



# Pact with the Alien Devil

## (Brides of the Vinduthi #7)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I agreed to serve him for thirty days. I didn't agree to crave his hands on my skin.

One job. One bad call. That's all it took to land me in the crosshairs of the Fangs syndicate—and in the hands of Korvan, their Vinduthi enforcer with a voice like smoke and a body built for war.

His offer? Serve him for a month, or well, I didn't want to know the else.

I should've said no. Should've walked away the second I saw the heat in his eyes—or the fangs he doesn't bother to hide when he's angry.

Now I'm tangled in a mission I never asked for, neck-deep in mercenaries, lies, and a dangerously possessive alien who swears he doesn't take what isn't offered.

Except the way he looks at me says he's going to ruin me. Slowly. Thoroughly. And when the time comes, I might just beg him for it.

Thirty days of service. One brutal, beautiful mistake.

And a deal I might not survive with my heart—or my body—intact.

**Total Pages (Source):** 22

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:05 am*

The Dead Man's Dock stank of desperation and cheap booze. I pushed through the crowd, ignoring the brush of fingers against my jacket and the hiss of conversations in languages I only half understood.

Thodos Station never slept, and the Promenade level hummed with life at all hours—mostly the kind that thrived in shadows.

I rubbed my thumb against the worn spot on my sleeve, a nervous habit I'd never managed to break. Four days without sleep; and the delivery should have been simple. Take the package, drop it off, collect my credits. But nothing in my life ran smoothly.

"You're late," the contact snapped when I slid onto the stool beside him.

"Traffic was murder," I answered, with a shrug. The truth—that I'd spent an extra hour dodging station security patrols—wouldn't win me any points.

He didn't laugh. "Where is it?"

I pulled the small package from my inner pocket and slid it halfway across the bar; my hand still grasping it. The contact, Miggs—I remembered from our brief comms exchange—grabbed for it, but I held firm.

"Payment first."

Miggs snorted, his greasy hair falling across his forehead. Dark circles underlined his bloodshot eyes, and sweat beaded on his upper lip, despite the bar's chill. Something

wasn't right.

"Half now, half when I confirm it's all there," he countered, his fingers twitching.

I almost walked. Deals with jumpy clients rarely ended well, and I didn't like people who changed the rules mid-deal.

But the docking fees for the Starfall were due, and my fuel cells needed replacing, and the loan shark I'd borrowed from to cover repairs last month had sent not-so-subtle reminders that payment was expected.

"Fine." I released my grip on the package, letting him pull it closer.

He fumbled with the seal, breaking it open just enough for us to glimpse the contents. My stomach dropped.

Not simple contraband. Not illicit pharmaceuticals. Not even weapons parts.

Alliance military tech. Shit.

Sleek, black, with the telltale blue power signatures that marked it as top-grade weapons systems tech. The kind people killed for—and not just people, but organizations. Syndicates.

I pulled back, my hand instinctively moving toward my blaster. "What the hell, Miggs? You told me this was a simple drop."

His eyes darted around the bar. "Does it matter? Just shut up and take the credits."

He shoved a small transfer chip across the bar. I checked the amount on my wrist scanner—only half my payment. Better than nothing, but nowhere near enough to

cover both the docking fees and to keep the loan sharks at bay.

I pocketed the chip, preparing to stand. “Where’s the rest? You’ve confirmed it.”

Miggs grabbed my wrist. His fingers dug in hard enough to bruise. “You’ll get it when I deliver the goods to my client. People are looking too hard for this.”

My stomach plummeted.

“And you thought using me as your delivery girl was a good way to avoid them?” I yanked my arm away. “Goodbye, Miggs.”

“Wait—” His eyes widened, fixed on something behind me. The bar had gone quiet, the usual din of conversation had fallen to whispers. “Oh, no. Too late.”

I glanced over my shoulder and felt the air leave my lungs.

A group of Vinduthi had entered the bar. Their gray skin made them look like they’d been carved from stone; with dark markings swirling down the side of their faces and disappearing beneath their clothing. The small horns protruding from their temples caught the dim light of the bar.

“Shit,” I muttered, turning back to find Miggs already slipping off his stool. “Where are you going?”

“Sorry,” he whispered, shoving the package back into my hands. “They’ve seen me with you already. If we both run, we’re dead. This way, one of us makes it.”

Before I could protest, he darted through the crowd, leaving me alone with stolen Alliance tech and a gang of Vinduthi closing in.

I considered dropping the package and walking away. Let someone else deal with the mess. But Miggs was right—they'd seen us together.

And there was no escaping a Vinduthi on the hunt.

The thought of fleeing crossed my mind, but my body refused to move. Pride kept my feet planted, even as the tallest of the Vinduthi approached—a male with gleaming red eyes and a face that looked like it hadn't smiled in decades.

The air in the bar grew heavy as conversations died. Glasses stopped clinking. Even the automated drink dispensers seemed to pause.

"Human," the Vinduthi said, stopping directly in front of me. His voice was deep and steady, with none of the nervousness I'd seen in Miggs. "You have something that belongs to us."

I tucked the package closer to my side. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His gaze flicked to where my arm pressed against the parcel, then back to my face. "We tracked a shipment of technology to this station. The signal ends here, in this bar."

My fingers itched to reach for my blaster, but the two Vinduthi flanking him could move before I finished the thought. They'd cut me down before I cleared my holster.

"Look, I'm just a courier. I was hired to make a delivery. I didn't know what was in the package."

"And yet you still have it," he said, taking a step closer. The heat from his body reached me, even from a foot away. "If you were only a courier, the exchange would be complete."

His red eyes missed nothing.

Damn it. He had a point.

“The buyer ran.” I nodded toward where Miggs had disappeared. “I was just about to turn around and leave myself.”

He studied me, eyes narrowing. “You’re lying.”

“Not completely.” I managed a smile. “Just omitting certain truths.”

To my surprise, his mouth twitched slightly. Not a smile—I doubted he was capable of one—but a break in that stone-cold expression.

“Your name,” he demanded.

“Iria Jann.”

He nodded, as if confirming something. “The smuggler with the modified freighter. The one who slipped through the Caraxis Blockade.”

My heart skipped. That job was supposed to be a secret. “You’re mistaken.”

“No.” His certainty unnerved me. “The Vinduthi collect information as others collect wealth. It fuels our operations.”

One of his soldiers leaned in to whisper something, and the lead Vinduthi nodded.

“I am Korvan,” he said, returning his attention to me. “Lieutenant to Alkard of the Fangs. The package you hold contains weapons systems stolen from an Alliance military outpost. They were meant for us.”

My throat went dry. The Fangs were the most powerful Vinduthi syndicate on Thodos Station. They controlled half the station's black market, and their leader, Alkard, was said to be as ruthless as he was cunning.

"Lieutenant?" I questioned, trying to buy time to figure out a plan. "You crime syndicates playing soldier now?"

A flash of something—pride, perhaps—crossed his face. "Alkard and I served together in the Border Conflicts. Many of the Fangs' higher ranks are veterans of that war. Old titles, old loyalties... they endure."

I studied his face, trying to understand why he was telling me this. Perhaps he wanted me to see the Vinduthi as more than just criminal enforcers—to understand the structure and discipline behind their operations. Or maybe he was just assessing how I'd use the information.

Whatever he wanted, it didn't matter to me. I just needed to get out of here in one piece.

"Meant for you?" I repeated, steering the conversation back to the package.

"We had arranged to purchase them through other channels." Korvan's gaze dropped to the package again. "Then someone decided to cut us out of the deal."

"Well, that someone wasn't me." I held out the package. "Here. Take it. I want nothing to do with this."

He reached for it, his gray fingers nearly brushing mine when a flash of movement caught my eye.

Miggs, darting back through a side door, pistol raised.

“Watch out!” I shoved Korvan aside as plasma fire scorched the air where he’d been standing. The package tumbled from my grasp as I dove behind the bar.

More shots rang out. Glass shattered. Someone screamed.

I drew my blaster, risking a glance over the bar top.

Miggs was fleeing again, this time with the package tucked under his arm. The Vinduthi soldiers had taken cover, returning fire, as patrons scattered.

Korvan, however, moved with astonishing speed. He vaulted over an upturned table and tackled Miggs to the ground. The package skidded across the floor, coming to rest near me.

I grabbed it and considered my options.

I could run. In the chaos, I might make it back to the Starfall before they caught me. But then what? The Vinduthi never stopped hunting their prey.

Or I could turn the package over to Korvan and hope he was feeling generous enough to let me live.

Neither option appealed.

A third choice presented itself as I spotted the service entrance behind the bar.

Unlike the main exits, which would be the first places the Vinduthi would watch, the maintenance tunnels beyond were a maze known only to station workers and smugglers who'd paid good money for that knowledge.

If I could lose myself in the station's infrastructure, I'd have access to docking bays



they wouldn't think to monitor.

“Don’t even think about it.”

I turned to find Korvan standing behind me, having circled around during my deliberation. His eyes bore into mine, and something in my chest fluttered—fear, I told myself.

“The package,” he held out his hand. “Now.”

I clutched it tighter. “And then what? You kill me for knowing too much?”

“If I wanted you dead, you wouldn’t be talking.” His gaze swept over me, assessing. “You have skills we could use. Your reputation precedes you—the smuggler who can slip past any security system.”

“That’s just a rumor.”

“Is it?” He stepped closer, and I backed against the bar. The warmth radiating from his body was unlike anything I’d felt from a human.

“The Caraxis Blockade had triple-layered scanners. Yet you passed through undetected with a hold full of contraband.”

I fought, and lost, the war against the snark. “Lucky day.”

“Skill,” he corrected. “The kind the Fangs value.”

Somewhere in the bar, Miggs groaned. I realized Korvan’s soldiers had him pinned to the floor.

“What are you suggesting?” I asked, my fingers tightening around the package.

“A deal.” Korvan’s voice dropped lower, meant only for my ears. “Work for me. One month of service in exchange for your life.”

I laughed. “That’s not much of a choice.”

“It’s the only one you have.” His gaze bored through me, and something passed between us—a current of understanding, or maybe just the recognition of two predators sizing each other up.

“You’re resourceful, Iria Jann. Prove your worth, and you may find the Fangs to be generous allies.”

My name on his lips sent an unexpected shiver down my spine. I pushed the feeling aside, focusing on survival.

“And if I refuse?”

His expression hardened. “Then you join your friend over there. Though his fate,” he glanced toward Miggs, “will be considerably less pleasant than yours.”

As if on cue, Miggs let out a pained cry.

“Fine,” I said, holding out the package. “One month. But I keep my ship, and when this is over, I walk away clean. No debts, no bounties, no Vinduthi shadows following me across the galaxy.”

Korvan took the package, his fingers brushing against mine. Even through that brief contact, I felt the unnatural warmth of his skin. The touch lingered, and something flickered in the depths of his eyes that I couldn’t quite identify.

“Agreed,” he said. “Though I suspect you may find working for the Fangs more... rewarding than you expect.”

Something in his tone made my pulse quicken. I blamed it on the adrenaline still coursing through my veins.

“Don’t count on it,” I muttered.

He turned to his soldiers. “Take this one,” he nodded toward Miggs, “to Alkard. He’ll want to know who hired him.”

“And me?” I asked.

Korvan’s gaze returned to mine, assessing. “You’ll come with me.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:05 am*

I marched the human through the back hallway of the Dead Man's Dock, my hand firm on her upper arm but not crushing. Alkard taught me the fine line between showing strength and causing unnecessary harm. Most humans broke too easily.

This one—Iria Jann—hadn't broken yet.

The private room waited at the end of a narrow corridor lined with pipes that hissed with steam.

The bar owner had cleared out when my men arrived.

Smart decision. The door slid open at my approach, revealing a small, stark space with metal walls and a single overhead light.

A security bulb, cheap and harsh, cast everyone's face in unflattering angles.

"Sit," I ordered, releasing her arm and gesturing to one of the two chairs at the small metal table.

She rubbed her arm where I'd gripped it. "Careful with the merchandise. I bruise easily."

I said nothing, placing the stolen package between us on the table.

A blue glow pulsed through the thin seam of the container, bathing our faces in cool light.

Alliance tech—military grade weapons systems with neural interface capabilities.

The kind that gave even a weak, untrained human the reflexes of a combat veteran.

“You have no idea what you were carrying,” I said.

Iria leaned back in her chair, her body language deceptively relaxed, but I caught the subtle tension in her neck, and the way her eyes darted toward the exit.

“Enlighten me, then.”

“Neural interface targeting systems. Military grade. With this,” I tapped the box, “even a child could operate heavy weaponry with deadly precision.”

“No wonder everyone wants it.” Her fingers drummed against the tabletop. “Look, I told you—I’m just the delivery person.”

“You’re a smuggler,” I corrected. “Iria Jann, captain of the Starfall . Known for slipping past security grids and blockades without detection.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Been checking up on me?”

“The Vinduthi make it a point to know every operator on our territory.”

“And by ‘territory,’ you mean half of Thodos Station?” She crossed her arms. “I wasn’t aware I needed Vinduthi permission to make deliveries here.”

“When the delivery involves tech stolen from one of our arranged purchases, you do.” I traced one of the orange markings on my arm, a habit when thinking. “Who put you in contact with Miggs?”

“Some guy named Lenz. Contact of a contact. Said it was a simple job—pick up from a shuttle bay on the Merchant level, drop at the Dock. Half payment up front, half on delivery.”

“You’re lying.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Lenz is one of our informants. He doesn’t deal in tech.”

A flush spread across her cheeks. “Fine. It was a woman named Dara. But everything else is true.”

I studied her face. Humans showed so much in their expressions, even when they tried to hide it. This one wore her defiance openly, but fear flickered beneath. Not terror, though—she wasn’t panicking. Just the healthy fear of someone who understood the danger they faced.

“Better,” I acknowledged. “Though still not the full truth.”

Her jaw set. “I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

“Start with why you took a job delivering stolen Alliance tech through Vinduthi territory without checking out your clients properly.” I leaned forward. “A smuggler of your caliber should have known better.”

She glanced away, a tell. “I needed the money.”

“For what?”

“Does it matter?” Her voice sharpened. “Docking fees, fuel cells, repairs—the

Starfall isn't cheap to maintain. And I've got a loan shark breathing down my neck."

Now we'd reached the heart of it. I nodded. "Money problems. How much do you owe?"

"Ten thousand credits."

"That's significant." I sat back, the chair creaking under my weight. "And the payment for this delivery?"

"Three thousand." She frowned. "Not enough to clear my debt, but enough to keep me flying another month."

I considered her situation. A desperate smuggler with a ship to maintain and debts to pay.

Useful. Exploitable. Under different circumstances, I might have simply eliminated her, but something about her intrigued me.

The way she'd warned me before Miggs fired.

The courage to face down Vinduthi soldiers without breaking.

"Tell me about the Starfall," I said.

The question surprised her. "What about it?"

"Specifications. Modifications. Range."

Her eyes grew suspicious, but she answered, "Modified Stellar Rim freighter. Custom engines, reinforced hull plating. Shielding that doesn't register on standard scanners."

Pride crept into her voice. “She’s fast, maneuverable, and can slip past most security checkpoints undetected.”

“The ship that made the Caraxis Blockade run,” I mused.

“So you keep saying.” She shifted in her seat. “What does my ship have to do with anything?”

“Everything.” I tapped my fingers on the package. “The Fangs have need of a smuggler with your particular talents.”

She narrowed her eyes. “For what, exactly?”

“I’m offering you a choice.” I kept my voice steady. “Work for me—exclusively—for one month. Make the deliveries I require, gather the information I need, and in return, I’ll clear your debts.”

“All of them?”

“All of them.” I nodded. “Ten thousand to your loan shark, plus enough to cover your operating costs. You’ll end the month with a clean slate.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And if I refuse?”

“Then I turn you over to Alkard for interfering with Fang business.” I let the implication hang in the air. Alkard’s methods of dealing with those who crossed the Fangs were legendary. Not all of the stories were exaggerated.

Iria crossed her arms. “Doesn’t sound like much of a choice.”

“It’s more than most get.”



She bit her lower lip, thinking. The gesture drew my attention to her mouth, which was surprisingly full for her otherwise angular face. I looked away, irritated with myself for noticing such a detail.

“What kind of jobs?” she asked finally.

“Various deliveries. Information gathering. Nothing beyond your capabilities.”

“Dangerous?”

“Potentially.”

“Illegal?”

I almost laughed. “You’re a smuggler. Does that matter?”

“Depends on the kind of illegal.” She leaned forward. “I don’t run people. I don’t deliver to slavers. And I don’t transport anything that breathes unless they’re paying passengers.”

“Admirable principles for a criminal.”

“Even criminals have lines they don’t cross.”

I studied her, impressed despite myself. “The Fangs don’t deal in slavery. Alkard has... strong views on the practice.”

She raised an eyebrow, clearly not expecting that answer.

“We primarily deal in information, technology, and certain restricted substances,” I continued. “Your duties would involve transporting packages similar to this one,” I

gestured to the tech between us, “as well as gathering intelligence from contacts across the station.”

Iria blew out a breath, considering. “One month?”

“One month.”

“And after that, I’m free to go? No strings attached?”

“Provided you fulfill your end of our arrangement, yes.”

She drummed her fingers on the table again. “I want it in writing. A contract.”

“The Vinduthi don’t use written contracts. Our word is our bond.”

“Well, I’m not Vinduthi,” she countered. “And in my experience, promises evaporate when they become inconvenient.”

Clever woman. I reached inside my jacket and withdrew a small data pad.

“Terms,” I said, sliding it across the table.

“One month of exclusive service to the Fangs, specifically under my command. In return, all your debts cleared and safe passage from Thodos Station at the conclusion of your contract.”

Her eyes widened slightly in surprise as she took the pad. “You came prepared.”

“I rarely leave matters to chance.”

She scanned the document, her brow furrowing as she read. “What’s this about my

ship?”

“The Starfall remains yours, but during the month of your service, we may need to install certain... modifications.”

“What kind of modifications?” Her tone sharpened.

“Enhanced shielding. Communications scramblers. Nothing that would compromise your vessel’s integrity.”

She looked up, eyes flashing. “My ship stays as is. No modifications without my express approval.”

I admired her protectiveness. Most smugglers felt the same about their vessels. “Fair enough. No changes without your consent.”

She returned to reading, her finger tracing down the screen. “And housing? It says I’ll be provided accommodation on Thodos.”

“You’ll stay at a Fang safehouse. More secure than your ship’s docking bay.”

“I sleep on my ship.”

“Not for the next month, you don’t.” I leaned forward. “If you’re working for the Fangs, you’ll be a target for our rivals. The safehouse offers protection.”

She frowned. “I’ve managed to stay alive this long without Vinduthi protection.”

“And how’s that working out for you?” I gestured to our surroundings. “One botched delivery away from execution?”

Her expression darkened, but she didn't argue the point. Instead, she returned to the contract, making a small sound of displeasure. "This clause about 'reasonable force'—what exactly does that mean?"

"It means that if you attempt to flee before fulfilling your obligations, I'm authorized to retrieve you."

"Retrieve," she repeated flatly. "Like lost property?"

"Like a valuable asset." I kept my tone flat. "One month, Iria Jann. Serve it well, and you walk away with your debts cleared and your freedom intact."

She stared at me across the table, measuring my words against the threat I represented. I waited, patient. Humans often needed time to process their options, even when the choice was clear.

"What guarantee do I have that you'll honor your end?" she asked finally.

"The Vinduthi keep their word. It's a matter of honor."

"Honor doesn't mean much in the smuggling business."

"Which is why you're in this situation to begin with." I bared my teeth in what might have passed for a smile. "But unlike your previous employers, when I make a promise, I keep it."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:05 am*

She held my gaze, searching for deception. I allowed the scrutiny. Let her look. Let her see the truth of my words. The Vinduthi might be many things—violent, dangerous, feared—but we valued our reputation. A Vinduthi who broke their word became outcast, shunned by their own kind.

“Fine,” she said at last. “One month. But I want my ship secured at a private dock, not the public bays.”

“Agreed.”

“And I want access to it. Regular maintenance checks.”

“Supervised access,” I countered. “Twice weekly.”

Her mouth twisted, but she nodded. “Supervised, then.”

I reached across the table, palm up. “Do we have a deal?”

She hesitated only a moment before placing her smaller hand in mine. The contact sent an unexpected jolt through my arm. Her skin felt cool against mine—Vinduthi ran hotter than humans—and surprisingly soft for one who worked with her hands.

“Deal,” she said. “But if you or your men lay a hand on my ship without permission, all bets are off.”

I closed my fingers around hers, careful not to grip too tightly. “Understood.”

Her eyes dropped to our joined hands, and I wondered if she felt the same strange current that I did. Unlikely. Humans rarely responded to Vinduthi physiology that way.

My communicator buzzed.

“Prisoner secure?” the message read.

“Affirmative,” I replied. “Alkard will want to interrogate him personally.”

“Understood. I’ll prepare the holding cell.”

I tucked the communicator away. Raxin had been with the Fangs almost as long as I had. We’d fought side by side in dozens of operations. If there was anyone I trusted with security matters, it was him.

I released her hand and stood. “We leave within the hour. Gather whatever you need from your ship and meet me at docking bay sixteen.”

“That fast?”

“The sooner we begin, the sooner your month ends,” I pointed out.

She stood as well, her height not much higher than my chest. I towered over her, but she didn’t shrink away. “What about Miggs?”

“Alkard will deal with him.”

Something flickered across her face—concern, perhaps, though I couldn’t imagine why she’d care about a man who’d tried to kill her.

“And what does ‘deal with him’ mean, exactly?”

“Miggs attempted to steal from the Fangs. The response will be... appropriate.”

She swallowed. “Will he live?”

“That depends on how useful his information proves to be.” I studied her reaction.

“Does it matter to you?”

“Not really,” she admitted. “But there’s a difference between signing up to be a courier and signing up to be party to murder.”

“You’re not responsible for Miggs’s fate. He chose his path when he drew his weapon.”

She nodded, though doubt remained in her eyes. Another surprise. Most smugglers I’d encountered cared little for anyone’s survival but their own.

“Docking bay sixteen,” I reminded her. “One hour. Bring only what you need.”

“What about the rest of my things?”

“They’ll be secured with your ship.”

She glanced at the doorway. “And I’m free to go? Just like that?”

“You’ve given your word,” I said simply. “I expect you’ll honor it.”

A flash of anger crossed her face. “What makes you so sure I won’t just fly my ship out of here the minute I’m back onboard?”

I allowed myself a small, tight smile. “Because you’re smarter than that.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Meaning?”

“Meaning the Fangs’ reach extends well beyond Thodos Station. You could run, but eventually, you would have to land somewhere. And when you did...”

“Right,” she muttered. “Honor and all that.”

“Precisely.” I gestured toward the door. “One hour, Iria Jann.”

She moved past me, her shoulder nearly brushing my chest in the confined space. A hint of her scent reached me—engine oil, leather, and something uniquely human. Again, that strange current flickered through me.

Inconvenient.

I watched her go, noting the straight line of her spine, the determined set of her shoulders. She didn’t look back as she left. Pride, most likely. Or perhaps she didn’t want me to see the calculation in her eyes.

Either way, I knew she would be at the docking bay. Humans like Iria Jann might strain against confinement, but they were survivors first and foremost. She would adapt. They always did.

I picked up the package from the table, feeling the faint hum of the technology inside. Alkard would be pleased. The tech was recovered, and we’d gained a skilled smuggler in the process.

As I left the room, following Iria’s path out of the bar, I found myself wondering what the next month would bring. Smugglers were notorious for their



unpredictability, their tendency toward self-preservation above all else. Working closely with one would require vigilance.

Yet something told me Iria Jann would prove to be more complex than the typical criminal I dealt with.

The way she'd pushed the package away when Miggs fired, warning me instead of using the distraction to escape.

The concern, however fleeting, for a man who'd betrayed her. The fierce protection of her ship.

Interesting. Potentially troublesome. Definitely worth watching.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:05 am*

I triple-checked the manual override on the airlock before I pressed my thumb to the scanner. The Starfall's entry hatch slid open with a hiss, welcoming me home.

"Don't touch anything," I warned, not looking back at the Vinduthi enforcer following me.

My boots hit the familiar metal grating of the entry corridor, and for just a second, I closed my eyes.

Familiar smells washed over me—recycled air with undertones of engine oil, the faint metallic tang of the cooling system, and the lingering scent of the Balosian trish I'd brewed that morning. Home.

A moment's peace before heavy footsteps destroyed it.

Korvan ducked through the hatch, his broad shoulders nearly scraping both sides of my ship's narrow entry corridor. His presence immediately filled the space, making my modest freighter feel claustrophobic.

"Your ship is... compact," he said, eyes scanning every detail.

"Not all of us need excess space to compensate for something," I replied, brushing past him toward the cockpit.

He smiled, revealing sharp canines. "And not all of us feel the need to deflect with crude humor."

I ignored that. “Cockpit’s this way. Try not to break anything on your way through.”

The Starfall wasn’t built for comfort or luxury.

She was a workhorse—modified, patched, and enhanced over years until barely anything original remained.

Her corridors were narrow, her quarters small, but her engines were top-grade and her cargo holds had a few special features that customs officials rarely discovered.

Korvan followed me, moving with unexpected grace for someone his size. His gray skin faded in the dim corridor, the orange markings on the left side of his face standing in stark contrast.

“This ship has seen better days,” he observed, running a hand along a patched section of wall.

“She’s seen worse, too.” I slapped his hand away. “And I told you not to touch anything.”

He withdrew his hand, but not before I noticed the calluses that covered his palm—a fighter’s hands, not just those of a crime boss.

“Your precious ship will survive my touch,” he said.

We reached the cockpit, and I dropped into the pilot’s seat, my fingers automatically running through the pre-flight sequence. The worn leather chair molded to my body, the only place in the universe that truly fit me.

Korvan stood behind me, still inspecting everything with those unnervingly attentive eyes. “Where’s my seat?”

I gestured to the co-pilot chair without looking up. “That heap of patched leather on your right.”

“It’s small.”

“You’re big. Life’s unfair that way.” I continued the startup sequence, taking perverse pleasure in every beep and whir that felt like home to me and probably meant nothing to him. “Buckle in or don’t. Your funeral if we hit turbulence.”

The co-pilot’s chair creaked in protest as Korvan lowered himself into it. I glanced over despite myself. He looked ridiculous—all long limbs and broad shoulders crammed into a seat designed for someone considerably smaller.

“Comfortable?” I asked.

“Exceedingly.”

“Good. Now shut up and let me fly.” I tapped the navigation console. “Where exactly are we going? You mentioned an abandoned mining outpost, but I need coordinates.”

Korvan pulled a data chip from his pocket and held it out. “Everything you need is on here. Coordinates, security codes, detailed mission parameters.”

I hesitated before taking it, my fingers carefully avoiding contact with his. “Let me guess. If I try to access anything else on this chip, it’ll fry my systems?”

“You think I’d give you a chip with more info than you need to know?” He leaned back, somehow managing to look at ease despite being folded into the too-small chair. “You’re not the first smuggler to work for us, Iria. We have protocols.”

I inserted the chip and scanned the data as it populated my navigation screen. “The

Kerillian Sector? That's the ass-end of nowhere."

"It's the outskirts of Vinduthi territory. The mining outpost was abandoned after a territorial dispute."

"Abandoned usually means stripped bare and worthless," I said, programming the coordinates. "What exactly are we retrieving?"

"A container. Sealed. Government-grade. You don't need to know what's inside."

"I always like to know what I'm hauling."

The engines hummed to life beneath us, a sound so familiar it was practically part of my heartbeat.

"The last surprise cargo I transported tried to eat through the hull."

"This one won't eat through anything."

"Then tell me what it is."

Korvan's expression hardened. "Research materials. Valuable ones. That's all you need to know."

I rolled my eyes and finished the pre-flight checks. "Fine. Your mysterious box better not blow us up."

I guided the Starfall out of the docking bay and into the open space beyond Thodos Station. The ship responded to my touch like an extension of my body—each twitch of the controls translated perfectly into movement.

Korvan watched me fly, the tension making the back of my neck prickle. I didn't like being observed this closely.

"What?" I finally snapped after several minutes of silence.

"You're good," he said simply.

"I know."

"Most smugglers I've met talk about their skills. You actually have them."

I shrugged, uncomfortable with whatever passed for a compliment from a Vinduthi crime lieutenant. "If I wasn't good, I'd be dead. Space doesn't forgive mediocrity."

Once we cleared the station's traffic zone, I engaged the FTL drive. The stars stretched into lines around us as the Starfall leapt into hyper speed.

"ETA is about six hours," I said, leaning back in my chair. "Try not to breathe down my neck the whole time."

Korvan unbuckled himself from the co-pilot's seat and stood, stretching to his full height. The top of his head nearly brushed the cockpit ceiling. "Show me the rest of your ship."

It wasn't a request.

I bit back the instinctive refusal that rose in my throat. One month, I reminded myself. One month of this, then freedom and a clean slate.

"Fine." I engaged the autopilot and rose from my seat. "But if you even think about tampering with anything, I'll jettison you into hyperspace. They say you stay

conscious for almost a full minute before your blood boils.”

“Your concern is touching.”

The tour didn’t take long. The Starfall wasn’t exactly spacious. Main cockpit, small galley, even smaller common area, engine room, my quarters (door firmly closed with a “not part of the tour” dismissal), cargo hold, and the maintenance bay.

Korvan examined everything with critical eyes, asking pointed questions about modifications and upgrades. His interest felt invasive, like he was cataloging weaknesses.

“You’ve made significant alterations to the propulsion system,” he noted as we stood in the engine room. “Non-standard configuration.”

“Gives me better acceleration and a smaller energy signature,” I replied. “Harder to track.”

“And more prone to failure without proper maintenance.”

My head snapped up. “My ship is perfectly maintained.”

“Is that why there’s a fluctuation in the secondary cooling system?”

I blinked in surprise. “How did you?—”

“I can hear it.” He gestured toward one of the coolant tubes. “The rhythm is off.”

I stepped closer to the cooling unit and listened. Sure enough, there was a subtle irregularity I hadn’t noticed before—a slight hiccup in the usual steady hum.

“It’s minor,” I said defensively.

“Until it isn’t.” Korvan crossed his arms. “Then it’s catastrophic.”

“I know my ship.” I turned away from him, hating that he’d spotted a flaw I’d missed. “I’ll check it after we’re in stable hyperspace.”

We returned to the cockpit, where I slumped back into the pilot’s seat, deliberately ignoring him.

The familiar surroundings of my ship should have been comforting, but Korvan’s presence made everything feel foreign.

His scent—something both metallic and earthy—filled the small space, and I caught myself taking deeper breaths than necessary.

“So,” I said after the silence had stretched too long, “what’s on this mining outpost that’s so valuable to the Fangs?”

“I told you?—”

“Research materials, I know. But what kind? Weapons? Biotech? Ancient alien artifacts?” I swiveled my chair to face him. “If I’m risking my ship and my life, I deserve details.”

Korvan studied me for a long moment. “Medical research,” he finally said. “Experimental treatments developed before the outpost was abandoned. Worth a fortune to the right buyer.”

I snorted. “The Vinduthi crime syndicate, suddenly interested in healthcare?”



“We’re interested in profit,” he corrected. “And before you make assumptions, these treatments aren’t for creating bioweapons or addictive substances. They’re legitimate medical advances.”

“Right. And I’m the Empress of Centauri.” I focused on the controls. “Just tell me what to expect when we get there. Security systems? Wildlife? Rival scavengers?”

“The security systems should be dormant. We have the deactivation codes,” Korvan said. “As for wildlife, the planet has minimal indigenous species, none particularly dangerous. Rival scavengers are always a possibility, but the outpost’s location has kept most away.”

“That’s suspiciously straightforward for a job that required kidnapping a smuggler.”

“We didn’t kidnap you. We offered you a deal.”

“A deal where the alternative was death,” I pointed out.

Korvan leaned forward, his voice dropping lower. “There are always choices, Iria Jann. You could have chosen death. You didn’t.”

A chill ran down my spine at his matter-of-fact tone. “Most people prefer living.”

“Most people haven’t seen what I’ve seen,” he replied.

Before I could respond, a sharp alarm cut through the cockpit. Red lights flashed across my control panel.

“What’s happening?” Korvan demanded, instantly alert.

I scanned the readouts, my heart racing. “That cooling system issue you spotted? It

just got a lot worse.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:05 am*

I shut down the alarm with a quick sequence of buttons and pulled up the diagnostic screen. Numbers flashed across it, none of them good.

“We need to drop out of hyperspace,” I said, already adjusting the controls. “If that coolant line ruptures at FTL speeds, we’re dead.”

The stars reappeared as the Starfall decelerated sharply. We drifted in empty space, the engines humming at minimal power.

“How bad is it?” Korvan asked, leaning over my shoulder to examine the readouts.

“Bad enough,” I replied, unbuckling my harness. “If we don’t fix it, we won’t make it to the outpost. I need to get into the maintenance bay.”

Korvan followed me through the ship to the small access hatch near the engine room. I keyed in the code and the panel slid open, revealing a cramped space filled with pipes, wires, and control units.

I pulled a tool belt from a nearby hook and strapped it around my waist. “I need to get in there and replace the faulty regulator. It’ll be tight.”

“You need assistance,” Korvan stated.

“I need you to stay out of my way,” I countered. “This is delicate work, and I don’t need your massive hands breaking something else.”

“I’ve worked on ship systems before.”

“Not on my ship.” I pulled myself up through the hatch and into the maintenance crawlspace.

The space was designed for someone smaller than me, let alone someone Korvan’s size. I crawled forward on my elbows, tools clinking against my side, until I reached the cooling unit access panel.

I pulled a screwdriver from my belt and began removing the panel, only to curse as one of the screws, stripped from age, refused to budge.

“Everything alright in there?” Korvan called from below.

“Fine,” I grunted, applying more force. The screw twisted suddenly, slicing my finger. “Son of a?—”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Just a cut.” I sucked the blood from my fingertip and continued working.

The panel finally came loose, revealing the coolant regulator—a small device about the size of my palm, clearly corroded around the edges.

“I found the problem,” I called out. “Regulator’s shot. Pass me the replacement from the toolbox.”

There was a moment of silence, then Korvan’s voice. “Which one?”

I sighed. “Silver cylinder, green connection ports, about this big.” I held my hands apart, before realizing he couldn’t see me. “Just grab the toolbox and hand it up.”

The heavy toolbox appeared in the hatchway. I reached for it, but miscalculated the

weight. It slipped in my grasp, and I scrambled to catch it before it crushed my fingers.

Suddenly Korvan was there, his large frame somehow squeezed partway into the maintenance bay, his hand supporting the weight of the box.

“I said I’d help,” he reminded me.

“I don’t need?—”

“Pride gets people killed, Iria.” He pushed the box toward me. “Take it.”

Our fingers brushed as I took the toolbox, and an unexpected jolt shot up my arm. I jerked back, nearly banging my head on a pipe.

“The replacement regulator is in the second drawer,” I said, ignoring whatever that reaction had been.

I found the part and set to work removing the old regulator. The close quarters made the job difficult, sweat beading on my forehead as I contorted to reach the connection points.

“You do this often?” Korvan asked, still hovering nearby.

“Often enough.” I twisted a stubborn fitting. “The Starfall’s been flying for thirty years. Pretty much everything needs replacing sooner or later.”

The old regulator finally came free. I tossed it aside and began installing the new one, but the primary connection bolt wouldn’t align properly in the cramped space.

“Hold this steady,” I said reluctantly, gesturing Korvan closer.

He squeezed further into the bay, his body heat immediately noticeable in the confined space. His arm reached past me, large gray hand steadying the regulator housing.

I worked quickly, acutely aware of his proximity. The musky, metallic scent of him filled my nostrils. Despite the coolant system's malfunction, the temperature seemed to rise several degrees.

"Almost done," I muttered, more to myself than to him.

As I tightened the final bolt, the ship lurched slightly—a minor power fluctuation—sending me off-balance. I fell back against Korvan's chest, solid as a wall behind me.

His free arm instinctively wrapped around my waist, steadying me. For one suspended moment, I was pressed against him, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against my back.

"Sorry," I said, pulling away quickly. "Power fluctuation."

"You should check the primary power coupling while we're here," he suggested, his arm lingering around me a moment longer than necessary, before withdrawing.

"It's fine," I said, my voice sharper than intended. "This is all we needed to fix."

I finished securing the new regulator and closed the access panel. "Let's get out of here."

Backing out of the maintenance bay proved even more awkward than getting in. Korvan went first, his powerful frame somehow navigating the tight space with unexpected agility. I followed, passing him the toolbox before dropping down

through the hatch.

Back in the corridor, I straightened my clothes and avoided eye contact.

“That should solve our cooling problem,” I said, all business. “We can get back on course.”

“Your hand is bleeding,” Korvan observed.

I glanced down. The cut on my finger had reopened, a thin line of red trailing across my palm. “It’s nothing.”

Before I could react, Korvan took my hand in his, turning it to examine the wound. His skin was surprisingly warm against mine, his touch unexpectedly gentle for hands so large and clearly designed for combat.

“You have a first aid kit?” he asked.

I pulled my hand away. “It’s a scratch. I’ve had worse paper cuts.”

Something flickered in his expression—amusement, perhaps. “Even small wounds get infected, Iria. Especially when working with ship systems as old as these.”

“Fine. There’s a kit in the galley.” I walked ahead of him, unsettled by the lingering sensation where his fingers had touched mine.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:05 am*

The blue light of hyperspace cast strange patterns on Iria's face as she piloted the Starfall . Her fingers danced across the controls, each movement precise. I watched her from my seat, analyzing her technique.

She'd surprised me so far. Most smugglers I'd dealt with crumbled under pressure, but Iria maintained her composure even when faced with my direct threats. Her resourcefulness in fixing the cooling system proved she knew her craft inside out. These were useful traits in an asset.

An asset. That's all she was supposed to be. A means to retrieve the research container. Nothing more.

Then why did I keep replaying our moment in the maintenance bay? The way her breath caught when I moved close. The warmth of her skin against mine. The subtle scent of engine oil, and something uniquely her.

I clenched my jaw. This distraction was unprofessional. Dangerous. I shifted in my seat, focusing on the mission parameters.

"We'll arrive in ten minutes," Iria said without looking at me. "You planning to tell me what we're going to find there, or do I get to be surprised?"

"The outpost should be abandoned. We land, retrieve the container, leave. Simple."

She shot me a skeptical look. "Right. Because jobs with you are always simple."

"Expecting complications?"



“With mercenaries like the Black Spikes hanging around this sector? Always.” She tapped a gauge on her console. “Plus, you’re too quiet. You get this look when you’re anticipating trouble.”

“Do I?”

“Your jaw tenses. The horns at your temples catch the light differently when you’re on alert.”

I’d never realized anyone paid such close attention to my mannerisms. It was both impressive and unsettling.

The ship dropped out of hyperspace with a slight shudder, and the vast emptiness of real space replaced the blue tunnel.

Before us loomed the mining outpost – a bloated, industrial monstrosity floating against the backdrop of stars.

Metal spires jutted at odd angles, punctuated by extraction towers and processing plants.

The station hung in orbit around a small, uninhabitable planet whose reddish glow cast the entire structure in an eerie light.

“Charming place,” Iria remarked. “Let me guess – ‘abandoned’ means ‘full of surprises,’ doesn’t it?”

“Stay close and don’t let your guard down,” I replied. “Surprises tend to be lethal, out here.”

As Iria guided the Starfall toward the main bay, I conducted visual scans of the

exterior.

Scorch marks marred the metal hull around several airlocks.

Evidence of past violence. The outpost had been officially evacuated five years ago after the primary ore deposits were depleted, but such places rarely remained truly empty in border territories.

“No signals,” Iria noted. “No comms traffic, no warning beacons. But someone’s left the lights on.” She pointed to a distant section where faint illumination glowed from within.

“Minimal power for essential systems,” I said, but something didn’t fit. The pattern of active sections was too strategic. “Dock at the secondary bay instead of the main entrance.”

She raised an eyebrow but complied without question. “Expecting company?”

“Just being cautious.”

The Starfall glided into the smaller port with only minor adjustments. Iria powered down the engines but left the critical systems running – a smuggler’s habit. Always ready for a quick escape.

“Should I stay with the ship?” she asked.

“No. I need you with me.” The words came out before I’d fully analyzed them. Tactically, having her guard our exit point made sense. But I wanted her where I could see her. Protect her.

We armed ourselves – my Vinduthi plasma rifle and sidearm, her blaster pistol. I

noticed she also slipped a small vibro-blade into her boot. Smart.

The airlock cycled open to reveal the docking bay. The smell hit me first – stale air, metal corrosion, and the faint tang of burned circuitry. My enhanced senses picked up subtler notes beneath: recent passage. Human sweat. Gun oil.

“Someone’s been here,” I murmured.

The bay itself told a story of hasty abandonment. Broken crates lay scattered across the floor. A loading mech stood frozen mid-task, its power cells long dead. Dust covered most surfaces, but not evenly.

I crouched to examine a pattern of footprints that cut through the grime. “Recent. Multiple individuals. Military-grade boots.”

“Not miners coming back for leftover equipment, then,” Iria observed. Her hand rested on her blaster, eyes constantly scanning our surroundings.

“No. Something else.”

We moved through the bay toward the main corridor, our footsteps creating the only sound in the vast space. The overhead lights flickered weakly, creating elongated shadows that danced and shifted as we passed.

“Which way?” Iria whispered.

“Level four, storage section C.”

I took point, moving with the silent precision drilled into me through years of combat training. Iria followed close behind, matching my pace.

The corridor narrowed as we progressed, the ceiling lowering.

The walls bore the marks of the outpost's industrial past – pipes running along joints, exposed wiring, instructional signage faded almost to illegibility.

Most of the side doors were sealed shut, though some had been forced open, the contents of the rooms beyond long since looted.

At an intersection, I paused, listening. Through the silence came the soft hum of active power conduits. This section shouldn't have power. Someone had redirected energy flow.

“What is it?” Iria asked.

“We're not alone.”

Her eyes darted to the shadows ahead. “Black Spikes?”

“Possibly.” I considered our options. “The information about this retrieval job must have leaked. Someone in the Fangs has betrayed Alkard.”

“Your boss has enemies even among his own people?”

“Power always attracts those hungry for it.”

We proceeded more cautiously now, taking a maintenance route rather than the direct path. The shafts were narrow, forcing us to move in single file. I kept Iria behind me, acutely aware of every sound and movement she made.

As we approached a junction, I spotted something on the floor – a discarded ration pack. I picked it up. The wrapper still held warmth.

“They’re close,” I said. “Be ready.”

The storage area lay just ahead, beyond a set of heavy blast doors. A security panel glowed beside it, requiring authorization.

I pulled a decoder from my belt and attached it to the panel. Numbers flickered rapidly across the screen as it cycled through potential codes.

“How long will that take?” Iria asked.

“Not long.” I turned to her. “When we enter, stay behind me.”

Her expression hardened. “I can handle myself.”

“That’s not?—”

“I didn’t survive this long by hiding behind anyone, not even a Vinduthi warrior.”

The frustration in her voice caught me off guard. “I’m not questioning your capabilities.”

“Aren’t you?” She stepped closer, challenging me despite our height difference. “I’m not just some tool for your mission, Korvan. I’m your partner on this job, whether you like it or not.”

The word ‘partner’ struck me oddly. I’d never considered any human my partner before. Servants, assets, tools – yes. Not equals.

The decoder beeped softly, interrupting whatever I might have said. The blast doors slid open with a hydraulic hiss, revealing the storage chamber beyond.

The room stretched before us, cavernous and dimly lit. Rows of shelving units created a maze-like pattern, most empty now but some still holding sealed containers. At the center of the room sat our objective – a government-grade storage pod, its surface gleaming despite the poor lighting.

Something was wrong. The container sat too prominently, too perfectly positioned. Like bait.

I raised my hand, signaling Iria to stop. “It’s too easy,” I whispered.

The warehouse lights suddenly brightened to full intensity, momentarily blinding us. A voice called from the darkness.

“Took you long enough, Korvan.”

Four figures emerged from hiding spots around the room. Black Spikes operatives, each heavily armed. Their leader stepped forward – a scarred Krellan, with cybernetic enhancements visible along his jawline.

“Vex!” I stated. “One of the Black Spikes’ commanders himself. Your syndicate must want this badly.”

He laughed. “Still doing Alkard’s dirty work? The mighty Vinduthi, reduced to errand boys while the Black Spikes grow stronger every day.”

I cataloged our options, measuring distances and angles. Four visible enemies, likely more in hiding. The container sat twenty meters away. Iria stood slightly behind me, her breathing controlled but rapid.

“How did you know we’d be here?” I asked, stalling for time.

“Credits talk. Someone in your organization values money more than loyalty.” Vex gestured toward the container.

“That research is worth more than you know, Korvan. Imagine weapons designed specifically for Vinduthi weaknesses—plasma that burns hotter against our skin, compounds that disrupt our healing abilities.”

His smile widened. “The kind of advantage that shifts power permanently.”

My blood ran cold at the confirmation of our fears, but I refused to let anything show on my face. He didn’t deserve it.

“You’d need to live long enough to use such weapons.”

Iria’s voice came low, meant only for me. “Three more behind the south shelves.”

I’d missed them. She’d spotted what I hadn’t. My estimation of her rose further.

“You know I can’t do that, Vex.” The suggestion alone made my blood run cold—using those weapons would make me no better than the Consortium.

“Then we do this the fun way.”

Everything happened at once. Vex drew his weapon. I shoved Iria toward a stack of crates as blaster fire erupted from multiple directions. I dove in the opposite direction, drawing my own weapon and firing as I rolled.

My first shot caught a mercenary in the chest. He fell without a sound. My second shot missed, as Vex dove behind cover.

Plasma bolts scorched the air around me. I kept moving, using the shelving units for

cover. From the other side of the room, Iria had positioned herself strategically, laying down covering fire with surprising accuracy.

Two more mercenaries closed in on my position.

I holstered my weapon and extended my claws, waiting until they rounded the corner.

The first one never saw me. I struck with Vinduthi speed, claws slashing across his throat.

The second fired wildly, but I grabbed his weapon, wrenching it from his grasp before disabling him with a precise strike.

Across the room, Iria was holding her own, though her fighting style lacked formal training.

She compensated with quick thinking and unpredictable movements.

When one mercenary rushed her position, she used a metal pipe as an improvised weapon, striking with enough force to stagger him before finishing him with a well-placed shot.

I circled back toward the container, eliminating another Black Spike who attempted to flank Iria. The skirmish was turning in our favor when Vex emerged with a heavy assault cannon.

“Down!” I shouted.

Iria dove as a barrage of plasma fire cut through the shelving units. Metal warped and melted under the onslaught.



I sprinted toward Vex, dodging fire as I closed the distance. He tracked me with the cannon, its barrel glowing hot with repeated discharge.

I almost reached him when pain exploded across my side. A stray bolt had caught me, burning through armor and into flesh. I stumbled but didn't fall, pushing through the pain as I'd been trained to do.

"Korvan!" Iria's voice cut through the chaos. "Are you?—"

"Focus on the fight!" I barked, straightening despite the white-hot agony searing my side. Blood soaked through my uniform, but I forced it from my mind.

Vex smiled when he saw my injury. "Not so invincible after all."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

The plasma bolt singed past my ear, heating the metal wall behind me with a hiss.

I ducked behind a crate, clutching my blaster with white knuckles.

The air stank of burning metal and ozone, making my nose wrinkle.

The shadows danced around us as the emergency lights flickered, turning the Black Spikes into ghostly figures one second and invisible threats the next.

My heart hammered against my ribs. This wasn't my kind of fight. I ran from trouble, not toward it. I'd spent years perfecting the art of slipping away unnoticed—not standing my ground.

Why the hell did I agree to this? One month of this insanity, and I'm already about to die.

I risked a glance at Korvan. He moved with brutal precision despite the dark stain spreading across his side. The wound hadn't slowed him down much, but I noticed the slight hitch in his movements. Blood dripped between his gray fingers as he fired back at our attackers.

He's bleeding, and he's still going. How does he do it?

I fired a couple of shots to give myself cover, then ducked back down as return fire peppered the crate.

"We need to move!" Korvan called out, his back pressed against a pillar. "They have

us pinned.”

I scanned the room, my brain racing. The Black Spikes had taken positions on the upper walkway. Three of them, maybe four. And by the sounds echoing down the corridor, more were on the way.

My stomach dropped. Korvan’s movements were growing stiffer, the injury clearly taking its toll. Each dodge a fraction slower than the last. I’d seen enough wounds to know when someone was running on borrowed time.

We wouldn’t survive unless I did something.

I spotted a stack of crates to my right. They formed a rough staircase up to the level where the Black Spikes had positioned themselves. If I could get up there...

“Cover me,” I shouted, not waiting for his response.

I broke from my position, sprinting low across the floor. Plasma fire erupted around me. The heat of a bolt brushed my shoulder as I rolled behind the first crate.

“What are you doing?” Korvan growled, providing covering fire.

I didn’t answer. No time. I scrambled up the stack of crates, using my smaller size to squeeze through gaps that would have stopped Korvan cold. My boots slipped on the metal surface, but I kept climbing.

A Black Spike noticed me just as I reached the top. He swung his weapon toward me, but I was faster. My first shot caught him in the throat and he went down without a sound.

The second mercenary turned, his face twisted in surprise beneath his visor. My

second shot wasn't as clean—it clipped his shoulder. He stumbled back but stayed upright, raising his weapon.

I rolled aside as his shot blasted the crate where I'd been standing. From my new position, I had a clear shot at his unprotected neck. I didn't hesitate.

Two down.

My new vantage point gave me a clear view of the remaining attackers. “Korvan! On your left!”

He spun, almost faster than I could track. The Black Spike who'd been trying to flank him didn't even have time to react before Korvan's claws sliced through the gap in his armor. The mercenary dropped, clutching his throat.

With the pressure momentarily relieved, Korvan surged forward, taking advantage of the opening, I'd created.

His movements were a blur of lethal efficiency.

One of the remaining Black Spikes tried to retreat, but Korvan was on him in an instant.

The mercenary's weapon clattered to the floor, followed by his body.

The last one broke and ran. Korvan let him go, sagging slightly against the wall.

The storage room fell silent. The acrid smell of blood mingled with the burnt metal odor. I climbed down from my perch and rushed to Korvan's side, anger and fear bubbling up inside me.

“You’re an idiot. You could’ve gotten yourself killed!”

Korvan smirked, wincing as he pressed a hand to his wound. “And yet, here I stand.”

“Barely. Sit down before you bleed out, you stubborn bastard.”

To my surprise, he complied, sliding down the wall to sit on the floor. His breathing came in short bursts, but his face remained impassive. Gray skin glistened with sweat, the orange tracery on his cheek standing out in stark contrast.

I knelt beside him and pulled a small medkit from my belt. All smugglers carried one—you never knew when a deal might go south.

“Let me see.”

Korvan moved his hand, revealing a nasty plasma burn that had cut through his armor and seared the flesh beneath. Not immediately fatal, but bad enough.

“It’s not as bad as you think,” he argued. “Vinduthi?—”

“I don’t want to hear it right now. Hold still,” I ordered, cleaning the wound with antiseptic. He didn’t flinch, though it must have hurt like hell.

I worked quickly, applying pressure bandages and sealing the wound as best I could. His skin felt hot under my fingers, different from human skin—smoother, tougher. My hands brushed against the edge of his markings as I secured the bandage.

“You didn’t have to help me,” he murmured.

I avoided his gaze, suddenly aware of how close we were. “I’m not heartless, no matter what you think of me.”

“I never thought you were.”

I looked up, caught off guard by his words. Red eyes watched me intently, their usual coldness softened. For a moment, the chaos around us faded away. The blood, the bodies, the burned metal—all of it receded until there was just us, locked in this strange moment.

Korvan reached out, his fingers brushing a stray strand of hair from my face. The gesture was so unexpected, so uncharacteristically tender, that I froze, momentarily speechless.

His fingers lingered near my cheek, warm against my skin.

I pulled back, breaking the moment. My heart pounded. I couldn't blame the fight.

“Let's just get the damn container and get out of here.”

I stood and offered him my hand. After a brief hesitation, he took it, pulling himself up with a grunt of pain.

“The container should be in the back room,” he said, his professional demeanor returning. “Through that door.”

We crossed the storage room, stepping over the fallen mercenaries. I kept my blaster ready, not trusting that we'd dealt with all of them.

The container sat on a reinforced table, exactly where it was supposed to be. Sleek and black, government-grade security locks running around its perimeter. Whatever was inside, it was valuable enough to kill for.

“Grab it,” Korvan instructed, standing guard at the door. “We need to move quickly.”

That runner will bring back friends.”

I picked up the container. Heavier than it looked, but not unwieldy.

“Ready?” I asked.

Korvan nodded, his eyes sweeping the room one last time. Despite his injury, he stood tall, shoulders squared, every inch the deadly hunter I’d first met. But something had changed. I’d seen beneath that cold exterior, if only for a moment.

For my part, the weight of what just happened settled in my chest. I’d fought alongside him instead of running. I’d patched him up when he was injured. And worst of all, I’d felt something when he touched me—something dangerous.

Just survive one month.

But as we walked back through the outpost, the container tucked securely under my arm, I wondered if survival was going to be as straightforward as I’d hoped.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

My side throbbed with each breath as I sat rigid in the co-pilot seat. The pain burned deep, but I'd suffered far worse over the years. The Starfall's engine hummed beneath us, its vibrations traveling up through the seat and into my bones.

The cockpit lights cast Iria's profile in shadow and blue-tinted light. Her shoulders squared with determination as her fingers danced over the controls. A smuggler with principles. Rare.

The Black Spikes' ambush... the timing, their preparedness—it wasn't coincidence. Someone from within our organization had betrayed us. Our exact location, cargo details—all leaked to our enemies.

Alkard needed to know. The Fangs had a traitor.

I studied Iria from the corner of my eye. During the firefight, she'd surprised me. Most smugglers I'd hired in the past would have fled at the first sign of trouble, leaving me to my fate. Yet she'd stayed, and fought at my side with unexpected skill.

I shifted in the co-pilot seat, wincing as pain radiated from my wound. The movement didn't escape Iria's notice.

"Don't just sit there," she said, glancing at me before returning her attention to the controls. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"I've survived worse," I replied, keeping my voice flat despite the fire in my side.

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I don't want you collapsing on my ship. Go clean



yourself up.”

I remained seated, studying her. “You fought well back there.”

Her hands paused briefly over the navigation controls. “Don't sound so surprised.”

A small smile tugged at my lips. “I'm not. But I am curious... Why didn't you run? You could've left me behind.”

Iria's shoulders stiffened. “I told you, I'm not heartless.” She hesitated, glanced at me, then back to the controls. “And maybe I owed you.”

I leaned forward, curious now. “Owed me?”

“You didn't have to take that plasma bolt for me. You could've let me get hit.” She busied herself with adjusting the ship's course, avoiding my gaze.

The realization struck me oddly. I hadn't consciously decided to shield her—my body had simply moved. An instinct I rarely experienced toward anyone outside the Fangs. A dangerous instinct when directed toward a temporary asset.

She was more than just a survivor. She had principles, values that extended beyond self-preservation. That made her unpredictable. Dangerous, even.

I stood slowly, my fingers pressing against the bandage where fresh blood was seeping through. “I need to send a message to Alkard. And deal with this,” I added, gesturing to my injury.

I left the cockpit without another word, feeling her eyes on my back as I walked away.

In the small galley, I extracted my communicator from an inner pocket. The device hummed as I activated its highest encryption protocols. Alkard needed to know immediately. I composed a coded message—simple, direct, but carrying grave implications:

“Black Spikes had our exact location. There's a traitor within the Fangs. Container retrieved - confirms biological weapons research targeting Vinduthi weaknesses.”

I transmitted the message through our secure channels. Alkard would understand the severity without elaboration. He would begin his own investigation, quietly and ruthlessly.

The pain in my side intensified as the adrenaline faded. I pulled out the medkit stashed beneath one of the galley cabinets. My fingers worked methodically to clean and re-dress the wound

Already the edges were beginning to close, the accelerated healing of my species at work. It would be hours before it fully repaired—the plasma bolt had burned deep, damaging multiple layers of tissue.

I had just finished securing the fresh bandage when a shrill shriek cut through the ship.

Danger. The proximity alarm.

I abandoned the medkit and rushed back to the cockpit, ignoring the sharp pain with each step. Iria hunched over the sensor display, her face illuminated by the red warning lights.

“We’ve got company,” she said, fingers already working combat sequences into the navigation computer.

I leaned over her shoulder, studying the readout. The ship's configuration was unmistakable. "Scavenger ship. They've been tailing us since the outpost."

The first shot hit before Iria could respond. The Starfall rocked violently, throwing me against the bulkhead. Pain exploded across my injured side.

"They think we're vulnerable," I growled, steadying myself against the pilot's chair. "They're wrong."

Iria's hands flew across the controls. "Sit down and strap in. This is going to get rough."

I dropped into the co-pilot seat, fingers finding the harness automatically. The scanner showed two more scavenger ships emerging from behind a small asteroid cluster. Not a coincidence—an ambush.

"Three ships," I said. "Coordinated formation. These aren't ordinary scavengers."

Iria snorted. "No kidding. Ordinary scavengers don't have military-grade targeting systems."

She pitched the ship into a steep dive, evading another barrage of laser fire. Her skills impressed me—most pilots would panic facing three-to-one odds. Iria handled the Starfall with the intimacy of long partnership, anticipating its responses, pushing its limits.

"Any ideas?" she asked, not taking her eyes off the viewscreen.

"The asteroid field," I replied, pointing to a dense cluster in the distance. "Your ship can outmaneuver them in tight spaces."

“The Starfall isn’t exactly built for combat maneuvers in asteroid fields.”

“And those scavenger ships aren’t built for precision flying. They’re retrofitted cargo haulers—heavy, slow to turn.”

She considered for only a second before changing course. “If we crash and die, I’m blaming you.”

“If we crash and die, blame will be the least of our concerns.”

She actually laughed—a sharp, genuine sound that surprised me. “Fair point.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

The proximity alarm screamed through the cockpit as the first plasma bolt sliced past the Starfall's hull, close enough to make the shields shimmer. Red emergency lights bathed everything in their harsh glow, transforming Korvan's gray features into something otherworldly.

I gripped the controls so hard my knuckles turned white. "Shit!"

Another bolt hit us, this time clipping the shield.

The ship lurched sideways. My stomach dropped as I fought to stabilize.

I'd faced danger before—hell, it was practically my job description—but something about this felt different.

Maybe it was the blood still seeping from Korvan's wound.

Maybe it was knowing what was in that container behind us.

Either way, my pulse hammered in my throat.

"Three scavenger ships," Korvan announced, his fingers moving over the secondary control panel. "Class-D Raptors. Old mining vessels retrofitted with military-grade weapons."

"I can see that," I snapped, banking hard to avoid another volley. "Kind of busy trying not to get us killed."

Korvan ignored my tone. “They’re trying to box us in. The lead ship has a tractor modification.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“The energy signature. And the way they’re maneuvering.”

I swung the ship into a tight spiral, throwing off their targeting systems momentarily. I’d run blockades, escaped Alliance patrols, and once even outflown a mercenary squadron. But I’d never done it with a bleeding Vinduthi lieutenant only inches away.

“You need to let me handle this,” I said, yanking the ship in another direction. “I know how to fly my own damn ship.”

“I’m not questioning your abilities,” Korvan replied, maddeningly calm as he rerouted power to the rear shields. “I’m supplementing them.”

Another hit rocked the ship. The controls bucked in my hands.

“Come on, girl,” I muttered to the Starfall . “Don’t let me down now.”

“Their lead ship has a weakness,” Korvan said. “The retrofitted weapons systems drain power from their engines during full discharge. There’s a two-second lag.”

I shot him a skeptical look but filed the information away. “And you know this how?”

“I’ve hunted their kind before.”

Of course he had. What hadn’t this man done?

I banked the ship again, this time diving beneath the formation of scavenger ships.

They adjusted quickly, their engines flaring as they changed course.

“There’s a debris field in sector seven,” I said, checking the nav charts. “If we can reach it...”

“It would give us an advantage,” Korvan finished my thought. “Their ships are larger, less maneuverable.”

“Exactly.”

Our eyes met for a beat too long. It was strange having someone who could follow my thinking without explanation. Stranger still that it was him.

“I’ll redirect auxiliary power to the forward thrusters,” he said. “It’ll give us the burst we need.”

I nodded, plotting the course in my head. “When I say now, hit them with everything we’ve got. Right in their belly.”

Korvan’s fingers hovered over the weapons control. I noticed how long they were, how precise in their movements despite his injury. He had to be in pain, yet nothing in his face or posture betrayed it.

I pushed that thought aside and focused on flying. The scavenger ships were closing in, two from behind and one sweeping around to cut us off.

“They’re coordinating,” I said. “That’s unusual for scavengers.”

“These aren’t ordinary scavengers,” Korvan replied. “They’re too organized.”

Great. Just what we needed.

I pushed the Starfall into a steep climb, then immediately reversed direction, dropping beneath the lead ship just as it fired. The maneuver put us on a direct course for the debris field.

“Hold on,” I warned.

The first fragments of destroyed ships and station parts loomed ahead. I threaded us through a gap barely wider than our hull, scraping past a twisted girder.

The scavengers hesitated, then followed. Just as I’d hoped.

“Now,” I said.

Korvan fired. Our ship shuddered with the discharge. The blast caught the lead scavenger ship square in its underside. Just as Korvan predicted, its weapons faltered for a brief moment. But that moment was all we needed.

I slammed the ship into a full-power turn that would have torn apart a lesser vessel, using a massive chunk of hull plating for cover.

“Again,” I ordered, and Korvan fired a second time.

This shot hit one of the fuel lines. Not enough to destroy the scavenger ship, but enough to damage it severely. It began to drift, belching flames and debris.

“One down,” I muttered.

The other two ships broke formation, suddenly more cautious. They spread out, trying to catch us in crossfire.

I wove through the debris field, my hands moving on instinct. Korvan and I settled



into a rhythm without speaking—him adjusting power outputs and firing weapons as I piloted, anticipating each other's moves before they happened.

It was unnerving how well we worked together.

“They're trying to herd us toward that derelict freighter,” Korvan observed as we dodged another volley.

I saw it too. “They think we'll get trapped between the hull sections.”

“But we won't.”

I grinned despite myself. “No. We won't.”

I banked the ship toward the derelict freighter, making it look like their plan was working. The scavenger ships followed eagerly, closing the distance.

“Ready to invert?” I asked.

Korvan nodded. “Weapons hot.”

I waited until the last possible second, then executed a maneuver that sent us scraping along the freighter's hull before flipping completely around. The sudden reversal caught the scavengers off guard. They tried to adjust but collided with a section of floating debris.

“Now!”

Korvan fired three quick bursts. The first disabled one ship's propulsion system. The second took out the other's weapons array. The third was a warning shot across their bow.

“Impressive,” he said.

A rush of heat spread across my skin. The rush of the fight, the close quarters. That’s all it was.

One of the scavenger ships was retreating, limping away with a damaged engine. The other held position, likely assessing whether we were worth the trouble.

“They’re receiving a transmission,” Korvan said, monitoring the comm frequencies.

“Can you intercept it?”

“No need. They’re leaving.”

Sure enough, the remaining scavenger ship was turning away, following its damaged companion.

I released a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. My shoulders ached from tension. I slumped back in my seat as the proximity alarms finally silenced.

The sudden quiet felt almost oppressive.

“You’re good,” Korvan said after a long moment.

I glanced at him, too tired for my usual snappy comeback. “I know.”

His mouth curved into the barest hint of a smile. “That makes two of us.”

The simple statement contained no arrogance, just fact. And he was right. Whatever else I thought about Korvan, he was good at what he did. Damn good.

“We need to make the jump to hyperspace,” I said, setting the coordinates. “In case they come back with friends.”

Korvan nodded, but I noticed how stiffly he moved now that the immediate danger had passed. The wound from the fight with the Black Spikes had bled through the bandage he’d applied in the galley.

“You should have told me it was getting worse,” I said, frustration edging into my voice.

“And risk you grounding us?” he replied, his stubbornness evident. “The mission comes first.”

“That mindset will get you killed one day,” I muttered. It was the same recklessness I saw in myself—pushing beyond limits, taking unnecessary risks. Maybe that's why we worked together so well, despite everything.

The nav computer beeped, coordinates locked in. I engaged the hyperdrive, and the stars stretched into long streaks of light.

Korvan unbuckled his safety harness and stood. A flicker of pain crossed his features.

“Let me know if you need a hand patching that up,” I offered.

He nodded but paused before leaving the cockpit. “Your skills are... not typical for a smuggler.”

“Most smugglers I've encountered run at the first sign of trouble. They're survivalists, not fighters.”

I kept my eyes on the controls, suddenly uncomfortable with his scrutiny. “I’ve had

practice.”

“More than practice. You have instinct.”

“Thanks for the assessment,” I said dryly. “Now go cover that up before you bleed all over my ship.”

He studied me for another beat, then left without another word.

I exhaled slowly as the cockpit door slid shut behind him. My hands trembled slightly as the adrenaline drained from my system. I flexed my fingers, trying to work out the stiffness.

The man was infuriating. Overbearing. Impossible to read.

And absolutely the last person I should trust.

Yet for those few minutes during the fight, we’d moved in perfect sync, as if we’d flown together for years. I’d never experienced anything like it—not with partners, not with co-pilots, not with anyone.

It bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

I sat alone at the small table, my communicator dark and silent before me. The wound in my side had become a constant battle drum that I refused to acknowledge. Pain was merely information, and right now, I had more important matters to consider.

I replayed the scavenger attack in my mind for the fifth time, dissecting each moment with cold precision.

The ambush had been too organized, too targeted.

Regular scavengers would have struck randomly, not waited at that exact location with a tactical formation.

No, someone had leaked our mission details, our route, our timetable.

Someone within the Fangs had betrayed us.

Alkard would make them pay. My leader did not tolerate traitors. But before justice could be delivered, we needed to identify the culprit. And quickly.

My thoughts drifted to Iria. The human smuggler had surprised me again during the fight. She'd fought beside me with unexpected skill and bravery. Her refusal to abandon the mission—to abandon me—continued to puzzle me.

She was unlike anyone I'd worked with before. Reckless and stubborn, but loyal in a way I hadn't anticipated. I clenched my jaw, trying to dismiss the strange pull I felt toward her. She was just an asset. Nothing more.

The soft hiss of the galley door interrupted my thoughts. Iria stepped in, a steaming cup of Balosian trish in her hand. She paused when she saw me, then crossed to the table and sat down across from me.

“You look awful,” she said bluntly.

I smirked faintly. “You have a talent for compliments.”

“Just calling it like I see it.” She tilted her head, studying my face. “You should rest. Bleeding out on my ship isn’t part of the deal.”

“The wound is healing.” I straightened slightly, ignoring the fresh bolt of pain the movement caused. “The ambush wasn’t a coincidence. Someone betrayed us.”

Her body stiffened, shoulders squaring defensively. “And you think it’s me?”

I studied her reaction carefully—the slight narrowing of her eyes, the set of her jaw, the way her fingers tightened around her cup. All the tells of someone bracing for accusation, but none of the subtler signs of guilt.

“No,” I answered simply. “If it were you, I doubt you’d still be here.”

Her posture relaxed slightly, but suspicion lingered in her expression. “So why the interrogation room stare down? You’ve barely blinked since I walked in.”

“Vinduthi don’t need to blink as often as humans.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.” She leaned forward, her voice dropping lower. “Why do you keep looking at me like that?”

The question caught me off guard. I hadn’t realized my observation had been so

obvious. I considered deflecting, but something pushed me toward honesty.

“Because I don’t understand you,” I admitted, the words sounding strange on my tongue. “You had every reason to run during the ambush, but you didn’t.”

Iria shrugged, taking a sip of her drink. “Maybe I just didn’t want to lose my ship.”

“No.” I leaned closer, drawn forward almost against my will. “It’s more than that.”

The distance between us narrowed until I could catch her scent, breathe it in.

“What’s it to you anyway?” she challenged, but there was something different in her tone now—a softness underneath the defensive edge. “I’m just doing what I was paid to do.”

“I don’t pay you to risk your life.”

“No, you pay me to follow orders. And I did.”

“You did more than follow orders.”

A moment of silence stretched between us. The constant hum of the ship’s engines filled the space, but another kind of electricity crackled in the air. Her fingers fidgeted with her cup, a rare display of uncertainty from someone usually so sure of herself.

I reached out before I could think better of it, my gray fingers brushing against her smaller, paler ones where they rested on the table. The contact was brief but electric, sending a jolt up my arm straight to my core. Her skin was soft, cool against my touch.

Iria froze, her breath catching. I allowed my hand to linger half a second too long

before pulling away, the phantom sensation of her skin still tingling against my fingertips.

“You’re not like anyone I’ve met before, Iria,” I said, my voice quieter than I’d intended.

She forced a smirk, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Is that a compliment, Lieutenant?”

I didn’t answer. Words felt inadequate suddenly, clumsy tools for something that required more precision. Instead, I leaned in, my gaze dropping briefly to her lips. They parted slightly under my scrutiny, and Iria moved forward in her seat as well, our faces drawing closer across the small table.

The air grew heavy between us, charged with something I hadn’t felt in years—perhaps had never truly felt at all. My usual iron control frayed at the edges, rational thought giving way to a baser instinct.

A loud ping from my communicator shattered the moment. We both pulled back abruptly, the connection broken. I straightened in my chair, professionalism sliding back into place like armor.

“Alkard,” I said, checking the encrypted ID.

Iria’s expression closed off, disappointment hidden behind a sarcastic quirk of her lips. “Saved by the boss.”

I stood, ignoring the protest from my wound. “I need to take this privately.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Your ship, your rules. Oh wait—my ship, your rules.”

I stepped into the corridor, closing the galley door behind me before answering the



call. Alkard's holographic image flickered to life from my communicator.

"Lieutenant," he greeted, his expression grave. "I received your report."

"The attack was coordinated, sir. These weren't random scavengers."

Alkard nodded. "Your suspicions are confirmed. The Black Spikes are making a direct move against us. They're trying to undermine our operations across the sector."

His eyes narrowed. "The Black Spikes have been expanding their influence across three systems," Alkard continued. "They've been recruiting our people, undermining our operations. This isn't just about territory anymore—it's about survival."

Well. That was interesting. The Spikes were a rising power, but I hadn't expected such a direct challenge.

"We have a lead," Alkard continued. "An informant on Velaxis Prime has information about the traitor within our ranks. You are to intercept and extract what they know."

"Velaxis Prime is in active conflict," I noted.

"Which makes it the perfect place to hide." Alkard's expression hardened. "This takes priority over the current shipment. Secure what you have, then proceed immediately."

"Understood."

Alkard leaned closer to the transmission pickup, his voice dropping. "Trust no one, Lieutenant. Not even the ones closest to you."

The transmission ended before I could respond, leaving me alone in the corridor with the weight of his warning. The irony wasn't lost on me—I was already trusting Iria Jann far more than I should.

I returned to the cockpit. Iria glanced up as I entered but didn't speak, letting me break the silence first.

“We have a change of destination,” I announced. “Velaxis Prime.”

Her hands paused over the controls. “Velaxis Prime? You really know how to pick vacation spots.”

“We have an informant there. Someone with information about who set us up.”

“And let me guess—it can't wait.” She sighed, inputting the new coordinates. “No problem. I love visiting war zones. Really brightens my day.”

I watched her closely as she worked, noting the efficient movements of her hands, the way she muttered quick calculations under her breath.

She was clever. Loyal, despite having every reason not to be.

And something else I couldn't define—something that kept drawing my attention when it should have remained focused elsewhere.

“This situation wasn't what I meant in our original deal,” I found myself saying.

“Is that your way of offering me a bonus?” She shot me a sidelong glance.

“If that's what it takes.”

“Careful, Lieutenant. That almost sounded like negotiation. You’ll ruin your reputation.” She finished the calculations and looked up at me. “Ready when you are.”

The Starfall jumped into hyperspace with a lurch, stars stretching into streaks of light around us. Velaxis Prime was hours away, giving me too much time with my thoughts—thoughts increasingly occupied by the human woman sitting beside me and the danger of the bond forming between us.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

I stared out the cockpit viewport, watching hyperspace flow past. My mug sat cold next to me, forgotten after the first sip. The ship hummed around me, vibrations through the pilot's seat as comfortable and familiar as an old sweater. But right now, nothing felt right. Nothing felt normal.

My fingers traced the edge of the control panel, rubbing over a spot worn smooth from years of the same nervous habit.

"One month. Just survive one month." The words fell flat in the empty cockpit.

I'd said that phrase like a mantra since I'd made the deal with Korvan. Back when he was just a dangerous Vinduthi enforcer who owned my contract. Back before I'd seen him bleed. Before he'd saved my life. Before his hand had lingered on mine in the galley, the heat from his skin searing into me.

Why did that moment keep replaying in my head? The slight softening around his eyes. The hesitation before he pulled away.

"He's a Vinduthi," I reminded myself. "Cold. Ruthless. Deadly."

The kind of man who killed without remorse. The kind of alien that most humans only saw in nightmares or on wanted bulletins.

So why did he keep protecting me? Why did I keep noticing the way his tall frame moved with dangerous grace through my ship? Why did my skin burn everywhere he touched me?

I pushed back from the console. This was ridiculous. I was acting like some love-struck teenager, not a hardened smuggler with a price on her head in three systems.

The door to the cockpit slid open, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“We’re approaching Velaxis Prime,” Korvan said, ducking his head slightly to clear the doorframe. Even after days together on my ship, his size still startled me. “You should prepare for atmospheric entry.”

I swiveled my chair, hoping my face didn’t betray my thoughts. “Already on it.”

I wasn’t, but he didn’t need to know that.

He studied me for a moment, those red eyes unreadable. “You should eat something.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’ve had nothing but trish for twelve hours.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re tracking my meals now?”

“I track everything,” he said simply, and folded himself into the co-pilot’s chair beside me. It looked absurdly small with him in it.

I turned back to the controls, disengaging the hyperdrive sequence. The streaking stars slowed, solidified into distant pinpricks of light against the black. Velaxis Prime hung before us, a gray-brown orb mottled with angry red scars – the remnants of decades of civil war.

“Charming place,” I said. “Let me guess – the tourist season’s over?”

Korvan didn't smile. "There's never been a tourist season on Velaxis Prime. The war never truly ended. The fighting just... paused occasionally."

I guided the Starfall into the planet's orbit, running standard scans. Multiple small craft showed on the sensors, but nothing that looked military grade. At least, nothing broadcasting standard IFF codes.

"So, where's this informant of yours?" I asked.

"Sector 12. Near what used to be the capital city. He's hiding in an underground bunker complex. Former military installation."

"And he has information about your traitor?"

Korvan nodded. "Krenis was a mid-level information broker for the Fangs. He disappeared right after the ambush at the mining outpost."

"Convenient timing," I remarked, angling the Starfall toward the coordinates he'd provided.

"Very. We tracked him to Velaxis Prime. He knows something, or he's involved somehow."

"And you think he'll just... what? Confess everything?"

Korvan's mouth tightened. "He has information we need. But trust will be in short supply."

"Sounds like a great guy," I said, programming the landing sequence. "Can't wait to meet him."

We descended through Velaxis Prime's turbulent atmosphere, the ship shuddering as I navigated thermal pockets and unexpected wind shears.

Below us, the landscape transformed from abstract patterns to a stark reality of destruction.

Bombed-out buildings jutted from the ground like broken teeth.

Entire city blocks had been reduced to rubble.

In the distance, dark smoke rose from multiple locations.

"This is recent damage," I said, surprised. "I thought the war was in a ceasefire."

"Official hostilities may have ceased. The militias never stopped fighting."

I landed the Starfall on a relatively flat section of cleared ground about half a kilometer from the coordinates Korvan had given me. Close enough to reach quickly, far enough to make a fast escape if needed.

"Keep the engines hot," Korvan said as we exited the ship. "We may need to leave quickly."

The air hit me like a slap – acrid, thick with smoke and the metallic tang of weapons discharge. Dust coated my tongue. In the distance, I heard sporadic gunfire and what might have been explosions.

Korvan moved with surprising stealth for someone his size, leading us through the ruins. We skirted crumbling walls and ducked under collapsed archways. Twice he stopped suddenly, holding up a hand, and each time I heard the sounds of people passing nearby – hushed voices, the clink of weapons.

We reached what had once been a government building. Now only the foundation and parts of two walls remained. Korvan crouched beside a half-concealed metal hatch.

“Here,” he said, pulling it open to reveal a dark shaft with metal rungs descending into blackness.

I peered down. “You first.”

He gave me a look that might have been amusement, then dropped smoothly into the opening.

The bunker stank of mildew, unwashed bodies, and fear. Dim emergency lighting cast everything in sickly green. We moved through narrow corridors, Korvan navigating the turns with confidence. The walls were marked with blast scorch marks and what looked disturbingly like dried blood.

“How do you know this place?” I whispered.

“The Fangs have operations everywhere. Even war zones.”

“Especially war zones,” I corrected.

After several minutes of walking, Korvan stopped before a sealed door. He entered a code into a battered keypad, and the door slid open with a grinding protest.

Inside, a gaunt man with patchy stubble spun toward us, a plasma pistol clutched in trembling hands. His eyes widened with recognition, then fear.

“You’re here to kill me, aren’t you?” Krenis’s voice cracked. The room around him was filthy, littered with food containers and bedding. A portable console glowed in one corner, surrounded by data chips.



Korvan stepped forward. “That depends on whether you make yourself useful. Who’s the traitor?”

Krenis backed up, pistol wavering between us. “No, no. Not that simple. I need... I need guarantees. Safe passage. Payment. Then we talk.”

“You’re in no position to negotiate,” Korvan said, his voice dropping to a dangerous register that made the hair on my neck stand up.

I watched Krenis’s face, saw the panic rising. This approach wasn’t going to work. The man was terrified—and terrified people made stupid, unpredictable choices.

“Wait,” I said, stepping between them. “You can’t just threaten him. Let me handle this.”

Korvan’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t stop me.

I turned to Krenis, keeping my hands visible. “Look, we just want information. You give us what we need, we’re gone. Nobody gets hurt.”

Krenis’s eyes darted between us. “You don’t understand. If I talk... if they find out I talked...”

“We can protect you,” I said.

“No one can protect me from them!”

“Who’s ‘them’?” I asked.

Korvan grabbed my arm, pulling me back. “This isn’t your fight, Iria. You don’t understand what’s at stake.”

I yanked my arm free, stepping closer to him, my voice low. “Maybe I don’t. But I know you’re not getting what you want by scaring him to death.”

We stood face to face, barely inches apart. I felt his breath on my skin, warm and surprisingly sweet. His expression shifted, anger giving way to something else as his eyes dropped briefly to my mouth.

The room suddenly felt too small, too hot. I should step back. I should look away. I should?—

“Wait!” Krenis yelled. “I’ll talk!”

The standoff had clearly pushed him to a breaking point. He looked between us, calculating his odds. Whatever he feared about the repercussions of talking, he’d realized being on the run from the Fangs forever was worse.

“There’s a data chip,” he said nervously. “In the console. It has names, dates, communications. Everything you need.”

Korvan moved toward the console, his attention focused on Krenis. I stayed where I was, my pulse still racing.

“If you’re lying—” Korvan began.

The world exploded.

The bunker entrance blew inward in a deafening roar of metal and concrete. The shock wave threw me forward. Dust and debris filled the air.

“Go!” Krenis screamed, already bolting for a back exit. He made it three steps before a plasma bolt cut through the haze, striking him mid-chest. He crumpled.

Korvan moved with inhuman speed, grabbing me and pulling me behind an overturned metal table as more shots sizzled through the air. Four heavily armed mercenaries pushed through the ruined doorway, their faces hidden behind tactical masks.

I drew my blaster, trying to control my breathing, to focus. Korvan pressed against my side, his body shielding me.

“Stay close,” he ordered, voice steady despite the chaos. “Don’t get yourself killed.”

More mercs poured through the entrance. Whoever they were, they’d come prepared. And they’d known exactly where to find us.

The traitor’s reach felt closer than ever.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

I pressed my back against Iria's, counting heartbeats between plasma bursts. Six mercenaries, tactical formation, military-grade weapons. This wasn't a random attack or local thugs. These killers came prepared.

"Any brilliant ideas?" Iria asked, her shoulder blades firm against mine.

The table we'd overturned provided minimal cover. Each new volley of blaster fire chipped away at our barrier. Metal fragments scattered across the floor with every hit. The air burned with ozone and scorched metal.

"You take left, I take right?" she suggested, already adjusting her grip on her blaster.

I shook my head. "They're waiting for that. Six against two—conventional tactics won't work."

A bolt struck dangerously close, forcing us lower.

"Well, I'm open to unconventional ones," Iria muttered.

I analyzed the firing pattern, the positions I could make out through the dust and smoke. Three on the far side, two flanking, one positioned higher for better angles. They'd set up a standard crossfire, expecting us to either make a break for the exit or try to pick them off one by one.

"Cover me," I said, tightening the weapon strap across my chest. "I'll circle around the right side. When you see me engage, take the two on the left. Don't hesitate."

Iria nodded, pulling a second blaster from her boot. “Go.”

I rolled from behind our cover, drawing fire immediately.

Iria responded with rapid shots, forcing the mercenaries to duck.

My Vinduthi reflexes gave me the edge as I sprinted toward a fallen support beam, sliding beneath it and coming up firing.

The first merc never saw me. The second barely turned before my blade caught him across the throat.

Across the room, Iria held her own better than most trained fighters would. Her shots weren't precise like military training would produce—they were intuitive, unpredictable. One mercenary dropped, clutching his shoulder. Another scrambled for new cover after she'd destroyed his position.

As I dispatched the third target, I caught a flicker of movement. A small metal sphere rolled across the floor—grenade.

I moved without thought, diving toward Iria and tackling her to the ground as the explosion ripped through the bunker.

The concussive force slammed into my back.

I curled my body around hers, shielding her from the shrapnel with my larger frame.

Pain lanced through my shoulder, but I registered it as minor—my body would heal.

When the dust settled, the ringing in my ears faded enough to recognize the absence of blaster fire. One heartbeat. Two. Silence stretched between us.

Iria lay beneath me, chest rising and falling rapidly. Her hair had come loose from its tie, fanning out against the metal floor. Her eyes met mine, wider than usual, searching my face with an intensity that made my pulse quicken.

“You really enjoy throwing yourself on top of me, don’t you?” she asked, her mouth quirking up at one corner.

“You make it difficult not to,” I replied, surprised by the softness in my own voice.

I became acutely aware of every point where our bodies connected—my arms braced on either side of her head, her knee pressed against my thigh, the heat of her radiating through both our clothes. The mission, the mercenaries, the data chip—all of it fell away for just a moment.

With a gentleness I rarely allowed myself, I brushed a strand of auburn hair from her face, my fingers lingering against her cheek. Her skin felt impossibly soft beneath my calloused touch.

“You’re reckless, infuriating...” The words came unbidden. “And I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Her breath caught. Something shifted in her expression—surprise, vulnerability, desire—I watched her pulse flutter at her neck. Her eyes dropped to my mouth, and I felt my own control fracturing.

My fingers traced the line of her jaw. For the first time in years, I wanted something beyond duty, beyond orders. I wanted her.

Footsteps thumped in the corridor beyond.

Iria heard it too—the sound of approaching reinforcements. The spell broke. I rose to

my feet, pulling Iria up with me. My hand held hers, fingers twined.

“We’re not done with this,” I told her, voice firm with promise.

She nodded once, eyes still holding that flash of heat that had been there moments before. She checked her blaster charge. “Are we done here?”

We moved with newfound synchronicity through the bunker corridors. Where before we had worked as separate units with the same goal, now we functioned as one unit. Iria seemed to anticipate which direction I’d choose at each junction. I knew when she needed cover fire without her asking.

Two more mercenaries appeared at the end of the hallway. Before I could warn her, Iria ducked, giving me a clear shot over her head. I took them both down with controlled bursts.

“Nice shooting,” she said, flashing me a quick grin that did strange things to my chest.

“Nice ducking.”

We reached the surface access tunnel. Dust filled the air as the door cycled open, revealing the wasteland of Velaxis Prime.

The once-thriving colony now stretched before us, buildings half-collapsed under the weight of war.

The red sun hung low over the horizon, casting long shadows across the ruins.

Iria caught her breath, leaning against the doorway. A cut above her eye had begun to bleed, trailing a thin line down her temple. I stepped closer, taking the medkit from

her belt.

“Hold still,” I instructed, applying antiseptic.

She winced but remained in place. “Thought you got hit back there,” she said, eyes flicking to my shoulder.

Her gaze flickered to my shoulder where shrapnel had torn through my armor. “You’re hurt.”

“It’s minor. Already closing,” I said, noting her surprise as she watched the wound begin to seal itself. “Vinduthi heal differently than humans.”

Her fingers reached out, hesitantly, then touched the edge of the closing wound. “That’s... handy.”

“It has its advantages.”

She looked up at me, hand still resting lightly on my shoulder. “Is that why you were so quick to play the hero? Throw yourself on grenades?”

“I wasn’t playing anything,” I said, my voice rougher than intended.

The data chip pressed against my leg in my pocket. I retrieved it, turning it over in my hand. “Krenis didn’t die for nothing. This chip better have the answers we need.”

Iria studied me, her expression cautious. “And if it doesn’t?”

“Then we find out who set us up,” I answered quietly. “No matter the cost.”

She nodded, turning toward where the Starfall waited in the distance, a small



silhouette against the dying sun. I caught her arm before she could step away.

“I meant what I said back there,” I murmured. “You’re more than I expected.”

Iria looked at my hand on her arm, then back at my face. Instead of pulling away as I half-expected, her lips softened into a slight smile.

“Come on, Lieutenant. Let’s see what that chip is worth.”

Whatever was on this chip, whatever came next, one thing had become clear to me: Iria Jann had become more important than the mission. And for a Vinduthi warrior, that was a dangerous revelation indeed.

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My boots crunched over the ashy debris as we traced our way back to the Starfall .

Velaxis Prime's night turned the wasteland into a field of shadows, with small fires dotting the distance like artificial stars.

The orange glow highlighted Korvan's profile with each step - the sharp angles of his face, his broad shoulders, the rips in his armor.

Korvan walked beside me, steady and sure despite the wound that had nearly killed him an hour ago. I snuck another look at him. His gray skin was smeared with dirt and dried blood, yet he moved with fluid grace while I limped along, muscles protesting every step.

"We're almost there," I said, more to break the silence than anything else.

The words he'd spoken in the heat of the fight replayed in my mind. You're reckless, infuriating... and I can't stop thinking about you. I pushed the thought away. Combat does things to people. Makes them say things they don't mean.

Korvan nodded. "Your ship should be undisturbed. I set proximity alerts before we left."

"Good thinking." I slowed my pace as a sharp pain shot through my calf. "Hope the deathtraps weren't necessary."

"The deathtraps are my favorite part," Korvan replied, deadpan.

I snorted, then winced at the unexpected pain from my bruised ribs.

“You’re injured,” he said, turning toward me.

“I’m fine. Just a scratch.” I waved him off, limping forward.

The Starfall wasn’t far now—its faint silhouette appeared against the horizon, a familiar shape that made my chest ache with relief. But before we could reach it, Korvan raised a hand, signaling me to stop.

“Wait,” he said, his tone sharp. He sniffed the air, his crimson eyes narrowing as he scanned the shadows ahead.

“What is it?” I whispered, instinctively reaching for my blaster.

“Movement,” he answered, almost too quiet to hear. “Something’s tracking us.”

I froze, my heart pounding as I strained to hear whatever he’d picked up. After a moment of silence, I barely caught the faint sound of scraping metal, like claws against a surface. It came from somewhere to our right, just beyond the skeletal remains of a bombed-out vehicle.

“Wildlife?” I asked, though I wasn’t sure if that was better or worse than mercenaries.

“Possibly. Velaxis Prime has scavenger predators—creatures that survive off corpses and scrap.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Just what we need.”

Korvan stepped in front of me, his plasma pistol drawn. “Stay behind me.”

I bristled at the order but didn't argue. My ribs ached, my calf throbbed, and honestly, if something jumped out of the shadows, I wasn't sure I'd have the strength to fight it off. So, I stayed close, my blaster ready as we crept forward.

The sound came again, louder this time. Claws on metal. My pulse quickened as I scanned the darkness, every shadow turning into a potential threat.

Then it struck.

A blur of sharp teeth and gray fur lunged from the side, slamming into Korvan and knocking him off balance. He twisted as he fell, one arm coming up to block the creature's snapping jaws while the other aimed his pistol at its chest.

I fired before he could, the shot catching the scavenger in its side. It shrieked, a horrible, high-pitched sound, and recoiled just enough for Korvan to shove it off him. He rolled to his feet in one smooth motion, his claws extending as the creature lunged again.

This time, his plasma bolt hit dead center, dropping it instantly.

The silence that followed was deafening. My breathing was ragged, my hands shaking as I lowered my blaster. The scavenger lay limp in the dirt, its metallic talons gleaming faintly in the orange glow of distant fires.

"You alright?" Korvan asked, turning to me.

I nodded, though my knees felt weak. "Fine. You?"

He glanced down at his torn armor, his expression unreadable. "It didn't break the skin."

“Good,” I said, though my voice came out shakier than I’d intended. “Because I’m not dragging you back to the ship.”

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I’d like to see you try.”

I rolled my eyes, but the tension in my chest loosened slightly. “Let’s just get out of here before something else decides we look tasty.”

We reached the Starfall without further incident. I punched in the access code, and the ramp lowered with a mechanical hiss. The familiar smell of engine oil and recycled air welcomed me home.

“I’ll start the decryption,” I said, heading straight for the cockpit while Korvan closed and locked the ship behind us.

I dropped into my pilot’s chair and inserted the data chip into the console. The encryption was heavy-duty - military grade. This would take time.

“Start program: Locksmith,” I told the computer, then leaned back, finally letting my body acknowledge just how tired I was. Every muscle ached. I rubbed at a bruise forming on my forearm, already turning purple against my skin.

Twenty minutes passed before I heard Korvan’s footsteps approaching. I turned, expecting to see him still bandaged and bloodied.

Instead, I froze. He’d removed his armored shirt, and where there should have been a gaping wound on his side, there was only smooth gray skin. The orange markings that curved along his torso stood out against his ash-gray complexion, unmarred by injury.

I stared, amazed. “Your wound... it’s completely gone. I knew Vinduthi healed fast from what I saw earlier, but this is incredible.”

Korvan looked down at his side with casual interest. “The damage was extensive, but not beyond my body’s ability to repair. We evolved as apex predators—quick healing was necessary for survival.”

I stood up, crossing the space between us. My fingers hovered over the spot where I’d seen him bleeding out just hours ago.

“That’s... incredible. You were bleeding out an hour ago.” The words tumbled out as I studied the orange patterns that ran along his side.

“We’re not like you, Iria. Our bodies are stronger. Faster. Designed to survive.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” I couldn’t pull my gaze away, fascination overriding my usual caution about personal space. “Is that why Vinduthi dominate the underground? Biology?”

“It helps,” Korvan said. “But strategy matters more than physiology. Strength only takes you so far.”

I finally looked up at his face, still marked with dried blood and grime. “Does it hurt? The healing process?”

“Yes.”

One word, but it gave me a glimpse behind his stoic facade. I stepped back with a start, realizing I’d been practically examining him like a specimen.

“You’re staring,” he said quietly.

Heat rushed to my face. “I’ve just... never seen anything like you before.”

Korvan stepped closer, erasing the distance I'd just created. "And I've never met anyone like you."

The air between us changed, charged with something I didn't want to name. My heart beat harder against my ribs.

"Iria..." Korvan's eyes searched mine.

I took a small step forward. "This is a terrible idea," I whispered.

"Probably," he replied, his voice low. His hand brushed against mine, then moved to my cheek.

When his lips met mine, the touch was tentative, questioning. I answered by pressing closer, and the kiss deepened, slow and thorough. His skin burned hot against mine, and I felt the slight press of his sharp canines against my lower lip. I should have been terrified. Instead, I wanted more.

The kiss broke, both of us pulling away at once. My lungs demanded air. My cheeks burned. Korvan looked at me with an open vulnerability I'd never seen on his face before.

"We shouldn't have done that," I said, my pulse still hammering in my ears.

"Maybe. But it wasn't a mistake." His voice remained steady.

I turned away, needing distance, my mind racing.

The kiss had awakened something I'd been trying to ignore since the moment we met.

A flutter of memories surfaced—hushed conversations in darkened spaceports, rumors about Vinduthi and their human partners.

I'd heard stories about the claiming bite, how it changed humans who received it.

How it linked them permanently to their Vinduthi mates, sharing some of their strength, their senses, even their distinctive markings.

I'd once seen a human woman on Balos Station with dark red swirls running across her neck and shoulder—unmistakably Vinduthi patterns.

She'd moved with unusual grace, tracked sounds a normal human couldn't hear.

When her Vinduthi partner had entered the room, the connection between them was almost visible, like an energy field linking them together.

I shook off the memory. That kind of connection wasn't for someone like me. My life was about staying free, unattached, ready to run at a moment's notice. The claiming bite was permanent—more binding than any contract.

“I can't afford to... to feel anything right now. My life is complicated enough as it is.”

Korvan's fingers brushed against mine. “I'm not asking for anything now. But when this is over... we'll figure it out.”

I hesitated before nodding. “When this is over.” Not a promise. But it was enough for now.

A beep from the console broke the moment. The data chip had finished decrypting. I stepped back to the screen, grateful for the distraction.



Lines of text and names filled the display. Korvan moved to stand beside me, his presence both comforting and unsettling after what had just happened between us.

“There,” Korvan said, pointing to a name at the top of the list. His voice hardened. “That’s the traitor.”

I stared at the screen, my eyes widening as I recognized the name. My stomach dropped so fast I thought I might be sick.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

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I leaned closer, reading over her shoulder. My jaw clenched as the information unfolded before us.

Miggs.

“That lying little worm.” My voice came out colder than I intended.

“Miggs was never just a courier. He infiltrated our organization months ago, working as an informant for the Black Spikes. When we caught him at the Dead Man’s Dock, he was trying to deliver the neural interface tech straight to them.”

“And then Raxin helped him escape,” Iria concluded, scrolling through more text.

“Exactly. Raxin was supposed to interrogate him, but instead took a bribe and let him walk. Now he’s selling everything he learned while inside our organization.”

“Isn’t Raxin one of your guys?”

“Yes. A senior officer. Someone I trusted.” My voice hardened. “Someone who knew all our operations, our safe houses, our supply routes.”

The deeper we dug, the worse it got. Every route, every supplier, every contact – all compromised.

“Look at this,” Iria pointed at a section of text. “He’s selling information to the Black Spikes.”

I leaned closer, reading the detailed notes Miggs had compiled. “And here—he mentions the research container. He knew exactly what was inside.”

Iria’s eyes widened. “The biological weapons research?”

I nodded grimly. “He’s been feeding them test data. Helping them perfect their weapons.” My fist clenched at my side. “If they develop something that can target our accelerated healing or thermal regulation...”

“They could wipe out the Fangs,” Iria finished quietly. Her body went rigid under my gaze. I read the passage she indicated, fury burning in my chest.

“He’s using my name? Of course he is. That bastard’s been setting me up from the start!” She slammed her fist against the console.

The document detailed how Miggs had carefully constructed a trail of evidence pointing to her as the one who’d stolen the tech and betrayed the Fangs, painting himself as merely following her orders. He’d set Iria up to take the fall if things went wrong.

My Iria.

I focused on controlling my breathing. A hot-headed Vinduthi was dangerous to everyone in their vicinity. “He escaped because someone in my crew was weak enough to take his bribe. I should have seen it coming.”

“This gets worse.” Iria kept reading, her face paling. “He’s documented every deal the Fangs have made in the last six months. Routes, contacts, drop points...”

I understood the implications immediately. “If he sells them the rest of this intel, the Fangs’ operations on Thodos Station will collapse. Our rivals will pick us apart. And

they'll have technology that pinpoints Vinduthi weaknesses.”

“And what about me?” Iria spun in her chair, her face inches from mine. “He’s painting me as the traitor! You think the Spikes will stop at ruining your syndicate? The Fangs will come after me, too.”

Her fear struck me – not for herself, but that I might believe these lies. That I might turn on her.

I met her anger with something I rarely offered: reassurance. “They won’t touch you. I’ll make sure of it.”

Iria studied my face, looking for deceit. Finding none, she nodded once and turned back to the console.

“Looks like Miggs has a meeting scheduled.” She pointed at a time and location. “The Red Nebula, tomorrow night. Some kind of black-market auction.”

“That high-end club in the decommissioned docking ring?” I raised an eyebrow. “Interesting choice.”

“It’s the perfect cover,” Iria explained.

“The Red Nebula is the only upscale establishment in the old Ring—a glittering oasis in the middle of abandoned docking bays and storage facilities. Rich thrill-seekers get the excitement of venturing into the ‘dangerous’ part of the station, but with private security ensuring they never face actual risk.”

“And station security barely monitors that section anymore,” I noted.

“Which makes it perfect for illegal auctions,” Iria countered. “The old maintenance

tunnels, derelict docking bays, abandoned storage areas—plenty of places to hide contraband and conduct business away from prying eyes.”

“You know the area well?”

She nodded. “Most smugglers do. When the station expanded its new commercial docking facilities five years ago, they left the old Ring to rot. Perfect for off-registry landings and quick transfers when you don’t want to file flight plans.”

My instinct was to refuse her help – I worked alone, made my own plans. But...

“Fine,” I conceded. “Your setup, my execution.”

Iria nodded, satisfied. She started pulling up maps of the Ring. “We’ll need to be subtle.

She laid out a basic approach, highlighting entry points and potential escape routes. Her plan was solid – better than I expected from a smuggler used to working alone. But as she shut down the decryption program, I noticed her hands trembling slightly.

For all her bravado, she was frightened. Not that I blamed her. The Black Spikes had a reputation for making examples of those who crossed them.

I stepped closer without thinking. “You’re scared.”

Her head snapped up, eyes flashing. “Of course I’m scared! You think I want to spend the rest of my life running from the Black Spikes? Or worse, end up dead because of something I didn’t do?”

There was more vulnerability in that outburst than I’d heard from her before. More truth.

I hesitated, then placed my hand on her shoulder. The gesture felt strange, foreign. When was the last time I'd touched someone with anything but violence? "You're not running. Not from them. Not from me."

Her eyes softened and for once, she didn't pull away from my touch, didn't throw up those walls she kept so carefully maintained.

My hand lingered longer than it should have. Her skin was warm under my palm. Her pulse quickened – I could hear it. I craved putting my lips against the flutter at her throat.

Iria turned to face me fully, her breath catching. My hand slid from her shoulder to her neck, fingers brushing the soft skin beneath her ear.

"You're stronger than you think, Iria."

Her lips parted slightly. "You don't know me."

The words held no heat, no challenge. Just a quiet truth.

"I know enough," I said.

I leaned down slowly, giving her every chance to pull away, to come to her senses. She didn't. Instead, she raised herself on her toes to meet me halfway.

The kiss surprised me with its softness. Different from our earlier rushed collision, this was deliberate. Her lips sought mine with purpose, with intent. The taste of her – spice and something uniquely human – sent heat through my body.

My fingers tangled in her hair as the kiss deepened. Her hands clutched at my shoulders, nails digging in slightly, awakening instincts I fought to control.

I growled low in my throat, backing her against the console. Her heart hammered against my chest as I lifted her, setting her on the edge. Data streams cast blue shadows across her skin as her legs wrapped around my waist.

“Tell me to stop,” I murmured against her throat.

“Don’t you dare,” she breathed, pulling me impossibly closer.

Her hands explored my bare chest, curious and demanding. Her palms splayed flat against my skin, feeling the heat rising from me.

“You’re burning up,” she whispered.

“Vinduthi run hot,” I replied.

Her gaze traveled over the markings that curved down the left side of my torso, a mirror to those on my face. Without breaking eye contact, she pulled off her tank, revealing pale skin and the curves I’d tried not to notice these past days.

When her fingers traced the markings on my chest, I nearly lost my tenuous control. Every nerve ending lit up under her touch.

“Does it hurt when I touch them?” she asked.

“No.” My voice came out rougher than intended. “The opposite.”

Her eyes widened at the implications. Then, with deliberate slowness, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to the marking over my heart.

The sensation broke something in me. I captured her mouth again, more demanding this time, my hands exploring the smooth skin of her back, her sides. She melted

against me, her body pliant yet somehow still defiant.

Her hands found the clasp of my belt, fingers deft even in her urgency. I caught her wrists, pulling back just enough to see her face.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

She met my gaze without flinching. “Do I look unsure?”

“You’ll regret this,” I warned, though I made no move to release her. “I’m not what you want, Iria.”

“I stopped getting what I wanted a long time ago.” She freed one hand from my grasp and placed it on my cheek, an unexpectedly tender gesture. “Maybe it’s time I take something for myself anyway.”

Her words cut through my defenses more effectively than any weapon. I released her other wrist, surrendering to whatever this was between us.

My hands slid up her sides, savoring the contrast of my gray skin against her fairness. When I brushed the underside of her breast, she inhaled sharply.

I kissed my way down her neck, across her collarbone, learning the map of her body with my lips. She arched into my touch, wordless sounds of pleasure escaping her lips.

The taste of her set my blood on fire, awakening desires I’d denied for too long. My arms encircled her waist, lifting her slightly as I plundered her mouth. She responded with equal fervor, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

For once, I stopped calculating, stopped planning. There was only Iria, warm and



alive in my arms, kissing me as if tomorrow might never come.

And for us, it might not.

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My world contracted to the pressure of Korvan's mouth against mine. Heat spread from my lips down through my body, pooling low in my stomach. I clutched at his shoulders, his arms, needing more contact.

He lifted me with effortless strength. I locked my legs around his waist, not wanting to break the kiss as he carried me toward my quarters. His hands gripped my thighs, fingers digging in just enough to make me gasp against his mouth.

"What happened to planning?" I asked, as he shouldered open the door to my room.

"Plans change." He set me on my feet beside the bed, his hands already working at the fasteners of my jacket. "Especially when you look at me like that."

I grinned. "Like what?"

"Like you've been starving." His hands moved to my waist, fingers tracing my skin. "And I'm the first meal you've seen in days."

His fingers traced the edge of my bra, then slipped beneath to cup my breast. I arched into his touch.

"You're one to talk," I said. "With those eyes that never stop watching me."

"Why would I look away?" Korvan bent, pressed his mouth to my collarbone, the hollow of my throat. "When you're the only thing worth seeing?"

His words sent a thrill through me. I'd been seen plenty in my life—as a target, an

asset, a means to an end. Never as something worthy of attention for my own sake.

“Korvan,” I breathed, as his lips traveled lower, over the swell of my breast. One hand slipped behind me, unhooked the clasp of my bra with ease.

“I’ve thought about this,” he murmured against my skin. “More than I should have.”

“Me too.” My hands found his hair, surprisingly soft between my fingers. “But I didn’t think it would happen.”

He looked up, the red of his eyes almost black with desire. “Why not?”

“People like us don’t get what we want.”

His smile was sharp. “Tonight we do.”

He straightened, capturing my mouth again as his hands finished undressing me. My boots, my pants, my underwear—all gone with methodical precision. I stood before him completely naked while he still stood in his pants and boots.

“This hardly seems fair,” I said.

He laughed, a deep rumble that vibrated against me. “Patience.”

“Not one of my virtues.”

“No?” His hands cupped my face. “And what are your virtues, Iria Jann?”

I pressed my palms against his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat. “Determination. Survival.” I met his gaze. “Loyalty, when it’s earned.”

“Have I earned it?”

“You’re getting there.”

He growled, a sound more animal than human, and pressed me back onto the bed.

I sank into the mattress as he knelt above me, his broad shoulders blocking out the dim light from the ceiling.

He leaned down, trailing kisses from my mouth to my jaw, my neck, my chest. My body responded to each touch, skin heating, back arching.

“Your scent is driving me crazy,” he whispered against my skin. His tongue flicked over my nipple, sending sparks through my nervous system. “Since the first day on your ship. Did you know that?”

I shook my head, words escaping me as his mouth closed around my breast. The slight scrape of his canines against sensitive flesh made me clutch at his shoulders.

He moved lower, kissing a path down my stomach, my hips, the inside of my thigh. Before I could form a coherent thought, he knelt between my legs and pressed his mouth to the most intimate part of me.

I nearly came off the bed. His tongue was unlike anything I’d experienced—slightly rough, textured in a way that intensified every sensation. He held my hips firmly as he explored, finding every sensitive spot with unerring accuracy.

“Korvan,” I gasped. “I can’t?—”

But I could, and I did. The orgasm crashed over me in waves, stealing my breath and my thoughts. Through it all, he didn’t stop, didn’t slow, drawing out pleasure until

my body felt boneless, my mind emptied of everything but sensation.

“Stars,” I managed, when speech returned. “That was...”

He looked up, mouth glistening. “Not enough.”

“More,” I demanded, reaching for him. “I want you. All of you.”

He stood, finally removing the last of his own clothing. I drank in the sight of him—powerful muscles, narrow hips, and the unmistakable evidence of his arousal. His cock stood proud, the broad triangular head and ridged flanges along the sides marking him as definitively non-human.

“Still sure?” he asked, the question revealing a vulnerability at odds with his powerful frame.

I sat up, reached for him. “Very sure. Come here.”

He joined me on the bed, his weight pressing me into the mattress in the most delicious way. The heat of his skin against mine was intoxicating, his mouth hungry as it reclaimed mine. I tasted myself on his tongue, strange and intimate.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, hands mapping my body as if committing it to memory. “Everything about you.”

I ran my fingers along one of the orange swirls on his chest. “So are you.”

His laugh was soft against my neck. “I don’t think that’s what most humans would say.”

“I’m not most humans.” I pulled him closer. “And thank the stars for that.”

He positioned himself between my thighs, the head of his cock pressing against my entrance. The anticipation was almost painful. He moved slowly, carefully, giving my body time to adjust to his size and unfamiliar shape.

The sensation was overwhelming—the stretch, the fullness, the ridges along his length stimulating nerves I hadn't known existed. I clutched at his back, fingernails digging into skin.

“Okay?” he asked, holding still despite the tremor I felt running through his muscles.

“Don't stop,” I breathed. “Please don't stop.”

He began to move, setting a rhythm that built gradually from gentle to urgent. Each thrust sent pleasure spiraling through me, the unique shape of him hitting spots within me that had me gasping, cursing, pleading.

“Iria.” My name sounded like a prayer. “Look at me.”

I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze as our bodies moved together. Something passed between us then—something beyond physical pleasure, beyond the simple release of tension. Something that terrified and thrilled me in equal measure.

For years, I'd kept myself apart. Safe. Alone. But here, with Korvan moving inside me, his eyes holding mine, I was neither alone nor safe. And I didn't care.

“I've got you,” he whispered, as if reading my thoughts. “I've got you.”

And just for a moment, I believed it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

The docking clamps met the hull with a dull thud as the Starfall settled into the private hangar.

Through the viewport, I watched the security barrier flicker to life, cutting us off from prying eyes.

It wasn't the most expensive place to dock on Thodos Station, but it served our purpose: discretion.

I rolled my shoulder, testing the newly healed tissue where a plasma bolt had struck me days before. The wound had finally closed completely, leaving only a faint discoloration on my skin that would fade within another day.

Stretching again, I ran a final systems check while Iria shut down the engines.

Something about watching her work, completely in her element, made my chest constrict.

She wasn't just a means to an end anymore. She'd become something I couldn't afford to lose.

The realization struck me with physical force. I'd spent decades building walls around myself. Now this human woman had compromised them in a matter of days.

"All set," Iria said, flipping the last switch. "Let's move before someone decides to ask questions about our registry."

I nodded, trying to focus on the mission ahead rather than the memory of her skin against mine just hours before. “What’s the least monitored route to the club district?”

“Follow me and stay close.” She grabbed her jacket, checking the concealed blaster in the inner pocket. “The maintenance corridors run parallel to most of the main walkways. We’ll be practically invisible.”

I bristled at taking orders. I’d always led - never followed. But Iria knew this area better than me, and this wasn’t the time for pride.

“Lead the way,” I said, more stiffly than I’d intended.

Iria shot me a knowing look. “Relax, big guy. You can go back to being all scary and in charge, once we get there.”

The maintenance corridors were narrow, dimly lit paths that snaked through the station’s infrastructure.

Service bots whirled past us, too focused on their programming to register our presence.

The air smelled of machine oil and recycled oxygen, with undertones of something metallic I couldn’t place.

Iria moved with absolute confidence, never hesitating at intersections, occasionally pressing herself against a wall to avoid a passing security detail. I matched her movements, though I had to duck occasionally to avoid overhead pipes.

“How do you know these routes so well?” I asked quietly as we passed through a junction.



“When you smuggle as long as I have, you learn every back door on every station,” she replied. “Plus, I used to date one of the infrastructure engineers. He showed me a few tricks.”

I felt an unexpected stab of jealousy. “An engineer?”

She glanced back with a half-smile. “Don’t worry. He got transferred to the outer rim three years ago. And he wasn’t nearly as good with his hands as you are.”

I growled softly, catching up to her and placing my hand at the small of her back.

“We should focus on the mission,” I said, though I kept my hand where it was.

She leaned into my touch for just a moment. “Of course. All business.”

The nightclub came into view as we emerged from the service exit.

The Red Nebula was exactly what you’d expect from a high-end establishment hosting illegal auctions: garish and expensive.

Its gleaming facade stood in stark contrast to the decaying infrastructure of the decommissioned docking ring surrounding it, like a polished gemstone set in rusted metal.

Patrons lined up at the front entrance, a mix of species dressed in their finest. The bouncers – two burly Kraelex with armor beneath their formal wear – selected who entered with practiced discrimination.

“Back entrance?” I asked.

Iria shook her head. “Too obvious. We go through the front. I have credentials.”

She produced two chits from her pocket. “These cost me a fortune last time I was here. VIP passes. No searches, no questions.”

“Where did you?—”

“Won them in a card game.” She winked. “From a very drunk Alliance official who probably shouldn’t have been gambling with government property.”

We approached the line from the side, and Iria immediately adopted a different posture – shoulders back, chin up, an air of entitlement that transformed her from scrappy smuggler to affluent patron in seconds.

The bouncers waved us through without hesitation when she flashed the passes.

The interior assaulted my senses – pulsing music, flashing lights, the mingled smells of expensive perfumes, alcohol, and body heat.

The crowd moved like a single organism around the central dance floor, while private booths lined the walls, their occupants hidden behind translucent privacy screens.

“The auction’s in the back room,” Iria whispered close to my ear. “But we can’t both go barging in. I’ll blend in, try to spot Miggs before he sees us.”

I nodded, scanning the room for potential threats. “I’ll position myself by the emergency exit. If things go wrong, that’ll be our way out.”

She reached up, adjusting the tiny comm device behind my ear. Her fingers brushed against the sensitive skin there, and I had to suppress a shudder.

“Keep this channel open,” she murmured. “And try not to look like you’re planning to murder everyone in the room.”

I watched her disappear into the crowd, her movements shifting to match the flow of dancers. Even knowing what to look for, I almost lost sight of her twice as she wove between patrons, picking up a drink along the way, laughing at something someone said as if she belonged.

I took my position near the exit, back against the wall, arms crossed. Around me, conversations ebbed and flowed.

“...heard the Alliance increased patrols after that weapons shipment went missing...”

“...swear, if Halkin tries to outbid me again, I’ll poison his drink...”

“...that Vinduthi by the door is making me nervous. Think he’s security?”

I tuned most of it out, keeping my focus split between the crowd and the hidden door that led to the auction room. Eventually, Iria’s voice came through the comm.

“You’re making the whole room nervous just by standing there.”

“Good,” I replied quietly. “Maybe they’ll clear out before I have to kill them.”

A soft laugh in my ear. “You know, I’m starting to enjoy your sense of humor.”

“Who says I’m joking?”

Another laugh. “I’ve spotted him. Near the front of the auction room. He’s got two guards – standard muscle, nothing special. Looks like he’s waiting for something.”

“Or someone,” I added. “Stay where you are. I’m moving in.”

The hidden door opened at my touch – Iria must have sliced the security while I

wasn't looking.

The auction room was smaller, more intimate, with rows of seats facing a small stage.

About thirty potential buyers sat in hushed anticipation, while a tall, spindly alien in formal attire prepared to begin the proceedings.

Miggs sat near the front, just as Iria had expected, flanked by two human bodyguards in matching black jackets.

The room fell silent as I walked down the center aisle. Even the auctioneer paused mid-sentence. Miggs turned, and I watched his expression change from confusion to recognition to fear in the span of seconds.

But then, surprisingly, he smiled.

“Korvan!” he called out, too loudly, too confidently. “Didn’t expect you to show up at my little business meeting. Care to bid?”

I stopped a few meters from him, aware that his bodyguards had shifted their positions slightly, hands moving toward concealed weapons.

“You’ve betrayed the Fangs for the last time, Miggs.”

His smile faltered only slightly. “Now, now. Business is business. No need for?—”

Miggs never finished his sentence. Instead, he pressed something in his hand, and suddenly the lights in the room flashed blindingly bright. The crowd erupted in panic. I heard the distinctive whine of blasters powering up, and I ducked just as the first shots flew over my head.

The bodyguards had drawn their weapons, firing wildly to cover Miggs as he bolted toward a side door. I rolled behind a row of seats as the auction-goers scrambled for exits, screaming and shoving each other.

I drew my own blaster, fired twice. The first shot caught one bodyguard in the shoulder, spinning him around. The second hit the other straight in the chest. Both fell, but the damage was done – Miggs had disappeared into the chaos.

“He’s running!” I snarled into the comm. “East side door!”

“I see him!” Iria’s voice came through clearly despite the noise. “He’s heading for the delivery entrance. I’m going after him!”

“Iria, wait?—”

But the comm went silent. I cursed, kicking aside a fallen chair as I sprinted toward the side door.

Two more of Miggs’ men appeared, blocking my path.

I didn’t slow down. The first one I hit with a flying tackle, smashing him into the wall hard enough to crack the decorative panel behind him.

The second got off one shot – which burned past my ear – before my fist connected with his throat.

I left them both gasping on the floor and burst through the side door into a service corridor. The alarm system had activated, bathing everything in pulsing red light. I heard shouting from the direction of the main club, security personnel trying to contain the situation.

Following the corridor, I found myself in the kitchen. Abandoned food sizzled on cooking surfaces, and staff hid beneath counters. I pushed through the back door into an alley, just in time to see a flash of auburn hair disappear around a corner up ahead.

Iria.

I ran after her, my longer stride eating up the distance, but when I rounded the corner, the alley stretched empty before me, branching into three different directions.

I stopped, used every keen sense at my disposal.

There... the sound of running footsteps fading away.

“Iria,” I hissed into the comm. Nothing but static answered me.

I stood there, breathing hard, torn between fury and admiration. She wasn’t just brave—she was reckless. And for some reason, I couldn’t stand the thought of her doing this alone.

I chose the middle path and started running.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

I spotted Miggs ducking through the side exit, his slick figure silhouetted for just a split second against the emergency lighting of the corridor. My body reacted before my mind even processed it.

I sprinted toward the exit, weaving through the panicked club patrons with ease. The bass thudded through the floor, vibrating up my legs as I ran. The exit door swung shut, and I shouldered it open with a grunt.

This was my chance to end it—to stop running, to stop being used. I wasn't going to let him get away.

The service corridor stretched ahead, cold and sterile compared to the pulsing nightclub behind me.

My boots barely made a sound on the metal grating.

Seven years on Thodos Station had taught me every shortcut, every maintenance tunnel, every ventilation shaft.

If Miggs thought he could outrun me here, he was dead wrong.

I heard his footsteps turn left at the junction ahead. Rookie move. He'd hit the main corridor that way, with all its security checkpoints. I veered right instead, ducking into a narrow access tunnel used by maintenance droids. The walls closed in around me, my shoulders nearly brushing both sides.

This would cut a full thirty seconds off the pursuit, if I hurried.

My lungs burned as I pushed myself faster, the weight of my blaster slapping against my thigh with each stride. I burst out the other end of the maintenance tunnel to catch Miggs rounding the corner ahead.

“Stop right there!” I shouted, but he only ran faster.

I took aim with my blaster, but there were too many bystanders—dock workers, cargo haulers, and station residents going about their business. I cursed and kept running.

Miggs glanced back, his face contorting in panic when he realized I’d somehow gotten ahead of his planned route. He slammed his hand against a panel on the wall.

The blast door ahead began to lower.

I pushed myself harder, diving into a slide that took me under the descending metal barrier just before it sealed with a pneumatic hiss.

Rolling to my feet, I noticed something blinking on the floor ahead.

Trip mine.

I froze mid-step, barely preventing my boot from triggering the sensor. The red light pulsed innocently, but I knew it would take out half the corridor if tripped.

“Dirty bastard,” I muttered, carefully stepping over it.

He’d already taken so much from me—my reputation, my safety, my freedom. I wasn’t letting him take anything else.

I spotted another mine ahead. And another. He’d littered the path with them. Smart.



The corridor led to the cargo bays, where he probably had an escape ship waiting. I needed to find another way.

I backtracked to a small access panel I'd passed moments earlier. Kneeling, I pried it open with my knife and crawled inside. The ventilation shaft was cramped and dusty, sending me into a coughing fit as I dragged myself forward on elbows and knees.

"Come on, come on," I whispered to myself, pushing through the claustrophobic space. The metal was cold beneath my palms, and the shaft rang with hollow sounds as I moved. I counted the intersections—one, two, three—before taking a right turn that should lead me to the cargo bay entrance.

He'd disabled the security cameras—another sign this had been thoroughly planned. I followed at a distance, keeping to the shadows between cargo containers.

The bay's massive doors stood at the far end, a stolen shuttle prepped and waiting with its ramp extended. Miggs was really going to get away.

Not if I could help it.

I raised my blaster and fired, catching him in the shoulder. He staggered but kept running.

"Miggs!" I shouted. "It's over!"

He ducked behind a stack of crates, and I lost sight of him. Advancing cautiously, I scanned the area, blaster at the ready.

The whisper of movement to my left was my only warning.

Two mercenaries stepped out from behind a cargo container, weapons aimed at my

chest. Then two more appeared to my right. Professional goons, not the usual station muscle—these were imported talent.

“Drop it,” one of them ordered.

I hesitated, calculating my odds. Four against one. Not good.

A familiar shadow moved behind them—tall, powerful, alien. Korvan had caught up.

“I’d reconsider that order,” he said, his deep voice cutting through the standoff.

The mercs spun, but Korvan was already moving. He grabbed the nearest one, twisting the man’s arm until it snapped with a sickening crack. The merc screamed as Korvan used him as a shield against fire from the others.

I dropped to one knee, taking aim at the mercenary on the right. My shot caught him in the chest, and he fell backward.

Plasma fire erupted around us. Korvan threw his human shield aside and charged the remaining two mercs. A bolt hit him in the side, but he barely slowed, continuing his attack with brutal efficiency. His fist connected with one merc’s jaw, the impact lifting the man off his feet.

The last mercenary fired wildly at Korvan, who took another hit to his shoulder before reaching the man and snapping his neck with one fluid motion.

He was a force of nature—unstoppable and unflinching. But even forces of nature weren’t invincible.

Korvan staggered slightly, his hand pressed to his side where the plasma bolt had hit him. The wound smoked slightly, the smell of burned flesh drifting to my nostrils.

“You’re hurt,” I said, moving to his side.

“It’s nothing,” he growled. “Where’s Miggs?”

A shot rang out, the bolt sizzling past my ear. We both dove for cover behind a nearby crate.

“That answer your question?” I peered around the edge. Miggs was backing toward his shuttle, firing wildly to keep us pinned.

“He’s not getting off this station,” Korvan said flatly, his jaw set with determination.

We moved in tandem, Korvan going right and me going left, creating a pincer movement that forced Miggs to retreat into a maintenance bay instead of reaching his ship.

Dead end.

Miggs knew it too. He spun around, his back to the wall, blaster trained on us as we cornered him. His face was slick with sweat, his breathing ragged. Blood soaked the sleeve where I’d shot him earlier.

“You think killing me will fix anything?” he spat, his expression desperate but defiant. “I’m not the only one who’s turned on you, Lieutenant.”

Korvan’s expression darkened, but he remained silent, his blaster leveled at Miggs’s chest.

I stepped forward, my own blaster trained on Miggs, and snarled, “You’ve been running long enough, Miggs. Time to pay for what you’ve done.”

“You don’t understand what you’re involved in,” Miggs said, his eyes darting between us. “The Spikes have contacts everywhere. They know about you two.” His gaze lingered on Korvan. “They know what you’re hiding.”

“Shut up,” I snapped.

“You’re just a pawn, Jann,” Miggs continued. “You always were. First Miggs’s patsy, now the Vinduthi’s pet.” He laughed bitterly. “At least I got paid for my betrayal. What are you getting?”

My finger tightened on the trigger. “The satisfaction of watching you answer for what you’ve done.”

“To who? The Fangs? The Alliance?” He shook his head. “Everyone’s corrupt. Everyone’s playing an angle. You think your Vinduthi boyfriend is any different?”

Korvan moved silently to my side, his presence solid and reassuring despite his injuries.

“Put the weapon down,” he ordered Miggs, his voice deadly quiet.

Miggs smiled, a twisted, ugly thing. “No. I don’t think I will.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

Blood ran down Miggs' arm from the blast wound, a stark crimson against his pale skin.

Still, that twisted smile stayed fixed on his face as he kept the blaster trained on us.

My senses registered everything at once - the stench of scorched metal from our earlier firefight, the distant hum of machinery through the station walls, Iria's measured breathing beside me.

My claws twitched involuntarily. I wanted to tear out his throat for that remark alone. But control had kept me alive this long. I forced my voice into a cold flatness that betrayed none of the rage building inside me.

"You're stalling. That's not going to save you."

Iria stepped forward, her movement fluid and confident. My peripheral vision caught the perfect steadiness of her blaster hand. Not a tremble. Not a waver.

"Enough with the speeches. You're out of tricks, Miggs. Drop the weapon before I put you down."

Miggs' smile faltered for just a fraction of a second. But he didn't lower the blaster.

I decided I'd had enough of this game.

My body moved before I'd consciously given the command.

Vinduthi reflexes - faster than human - launched me into motion as I fired with pinpoint precision.

The bolt struck his hand, sending the blaster clattering across the metal floor.

Before he could even register the pain, I crossed the distance between us and slammed him against the wall, my hand around his throat.

“The only reason you’re alive is because I need answers. Test me, and I’ll make sure your last moments are slow.”

His pulse hammered against my palm. The acrid scent of his fear cut through the recycled station air. Good. He should be afraid.

I kept him pinned, my claws extending slightly - just enough for him to feel their tips against his skin. A promise of what would come. Behind me, I heard Iria shift position, keeping her blaster trained on Miggs. Always covering me. Always where she needed to be.

“Who’s the second traitor? Who gave you the intel?” I kept my voice low, a dangerous quiet.

Miggs hesitated, his eyes darting between me and Iria. Even cornered, even beaten, he tried to find an angle. “She’s going to betray you, you know. That’s what survivors do.”

I tightened my grip, applying just enough pressure to restrict his airflow. Not enough to kill. Not yet. “You’ll tell me what I want to know, or I’ll remind you what a Vinduthi can do to a human body.”

The threat wasn’t empty. There’s a reason humans fear my kind. My ancestors didn’t

need weapons to tear their enemies apart.

Something changed in Miggs' eyes. The calculation, the defiance - both gave way to raw survival instinct. He'd pushed as far as he dared.

"Raxin," he coughed out, his face going red under the pressure of my grip. "It was Raxin who helped me escape. He's been working with the Black Spikes for months. Feeding them intel. Everything about operations. Your missions."

I loosened my hold just enough to let him speak more clearly. "Details."

"Security codes. For the depot. They're coming. Less than an hour. Going to blow the weapons cache." He swallowed hard against my palm. "Raxin's smarter than the rest of you. He knows the Black Spikes are going to win this war. You're just too loyal—or too stupid—to see it."

The name hit me like a physical blow. Raxin. Not some low-level grunt. A lieutenant. One of our own. Someone I'd fought beside; someone I'd trusted.

The betrayal burned deep, acid in my veins. The Fangs were more than an organization - they were family. The only one many of us had. And Raxin had sold us out.

I glanced at Iria. She watched me too closely, those perceptive eyes reading more than I wanted to reveal.

She'd risked everything to help me; a human caught in a war between rival syndicates that wasn't hers to fight.

And now the thought of her being dragged into this betrayal, put in the crosshairs of the Spikes because of me.

.. it ignited something primal in my chest.

The Fangs had been my family, my purpose. But Iria... she was something I never thought I could have. Something I wasn't sure I deserved.

Iria stepped closer, her presence solid, grounding. "We still have time to stop them. But we have to move now."

I nodded, her calm determination clearing my mind. Finish this now.

And then... then I'd decide what to do with this strange emotion.

Something shifted in Miggs' posture - a subtle tensing that my heightened senses caught immediately. My instincts screamed warning. His hand darted out toward a metal tool that had fallen to the floor during our earlier struggle.

I reacted instantly, slamming him back against the wall with enough force that his head cracked against the metal surface. His eyes rolled back, body going limp in my grasp. Unconscious, not dead. Though he deserved worse.

Iria flinched at the violence, a small reflexive motion. But when I turned to look at her, she stood firm, meeting my gaze without backing away.

I stepped back, my breathing heavy from the controlled fury coursing through my body. Something vulnerable cracked through my voice as I looked at her.

"You're not like him. Don't ever think you are."

She didn't respond immediately. But her expression softened, the usual guardedness in her features giving way to something warmer. Something that spoke of trust - more than she was willing to admit aloud.



“We need to move,” she said finally, holstering her blaster. “Less than an hour doesn’t give us much time.”

The depot was vast - a sprawling complex of storage units and distribution centers that served as the primary weapons cache for the Fangs’ operations across three sectors.

With the Spikes’ attack imminent, we worked quickly to fortify our position, setting traps at key entry points and repositioning the remaining security systems.

I connected my comm unit to Alkard’s private channel, bouncing through encryption codes. His face appeared, eyes narrowed.

“Raxin’s the traitor,” I said without preamble. “He’s given them access codes to the depot. Attack coming within the hour.”

Alkard’s expression hardened. “Eliminate him. Secure the depot at all costs. I’m sending reinforcements, but they won’t reach you in time.”

“Understood.”

The connection cut, leaving me alone with the echo of his orders.

Eliminate Raxin.

A fellow Vinduthi. One of our own.

As we finished our preparations, I caught Iria watching me from across the room. She’d been setting proximity mines at the south entrance, her movements efficient and precise. For a moment, the air between us shifted, the usual barriers falling away to reveal an unspoken understanding.

“If something happens to me... you run. Take the Starfall and leave.”

She crossed her arms, that familiar defiance flashing in her eyes. “Not a chance, Lieutenant. You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

My lips twitched into the faintest smile, but I didn’t reply. There was no point arguing with her. Once Iria Jann made up her mind, the universe itself struggled to change it.

We took our positions as the first sounds of approach echoed through the depot. The subtle whirl of transport vehicles. The soft metallic clicks of weapons being prepped.

My claws were extended fully now, my body coiled and ready. I gripped my weapon, feeling the familiar weight in my hand. Let them come. They’d chosen the wrong place to strike.

And they were about to pay for it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

The air stank of plasma discharge and sweat. My blaster felt overheated in my hands, but I didn't dare let go. Korvan was bleeding again, darker patches spreading across his armor. How was he even standing?

I ducked behind the overturned storage container as another volley of plasma fire sizzled past, leaving scorch marks on the wall beside me.

"Alkard's coming," Korvan said, his breathing labored as he reloaded his weapon. Blood ran down from a cut above his eye, mingling with the markings on his skin.

"When?" I asked.

"Not soon enough."

Great. Just great.

We'd spent the last hour barricading ourselves inside the depot, rigging makeshift traps and repositioning defensive systems from other sections of the building.

The Black Spikes had us surrounded, a seemingly endless wave of mercenaries pouring in from every entrance except the heavily fortified main door.

I fired off three more shots, taking down the first attacker before he could reach our position.

"Seven minutes of charge left," I muttered, checking my blaster's indicator. The smell of burnt circuitry told me the weapon wouldn't last much longer, even if the

power held.

Korvan gripped my shoulder briefly. “Save your shots.”

His touch lingered a second longer than strictly necessary.

In the midst of this chaos, that small gesture anchored me.

I’d gotten myself into some bad situations during my smuggling career, but nothing like this—nothing that had me fighting alongside a Vinduthi lieutenant against an army of mercenaries led by a traitor.

“They’re regrouping,” Korvan said, his voice low. He pointed toward the eastern entrance where shadows moved behind the crates.

I wiped sweat from my eyes. “I count at least fifteen.”

“Seventeen.” Korvan’s keen Vinduthi senses never ceased to amaze me. “And their leader is with them.”

As if summoned by Korvan’s words, a tall figure stepped forward, flanked by armed mercenaries. Raxin. The memory of Miggs’ confession flashed through my mind—Raxin had been the true traitor all along, feeding intel to the Spikes for months.

“Korvan!” Raxin called out, his voice carrying across the depot. “Your position is compromised. Your reinforcements won’t arrive in time. Surrender now, and perhaps Alkard will find your corpse with some dignity intact!”

Korvan snarled beside me, his sharp canines bared. I’d never seen that level of raw hatred on his face before.

“You think I fear death, traitor?” Korvan shouted back.

Raxin laughed. “No. I think you fear failure. You’ve always been a fool, Lieutenant. Blind loyalty instead of looking to the future, looking for a better chance. How far do you really think you can go, always working under Alkard and his circle?”

I thought of how he’d arranged Miggs’ escape, how he’d sabotaged our missions, all while maintaining the facade of loyalty. The betrayal would have cut Korvan deeper than any blade.

I gripped my blaster tighter. If I could just get a clear shot...

Korvan turned to me. “Stay here.”

“What? No?—”

But he was already moving, faster than I thought possible given his injuries. He vaulted over our barricade and charged directly into the mercenaries’ line of fire.

I cursed and followed him, firing rapidly to provide cover.

The mercenaries scattered, some dropping under our combined assault.

Korvan moved like a predator born for war, claws extended, cutting through the ranks like a storm.

But even he couldn’t take on this many alone. And I wasn’t about to let him try.

I spotted a clear path to Raxin’s exposed flank. If I could just circle around those fuel canisters?—

The world exploded in white-hot pain.

I hadn't seen the grenade. One moment I was running, the next I was airborne, then slammed hard against the metal floor. My ears rang. Blood trickled down my forehead, into my eyes. I tried to stand but my legs refused to cooperate.

Through blurred vision, I watched as Korvan engaged Raxin. They collided with bone-jarring force, trading blows that would have killed a human instantly. Raxin caught Korvan across the face, opening a new wound.

Raxin smiled when he saw Korvan's injury. From his belt, he pulled a small device and pressed it. A fine mist sprayed into the air between them.

Raxin remained safely beyond the dispersal radius, a thin protective shield shimmering almost imperceptibly over his skin—clearly, he'd come prepared with countermeasures against his own weapon.

Korvan staggered back, his face twisted in pain. I watched in horror as the wound on his side—which should have already begun closing—started bleeding more heavily.

“Like it?” Raxin called out. “Courtesy of the research you tried to steal from us. Disrupts Vinduthi cellular regeneration. Your famous healing response won't save you now, Lieutenant.”

Korvan growled, pushing through the pain. “It'll take more than your experimental toys to stop me.”

But I could see the truth—whatever Raxin had deployed was working. Korvan was weakening faster than he should have been. The biological weapons weren't just a theory anymore. They were real.

“You should’ve joined me, Korvan,” Raxin said as they circled each other. “Alkard’s reign is over. The Spikes will take everything, and you’ll die defending a corpse of a syndicate.”

Korvan wiped blood from his mouth. “You’ll regret underestimating me.”

They clashed again, their movements almost too fast for my human eyes to track. But I saw enough to know Korvan was slowing. His earlier injuries, combined with the brutal pace of this fight, had taken their toll. Raxin drove him back, step by step, until Korvan’s shoulders hit the wall.

Raxin pinned him there, forearm pressed against Korvan’s throat, and drew back his fist for what would likely be a killing blow. The remaining mercenaries watched, waiting for their leader to finish this.

My blaster lay just a few feet away, knocked from my hand in the explosion. I dragged myself toward it, ignoring the fire in my ribs that suggested at least one was broken. My fingers closed around the grip.

Don’t miss. Don’t miss.

I steadied my arm as best I could, aimed, and fired.

The shot struck Raxin in the shoulder, burning through armor and flesh.

He roared in pain and lurched away from Korvan—exactly the opening Korvan needed.

In a blur of movement, Korvan reversed their positions.

His claws sliced through Raxin’s defenses, leaving deep gouges in the traitor’s chest

and throat.

Raxin crumpled to the floor.

Korvan stood over him, bloodied but unyielding. “Traitors don’t get second chances.”

For a heartbeat, the entire depot fell silent. Then chaos erupted again as the remaining mercenaries realized their leader had fallen.

Korvan staggered back to me, helping me to my feet despite his own wounds. We retreated behind the barricade once more.

“Nice shot,” he said.

“Nice finish,” I replied.

But our momentary victory changed nothing.

More mercenaries poured in, filling the spaces left by their fallen comrades.

We were out of traps, out of ammo, and out of time.

Plasma bolts rained down around us, forcing us back against the depot’s reinforced door.

I glanced at Korvan. He was pale, his movements sluggish.

He wouldn’t last much longer. Neither would I.

Despite his Vinduthi healing abilities, the accumulated damage was too much.



I'd seen how quickly he could recover from a single wound, but this was different—multiple plasma burns, blood loss, and continuous fighting without rest had overwhelmed even his enhanced physiology.

His body couldn't keep up with the damage, and it showed in every labored movement.

He needed medical help, now. And there was no way we were going to get it.

The mercenaries advanced for the kill—then froze as a deafening roar filled the depot. The ceiling trembled. Dust and debris rained down.

“What—” I began.

The roof imploded. Through the massive hole descended a combat shuttle, weapon systems fully engaged. Its first salvo cut through the mercenaries' front line, scattering the rest.

When the loading ramp dropped, five Vinduthi warriors emerged, led by a figure I recognized immediately from the rumors that flew across Thodos III. Alkard. The leader of the Fangs moved with deadly grace, his every step radiating lethal purpose.

“You dared to attack my people?” Alkard's voice filled the depot. “You dared to betray the Fangs? Allow me to show you the consequences of such poor decisions.”

The Vinduthi spread out with military precision. I recognized Makar from his distinctive build, dropping into position near the east entrance and quickly setting what looked like proximity mines. Another—Havek, I guessed—worked on a portable terminal, his fingers flying over the interface.

Everyone on Thodos knew Alkard's inner circle. Stories stuck to them like

shadowmarks—half warning, half awe.

A mountain of a Vinduthi who could only be Razov charged directly into a group of mercenaries, sending bodies flying. From the shuttle's ramp, a slimmer figure—Tazhr—picked off fleeing enemies with methodical precision.

Korvan straightened beside me. Despite his wounds, he grabbed his weapon. “Come on.”

I nodded. This was my fight too, now.

Together we rejoined the battle, fighting alongside the Fangs. The tide turned completely—mercenaries who moments ago thought victory assured now fought desperately for escape.

None made it out.

When the last enemy fell, an unnatural quiet settled over the depot. Alkard surveyed the carnage, then turned his attention to us. His expression revealed nothing as he approached.

“You’ve done well,” he said, his gaze moving between Korvan and me. “But this isn’t over. Whoever orchestrated this attack will pay.”

He turned to his men, issuing rapid orders to secure the perimeter and gather any intelligence. Korvan sagged against me, his strength finally giving out. The anti-healing compound was beginning to wear off, allowing his natural regeneration to slowly resume, though the process remained sluggish.

“You saved me,” he murmured. “Again.”

“Don’t get used to it,” I said, trying to mask my concern with humor.

The moment between us stretched, intimate despite the chaos around us. Then Alkard approached, his piercing gaze locked on us both.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

I stood among the remnants of destruction, my body protesting with each breath. The acrid smell of plasma discharge burned my nostrils, and scorched metal mingled with the metallic tang of blood. Mercenary corpses sprawled across the depot floor, their weapons scattered uselessly beside them.

Iria stood next to me, her blaster still gripped tight. Dirt and blood streaked her face, but her eyes remained clear, alert. She'd fought well—better than well. Without her, I might not be standing here now.

Alkard approached through the smoke, his stride purposeful. Unlike the rest of us, he looked untouched by battle, his clothing pristine save for a few specks of dust. His gaze swept the destruction, before settling on us.

“You’ve proven yourself, Iria Jann,” Alkard said. “The Fangs reward skill and loyalty. I’d like to offer you something more permanent—a different kind of contract. Longer than your first, but with better pay and more freedom.”

I kept my face blank, but my chest constricted. Pride in her accomplishments warred with unease about what her answer might be. I hadn’t prepared for this possibility.

Iria blinked, her shoulders tensing. “You’re serious? I didn’t think I’d even survive the month, let alone get invited back.”

“You’ve earned it,” Alkard replied. “But I won’t decide for you. Take your time.”

Alkard turned to me, his expression unreadable. “Lieutenant, get her answer. If she accepts, make sure the terms are clear. I’ll leave it in your hands.”

Leave it to me? Alkard trusted me with many things, but this felt different. Personal. It wasn't just about Iria's skills—it was about whether I wanted her to stay.

Alkard strode away without waiting for my response, disappearing into the smoke. He'd made his expectations clear: bring Iria into the fold or let her go. The choice was technically hers, but he'd put me in position to influence that choice.

I looked at Iria. She stood tall despite her exhaustion, her fingers flexing on her blaster. Ready for another fight, even now.

“We're leaving,” I said. “You're coming with me.”

Iria raised an eyebrow. “What? Back to the Starfall?”

“No. My quarters on Thodos.” I holstered my weapon. “You need rest, and I need to know you're safe.”

“You don't trust me on my own ship?” Her head tilted, challenge in her stance.

I smirked. “Not tonight. Call it... precaution.”

It wasn't just precaution. I didn't want to let her out of my sight. Not after everything we'd been through. Not after what we'd almost lost.

The journey back to Thodos Station passed in silence. Iria's exhaustion finally caught up with her, and she dozed in the transport shuttle while I kept watch. The adrenaline had drained from my system, leaving dull pain across my ribs and shoulder where a mercenary's blast had grazed me.

My quarters sat in the secure wing of the Vinduthi compound—sparse and functional by design. When the door slid open, Iria stepped inside and surveyed the space with

careful eyes.

“You live here?” she asked. “It’s... very you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I moved past her into the main room.

“Efficient. Practical. No frills.”

I didn’t respond, just gestured toward the small couch against the wall. She needed to rest, and I needed to tend to these wounds before the blood dried completely.

I retrieved my med kit from a storage compartment and began cleaning the gash on my arm. The antiseptic stung, but I’d endured far worse.

Iria watched me work for a moment before standing. She crossed the room and took the kit from my hands.

“You’re terrible at this,” she said. “Sit down.”

I complied, watching her work as she cleaned and bandaged the worst of my injuries. Her touch was gentle but firm, her hands steady despite everything she’d been through. I hadn’t asked for her help, but I didn’t stop her. I didn’t want to.

“There,” she said, securing the last bandage. She remained close, the scent of smoke and battle still clinging to her skin, mingled with something uniquely hers.

“Alkard’s offer,” I said finally. “What do you think?”

“What do you think?” She turned the question back on me, her expression guarded.

The words caught in my throat.

I'd been trying not to think about it, but this was all that was in my mind.

I wanted her to stay. I wanted her beside me. But I couldn't ask that of her—not after everything she'd been through. She deserved to make this choice on her own.

“It would be beneficial for the Fangs,” I said carefully.

Iria snorted. “I didn't ask what Alkard thinks. I asked what you think.”

“I think you're skilled. Resourceful.” I met her gaze directly. “And unpredictable.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It's the only one I can give.” I stood, putting distance between us. “The choice is yours.”

Iria leaned back, her expression thoughtful. “It's not a bad deal. Better than most I've had. But I'm not about to give up the Starfall or let anyone tell me where I can and can't go.”

A rare flicker of amusement broke through my composure. “Alkard wouldn't expect anything less.”

She was as stubborn as ever. But that's what I admired about her. She didn't bend. Not for me, not for anyone.

“And what about my other arrangement?” she asked, her tone deliberately casual.

“What arrangement?”

“With you.” Iria shifted closer, her gaze steady. “What about you? Do you want me

to stay?”

My breath caught. For a moment, I considered lying—keeping the professional distance I’d maintained with everyone else under my command. But Iria deserved more than that.

“It’s your choice, Iria,” I said, forcing myself to meet her gaze. “But if you stay... you won’t be alone.”

The air between us grew heavy, charged with possibility.

“You should rest,” I broke the silence. “Take the bed. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

Iria’s lips curled into that wicked smile I loved. “You’re letting me have the bed? What happened to the cold, ruthless Vinduthi I met at the Dead Man’s Dock?”

“He met someone who makes him want to be better,” I answered softly.

She fell silent, and I felt the weight of my words settle between us.

I prepared the couch for sleep, removing my outer armor and stretching my sore muscles. My mind spun through the day’s events -- the battle, Raxin’s betrayal, watching Iria fight alongside me like we’d been partners for years instead of days.

She was reckless, infuriating, and impossible to predict. But she was also brave, loyal, and unlike anyone I’d ever met. I didn’t know what the future held for us, right now, I wasn’t afraid to find out.

The bedroom door slid open, and I looked up to see Iria standing in the doorway. She’d washed the blood and dirt from her face, but hadn’t changed clothes. Her hair fell loose around her shoulders.



“I can’t sleep,” she said simply.

I sat up. “Do you need?—”

She crossed the room before I could finish, bent down, and pressed her lips to mine. The kiss stole my breath, fierce and demanding. Her hands found my shoulders, urging me to stand.

“I’ve made my decision,” she murmured against my mouth.

“About the contract?” I pulled back slightly, needing clarity.

“About everything.” She kissed me again; her body pressed against mine. “Come to bed, Korvan.”

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I led Korvan into the bedroom, my fingers laced through his. My heart pounded against my ribs, but I refused to second-guess myself. For once in my life, I wasn't running away. I was running toward something I wanted. Something I'd chosen.

The bedroom matched the rest of his quarters – utilitarian, sparse, and lacking personal touches. A low bed dominated one wall, the sheets pulled military-tight. No decorations, no mementos. Nothing to mark the space as truly his, beyond its functional purpose.

The dim lights cast harsh angles across his features, across the planes of his gray skin and the orange markings that traced down one side of his face.

“You don't spend much time here, do you?” I asked.

“Only for sleeping.”

“Shame.” I pulled him closer, sliding my hands up his chest. “We'll have to change that.”

I kissed him, and he responded with a hunger that stole my breath. His lips captured mine, urgent yet restrained – that control I'd noticed in him from the beginning. His hands hovered at my waist, barely touching me, as if afraid I might break.

“You've been holding back,” I murmured against his mouth.

He drew back slightly. “Because I had to.”

With steady fingers, I undid the clasps of his shirt, revealing more of his muscular body, more of those fascinating orange markings that spiraled across his chest in intricate patterns.

“You’re always so careful,” I said, tracing one of the markings with my fingertip. “Why?”

His chest rose and fell under my touch. “Because you’re not something to be taken lightly.”

I smiled, my hands traveling down his sides. “Good. Because I’m not done with you yet.”

Taking charge, I pulled my own shirt off and tossed it aside. His eyes darkened as he took in the sight of me. For a moment, he stood frozen, and I wondered if I’d misread everything.

Then his hands found me, trailing across my shoulders, down my arms. His touch was firm but deliberate, as if mapping every inch of me.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, his voice rough.

I smirked, tugging at his waistband. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

He claimed my mouth again, and this time his restraint slipped. Strong arms lifted me onto the bed, and he followed, bracing himself above me. Each movement was slow, deliberate – savoring the moment.

His lips trailed from mine, down my neck, across my collarbone. I arched up into him, my fingers digging into the muscles of his back.

“Never thought we’d end up here,” I breathed as his mouth moved lower. “When you cornered me at the Dock.”

“I should have killed you then,” he admitted, his breath hot against my skin.

“And now?”

“Now I never want to let you go.” His hands slid lower, helping me out of my pants, his movements careful despite the obvious hunger in his eyes.

I returned the favor, pushing his remaining clothes away until there was nothing between us but skin and heat and want.

His body was different from a human’s – stronger, harder, the temperature running hotter.

The orange markings I’d traced on his face and chest continued in swirling patterns down one hip and leg.

“Touch me,” I whispered, letting my legs fall open, inviting him in.

His hands explored me with devastating precision, as if he knew exactly where and how to make me burn. Every touch from his calloused fingers drew sounds from me I barely recognized.

“Do you like this?” he asked, his fingers finding a particularly sensitive spot.

“What do you think?” I gasped, my hips lifting off the bed.

His lips curved into a rare smile. “I think I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “Yes, I like it. I like your hands on me. Your mouth?—”

He cut me off with a kiss, deep and consuming, before his lips traveled down my body. When his mouth replaced his fingers, I buried my hands in his hair, holding him to me.

Time blurred, my world narrowing to the heat of his mouth, the pressure of his hands, the relentless rhythm he built. I felt myself climbing higher, teetering on the edge of something overwhelming.

“Korvan,” I moaned, my back arching off the bed. “Please?—”

He increased his pace, and I shattered, pleasure washing over me in waves. I clung to him, my nails digging into his shoulders as his name fell from my lips.

Before I’d even caught my breath, he moved over me, his eyes locked with mine as he positioned himself at my entrance. He paused there, giving me one last moment to change my mind.

I wrapped my legs around his waist in answer, drawing him toward me.

He entered me slowly, the sensation of fullness bordering on too much – the flanges down his cock hitting me deep inside. When he began to move, I moved with him, our bodies finding a rhythm together.

His control began to slip as our pace increased. His breaths came faster, his grip on my hips tightened. I ran my hands over his chest, his shoulders, his back, wanting to touch every part of him.

“Let go,” I urged, watching his face tighten with the effort of holding back. “I won’t break.”

Something in him snapped at my words. His thrusts grew more powerful, more urgent.

The bed creaked beneath us as he drove us both toward release.

When it came, it washed over me like a solar flare – intense and all-consuming.

He followed moments later, his body tensing above mine before he collapsed beside me.

We lay together catching our breath, our skin cooling in the recycled air of the room. His arm wrapped around me, pulling me close against him. I traced the orange markings on his chest with my finger, following their pattern where they disappeared down his side.

“Why didn’t you claim me?” The question left my lips before I could stop it.

He stiffened slightly beside me. “You know about the claiming bite?”

“I know more than you think.” I smiled up at him. “I’ve heard the stories.”

“From who?”

“You pick things up.” I traced a pattern on his skin. “Some drunk Vinduthi trader once told me how their bites changed their mates. Heightened senses, increased strength, faster healing.” I paused. “Marking that matches their partner’s.”

Korvan’s fingers brushed my neck, right where the bite would go. “Those stories are true.”

“Then why didn’t you? Don’t you want that?” A flicker of insecurity shot through

me. Maybe he hadn't meant this to be permanent.

"It's not about what I want." His voice dropped lower, more serious. "The bite changes you. Forever. It binds us together in ways that can never be undone. I wouldn't do that without your consent."

I pushed myself up on one elbow, meeting his gaze directly. "If we're going to be partners, I want to be your partner in everything. No holding back. No hesitation."

He stared at me, searching my face for any doubt. His thumb brushed my cheek. "You're sure about this?"

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

I pulled him into another kiss, fiercer and hungrier than before. I climbed onto his lap, straddling him as I deepened the kiss. I wanted him to feel how much I wanted this – how much I wanted him.

His hands gripped my hips, his control slipping as our movements grew more frenzied. Every touch between us held more urgency now, more need. I guided him inside me again, taking him deep as I moved above him.

This time, there was no slow exploration, no careful restraint. This was raw and primal need. His hands traveled my body, claiming every inch. When he flipped us over, pinning me beneath him, I welcomed his weight, his heat.

Our bodies moved together, finding a rhythm that built toward something I'd never felt before. His thrusts grew deeper; my legs wrapped around his waist urging him on.

As I felt myself approaching the edge again, his lips brushed my neck, the prick of his fangs making me shiver with anticipation.

He paused, giving me one last chance to stop him. “Iria...” His voice was hoarse with restraint.

“Do it,” I urged.

As pleasure crashed over me, his teeth sank into the curve where my neck met my shoulder. The bite wasn’t painful—it was electric. A current ran through my body, setting every nerve on fire. Heat spread from the point of contact, flooding my system with something alien and intoxicating.

I cried out, clutching him closer as the sensation overwhelmed me. I felt him everywhere, like we were two parts of the same whole. His release followed mine, his body shuddering above me.

As he withdrew his fangs, he licked the wound closed, the gesture somehow tender despite its strangeness. Exhaustion washed over me suddenly, my limbs heavy. Something was changing inside me, a warm tingling spreading through my veins.

“What’s happening?” I asked, my voice thick with drowsiness.

“The transformation.” He brushed my hair back from my face. “Sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

My eyelids grew too heavy to keep open. The last thing I felt before drifting off was Korvan’s arms around me, holding me close, and I knew I was exactly where I belonged.



*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:06 am*

I flicked the stabilizer relay switch back and forth, noting the slight drag on the downstroke.

Another item for the repair list. The Starfall had always been my sanctuary, my escape.

For years, it was me against the galaxy, and the Starfall was the only thing I could trust. But now, as I ran my fingers over the worn controls, it felt different. Like I wasn't alone anymore.

"Going to need a new relay soon," I muttered to the ship, patting the console affectionately. "Don't worry, I won't let you down."

The nav computer beeped, confirming our flight path to the Cassian sector—our first official mission under the Fangs' banner. I leaned back in the pilot's seat, taking in the cockpit I knew better than my own face. Every scratch, every patch job, every modification held a memory.

My hand drifted to my neck, fingers tracing the new markings that had appeared after Korvan's bite.

Orange swirls, matching his own, now adorned the left side of my neck and shoulder, extending partway down my arm.

The reflection in the darkened viewscreen showed their faint pattern against my skin.

Just two weeks ago, I'd been dodging creditors and taking whatever jobs came my

way—legal or not—just to keep fuel in the tanks. Now I was... what? A syndicate operative? The mate of a Vinduthi lieutenant? Both seemed equally impossible.

The environmental controls hummed as they cycled, a sound that had lulled me to sleep for years. The Starfall had been built for a human crew, but she was adaptable. We both were.

“Primary thrusters check complete,” I said to no one, then reached to calibrate the shield generators. “Let’s make sure these don’t fail us at the wrong moment again.”

“Still talking to the Starfall ?”

I spun around to see Korvan filling the cockpit doorway, his broad frame dwarfing the space designed for humans. He carried a sleek metal case in one hand.

“She listens better than most people.” I grinned, my eyes drinking him in despite having seen him only an hour ago.

“And yet, here I am.” He stepped into the cockpit, moving with that predatory grace that still made my breath catch.

“To what do I owe the honor? I thought you were meeting with Alkard.”

“Just finished.” He placed the case on the console beside me and opened it. Inside lay what looked like a modified blaster, but with Vinduthi design elements—sleeker, more elegant than standard Alliance models, with curved lines that somehow looked both beautiful and deadly.

“Alkard wanted this to go to you. Consider it a symbol of your new role.”

I lifted it from the case, surprised by its perfect balance. The grip molded to my hand as if it had been custom-made.

“This looks a little too fancy for a smuggler like me,” I said, but my fingers already curled possessively around it.

“It’s a Vinduthi-modified SX-90. Fires standard plasma bolts, but also has a neural disruptor setting. The targeting system adapts to your eye movements.”

I whistled low. “Guess this makes it official, huh? Smuggler to syndicate operative. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“You’ve earned it.” His expression remained stoic, but I caught the pride in his gaze.

I holstered the weapon at my hip, feeling its comfortable weight. “How does it look?”

“Like it belongs there.” He moved closer, leaning against the co-pilot’s chair as I returned to my pre-flight checks. “Need help?”

I laughed, flicking through the fuel mixture settings.

“You’re good at this, but you could use a second pair of eyes.”

“I’ve been flying the Starfall longer than you’ve been bossing people around, Lieutenant. Sit down and let me work.”

“You forget I’ve saved your life—twice.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“And I saved yours. Guess that makes us even.”

I continued working, conscious of his presence behind me. Our bickering had become comfortable, familiar. After a moment, he relented and squeezed into the co-pilot’s seat that was clearly too small for his frame.

“That chair wasn’t made for someone your size,” I observed, hiding a smile.

“Few things here are,” he replied dryly. “Yet I manage.”

“The Starfall ’s tougher than she looks. She’ll adjust.” I patted the console again. “Just like her captain.”

Korvan watched me work, his sharp eyes tracking my movements. “How does it feel?” he asked suddenly.

I knew he wasn’t asking about the ship. My hand went to my neck again, to the markings that connected us. “Different. Stronger. I can hear things I couldn’t before. Smell things.” I glanced at him. “Feel things more intensely.”

“The effects will stabilize in another day or two.” His voice softened. “Any regrets?”

I shook my head without hesitation. “Not one.”

The Starfall’s engines hummed beneath us, ready for departure, but I hesitated, my fingers hovering over the ignition sequence.

“What is it?” Korvan asked, leaning forward in his too-small chair.

I turned to face him, suddenly needing to say the words that had been building inside me. “You know, when I took that job from Miggs, I never imagined it would lead me here. I was just trying to survive another day.”

“And now?” His gaze held mine, patient and intense.

“Now, I’m not just surviving. I’m...” I paused, the words feeling strange but necessary. “I love you. That’s not something I ever thought I’d say to anyone, let alone a Vinduthi lieutenant who kidnapped me.”

For a moment, his expression remained unchanged. Then his mouth curved into that

rare smile that still made my heart skip.

“I loved you the moment you refused to run when you should have,” he said simply, as if stating an irrefutable fact. “Everything since has just confirmed what I already knew.”

I felt the warmth of his words spread through me, joining the connection that already bound us together. With a newfound certainty, I engaged the ignition sequence.

Engines thrummed to life beneath my hands, the vibration traveling up my arms—a sensation both familiar and new with my enhanced senses. The preflight sequence completed with a series of satisfying beeps.

“All systems go,” I announced, leaning back in my seat. My hands rested on the controls, not yet engaging the thrusters.

I’d spent most of my life running—running from debts, from enemies, from myself. I never thought I’d stop long enough to find something worth staying for. But here I was, about to launch into the unknown again. Only this time, I wasn’t running. I was choosing to go.

“Thodos Control, this is the Starfall requesting departure clearance,” I said into the comm.

“Starfall, you are cleared for departure. Docking clamps releasing,” came the response.

The ship shuddered slightly as the clamps disengaged. I engaged the thrusters, guiding us smoothly away from the station.

“Hope you’re ready, Lieutenant. The Starfall doesn’t do smooth rides.”

“Neither do I,” Korvan replied, his expression unchanging but his eyes holding mine, fierce and intense.

The stars stretched before us as we cleared Thodos Station; a vast expanse of possibilities. I punched in the coordinates for the Cassian sector and engaged the hyperdrive.

The galaxy was still dangerous, still unpredictable. But for the first time, I wasn’t facing it alone. Korvan and I were partners now—in the Fangs, in the Starfall , in whatever came next.

And we’d be ready for it.

Thank you for reading!

There’s a whole world of Vinduthi bad boys looking for their mates on Thodos Station.

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