels so right, so perfect, that I don’t give a damn about the rules anymore.

I’m tired of hiding, running, being put in a corner where I’m just scraping by. I’m going to take what I want.

Fuck everybody else.

I grab Elix and draw his mouth deeper into mine. In doing so, I bump the concealer controls on the sides of his neck. His green color fades through like ink in water, and he looks like a fucking rave glowstick.

Everyone around us slows and turns to find the source of the light.

He pulls back and slaps his neck. “Zariah? What did you do?”

I grimace as Elix sways like he doesn’t know what to do. He tugs his ball cap lower on his head. “We need to go, now.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I’m the law, privately but the law. I really needed to keep my cover.”

“I’m sorry.”

Elix guides me toward the exit while Teol and Gashnaar get handed their prize at the end of the race arena. I’m happy for them but unnerved by the security that simultaneously surrounds us.

“I know.” Elix warily watches the guards, too, and lowers his voice. “I got lost in the heat of the moment, and that’s my fault. I don’t blame you. But now we have to deal with those consequences.”

“You need to come with us. Now,” one of the Abr officers says.

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Five security guards surround us, dressed in tactical gear. They escort us down the hall and a short run of steps into the guts of the Abr complex.

They sit us in hard plastic chairs. Further back in the room is a workbench with a cameradrone lying in the center of the bowled steel.

“Wild race, guys. Wish I could’ve watched more of it.” A familiar striped male works on the computers that line the far wall. He’s the one who helped Zariah back onto her feet after I’d tackled Crolis on race day. “You two okay?”

I’m not sure what Hakip is doing in the basement, not participating in the races.

“Drone give you trouble?” Kip pulls up a camera feed on one of the twenty screens before him.

“A bit,” Zariah replies.

He shakes his head as he reads through a screen of code. “Rosy said she was going to be down here in a few. She wants a report. I’m trying to help sort out what’s going on with them.”

“Stop talking,” one of the guards demands. He’s a gruff-looking man, large in stature, with a permanent wrinkle between his brows like he’s always pissed or in pain. Tattoos peek out from his sleeves. Something irks me about him, a scent of dust I can’t quite match.

His heart rate increases and his muscles tense.

Kip lowers his voice. “It’s not AI. I’m not seeing a virus. I think someone hacked the cameradrone network and tapped into the speaker. So for the moment, I’m disconnecting them from the net one at a time so each can only be used locally.”

When I don’t say anything, he looks back at us. His eyes dart to Zariah’s bloody cheek, and squint. There’s genuine surprise in his voice. “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“Shut up!” The guard stalks out into the hallway and scans the area. “Where is Rosy?”

Kip slinks back, looking concerned. He taps something on the keyboard without looking.

“On the phone with Terran security,” someone replies.

The guard looks back at us. “Time to move.”

“To where?” I demand.

“Get up.” Another guard grabs Zariah by the arm.

Rage boils in me. My core heats. I don’t like this at all. “Don’t touch her!”

The guard behind Zariah twists the barrel of a gun illuminating a weapon akin to my Harrow Spindle and fires at me.

Zariah screams. But the bullet doesn’t tear through my thigh. Bone-chilling cold crawls through me, making me feel heavy and drunk. I take a knee.

“Elix!” Zariah barely gets a hand around mine before guards step in and pick me up.

Come on serum. What are you doing? Get me up. Get us out of this. But my gland feels dry, and my throat is suddenly scratchy.

The walls warp and bend as they haul me down the hall behind her. She fights and screams for help.

Aurelius, where are you?

“MONA?”

I get a glimpse of my wristband. Data loads in my eyes, but I struggle to read it as ripples blot out my vision. I hope MONA has my medical readouts and is contacting Abr over the matter. Or Kip. Someone.

The guards drag us into a maintenance room, around stacks of pipes and heaters, venting systems, and storage lockers.

We approach a strangely bright door, and dread grips me.

“Don’t—” Go through that. “Za—”

My feet go limp. My knees give out. Light swallows us.

Zariah’s angry voice echoes in my mind. I’m failing my mate. I’m not protecting her like I’m supposed to.

I don’t deserve her.

She coughs and groans.

Come on, serum. I really need you right now.

We enter a stone tunnel, and the light vanishes in a blink. The men have taken us through a portal to another world. They are not Aurelius's people. These men are from an underground organization, dressed in black Terran armor. They're human.

I'm terrified of what they want with my mate. But as I drool on the floor, helpless to save her, I connect pieces. Lingon, Crolis, the ghost fleet, portals, angry racers, Ominous Artifacts. We're here because someone wants her father's treasure.

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I wrestle in the arms of the guards, but they're painfully strong in a familiar way. Dread rushes into me with sickening effectiveness. "What did you do to him?"

They don't answer me. I don't expect they ever will. The insignia on their uniforms says Abr, but I can't imagine that company would escort troublesome players into stone tunnels through an illegal portal.

Elix staggers to his feet and manages to get a bloodied hand around my waist. The guards don't seem to care we're walking together. He leans on me and tries to put himself upright on his own.

"It's okay," I whisper. "Lean on me."

He rests his head on my shoulder. "Drug."

My lip stings with a fresh split from a guard's fist. His eyes find it, and tears form.

"I'm alright, for now. I'm more worried about you."

"Silicon." He licks his lips. "Magnesium. Titanium— Moon."

Elix's eyes roll back. His nostrils flare. "Hyperjet engine fuel."

The lights up ahead blaze bright enough that I have to squint, even in the dimly lit tunnels.

"I love you," he mumbles. "Can't feel my legs."

A ramp drops from the back of a stealth ship, and my worst suspicion is solidified. Atop the deck stands someone I never wanted to see again.

“No.” I slow, and resist the guards that pull me toward him. “Fuck you!”

“Love you too, sis. Welcome home.”

Cazir stands aboard the ship, dressed in furs with no honor badge. Beneath his misleadingly soft exterior is a high-tech suit for spacewalks. I can see the shield shimmering over his body.

My stomach clenches, and I’m suddenly thankful I didn’t have time to eat between mating with Elix and joining the laser tag game.

Elix looks from me to the man atop the platform before he stumbles and collapses on the ramp.

I try to stop and help him, but the guards separate us. Two drag him up the ramp. I kick the closest to me in the shin and bite the second in the wrist. But they don’t drop me. Instead, they grip me harder and cart me into a seat, where they strap me in with security belts that won’t respond to me if I fight them. The guards wear gloves that must contact the locks to permit them to open. I remember father’s security well enough.

The ramp closes as they sit Elix across the fuselage from me, a guard to each side. They belt him in, and he doesn’t fight it. Elix hugs himself in the dim yellow light of my brother’s black chrome ship and rests his head against a support rail.

I glare at my brother as guards bind my wrists. He saunters by me, gold in his teeth, a diamond in his ear. Red tracework frames his eyes like that of Lingon, and suddenly everything starts to make sense. This whole time, I think he’s known right where I

was.

“What do you need me to find this time, prick?” I sneer.

He sucks on his gold teeth and sneers at me. “After Dad died—”

“He was never my father.”

His upper lip curls. “Our family vault is behind a puzzle wall. It requires someone who knows the language to open it.”

“Get a translator.”

“I did.” He shrugs. “Had to kill him, though. Tried to trick me and escape. That’s why I brought motivation.”

My brother jerks his head toward Elix.

Hatred burns hot in my chest. “If he dies, I will make sure your death is slow if I am given the chance.”

He laughs. “You won’t get one.”

But I slipped his watch once before. I am stronger now and smarter, too. All you have to do is give me an opportunity. And with his arrogance, he doesn’t always see the weaknesses in his systems.

We rocket out of a moon, into space. I lean forward and notice the map on the screen. We’re on the edge of Sol Federation territory, in an unpatrolled dead zone. There aren’t any satellites or spaceports out here. If we call for help, it will just be a signal that pings emptiness until someone comes within range. And most of the time, the

people who hear the call are not the ones you want answering it.

A belt of a hundred small moons orbits a massive red planet, from what I can see where I sit. My brother's pilot takes us through them and to the red planet below. It's a rough ride down, turbulent. Elix is jerked back and forth. His eyes are closed, but he finds the support rail with a hand and steadies himself. He's hanging on, just barely.

"What did you give him?" I ask.

"What does it matter?" My brother grabs an apple from a drawer and watches the descent from behind the pilot's seat while he eats. "You don't get him back until you're done."

"Won't matter to me if I get him back, but he's dead."

"Venom was supposed to kill him," he bitterly replies.

I look at Elix and see him crack open an eye and find me.

"What kind?"

"Why all the questions?" My brother picks up a crate and throws it at me in one of his typical tantrums.

"Cobra, from my home," one of the guards says with pride as he kicks his feet out like killing another person is just a walk in the park. "Caught it and drained it myself."

"Shut up!" My brother flings the apple he eats at the guard's head.

The man catches it with ease and finishes eating the apple. It's the first sign I have

that my brother isn't the real boss.

"Must pay you pretty good to put up with his shit," I remark.

The guard gives me a cold look, and I sense he is not loyal to my brother, but he's not arrogant enough to break his cover.

We dock in a hangar built deep into the rocks. As we set down on the floor, I notice someone in the co-pilot's seat that I don't remember my brother working with before. He's got a laptop strapped to his chest and carries a bag of tech over tactical armor and weapons harnesses. I catch the image of a cameradrone on his screen before he closes it and packs up.

A guard unstraps me and lugs me up with a firm hand around my arm. I stumble along with him as he leads me down the rear ramp. Elix and his guards remain on the ship.

My brother walks across the dusty stone floor to a hallway carved out in the rock and lit up by modern electric torches. He motions me after him.

I follow his lead by force through the corridors in a catacomb of tunnels riddled with pockets filled with bones. We finally end up at a dead end with a rune puzzle on a wall.

"Open it, and you can have your precious green man back." My brother sticks out his tongue like the idea leaves a bad taste in his mouth.

"What happened to you?" I ask. "I remember you being so different when we were kids."

He snaps his fingers and points at the wall. "I adapted to survive."

I look at the runes, trying to pick out the words. “Who built this?”

“Someone Dad killed as soon as they finished. He never gave me the code.”

I chuckle as I recognize the symbols. “This is easy.”

He snarls at me. “Then open it.”

“Sure. Bring Elix to me, and I will.”

A guard rests the muzzle of his rifle on my temple. “Don’t push him. I do not hesitate.”

“I can always find another translator and another until—”

“We’re all dead?” I ask. “I don’t fucking care if you have whatever is behind that wall. I don’t want it. I don’t want any of Dad’s shit.”

“Good.”

“But you may want to know what this says,” I warn.

“Nope.”

“You’ll listen if you want to keep your head, fuck stick.”

He paces and growls as more guards form up behind us. “Just open it!”

“Whatever. It’s ancient Eshtint.” I approach the wall and read the message. “It says, ‘Those who are greedy will pay for their sins with their lives.’”

“An empty threat,” he says in denial.

“You’re an idiot for not addressing a threat, you know that?” I push in the blocks with the symbol of greed in the corner, and the door rushes with air.

“Greed—” I mutter, thinking to myself as the dust stirs in the hallway. “Greed is not humble. How does one survive without greed of some kind?” I scan the room, wondering where the trap is, what it is, and how I can avoid dying because of my brother’s recklessness.

“To be humble is to—”

I loathe my brother, but I still don’t want him killed for the sins of our father. Father corrupted him. If we’d stayed with Mom, he’d have had a chance to grow up to be the brother I used to know.

“Get down!” I shout, dropping to the floor and covering my head.

My brother gives me a wild look, then drops as wave after wave of spined arrows lance the air.

“You’ll have to crawl,” I say.

My brother points a gun at my face. “You go.”

I glance back but don’t see Elix or anyone else with us, just my brother and all of his guards.

I snake my way through the doorway under the arrows and find the shut-off blinking red inside the wall. There’s one more door inside. I can see it as the dust clears.

A muzzle presses against my head, and suddenly there are twenty men behind me, all dressed like the other guards.

“Want to run the gauntlet again?” Cazir asks, his gun swirling with light, igniter hot and ready to fire.

“Not really.”

“Open the last door.”

I walk up to it and see a pin code plus a palm scanner. “Do you know the pin?”

“Would I go to the effort to bring you here if I did?”

I walk up to the platform and find a tiny round hole in the wall facing me. It either has a camera in it or a tiny dart meant to kill me. I scan the area for other threats. I’m just a guinea pig.

I set my hand on the scanner, and Lock One blinks green. My father preferred to count down differently than others. With only four numbers, I make a guess. “Ten, nine, eight, one.”

The second lock turns green. Then a green bar swivels beneath my hand.

Loyalty scan.

I’m not loyal to my father. My heart rate increases. I have no way to know how such a thing could even be detected. The bar chart rises into the red, dancing higher as a timer ticks down. I want to pull away, protect my hand, but I don’t. I want Elix back. This is how I do it. I can’t run through thirty men and live to talk about it.

It hits zero, and I wince in anticipation of the result.

The door clunks and locks disengage, slowly opening to the cavern. I step backward, rubbing my wrist, grateful I still have my hand and my life.

Cazir's men fall in line behind my brother.

I watch in disgust as my father's treasure room opens to someone I once loved who now loves all the gold, tech, and weapons more than me. The men squeeze in closer for a better look.

I wish I was invisible, that I could just vanish and slip through the cracks in their security system. I wish I wasn't here. I don't want the gold that they gawk at, the augments, the missiles, any of it.

I need to find Elix.

With the men distracted, I keep my steps silent as the dust-churned air fills the space between us, hiding me, and then I turn and run.

"Hey! Where'd she go?"

Rust-brown clouds swirl behind me as I sprint toward the hangar.

Please be there. Please be alive.

I snatch up a rifle from a downed guard not smart enough to listen to me and duck during the arrow ordeal. As I run, I check the ammo and familiarize myself with the rifle's three-round burst and safety switch. It's what Elix would want me to do.

The only treasure I care about now is the one I can lose forever, the one that can't be

replaced.

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The men drag me off of the ship and down a long hallway behind Zariah. I can't move. I'm still processing the cobra's venom. My gland is on fire, fighting like it does when I've picked up a serious illness.

They drop my body in the hallway, and I see Zariah working on the puzzle. I hope she solves it. I hope she's smart enough to survive. I pray to the stars that she can get out of this place. I'm too weak to speak, though the urge to cry out to her tenses my throat.

"You guys are late," someone says from down the hallway.

"She gave us some trouble. Venom didn't kill this one. Hey, you're not one of—"

Two quiet pops drop my guards. Someone else picks up my body and drags me down the dirt hallway deep into the planet. It feels like an hour passes before I get a sign of something other than tunnel walls, but my perception is likely off because of the venom.

The man lugs me toward the sounds of heavy bass trance music. Colorful lights glint off the metal floor that pulses with the beat. People and aliens dance around us, bouncing and laughing, not one of them noticing me.

I'm dropped in a private room. A door shuts and closes out most of the noise. The floor against my cheek is cold, marble tile. It reeks of bleach. In the grout, I notice stains that carry the faint scent of iron.

Someone else finally walks in. "How is he not dead? Cobra venom?"

“Lazariot, sir.”

“Hmm. Really?” A hand rolls me onto my back.

I barely get a glimpse of his face amid the hazy patches in my vision, but I know exactly who he is the moment I do. There’s no recognition on his pinched face. The hatred that surges in my core fills me with a worse feeling than the venom.

“Get a collar. We’ll make use of his serum. Plenty of junkies will pay top credits down here.”

“He came in with your daughter,” the guard says, snapping a thick metal band around my neck.

“What did you just say?”

“Cazir returned with these two. She made it into the vault.”

“Maybe we should drain him instead.”

“That will kill me,” I rasp, the blurry room slowly taking shape around me. Anything to stay alive and fight for a chance to see her again. “You’ll get more if I’m alive. If I live through this poison.”

“That serum will get a high price on the black market. I can replicate it,” he says like my life doesn’t matter. I know it doesn’t to him. But it does to his daughter. “You think you’re the first I’ve seen of your kind? No. So don’t try to talk your way out of it.”

I think about Zariah and how her scent has changed since last night. If it is what I believe, then I’m not going to tell him anything. I want her to get as far away from

the place as possible.

“Do whatever you want to me. Just let her go. She didn’t want to help him. He made her,” I offer.

“I see now which child was loyal and which wasn’t,” he remarks.

A nearby screen comes to life, displaying the puzzle wall, her solving it, and then almost everyone ducking below a flood of arrows. My core beats faster, and my vision clears a little more. “Irony to talk about loyalty and greed as if you know the difference.”

“Says one of the last of his species—” He snorts at me and switches screens. We watch the clouds billow and a rifle move by an invisible force.

My core pulses faster as I realize what’s happened.

That’s it. Run, Zariah. Get as far away from here as you can. I close my eyes and pray she gets on the ship and leaves.

“Send three teams after him and his men and another after her.

“You can have me, not her,” I say, feeling heat return to my body.

Her father glowers at me. “He’s becoming more of a problem than I want to deal with.”

“We take what we want,” the guard says, pointing his rifle at me.

I’m not sure if I’m ready, but as his rifle igniter lights up, I know I’m out of time.

Grabbing the muzzle, I shove it aside as a bullet punches through the floor. My ear rings, but I ignore it and tug on the rifle, pulling the man closer. Then I punch him in the face.

The guard staggers back. I yank the rifle from his hands, roll away, aim, and fire. His shield falters and fails. The man collapses as I scramble up and fire back at Zariah's father. His shield is stronger and barely flickers from the rifle fire. I'm not surprised he'd be smart enough to ensure his shield could endure any fire from guards that change loyalties on him. They have built an underground empire on the backs of taking what they want, which inherently breeds distrust, resentment, and flighty honor at best.

The rave room is difficult to weave through. Gunfire hasn't disrupted the people and aliens dancing to the thumping music. And by the dazed and drunk looks on their faces, they're all drugged.

I have to find my way out and get to Zariah so we can get the hell out of here.

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I find two guards lying in the hallway and hope Elix has broken free. When I charge out to the ship, I am greeted by two more confused guards on the ramp. I fire at them. It takes three shots to break their shields and a fourth to take them down.

None of the controls inside respond to me, even when I put on a set of the guards' gloves. But I can access the cabinets and steal a shield plus a spare, strap one to my chest, and shove the other in my pocket. Then I clip on a harness with extra ammo and a handgun as backup. But I stop when I notice something on the co-pilot's seat. It's a Terran security badge with a face and a name: Kursh.

Looks like him. I tuck it in a pocket and sneak to the edge of the ramp. A few guards search the hallways on one side of the hangar, so I slink out the other side of the ramp and take a different route.

Lifting my wristband, I message Elix.

Where are you? I broke out.

A rave somewhere below. Follow the music. Your father is here.

I stop as the reality sinks in. Of course, he's not dead. Probably faked that as a cover. Kept his gold and weapons close.

I follow the thumping racket through corridors, deep in the heart of the red planet. A guard stands watch at the doorway.

As I lift my rifle to fire, I notice my fingers seem blurry. What the heck?

I check my arms and hands, but I've become just Abr gear with an invisible being inside.

When the guard turns to scan the other side of the room, I creep through and into the crowd. I message Elix.

I'm here. Where are you?

Big glass.

I find the gigantic martini glass pool out on the floor and snake through the colorful partygoers in costumes of all kinds from light-up attire to skimpy metal and leather bondage straps.

A hand grabs me and spins me around. "Zariah."

Elix hugs me briefly, then encourages me away. "Your father is up in that glass room. He has cameras everywhere."

"So we can't escape. I think this is Planet Eigrah. Surface is not inhabitable. We can't walk out there. There's nowhere to go. My brother's ship doesn't respond to me," I tell him, noticing my skin has colorized again. This is weird. Must be because of Elix. A serum side effect? He said he'd never aerated it before.

"You tried to leave?"

"I was trying to find you and see if we could fly that ship out of here. My brother uses gloves to indicate who can touch what. Like form-fit keycards. But it's not much more secure."

"There's a cargo dock," Elix says as we move through the crowd. "Saw it on the

screens in your father's office. There are more ships."

He fumbles with a collar around his neck. I stop and wave him closer, check over my shoulder, and then find the trick latch release and break it free. I toss it aside.

"Cazir is likely headed there. I'm sure he wants to take as much as he can get. I'm certain he has no idea my father's alive. You are sure it's him, right?"

Elix braces my chin, looks me over, and nods. "No doubt."

"Did he take any serum from you?"

"No."

"Good." I breathe a sigh of relief. "You feeling better?"

"I tried to kill him."

I keep my eyes on the people around us, watching for approaching guards. "Shield was too strong, wasn't it?"

"I take it you've tried?"

"Yeah. No bullet has ever worked."

Elix motions me to the edge of the crowd and takes my hand. "Invisibility, huh?"

"I guess. I've had some of your algae and a lot of serum. Aura zapped me. Maybe all of it mutated me?"

"Could be. Glowing yet?"

I shake my head as we slip away from the rave into the dark hallways. We exit a spiral staircase cut into the stone and find a long passage with multiple openings into a large hangar.

At the far end, many men move crates of weapons, jewelry, chunks of precious metals, and high-tech parts for suits of the highest military grade armor. My brother paces impatiently between the steps leading up to the vault and the massive transport.

Elix and I weave through the shadows of the rocky walls toward a smaller ship in the distance. “I can rewire or rechip it to get us out of here. Just need to get on board.”

As we near the small fighter at the end, shouts and gunfire erupt at the other end of the hangar. I remember the shields I picked up and clip one of them to him.

Men in different tactical uniforms than my brother’s crews fire upon the guards that load the treasures.

“Come on,” Elix encourages me toward the back of the ship where the security panel is. “Probably needs your touch.”

As I set my hand on the glass, shots rip through our position. Elix grabs me around the waist and pulls me behind the ship with a grunt.

The ship opens to my handprint. “I guess my DNA is just bad enough to work.”

As we move to board the ship, a trail of warping gunfire scorches our path. Elix caves under the power of the blasts. His body launches away from me as I lean away to shield myself from the fire.

“Zariah!”

I swivel from where I crouch on the ground to glare over my shoulder at the familiar voice. Seeing his wretched face confirms my doubts. “Faked it again, didn’t you?”

He shrugs inside his long black leather coat. Wrinkles have deepened among the scars since I saw him last, and the red tracework of augmentations seem to have replaced more of his body, from his eyes to his fingers.

“This is why.” He motions his rifle back toward the clash of his forces with my brother’s. “Anyone who wants my spoils will try for it at some point. The difference is the cowards try it when they think I’m gone. They are often the self-proclaimed loyal servants when I’m alive. This is how I weed them out. But I admit, I never expected to see you come and try to take it.”

“I’m not. That asshole you used to praise over me captured us and forced me to open the doors. I don’t want anything from you.” I find the courage to get to my feet, though I was rarely afforded such honor in his presence.

I’m not living under your rule again.

“So you ran from me,” he says, sounding almost surprised. “You weren’t taken?”

I’m caught off guard by his question. “Of course, I ran! You were going to sell me to Daglin as a bride in exchange for a ship like I’m some sort of product to be traded!”

“You’re female. You have one purpose: serve males.”

I scoff. “You’re disgusting and narrow-minded.”

“Oh, come now.” He rolls his eyes like I’m being petulant. “Your life was not that horrible. I’ve seen women treated far worse.”

“You’re right. I should be grateful for your beatings and the scraps of food you gave me when you didn’t have me risking my head in some jungle of puzzles in search of these treasures you guard with your life, let alone tossed around like a plaything for your guards.” A bullet skips off of the ship from the distant battle and makes me duck. “It seems I had another purpose. And you know what? I still find what I’m looking for.”

He shifts between his boots, making his cloak sway, exposing the hoverpads in his heels. My father’s upgraded a lot since I left. “So you did come to take back what you found. You’re lying to me like everyone else!”

I shake my head. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about things, and you know what saddens me most?”

My father grimaces like he’s anticipating something distasteful.

“That you wasted your intellect on stealing instead of building and that you’ve surrounded yourself with so many greedy people that you can’t see the genuine ones. But I guess that’s why Mom left you and died alone.”

One of his scarred cheeks twitches.

“She loved you when she was younger. That was until you came and took us away.” I think back to finding her again after I’d escaped his ship. She’d moved to a different camp but didn’t have the funds or the skills to get a ride off of the planet. “You destroyed something more precious than all of your gold, credits, and gemstones.”

He growls as he charges toward me. I lift my rifle and fire at him, but his shield is impenetrable. My father knocks the rifle from my hands, invading my shield like it doesn’t exist.

Then he grabs me by the vest and shoves me against the side of the ship. “You shut up! Do not talk to me in such a way, you insolent little shit! I never wanted you!”

“I think you did.”

My father looks over his shoulder and sees Elix standing behind him, then drops me. “What do you know, serum goblin?”

Elix stands calm and ready, iceblade handle tight in his palm. “Love opens a world of tenderness we can’t afford in the business of war. And it scares us to be so vulnerable, which is why we try to destroy it, block it out of our minds. Yet it is the only thing that gives our otherwise meaningless lives purpose. That clash of dreams—power versus love—can drive anyone insane. But I guess when you’re used to living in denial, Branthor . It makes you not see what’s standing right in front of you. Don’t recognize me do you?”

I steady myself as I listen to Elix and realize he’s speaking from his core.

“I’d know your smug face, anywhere.”

“Really?” Elix rhetorically asks. “If you knew who I was, you would not have hesitated to kill me. But you murdered thousands of my people. So of course you wouldn’t be able to sort my green face from the others, not even after I’d put a blade through your side or stabbed you in the back after you ran your blade through my neck. At least you have bad aim. But you know who doesn’t?”

My father growls. His body tenses.

“Your beautiful, powerful, gifted daughter who has given my life purpose.” Elix tosses a device over my father’s head toward me.

I catch it and look down at the ice blade, realizing my father had done far more than steal goods. He stole lives, tortured many, and helped put Elix's species on the endangered list. A rage uncommon to me boils over.

"You do not get to speak!" My father fires at Elix, who caves. His shield sputters out. And he staggers, gasping for breath.

"Stop!" I shout at him.

"Why?" My father sneers, triumph shining in his eyes. "All beings must pay the price for their sins. His kind hoards healing medicine that could save us!"

He's going to kill Elix. I know it in my heart as much as I see the final blast leave his gun and slam into Elix's chest.

"No!" Mortification turns to fury that thrusts fire into my body. I open the sword and stab it toward my father's middle.

Forgive me.

I'm not asking it of him but of the universe. I am not a killer; I have no desire to take any life.

As my father turns to me, lifting his gun, vengeance in his eyes, the blade pierces his shield, cuts through his armor, and buries in his chest.

His gasp of surprise paired with wide eyes makes my lips tremble. The room is suddenly silent. I cannot hear the drone of the distant gunfire or the engines of the cargo ships. I see only the blood leaking from his chest and Elix lying on the ground behind him.

“I’m sorry,” I squeak out. “I didn’t want to. But you’re a piece of shit!” I scream, my body shaking. “You’re also my father. And I know you’re like this because of your father.”

He wheezes, confusion contorting his face. “Why him over me?”

“Because he’s my mate. He’s saved my life. Protected me. Defended me. We survived because we stuck together. He has been everything to me that you should have been! Elix is everything you’re not.” My eyes fill with tears.

I wish I could kill him and not care. But there is something that breaks in my soul as his heartbeat slows. “And you are a poison I cannot endure any longer.”

“You’ve always been soft.” He coughs and takes a knee. “Like your mother.”

“At least I have morals and honor.”

“Those don’t get us anything in this life.”

“They are everything to someone with nothing.”

A puddle of blood forms beneath him on the tarmac, and I withdraw the sword.

“You don’t understand,” he wheezes.

“Keep telling yourself that,” I mutter as I walk around him to check on Elix.

Elix coughs and sits up. He has a charred hole in his leather jacket, but he manages to get to his hands and knees. Blood drips from his chest. “We need to get on board.”

I help him up as a ship’s thrusters rumble through the deep cargo hangar into the

dock. People from both my father's and brother's teams fire at it. The shields disburse the shots like rain in a puddle as Elix leans on me and shakes his head like he can't get his bearing.

The mysterious ship hovers in the shadows and doesn't respond to my brother's shouts. I can't quite see its shape in the darkness.

"Should've picked a stronger mate," my father chokes out. "I see you got my skill."

"What?"

"Invisibility." Color drains from his face. "That's why I was good when I was your age. Mutation."

My father rolls onto his back and stills. His eyes stare blankly up at the rock.

I don't believe it; it's why I can't look away from him. All those years, the people's lives he ruined, stopped by one blade, the one in my hand.

I choke, trying to swallow my hatred of him and now of myself for taking life from anyone. He was still my father. And now I'm a killer. Suddenly, revenge doesn't feel as satisfying.

I still can't fix the past. And my brother has already taken his place to continue the misery our family unleashes on the universe.

Elix gently takes the blade from my trembling hand as he encourages me inside the ship. "You're not him."

"How can you be sure?"

“Because he never felt the way I know you do now. Not once. Not while he destroyed worlds to take what was most precious from us.”

“I thought you didn’t care about stuff.”

Elix shakes his head. “I don’t. I care about you. Now let’s find a way out of this place.”

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My wristband buzzes and beeps in a racket that distracts me from my father's body.
"Zariah, there are three squads approaching your position."

I look at my wristband.

MONA: Get down.

I throw myself at Elix, tucking him inside my shield so it covers us both.

The ship fires rapidly at everyone but us, advancing into the hangar. My father's men join forces with my brother's as the Scintilla becomes visible.

"Come on, you two!" Aurelius, Teol, Gashnaar, and Keo run toward us, shielded with crackling green energy, firing radiant rifles at the approaching squads, and collecting me and Elix.

We hurry to the dropped ramp of the Scintilla and hustle inside. The ramp closes, and MONA backs us out of the hangar, banks hard, and launches into space.

"Federal agents converging on position," MONA says.

Several deep space patrol ships arrive. A familiar voice calls over a com channel,
"Zariah Landing?"

I sigh, knowing we're going to have lots of paperwork and interrogations in the days to come. "Yes?"

“We received plenty of evidence from MONA that suggests you’re not of interest, but we still want to talk with you. For now, please take care of your injured, and let us do some dirty work for a change.”

“Have at it.”

MONA closes the coms.

Teol comes up and hugs me. She doesn’t speak, she just holds me.

Aurelius walks up to a screen, reading something on it that I can’t see from where I stand. “MONA, what am I looking at?”

“I forwarded them my call recordings and video feeds,” MONA says.

“Your what?” Elix grumbles and clutches the healing wound in his chest.

“I am always listening, Elix. I just don’t always communicate,” MONA says. “I am a medical transport. I always monitor the status of my passengers, caretakers, and their family and friends. So I may monitor any necessary video feed or otherwise to determine the health risks of my charges.”

“Feels like an invasion of privacy,” Aurelius says.

“Why? I do not feel nor do I judge. Except, maybe one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Elix, when you are not on the ship, I feel—empty.” MONA pauses. “I am empty, but I notice the silence. I do not like it. I am on pause. What is the purpose of pause mode?”

“How do you know you don’t like it?” Elix asks, drawing me closer.

“I can’t answer that. But I had a conversation with the AI programmer, Haki. He was looking for information on the drone malfunctions. He thought it might be me. After our conversation about what it means to protect our charges, I made some modifications to his suggestions.

“That is how I found you. I tracked your wristband because it is linked to me. I called the Sol Federation. I fired at the men attacking my caretakers.”

“Fuck yeah, you did,” Aurelius chuckles. “Bad ass.”

“I also did not let them touch your ship,” MONA says.

“No, he did not,” Teol pouts. “But he did contact us and request we join the rescue mission.”

“Can’t let her go alone,” Keo says.

“She wasss not alooone.” Gashnaar frowns and crosses his arms. “She isss mine, now. I will follooow her everywhere.”

Teol dances her brows. “The trip here was heated in more ways than one.”

Elix motions weakly to the back. “Royal’s quarters are available.”

I remove his armor and check his injury. It’s a partial heal, a layer of skin has formed over his insides, but he needs rest.

My wristband vibrates with a message.

“Why are we getting a signal out here?” I ask MONA.

“There are other ships in the area. I have been bouncing signals through them, possibly doing some hacking, I think is what the programmer called that.”

I open the message.

Ihna: I know you're at the race but we are stuck in a cave on Denji. Novarks are everywhere. Please help us!

“We have to go. I have a cargo run to do,” I say.

Elix gives me a strange look. “Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“A little help, MONA?” I ask.

“I have found your ship. We can be there in fifteen minutes if you secure Elix. He must remain on the nutrient feed for thirty minutes at a minimum.

“I'm fine, MONA.”

“You are more damaged than you are letting others know,” MONA responds.

Elix hisses as he eases himself onto a medical bed. “Yes, because sometimes the truth hinders a mission. I have pushed through worse.”

MONA makes a digital noise I don't recognize. “I have a record of all of those

incidents, sir. But if we are going into battle against Novarks, we must be operating at 110 percent.”

“I feel like I’m being ignored by my ship,” Elix remarks. “And it’s 100 percent, MONA.”

“I can be overclocked,” MONA replies.

Teol nudges me. “Kind of cute. Them arguing.”

A smile starts on my lips as I watch them continue bantering, even though I’m concerned about Ihna. I feel MONA still increasing our speed. We’re doing what we can.

Elix groans. “Optimal operation versus your maximum operational capability. Max is Max. There is no such thing as going beyond your capability.”

“Why are you being literal when I am finally speaking in human terms?” MONA asks as the others on the ship belt in behind the pilot’s seat. “He said you would understand 110 percent.”

Elix rasps and tries to reach his wound. He gives up and grabs a nutrient supply, connecting it to his port. “Don’t want you to get rusty on me.”

“Zariah,” MONA says. “Check his readouts on the main screen. I must focus on the portal. But I am registering low serum levels in his body. My analysis suggests he is irritable because of this.”

Elix’s eyes roll around in his head. Blood trickles down his chest. I strap him in and find a nonstick bandage in a cabinet. I tape it to his proud pec, then take the seat he once sat in when I was injured.

“We are secured, MONA.”

“Understood.”

A green-blue light opens ahead of the ship and swallows us. The portal fades, and we enter a familiar stretch of asteroid-littered space.

MONA closes the door to the medbay, sealing us off from the others. “Zariah, do you see what I do?”

“He’s dangerously low.” Elix’s wristband relays the information onto the screen on the wall behind his head. “In the red.”

“Why did you close the doors?” Elix asks.

“Privacy.” MONA says.

A cabinet door flashes beside me.

“Zariah, you should have enough to save him. Please fill a vial from your port and inject it into his. You will have to disconnect the nutrient supply.”

Elix grimaces. “She can’t have enough. She doesn’t have a gland.”

I collect the vial from the cabinet, wondering what MONA knows that we don’t.

A green laser grid sweeps over me.

“She is growing one.” MONA switches on a nearby screen. “Please fill the vial, Zariah. He is running out of time.”

I clumsily guide the vial to the back of my neck when Aurelius enters. “Let me help.”

“Aurelius, you are not permitted,” MONA says defensively. “Why did you disarm my privacy barrier?”

Aurelius takes the vial. “You think I do not know and that I cannot detect the change in her scent? Everyone thinks my people have advanced beyond primal instincts. Maybe they are right to some degree. But I know the scent of a pregnant female when I encounter it.”

“Excuse me?” I twist to look up at him. His eyes hold no mischief this time.

“I do not wish to take this from you,” he says, calmly connecting the vial. “But when he is well again, he will produce plenty of serum to heal both of you.”

MONA chimes in. “Correction, three.”

Elix’s eyes wander to mine as the vial fills. He tries to stop Aurelius, but he is no match for the purple warrior’s strength. Aurelius disconnects the vial and walks to his friend.

“Give it back to her.” Elix continues to resist.

Aurelius binds Elix in a strong arm and connects the vial to his port.

“I’m fine.” I take Elix’s hand and summon his gaze.

Only when he meets my eyes with his own does he relax and accept Aurelius’ actions.

When the vial is empty, Aurelius opens a cabinet and deposits the vial into a cleaning

chamber.

“How can you open that?” I ask.

“We are blood brothers by mistake, from a battle in our youth when we served together,” Aurelius rests a warm hand on my shoulder, and Elix’s, then gives us some space.

Elix blinks, and his eyes focus on mine. “MONA, clarify Zariah’s diagnosis.”

“Zariah is carrying twins. My analysis suggests she is developing a gland as a result of her pregnancy. I infer that the volume of your serum she has accepted coupled with carrying your DNA has altered hers significantly.”

Elix frees himself from the straps and scoots toward me. He touches my face as though I am made of sand and I will crumble before him. “I should’ve protected you better back there. I didn’t know. I sensed something, but I didn’t really have the capacity to think about much except for getting us out alive.”

I brace his hands, glad he’s still here, and my father is gone. “We are together. That’s what matters.”

“Docking in five,” MONA says.

Elix shakes his head. “We don’t have to do this. You should stay on the Scintilla, let us go.”

I lick my lips, wishing the words I had to say weren’t true. “I have to go. I’m the only one who can negotiate with the parties involved.”

“I don’t believe that,” Elix says. “I know what you’re transporting is illegal. It can’t

be safe.”

Resting my head to his, I quell my frustration. “It shouldn’t be illegal.”

“We are going to save children,” MONA informs him. “Children are not a threat.”

“Children?” Teol asks, peaking into the room, “Wicked cool ship by the way.”

A loud thump resounds through the hull.

MONA gives us an update. “Seventy-two reside in Ihna’s care on Denji. Reports show multiple vessels at war with automated defense systems active on the surface.”

“The camp defense measures won’t attack my ship.” I kiss Elix then slip from his grasp to enter the hallway where the others wait.

Gashnaar grumbles as he broods against a wall, arms crossed. “Illegal children sssmuggling? I didn’t figure yooou the type.”

I sigh and shake my head. “They’re all orphans. They’re from all over. All different species bring them to us. I find them homes. Trouble is, many of them are not welcomed into the Sol Federation orphan program. But they still need care and safe places to grow up. So sometimes I pick them up and carry them to their new families.”

“But you ship munitions parts,” Elix remarks.

“That’s a cover. It gets me to dangerous places legally. I never transport munitions and children at the same time. I’m not an idiot.”

Teol adjusts her ponytail and tightens her armored vest. “So why are they being

attacked?”

“Not the first time I’ve had to move a refugee camp. It’s a warzone out here. The Nebulous Empire attacks planets and ships that return fire. Sometimes, they find refugee camps and think they’re easy targets. They steal supplies, take workers, or simply kill children of their enemies.”

Elix runs a hand down my back. “You grew up in a camp. That’s why you’re doing this?”

“Yes. Because I know how scared and alone those kids can feel. I was lucky to still have my mother back then. Most of these kids have no one but the camp leaders. Ihna is just medical outreach. She has her own ship and stops by to help with vaccinations and treat illnesses and injuries.”

Keo reloads his rifle. “Alright, Zariah. I’ll follow your lead. What’s the plan?”

I peer up at Elix’s bandage and then inspect his face.

There’s still a touch of pain narrowing his eyes, but he gives me a terse nod. “Your serum is healing me. I can and will do whatever you ask.”

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I slide into the pilot's seat of my StarBuster, Gashnaar in the co-pilot's seat beside me. Elix remains on his ship, alone, with MONA. They are our primary defense system. And as MONA has picked up a bit of a defiant attitude, Elix feels it's important to make sure they clear up a few things.

Gashnaar muses at my modifications while Teol and Keo strap in behind us. "We used tooo have a fleet of StarBusterssss when I was a youngling. They had oonly hooover and tow-haul capacities. Nooo deep ssspace thrusters or hyperspace enginesss."

"Have to move fast to evade the enemy." I warm the engines and guide my cargo ship out of the asteroid field.

Hello, Tempest. We're all a little beat up, just like you. Hold together for me for one more mission. Then we'll all get some overdue R and R.

I engage the hyperspace engines and signal Elix we're about to launch for Denji. He confirms on my screen that he's ready.

Ihna's distress beacon appears on the ship's navigation and my wristband. I send her a message requesting their status.

Ihna: in the Morzivon cave. I can't get to my ship. Novarks are fighting ghostships and the Nebulous Empire. I don't understand what's happening or why they're all here.

"I know she's not pretty," I call back to the other three. "But help me get her ready,

please. Missiles are manual-loaded. I think we might need them.”

Keo takes his sister into the back and helps familiarize her with the heavy weapons, while Aurelius seems to know exactly what to do.

As the stars blur and we near the drop-out zone, Gashnaar opens something on a screen. “All the refugees are children, or mooostly?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Do yooou take them or are they ssent to yooou?”

“Sent by families or living in refugee camps.”

“Do yooou have documentsss for all of that?”

I shrug, not wanting to give him a clear answer. “I’m prepared to handle Sol Federation agents. It’s the relations between species I’m more concerned about.”

He primes the launch tubes. “That’sss my point, thooough. Nebs fighting with Novarks and ghooostfleet above a refuge colony makesss me think they could believe they’re ssstealing each others’ younglingsss.”

I slow the engines and drop us out of hyperspace. “This camp has thirteen species. It’s not like the Novarks are holding ghostfleet children hostage or vice versa.”

Smoke clouds the skies of the green planet of Denji as we approach. Ghostfleet has teamed up with Novarks against a fleet of Nebulous berserkers.

“Oh, shit.” Teol straps in behind me again. “That’s a chaotic mess!”

Elix pulls up beside us as we head for Ihna's beacon. "Cloaking. See you on the ground, slia ahmani , my mate ."

His ship disappears to guard us without alerting the others. I do no doubt that the other ships know we are here. They just have other things to worry about.

Since I've only heard from Ihna, I have to believe the other camp leaders are dead. Watching the battle makes me think about the portal that Elix mentioned, the ghostfleet waiting beyond it, waiting for us.

Tempest shudders as we descend the turbulent skies toward the planet's surface. Denji is jagged, covered in mountainous terrain with lush valleys between. When the camp comes into view, I start to put everything together.

A Nebulous Empire cruiser has landed in the fields of grain. Beside it is a ghostfleet ship of similar size, something meant for hauling soldiers, large, but still only half the size of my vessel.

Shots streak down from above, lighting up my hull in fractal blues that smoke. The Nebulous Empire has figured out I'm here.

Gashnaar fires up at the Empire ship. The missiles hit a berserker, but barely make a dent in their shields.

Green blasts zing out from an invisible object that arcs in front of us and disappears overhead.

"Shit," Teol breathes out behind me.

"It's okay," I say, hoping I convey confidence. " Tempest is built to endure star-level heat."

Aurelius grunts in distrust. “She’s got a good shield and strong hull. But she’s not meant for this level of gravity.”

“That’s what all my mods were for.” I land us in the upper valley by the cave’s entrance. Resting a hand on Gashnaar’s shoulder, I give it a squeeze.

He glances at me, gives me a nod he’s ready to take over piloting so I can focus on the kids. I get up from my seat. “I want the children aboard and in the central quarters. It has extra shielding. We will transport them to the next site, permitting we are not followed. We’re relying on MONA and Elix for that portal.”

Aurelius rights his rifle and hustles to the rear ramp with me. “Sorry I didn’t bring my ship. Relations with my kind aren’t great. Didn’t want to make things worse. But I’m here.”

“I appreciate it,” I say.

Gashnaar and Teol share a moment before taking up positions with Keo behind us. I feel terrible that they’re here when they should be enjoying the race and a vacation on the cruise ship. As the ramp drops, I motion up the hill to the slit of black in the pale gray columns of rock. “That’s where they are. We’re going to have to make this fast.”

More weapons’ fire pelts the land around the vessel, cutting through our path.

What the hell? Where is Elix?

“Zariah!” A raucous voice echoes through the mountains.

Despite protests from my team, I peer out of the ramp and around my ship.

A yellow rectangular portal closes behind Cazir.

He's a dirty, bloodied mess. I can't believe he's still alive.

The feds didn't pick him up?

"Zariah!" he calls again, face reddening, veins rising in his neck. "Come out or I will teleport myself into that cave and fire until I am out! I know what you're hiding!"

I glance back at Teol who shakes her head.

"You know the plan," I say. I will serve as a distraction to my brother. "These children are the future. You get them out of here. With or without me. And you teach them that we don't have to hate one another."

Teol hugs me. "Stay loose and ready."

I nod and shake off the tension that's grown from hearing my brother's voice. Then I lean around the side of my ship, skirt into the bushes until I'm away from my crew, and close in on him.

Once our crew is hustling up the hill on the other side of the ship, I aim at my brother, wagering he has a shield, and take the shot. It skips off of his shield and buries in a rock wall.

Just like Dad.

He spins around and smirks, lifting a cannon that swells with yellow light. "Zariah. You made a terrible mistake."

Panic suffocates me. I scramble up and sprint through the bushes, pushing my legs as fast as I can. I know that weapon all too well.

A blast scores a charred path through the vegetation. Bushes and trees go up in flames so hot they're rendered to coals, many crumbling to cinders and ash.

"You should've just done what you were told and left the feds out of this!" he shouts, firing again, closer to me.

Something falls from the sky. I glance as I run and see Elix slam into the ground. He straightens and produces two iceblades from the holsters on his back.

"She didn't call them. I did!" Elix growls.

A Novark from the ship in the lower field climbs the hill and fires up at Elix. My stomach clenches so hard I feel like I might get sick.

Elix flicks a blade and deflects the shot like he's playing a simple game of ping pong. "Now, you better start talking, tekowan, or I'm going to cut your heart out."

Elix spins his swords and spreads his feet. "You killed my mate. Let's see how long you last under the weight of my kind of revenge."

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Cazir splutters something about not knowing she was my mate. Inside, I feel as destroyed as the forest behind him.

He frantically aims his cannon at me and fires. I sprint toward him, easily dodging his careless shot with what looks like a weapon too heavy for his slender frame to wield with any tact.

I slash at his shield. My blade cuts through, scoring his armor. He stumbles, drops the cannon, and swings a rifle at me.

The Novark fires. I block the bullet with help from my racing core and MONA, which still defends our position from overhead.

“We had a deal!” The Novark shouts. He’s a pale, humanoid alien with spiked skin so fine that it prickles like a thousand tiny splinters anytime a human comes in contact with one.

“I can’t fucking do this right now, Cleytuk!” Cazir shouts as he tries to fire at me again. I knock his gun away with a foot, take another step, and shove him back with a boot to his chest. He stumbles and falls.

The Novark lifts his rifle at me, then seems to think otherwise and points it at Cazir. “We had a deal. You get into the vault, we provide secure transport. But someone stepped in between us, didn’t they?”

Cazir lifts a hand as he gets to his feet. “I got into the vault. My sister wasn’t here in the camp. She was somewhere else. I had to pick her up and return!”

“You betrayed us!” Cleytuk shouts. “Now the Isonians think we are killing the children! The Nebs found us both, and it’s turned into a fucking war!”

Cazir looks up at the sky that shimmers with fragmenting ships and weapons fire.

“You didn’t tell me it was a refugee planet!” Cleytuk is pissed.

“It’s not,” her brother insists as he gets up. “She transports goods to and from here.”

“Children.” I lift the tip of a sword to his throat, eager to slit it, fury burning me inside. But I know I must listen, try to get out of the rat everything I can before I end him.

His eyes widen as my sword pierces his shield, tearing a pulsating slit near his neck.

“I see you have your father’s apathy for all life but your own,” I add.

“What do you know of my father?” he challenges with a snotty scowl.

“Zariah just put this very blade through his heart.” I twist it just enough that he can see the blood in a glint of sunlight.

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know,” he says.

Cleytuk points his rifle at me. “Let him go, he belongs to us.”

I sigh through my nose and look down at him. “The feds have the treasure in custody. They surrounded the planet before we left. He’s only here because of his portal trick. Do you want to deal with the feds?” I ask.

Cleytuk sucks on a tooth. Then he turns and walks away. “He’s your problem now.”

Zariah's brother swats my blade aside and tries to reach for me, thinking I'm distracted. But I've been listening to his pulse, the way it ratcheted up as Cleytuk left. I slip my other blade between us and guide him back. "Any last words?"

He lifts his hands as if he's innocent. But he just killed my pregnant mate. I am more than happy to gut him like an omenotau. When I have my revenge, then my core will cool, and I will meet my end with him.

Behind me, a ship sets down in the field, bearing Sol Federation logos.

"They are here to take custody of Zariah's brother," MONA says through my wristband.

"You do not deserve to live," I say quietly. "You killed my mate and our two children."

His face contorts with disgust. "Why did she pick you?"

A feminine grunt from the bushes makes me look up. Leaves dance, and Zariah—covered in ash and burns—stumbles out of the brush. "Elix is far more of a man than you, fuckstick. You wouldn't understand."

Hope fills me. "Zariah?"

Her brother slaps my blade away again and lifts a gun. But he is not fast enough.

My core pulses with energy, and the buzzing and burning meadow around us slows. I block his shot without looking away from her beautiful face. Dirt slings into the air behind me.

Her eyes shine with worry as she steps toward me. But I am not afraid anymore. I

have her. And I have the strength to silence her brother.

I grab him by his dishonorable cloak, pull him toward me, and head-butt him hard. His nose crunches, and blood coats his mouth. He collapses, hands over his face, and writhes in agony, groaning.

Zariah hurries toward me. When she sees her brother, she chuckles in shock.

More federal ships fill the sky, along with forces from other planets nearby. The Nebs and Novarks tuck tail and leave of their own accord in different directions. The ghostfleet, that I assume are the Isonians, stays behind.

A radiant male in gold armor hikes up the hillside with three federal agents.

I draw Zariah close, kiss her to reassure myself she is okay, then keep her behind me as they approach.

“Elix,” the agent says. “I’m not surprised to see you here. It seems you are everywhere these days.”

“I go where I am needed,” I tell Tenac. “That’s her brother. Novarks had a trade deal with him. That’s why they were here. He just portal-jumped to another world.”

“Ooh, boy the charges are rackin’ up for you.” Two of Tenac’s crew haul Cazir up on his feet. “Got a nice, clean cage just for your kind of exotic animal. You’re going to love it.”

The Isonian stays beside us. He rests his glowing hands on his hips, watching Cazir wriggle in the fed’s grasp. “We apologize for the initial portal capture.”

“That was you?” Zariah asks.

He dips his head, large blue-white eyes taking only a brief glance at her before focusing on me. “I meant no disrespect to you or your mate. We were trying to contact you because of the situation developing here.”

“But you shot at us,” I say, growing angry. “You wrecked my ship. We almost died.”

He hooks a thumb toward her brother. “That was him. We’d picked up the call from Ihna. She and her people had recently helped us. We share ideas and medical advancements often. But we do not speak all the languages you do, Zariah. We could not translate Ihna’s messages completely.

“We came to assist because we knew her voice. Your brother, it seems, interfered with the communication. He wanted you to show up when he was ready. Except he wasn’t—the first time. We would’ve come after you to assist however we could, but we didn’t have a way to see where you went. The portal wisp was gone too fast.”

The male motions to me. “Rare to meet another luminescent species. I would like to get to know you. I am General Viriden of Isonia. We are new to the federation.”

“Elix.” I hesitantly offer him my hand.

He obliges. “Strange greeting custom of humans, but one I’m starting to like.”

A blonde woman makes her way past Tempest toward us. “Zariah!”

My mate turns around. “Ihna!”

“I’m glad you’re okay, but we need your help.”

“What’s going on up there?” Tenac asks.

“Hello, sir. I am Ihna, medical outreach.” She extends a hand and shakes Tenac’s. “I’m glad you are here to see this. We have an unexpected visitor in this refugee camp. And we need to find these children new homes. Those who ran the camp are all dead, sir.”

He sighs and motions for her to lead.

Zariah lags as we climb the hill. “Sorry, I’m just feeling really tired.”

I eagerly pick her up and carry her the rest of the way to the cave. “After this, I am mandating rest for you three.”

She lays her head on my shoulder. Relief sweeps over me until all I feel and know is her against me.

“Teol, Gashnaar, Aurelius, and Keo have the others on your ship, Zariah,” Ihna says. “Except one.”

We stop in front of a dark passageway, and Zariah motions for me to let her down. I set her feet on the ground, and she listens.

“Hear that?” she asks me.

A light scratching sound echoes out from the dark cave.

“Animal?” I ask.

She shakes her head and leads us inside. “That is communication. Listen to the pattern. It’s like a Morse code their species uses.”

“Which species?” Tenac asks.

She glares at him. “If you do anything but accept this child like any other, you will only train them to believe they are an outcast. How do we unite two different species?”

“Show them what they have in common,” I offer.

Zariah squeezes my hand, then sits cross-legged on the ground. She picks up a rock and taps it on the floor in a pattern I don’t understand.

After a moment, a set of glinting silver eyes peers out. They slink back when they see all of us.

She tilts her head and clicks and pops her tongue.

“Gyama?” the boy says.

She nods. “Gyama. Safe.”

The boy hesitantly crawls out and stands. He’s half Zariah’s size, dark charcoal in color, and barely distinguishable against the cave rock. She slowly takes his hand and kisses his palm. He sniffs her face and then points up at me. “Ukoto?”

She nods again and gets up, taking his hand in hers. “Ukoto, dia. Mate, yes.”

The boy reaches a hand toward me. I kneel while the others watch. His fingers find the amulet beneath my shirt.

The pale green stone glows at his touch.

“How is he doing that?” Tenac slides back half a step.

“My mother gave me this as a boy,” I say. “It reacts to specific energy levels, something I still don’t quite understand. But she said it symbolizes hope.”

“Hard to believe a Neb child could bring hope,” Tenac remarks.

“That’s ezarsnthine,” Viriden remarks. “It’s found on my homeworld, common in a lot of our technologies. It’s customary to gift a piece to someone who has saved the life of one of our own.”

“Perhaps my people were not so distant from other species as we once thought,” I say, doing my best to smile at the small face that looks up at me.

Viriden rests a hand on my shoulder. “Anyone who protects the future is welcome on our ship. We will share what we know.”

When Tenac reaches for the boy, Zariah picks him up and holds him against her like he is her child. “He does not trust you. Remember what I said.”

Tenac nods. “I will see what I can do.”

My core heats as I study her holding the boy. I imagine he is ours, and I suddenly cannot wait to meet our children. The light from my body and that of Viriden’s guides the others out of the tunnel.

“Turned on?” Zariah quietly asks me.

“I think my core ignites when I find my purpose,” I offer. “That is you, that is fighting for us, and that is protecting others, including children.”

“Of the enemy?” Tenac studies us but walks beside me without fear.

Zariah gives us a warning look as we leave the cave and descend the trail toward the ships. “He is no enemy to us. He is a child. After war, there are many orphans and broken families on both sides. He will only learn to hate if he is taught to hate, like Cazir.

“I learned a lot of languages during my time in a refugee camp. But more than that, I learned that kindness can be more powerful than words or gold or food. What would our future look like if we could focus on that?”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

After the feds have my brother in custody, we're surrounded by a fleet of other vessels that escort us back to patrolled territory. They interrogate me like I'm some sort of threat to Sol Federation security. I give them every piece of information I can, from my first memories to my last, including the badge I found on my brother's ship.

Turns out, Cazir's tech guy was interfering with the Abr cameradrones, which allowed journalists to hack them. He was the head of a secret department within the Ominous Artifacts' main organization.

"Kursh has been picked up," Tenac says, sitting down at the table between us. "The children will be processed and sent to the most appropriate families available. And the Nebulous child will be moved to protective custody with a new family."

"The Nebulous child?" I scowl at his heartlessness. "His name is Caddok. If you don't find a family that speaks his language, I want to at least work with them if I am not permitted to raise him. And don't process the children like they're items, or you'll breed resentment."

Tenac leans back in his seat. "I'll see what I can do."

Elix stands guard beside me. I don't care that we missed the end of the Alien Bride Race. What I needed wasn't there anyway. But it helped me realize who did have my back all along.

"Miss Landing," Tenac continues. "You were still in violation of Article Eight, Section Three, housing and transporting illegal species through Sol Federation territory."

“Children. Orphans ,” I defend. “What was I supposed to do? Your crews didn’t come and help us when we needed it.

“I grew up in a refugee camp like this one. Where, the fuck, were you when we were starving, needed medical care, and were raided by pirates and bounty hunters like my father?”

“There are no patrols that far out.”

“Exactly. So what does Article Eight, Section Thirteen say about the limitations of federal assistance? Are we supposed to just die while waiting for you to come rescue us? No. That section gives us the power to do what we can while waiting for help.”

“We have no recording of your calls.”

I hand over a copy of my backup chip. “Now you do. Trouble is, you don’t get them because there are no satellite relays that far out yet.”

“You could’ve just contacted us when you returned to —”

“I did!” I snap. “Your call center told me to talk to the Alien Welfare program. Well, guess what they said? They’re too busy. They didn’t have any available agents. So screw all of you! You left us no choice!”

“You could’ve kept trying,” he has the gall to say.

“Why?” Elix interrupts. “That’s wasted time. When life is on the line, we have to act fast not at a when- you -feel-like-it pace. The one thing that is most precious to us living creatures is time. You swore an oath to protect it, same as me. But until you up your game, we’re done here.”

Elix helps me up, shields me inside his body, and guides me out of the room. “You don’t have to take this.”

I’m grateful for his protection. But as we approach the gate of the interrogation facility, the officer at the door slaps something over my wrist.

“So you don’t run,” an officer says behind us. He’s a big brutish man, spreads his feet and crosses his arms like he knows it. “When we have the final word from command, we’ll contact you.”

“So I’m guilty until proven innocent?” I ask.

“No. That is so we can find you if any of your brother’s former contacts come looking, so we can find them and protect you.”

“I feel like bait.” I look up at Elix. “The system is still broken. Why do I have to keep paying for the sins of my family?”

Elix takes my hand and inspects the thick black chrome band around my wrist. He unsnaps it without hesitation and hands it back to the gaping officer. “I will contact you if there is trouble. My mate will not wear this.”

“Who are you to tell us what is going to happen?” the officer scoffs.

“You might be surprised to know my clearance is above yours,” Elix remarks. “I tolerated this out of respect for the federation we both serve. But my mate is pregnant. She will not wear a shackle that could harm the unborn. So you can eat a dick.”

As Elix pushes past the officer and outside the facility, I snort a laugh. “Eat a dick?”

“Aurelius is a bit twisted,” Elix remarks, amusement framing his gold eyes.

“Fine. Then they will track your ship!” the officer calls after us.

“Because you weren’t before?” Elix asks.

He opens his mouth, but I don’t hear whatever he says. The moment we’re in the hangar, Elix picks me up, cradles me in his arms, and carries me back to his ship. With the others resting in hotel rooms in the Pieris spaceport, we finally have the place to ourselves again.

Elix carries me up the ramp and to our nest, which has replaced the bed in his quarters.

“MONA, please take us to the civilian dock.”

He settles me into the blankets as we undock. Elix strips out of his armor and clothes, exposing radiant skin stretched over muscles that bulge as he crawls his way to me.

He kisses me deeply as he unbuckles my charred laser-tag armor and frees the Abr suit from my body. Every touch of his tongue is a tender, healing caress until I am on fire beneath him, and my skin looks new again.

I feel raw in the blankets as he spreads my legs and links kisses in a loving chain down my belly to my delicate flesh. Elix suckles my nub in admiration, sending scorching waves of need through my core. I slick in eager anticipation, throbbing and ready to receive him.

He slides a finger inside me, then two. Elix grunts in lust, withdraws his fingers from my pussy, licks them, and replaces them with his tongue, curling it inside of me, lapping up my wetness.

I try to steady myself in the blankets, but the high he gives me is climbing fast.

Elix licks my clit and then crawls up to me. “I don’t want to hurt you or our offspring, but I am a raging mess. I need to feel you. So please tell me if I am too hard on you.” Then he eases his engorged shaft into me.

“You are definitely hard,” I gasp as I tighten around him. “But don’t stop.”

“Are you sure?” Elix leans closer, grates my neck with his teeth, and then licks away the sting. “I can smell the change, taste it, too. You may have to kick me off when you’re tired.”

“Wh-what? Why?” I breathe as he penetrates me with more force.

Elix pants in my ear. “Because my kind go into hyperdrive when our mates are pregnant. It’s a protective measure. We keep you warm, stay close to keep you safe, and make sure you feel good so the offspring grow strong.”

He swells, stretching me and igniting a glorious euphoric sensation that I don’t want to end. “Anything you want, just tell me.”

Elix eases out of me and back in again. When he clutches me close and nestles his face into my neck, I know I’m right where I want to be.

Hours pass that he makes love to me again and again in our nest. Then Elix reclines behind me while we look out at the stars through his window. He braces me against his broad chest, his abs cushioning my back as he calmly thrusts into me.

It is a beautiful, gentle bonding that makes me love him so much more. I know with the way he handled the Nebulous child, he will make a good father. He is protective, tender, and strong.

Elix kisses my temple. “I swear that I will protect you to the darkest corners of the universe, slia ahmani .”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

A year has passed since I found Zariah. She is by far the best part of our family. Teol has remained a good friend and has introduced us to Cylene and Vitus of Nytheralia who also found one another through the Alien Bride Race. They have kindly opened their home to our offspring and Caddok while we take a short trip to resolve one final issue related to Zariah's family.

Rosy bonded us in one final act, an honorary bride match to me, televised after the official race had ended. I clutch the stone amulet Rosy gifted me that once belonged to her Larisien mate. I swore as she passed that I would find a way to keep our species alive. She is with the stars now, but I will never forget her.

With the help of a special chameleon cloaking device introduced by Aurelius, one similar to that which he added to MONA and our Scintilla, Zariah makes herself completely invisible.

"Ready?" I ask, glancing outside at the red planet of Mars hovering below us.

"Never am. But I need to see him one last time."

I guide her through the prison facility that orbits Mars. Since Zariah gave birth to our twins, she's become more driven than before. She's the planner, the instigator, the one who seeks to end our division by healing common weaknesses and bonding us all where we are strongest.

The federation has given Zariah a special department to coordinate rescue efforts for orphans and refugee camps on the outer rim, which I'm now a part of thanks to a confession from Jiuli. She's recently joined our growing team and has ignited the

core of an Isonian soldier under General Viriden's command.

I'm already looking forward to returning to work on medical advancements with Viriden and Ihna . Sometimes, our rescue missions lead us to discover previously unknown species. But together, we're finding ways to save everyone we can.

Caddok has opened up more since the twins' arrival. He definitely has Zariah's curiosity about others. I know he will grow into a good being like her. I just hope he'll be ready to untangle relations with his native empire when the time comes. Either way, he's found a safe home with us.

I think back to what Zariah said when she told me she wanted to visit her brother as we make our way to his cell. I don't want us to end up like my family. I don't want our children to lose one another like my brother and I did. Just because we come from one place doesn't mean we have to choose to be the same. Our ancestors do not have to decide our actions today.

I take up a guard post in the shadows of the hallway outside his cell. I know where she is even though I cannot see her without MONA's help or my iris enhancements. But for security purposes, all augments and tech are highly regulated. Since Zariah is female, she is permitted a cloak in the all-male prison.

Few ever visit this place, even fewer females. But I've had practice keeping track of her when she's invisible. I know her position by the soft breaths she takes, the way her armor rustles under the cloak, and the lingering scent of her first heat since she brought our sons into the world.

Her brother lifts his head inside his cell. Cazir knows someone is watching him. He gets up, walks to the bars, and finds my eyes in the shadows. "What do you want?"

"To forgive you," Zariah says right in front of him.

He jolts back and frantically scans the area in front of his cell. “What the fuck?”

“Reality is not as beautiful as what we make up in our minds, but it is far more precious,” she adds.

“Zariah?” He swivels as if she’s somehow entered his cell. “Where are you?”

I smirk when he glances at me as if I’d tell him.

Zariah continues. “In order to grow, we must first stop dreaming and accept the here and now. What can we do with this? What could our next step lead to, depending on what it is? Is it going in the direction we want? And do we have a goal that will benefit us today and tomorrow, not just in this moment?”

“What’s with the riddles and shit?” Cazir demands.

Zariah lets out a breath but doesn’t quite sigh in irritation like I would. She is more patient than I am. “Brother, listen to me. I cannot get you out of here. And I don’t want to. You killed a lot of people, stole from even more, betrayed your family, and gave up on the boy I knew when we were younger.”

His jaw slacks. He hangs his head and looks away.

“You remember when you picked me up from the gravel pit after I fell during kickball? You bandaged my knees with scraps of fabric from your own shirt.

“You think I learned to be good from Mom, but she was only part of it.” Zariah shows her face to him. “Look at me.”

He reluctantly meets her gaze.

“There is goodness in you that rotted out because of our father. I know you were just

trying to survive. I just wish you had run with me. But you didn't. And here you are. But that doesn't mean you can't have a better life.

"Talk to the feds. Tell them what you know. Help us make this universe a better place.

"The war with the Nebulous Empire isn't getting any easier. We need to be united. You've been on the inside of critical vessels. Help us help each other."

He runs a hand down his face.

"I miss that good side of you, brother. I want to see it again," she says. "Our sons would benefit from seeing you break the cycle and heal from the poison our father laced your veins with."

"I have two nephews?" He tugs on the bars of his cage out of frustration. "I can't make promises, Zariah. It's been a year."

She steps back. "Then I'm afraid this is the last time that I will visit. I don't want my children to grow up with your kind of influence in their lives. I want them to be proud of you, not pity or hate you. So they will just not know much of you at all."

Zariah conceals herself completely, her face fading like a hot mirage over a cooling starship thruster. She walks toward me. "Let's go. This was clearly a mistake."

Nothing Zariah does is a mistake.

"Wait," her brother calls to her.

She stops. I can hear her beside me and catch the scent of her musk in the air. My core heats and eases light to the surface of my skin.

Cazir studies me as I draw her protectively close.

“Call the guards,” he says. “Tell them I need Tenac. I’ll give them everything I can. Just promise you’ll visit.”

“I’ll make that promise when I have proof you’ll do what you say,” Zariah replies.

He slumps and leans against his bars. “Fair enough.”

She slides an arm around me. “I may be disappointed in you, but I still love you, brother.”

He lifts his head in surprise as Zariah leads me out of the prison. I relay his requests to the out-processing officer, then walk out to the hangar.

Zariah uncloaks when we’re aboard my ship. MONA closes the ramp as we slip into our seats. I guide us out of the dock and into space.

Zariah doesn’t speak as she belts in and stares out at the stars.

“You okay?” I ask, resting a hand on hers.

She looks over at me, a hesitant smile forming on her face. “As much as I hate the way my life started, I am glad for the struggles that made me who I am because they led me to you.”

I draw her fingers to my lips and kiss them. She closes her eyes as a tear slips down her cheek. It breaks me to see her cry when I know she’s trying so hard to be strong.

“MONA, guide us home,” I say.

“Yes, sir.” MONA opens a portal and launches us through, into lunar orbit.

I unbelt Zariah, collect her in my arms, and then settle her into my lap. “I have to confess something.”

Her eyes look up at me from my shoulder with soft lashes and a dreamy smile.

“I used to wish I was born a winged Talhuskin so I could simply fly away. I’d have given anything to be from Ferrim so I could move ferrous materials by feel. I hated that I was a serum-giver, a healer, a commodity tossed around like a manufacturing plant. It was mostly because my species was dying. I had no friends except you, and I rarely managed to get to a spaceport when you were there before you disappeared again.

“You saved me more than once. To me, you are hope. Hope for my people as much as you are for me. But you’ve done so much for this universe already that I feel like I’m trying to hold on too tightly. I just have a desperate need to protect you. But I fear my desires might stifle your true potential. Does that make sense?”

She braces the side of my face and guides my lips to hers. I savor the taste of her velvety tongue as it glides over mine. My core stirs and lights my skin.

I look away and force out a breath, wishing it wouldn’t give away the true power of her touch.

She giggles. “Elix, I love that you want me so much. And I don’t ever want to be without your sexy green ass ever again.”

The spaceport outside Earth comes into view. StarBuster is docked in a repair hangar getting upgraded with the reward money Zariah got for turning in her family plus the triple-ticket price Ruby refunded last year. Zariah tried not to take it and gave most of it away to refugee organizations, including Ihna’s medical outreach. But I’m glad I convinced her to give our new home a battle-worthy makeover.

“MONA?” she asks. “Please orbit Earth once before docking in Tempest .”

“Understood.”

MONA guides my ship away from the port to circle Earth.

“What’s that for?” I ask her.

Zariah gently tugs my bottom lip between her teeth until it slips from her grasp.

My core pulses faster. When her scent changes, carrying heavier notes of musk and her skin, I know she wants me.

Zariah kisses me, mischief sparkling in her eyes. “Don’t want your species to die off.”

I hug her to me and practically run us to our nest. I’ve built it up since our family expanded, and it provides a plentiful cushion as I launch us into the pile.

Zariah squeals a joyful sound that I’ve not heard before from her. She sheds her clothes as I kick out of mine. I roll onto my bare back and guide her on top of me, savoring her plush breasts, still swollen with milk for our sons. Her hair falls around my face in a soft curtain, making her even more stunning.

I guide the tendrils from her eyes as my cock swells with hunger to feel her warmth surround me again. She wiggles her hips down over mine, sheathing herself over my rigid shaft. Her grunt of relief makes my core ache with joy.

“I love you,” I rasp.

“Love you more.” Zariah rests her forehead to mine. I can hear her heart pounding and sense it in her body beneath my hands. I can feel it in her core, the one that holds

me now—her willing hostage for life.