



Saved by the Alien Mercenary (Monster Mercenary Mates #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Alone in the Zeta quadrant, I made one reckless choice. Now I'm pregnant, trapped on a pirate ship, and my only ally is a gruff, brooding cook with a dark past.

Ruby

As a lone human in the Zeta quadrant, my life revolves around survival. It's isolating, and in a moment of weakness, I give in to my deepest desire—to have a child. Now, pregnant and more vulnerable than ever, everything is twice as terrifying.

When I discover smuggled drugs aboard my ship, I'm furious. When pirates arrive to steal everything of value, I'm horrified. Desperate to survive, I strike a deal with the devil—and become a 'guest' aboard their ship.

The only solace? A gruff voice that speaks to me during my midnight snack runs to the mess hall. A soul as lonely as mine.

Brace

Rage is my constant companion, a force so dangerous I keep myself locked away in the galley, focusing only on making food. If I let go, I'd be on a path of vengeance, leaving nothing but death and destruction in my wake.

Then she appears in the dead of night. Pregnant, hungry, and despite everything, still smiling. She's my light in the darkness, my heart. For her, I want to be better. For her smiles, I'll leash the fury inside me, channel it, and destroy anyone who dares to threaten her unborn child.

For my Ruby, I'd do anything—even face the past I swore to bury and endure the revulsion of revealing what I truly am.

This is a standalone novel and the fifth book in the Monster Mercenary Mates series. This sci-fi monster romance features a grumpy alien hermit chef, a brave pregnant human captain, and a

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Ruby

I paced back and forth behind the captain's chair, my hands clasped tightly behind my back. "Status, Kip. Are they still on our tail?" I barked at my pilot. Five minutes ago, a ship had popped up on our radar, and it had been dogging our Long Hauler ever since. Finix was an old ship, and she was barely limping along after one of our engines had blown a few days ago. We were late for our delivery on Rummicar on Planet Six—also known as Rumcas. All we carried were bales upon bales of boring gray fabric for delivery to a military base; they were going to be turned into uniforms. It was not a haul worth stealing by pirates, but I was pretty sure the ship chasing us fully intended to board us.

"Still closing in, Captain," Kip responded. He was a young Sune male, and the excitement had caused him to shift into his hybridform. His narrow snout and pointed ears were much like those of a fox, as was the plume of a tail he flicked behind his back. In comparison, our navigator looked practically dead in his seat. The old Rummicar on male was slumped back, beady black eyes bleary and unfocused. He was barely looking at his screens. It would not surprise me if he'd been into the Roka again; the male always managed to stash some away, no matter how thoroughly I searched the ship.

I cursed out loud, resuming my pacing as I considered our options. Normally, I wouldn't be so scared of pirates; we had nothing of value. When they saw that, they'd leave. But after what I had accidentally found this morning? I was screwed either way. The pirates would find the stuff, take it without harming us, and then the guy who actually owned it would kill us. Or the pirates would find it and kill us. I had no doubt they'd find it because if I had found it, they definitely would know where to

look for it.

Kip sharply tilted his head to look my way, and his eyes were huge in his narrow face, the whites showing all around his bright blue irises. He could sense how scared I was, and the youngster was letting that feed his own worries. This was his first long trip on the Finix ; he'd never had to deal with pirates before. The truth was, I had never dealt with pirates either. I always took safe cargos for exactly that reason. Playing it safe—that's what I was all about. Except for one daring choice, I'd never taken a single risk in my life.

Immediately, my hands dropped to the gentle curve of my belly, and I added silently: And now I could take even fewer risks. I had another life depending on mine. If we couldn't outrun them, the only way forward was to surrender quietly and hope for the best. I couldn't worry about the owner of the drugs killing me when the more immediate worry was the pirates doing the same.

My eyes flashed from face to face on the bridge—a quick round to survey what anyone was thinking. One of these males was the traitor who had smuggled the Kanfray aboard the Finix and put all of us at risk. One of these bastards was on the payroll of a powerful druglord. I did not run in those circles—stayed as clear of them as I could—but even I knew which powerful bastard it probably was. We were heading into Rummicarón territory, and only one crimelord held reign there: Jalima.

The Finix was not a small ship, but it was run by a very small crew—me, the pilot, and the navigator required to get this rustbucket where she needed to go. And that was it. It was easy to discount Kip as the traitor, thanks to his youth, but at the same time, he was new for this trip... How well did I truly know him? Then there was Chawz, who, with his Roka habit, certainly had the criminal connections. It would not surprise me if he was in debt and had gotten in over his head. That would make for the right kind of pressure to smuggle drugs aboard my ship. Not just any drugs: Kanfray.

“Open a channel,” I said with a hiss, coming to a decision. The ship chasing us was flying dark, its transponder turned off so we could not read its call sign—unless it was painted on its hull and we got close enough. But I really wanted to avoid getting that close to the black menace. A Battle Class Cruiser, it was almost as big as the Finix but made up entirely of armored panels and bristling weapons. To me, it looked like a shark—dark and sinister—as it cut through space with the blue glow of its powerful engines.

“Yes, Captain,” Kip murmured, his tail swishing even more wildly in agitation, his tufted ears trembling against his head. He was terrified, and now I was starting to read that terror as worry for his smuggled drugs. Pregnancy had made me even more aware than usual just how precarious my safety was. There was nobody I could truly trust, nobody except myself. I cupped my belly again, worry filling me for the unborn life. I should have never taken this risk, but the loneliness had been getting to me. It was selfish.

“Channel is open,” Chawz muttered. I realized that Kip had frozen, his hands trembling around the yoke of the ship. It had roused the navigator from his stupor just enough to take over, the tense atmosphere finally getting to him. That still did not mean he looked scared; but Rummicaron suppressed all their feelings, especially the good ones. He was not supposed to feel anything but cool rationality.

“Attention, approaching ship,” I said after clearing my voice and fisting my hands behind my back to stop their trembling. “This is Captain González of the Finix . Please explain your intentions. We are a peaceful trading vessel; we carry nothing of value—unless your preferred fashion is gray.” I didn’t know why the lackadaisical comment slipped out; a joke was hardly going to fly with a bunch of greedy pirates. Humor was just the way I handled stress.

There was a long silence that followed my statement, and I held my breath the entire time I waited. I wasn’t the only one frozen in place; Kip had his tail straight out, ears

pitched forward as he listened intently. Even Chawz looked alert, his maw of razor-sharp teeth open as if he wanted to intimidate whoever was listening. It was an open communications signal, meant to broadcast on all frequencies to ensure whoever was following us could hear. They had to be listening.

When an answer came, my legs trembled, and I was forced to rush to my seat and sit down before I collapsed. The voice was dark and mean and spoke in a language I recognized but that made absolutely no sense to me. It was an Alpha Quadrant tongue—one I hadn't heard since I was a little girl growing up on one of the outer Earth colonies. He spoke Talac. What was a Talacan pirate doing in the Zeta Quadrant? That made about as little sense as my being here did.

“Hello, Captain González. Gray is my color, so you're going to have to surrender your cargo—particularly the cargo you're hauling for a certain crime lord. You know what I'm talking about. Don't even bother to hide it.” Kip blanched. Chawz sank low in his seat, but that still didn't prove guilt for either of them. It could simply be their fear of the pirates or the mention of a crimelord. Fuck, this was bad. How did this ship even know about the Kanfray I had found hidden in a section of vents that morning? What were the odds?

“I have no intention of resisting,” I said, my hands clutching my belly tightly as fear and adrenaline flooded my system. So far, the baby hadn't been big enough yet for me to feel him kick, but I imagined the flutter of my nerves might be him now. Was he responding to my stress? “Will you let us go unharmed if we hand over everything of value?” I did not bother to explain to this sinister Talacan voice that I had no knowledge of, nor any connection to, the crimelord or the drugs. The authorities might care that I was simply an innocent bystander—but pirates? Doubtful.

There was another silence, and I felt my belly flutter, wondered if it was my son responding to my fear. Then the voice drawled, “Absolutely. Lower your shields and halt your ship. A boarding party will arrive shortly. Confine your crew to their

quarters, then meet me at the airlock. Understood?” I understood, and so did my crew. Kip was a mess; Chawz was calm as a cucumber as he hauled the young Sune to his feet and dragged him to their bunks. I thought I saw a flicker of warning in the cool, sharkish eyes of the Rummicarons right before I closed and locked their door.

Then, with lead in my shoes, I went to face our doom at the airlock.

Brace

Pacing inside my galley, the fur on my back bristled with tension. These moods struck at random moments, capturing me in the past — in the battle rage, the pain, and the fear I’d felt when I was a gladiator. The need to strike something and pummel it into oblivion was all-consuming. This was why I kept myself locked away: for the safety of everyone else. I could not trust myself to control this around others; I could barely control the rage when I was alone.

I was alone. Very much alone. The mess hall was empty —no visitors, since we were on the hunt and the Varakartoom was closing in. Varakartoom — the name was appropriate, coming from our captain’s native Naga tongue. It meant She Who Hunts, and that was exactly what we’d been doing for the last couple of weeks: striking one ship after another from Jalima’s fleet, based on intel Elyssa had brought us — me.

Elyssa’s name only made the rage simmer brighter in my veins. Not because I was mad at her, not because I wanted to harm her, but because she reminded me of the past. She was part of my past, and her being here had brought it all back — more vivid, more powerful than ever. It was as if the last few years no longer existed, and I was once again the young male Asmoded had scraped from the bottom of a cell, injured and dying.

It was getting worse, and the loneliness was getting to me too. Now that Elyssa was trying to reach me, and blissfully happy with her youthful, always cheerful, and kind mate, I felt it even more. Envy was not an emotion I enjoyed; I hated it even more than the rage. I wasn't envious of Tass, either. Thinking of Elyssa in any way other than sister was extremely distasteful. But I was jealous of the males—like Tass, like Aramon, and like the captain—who had found their mates. It wasn't so easy to be alone when you had to observe blissfully happy couples at dinner, at breakfast, and at lunch. Or when you knew why they were absent, having requested a meal in their blazing quarters.

Turning to the counter, I forced myself to breathe deeply through my nose. There was a hunger in the pit of my stomach that came from what I was. The Hoxiam hunger was always present, just like my rage. It was too dangerous to step out of the galley and work off my aggression in the gym. The thought of the punching bag in my quarters made my stomach sour, so I took it out on the batch of dough I'd made earlier that morning.

Five minutes later, I'd punched all the air out of the previously fluffy dough, and with a growl of frustration, I threw it all in the bin. I didn't think I felt any better, but when I started a fresh batch, mixing Haras f flour with oil, salt, and my preferred rising agent, my hands moved calmly. Yeah, that was a little better, if not by much. Now, if only I could get rid of the pit of rage in my gut as easily as I could the failed dough. I didn't think I'd be able to — not when the loneliness and the weight of my failures clung to my shoulders. Not when every day that we were hunting these ships was a reminder of the past.

The others were loving it, the stories that filled the mess hall rowdy and cheerful each night. The bragging, the tall tales — normally I'd listen in and enjoy every minute of it, feel like I was part of the crew, even if I couldn't be. But now, those stories just felt sour, because they were all about Jalima's ships, Jalima's dented pride, Jalima's downfall. You'd think I couldn't wait for that to happen, but all I wanted was to

forget he existed and bury the past.

This dough needed to rise again before I could shape it more carefully into loaves to bake. But there was always more to do in a galley that served close to a hundred males and females at any given time. Asmoded had taken extra crew aboard to handle the constant hunting of the ships, rotating them in and out for rest as needed — but always running, always hunting, until he'd gotten every single ship he could from the data Elyssa had provided.

I was cutting vegetables when I heard the voices, my ears swiveling in the direction the sound came from. Female voices — bright, warm, cheerful — very much the opposite of what was roiling inside my hollow gut. Those females were as distinct by their tone as they were by their scent, and I knew their drinks and food orders by heart. I was moving before they could reach the hatch and ask, sliding cups of tea and plates of the cake I'd made earlier that morning out from under the hatch.

Elyssa tried to pet my hand, her greeting bright and cheerful, but I evaded the touch. I knew she meant well — I knew it hurt her feelings when I withdrew — but I simply couldn't bear it. She wouldn't want to touch me if she knew what kind of murderous rages I fought to control every minute of the day. She'd be appalled, and her mate would never let me near her if he knew. He'd be right.

"Thanks, Brace!" one of the others said. When I ducked, I could peer through the crack and see that Mandy had draped her arm around Elyssa's shoulders and was hustling her to a nearby table. The young Elrohirian, whom I'd known as a little girl, was giving my hatch a forlorn look, but she was easily cheered up by the others. Mandy was already digging into her slice of cake with gusto, patting her pregnant belly as she sat down and joking about her extra appetite. I understood that, Hoxiam females were especially ferocious eaters when gravid.

I shouldn't have listened in to what they had to say, but I couldn't help it. The rage

for Jalima that I wanted to forget also drove me to savor each snatched bit of information about Asmoded's quest for vengeance. It was why I was still here, aboard the Varakartoom, instead of hiding away on some moon. I didn't know if I remained to torture myself further or if I couldn't stand the thought of truly being alone. Whatever it was, I was still here, still running my little, lonely domain aboard the ship — which meant I was here to listen to every word the mated women had to say as they bent their heads together to gossip.

“Mitnick says it was a human woman — he was dead certain,” Harper said. She was mated to the ship's communications specialist, aka hacker. “She spoke English with a modern accent, so she's from the present time, not a stasis girl like us.” I knew what Harper was referring to and wondered what Elyssa was thinking at that moment. Did it cut to be excluded by the other three? She wasn't a stasis girl — she wasn't part of the ‘us’ that Harper referred to.

“I heard she surrendered without a fight,” Elyssa said brightly, with not a hint of sadness or of feeling excluded in her tone. “Tass was with the boarding party,” she added. “She's pregnant. Not as far along as you are, Mandy, but definitely showing.” The four women began speculating about how she got here, what her part in this was, and whether she was working for Jalima or not. I felt static rush through my brain, my thoughts spinning as a single image formed: a lonely, pale-faced pregnant woman, and Jalima's four hands controlling her every move. The rage that I'd been fighting all morning boiled over, exploding through my veins — lava - hot, then ice - cold.

I could not risk harming the four at the table in the mess hall; I could not let them see me. So I spun and raced for my quarters next door, hands pulling at the fur on my head, the door slamming shut behind me with a bang. Then there was darkness, and silence—except for the pounding of my heart and the rapid bursts of my breath. My eyes zeroed in on the punching bag dangling from the ceiling next to my bed. I knew it wasn't enough, that I'd lose control once I started, but it was too late now.

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Ruby

My palms were sweaty , so I wiped them on my pants . T hen I did it again and again because I couldn't stand still. Pacing in the hallway beside the airlock was hardly an option, it was very tight quarters. Though I was only five months along, my belly was getting big enough that I didn't feel quite so maneuverable in the tight space. I did n' t want to be surprised when my back was turned. Unarmed, I felt extremely vulnerable, and I didn't need to add to that.

When the airlock hissed, I still nearly jumped out of my skin in fear. Damn it, I was better than this. I had to keep it together. But I was certain I should have heard the clunking of a ship as it docked with our airlock—why hadn't I? The manual wheel on the door spun as it unlocked, which meant someone was using the override from the inside. It had to be the pirates from that scary, black ship. I wondered if it was going to be the Talac male on the other side, and if he'd recognized that I was human.

The fact was, a human might be just as valuable as that stash of Kanfray I'd discovered in the vents. Once the pirates saw me, there was no hiding it. Would they snatch me and sell me? I stopped my nervous fi dge ting and attempted to strike a cool, confident pose as I waited for the door to open. My breath felt stuck in my chest, and I forced myself to breathe deeply.

These pirates swung open the airlock door but did not leap through it ; the portal remained conspicuously empty for several seconds before the first one stuck his head around the corner. All I saw was an opaque faceplate and black armor snugly encompassing a muscular male body. He was large, and that armor only emphasized how powerful he was, and how useless fighting him would be.

As he stepped from the airlock, his head first aimed my way, so I knew he'd seen me. Then he swung it around and scanned the rest of the narrow passage; he even turned his back, a laser pistol raised. I didn't expect him to just jog off down the passage, but he disappeared around the corner without a word. Another already took his place, and then another. They weren't really bothering with me, and one brushed by without touching me—a miracle in the narrow space.

“Captain González, I presume?” It was the very last black-armored male to board my ship who spoke. I recognized the Talacan voice, but he sounded even colder in person than he had over the communications channel earlier. A shiver of apprehension shot down my spine. There were two strangers in black roaming my ship, and I was left sandwiched between two more. I felt positively tiny, and I didn't like it.

When I nodded, the faceplate on the helmet of the Talacan male withdrew, and I was staring into his silver - gray face and black eyes. His head was bald, as was normal for anyone of his species. Not so normal was the silver liquid that coiled like quicksilver up the side of his neck. It moved organically, but I had no clue what it could be. It made my stomach twist even more, fear rising sharply in my chest until I felt like I was about to burst.

In my belly, my tiny son fluttered and moved, I was certain of it now. I cupped my hands protectively over him, as if that would keep away the danger. When I raised my chin and gave the Talacan pirate my most defiant glare, his mouth tilted into a cruel smile. As if the plug had been pulled, all the fear spiraled out of me, swishing from my chest, gone without a trace. I felt lighter for it, but also oddly empty and drained.

“Why don't you come with me?” the Talac male said with a smirk that could only herald bad things to come. Here we went — I knew it. I should have taken more time to vet Kip before I hired him, should have double - checked that Chawz was still trustworthy. I'd let the cost of having my ship idle weigh too much, rushed the

process of hiring a new pilot. This was the result : t hree trips in, and I was facing a threa t I hadn't encountered in all ten years I'd been flying the Finix in the Zeta Quadrant.

"I don't think so," I said firmly. "If you don't mind, I'm staying aboard the Finix , where I belong." I crossed my arms over my chest and ignored the snort of amusement that came from the other pirate. He , too , had lowered his faceplate, and now I could see that he was Viridara. His black eyes were framed in his green face by a scar on one side and glowing golden spots on the other. Fairly young, handsome, almost kind-looking. He was too boyish to make much sense as a pirate. It confused me for a second, and that was all it took.

The Talac curled his hand around my biceps and steer ed me to ward the airlock. I stumbled, protesting the treatment with a yelp. "Hey, let me go! You promised we would be unharmed if I let you take the cargo. It ' s just bolts of gray fabric for the Rummicaron army, but you can have them. I don't care." Despite the manhandling, I didn't fall, and he didn't hurt me. I found myself inside the small airlock with the tall Talacan and his sinister, dark expression. The Viridara male was blocking the entrance now, ensuring that I could not escape. His arms crossed over his wide chest made him an unmovable wall.

"I did. Didn't say you could stay. First, you're going to tell me all you know about Jalima's operation." The words the Talac drawled made all the steam w h oosh right out of me. Jalima? So I was right about who that Kanfray aboard my ship belonged to. I was so screwed. If my ship was responsible for losing his cargo, I was certain he w ould make me pay — should I escape these freaking pirates. Although I was seeing my hopes of a somewhat peaceful resolution rapidly dwindle.

"Nothing!" I denied immediately. "I only found a stash of Kanfray in the vents this morning. I've been trying to decide if it's my nav or my pilot who betrayed me all morning!" My hands couldn't stop going to my belly, protecting the only thing that

really mattered. But what home could I offer my child if I didn't have my ship?

The Talac didn't believe me, I could see it in his eyes. But the Viridara male was kinder, younger, and not quite so bitter as his companion. I turned my eyes on him and implored him to intercede on my behalf. "I'd never help a crimelord or smuggle drugs! I swear I have nothing to do with the Kanfray or Jalima." The question was : why did these pirates care?

They were much better equipped and more disciplined than I would expect of a pirate crew. Their black armor was all uniform, making them seem more like military than criminals. The questions about Jalima and what role I played also made me feel like they weren't your average pirates. What were they really after? I suddenly doubted it was the gray fabric or the Kanfray.

"We'll get this sorted aboard the Varakartoom, Captain González. Once your story checks out, you'll be free to go," the Viridara male said soothingly. Yup, now he was starting to sound like a freaking police officer. What the fuck had I landed myself in?

The two males hustled me through the airlock and then aboard the small shuttle they'd docked to the Finix. The Talac took the helm for the short flight, but the Viridara never left my side. He might be the nice one of the pair, but he was no fool—his watchful eyes stayed on me the entire trip. Then I was hustled aboard the large black ship, the Varakartoom, he'd called it. The name stirred some faint memory, but I couldn't place it. Not until I was led into an interrogation room and seated in a metal chair behind a metal table.

The sight of their captain jarred that memory loose when he slithered into the room with me. A Naga—black-scaled, speckled with gold and green. His long hair rose sharply from a widow's peak, black locks streaked with green highlights. He was Asmoded, and the rumors said he had a vendetta against Jalima. Of course, this

wasn't about stealing goods ; this was about dealing the crimelord a blow. That smuggled contraband was just the way to do it, and now they wanted to know what I knew. Would they believe me when I said I knew absolutely nothing? I doubted it.

This male was as terrifying as the Talac, and facing both at once made the fear come back. It jumped in my throat, made my pulse pound in my chest. It felt like I was about to have a heart attack when the black-scaled male turned his intense golden gaze on me. "Talk" was all he said. And I jumped to do as he wanted, blabbering almost incoherently about how I'd found the Kanfray that morning and had nothing to do with it , begging him shamelessly not to harm my child or me. At this point, I didn't even care about keeping the Finix ; as long as they didn't sell me into slavery , I'd be happy.

The Varakartoom and its captain weren't pirates; they were mercenaries. They sold their services to the highest bidder, and they were really good at what they did. I'd heard whispers about them when visiting Yengar Station.

They let me talk unimpeded for as long as I had words , never saying anything — just staring at me with cold, implacable eyes. I talked myself hoarse explaining how little I knew of Jalima and that filthy Kanfray. I wasn't sure how much time had passed; there was no way to tell inside this dark room. My voice was shot when the Captain rose, abruptly ending the conversation. My throat ached, I'd talked so much, and none of it was useful to them . I knew that too. Falling silent, I bit my lip and waited anxiously to see what they would do next , certain it wasn't going to be anything good.

"Sin, escort our guest to the med bay for a checkup. Then see to it that Flack assigns her quarters near the mess hall. Thank you for your time, Captain González . I'll be corroborating your story with the rest of your crew, but I'm sure it will check out." The captain still looked mean, closed off, as he slithered from the room. Now I wondered if I had misjudged. Doctor? Corroborate? They believed me?

The Talac's expression was even more unreadable as he urged me to my feet with a jerk of his chin. I levered myself upright with a hand on the table, the cold metal biting into my skin and causing me to shiver. My emotions were crashing, spinning as I struggled to keep up with what was going on. Was I free to go or not? It sounded like they were keeping me here, but why?

This time, the Talac, Sin, didn't physically haul me around. He kept a careful distance as he strode across the small room and opened the door. Then he halted, and I wondered if he had been caught by surprise by what was on the other side of the door. Silver flashed over his black armor, not just writhing along his neck but sliding down his arms and around his head. "Let us in, Sin," a female voice said firmly. "There's been a change of plans."

That was English. There was no mistaking the familiar tones of my native language. This woman spoke the words with an unfamiliar accent, but the tones were crisp and decisive. They brought forth a wave of homesickness that, augmented by my pregnancy, made me burst into sudden tears. Ah , fuck, way to go , Ruby — cry in front of the scary mercenary/pirate. I'd held firm all this time . G ranted, I'd babbled like a fool, but I hadn't cried.

The Talac male looked at me over his shoulder with what was clearly a horrified expression. The way he slipped from the room seemed hurried, as if he couldn't get out of my presence fast enough. "She's all yours, Mandy," he snarled in parting.

I thumped back down in the chair and fought to get the tears under control, wiping my face with the edge of my sleeve. I wasn't prepared for the four women who burst into the room after the scary guy had booked it. They were all human, like me. One was also pregnant, and they all looked healthy and happy. It was such a confusing, unexpected sight that I just sat there and stared, the tears forgotten.

The pregnant woman was in the lead, her belly bigger than mine, brown eyes radiant

beneath her stylish black bob. She wore jade green, a flirty dress that had to be tailored to fit her beautiful pregnant belly. She smiled warmly as soon as she saw me, rushing around the table as fast as she could, though really , it was more of a waddle than a walk.

The other three were close on her heels , and now that I got a better look, I realized one was not actually human but Elrohirian —a humanoid species that , save for their pointed ears , could easily pass as human back on E arth. They were all smiles, about as close to the opposite of my welcome so far as one could get. The pregnant woman drew my attention again when she perched on the edge of the table next to me. “Hi, I’m Mandy!” she said. “I’m so sorry about my mate, he’s got no manners at all. Let’s get you sorted.”

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Brace

My room was in shambles, and I had no recollection of doing it. I was the only one with access, so it had to have been me, though. Not even the captain could enter my room without my permission—a concession he'd made for me and me alone. Shame filled me when I took in the damage I'd done. My mattress was shredded, blankets torn, and any furniture not made of metal was in splinters. The lone metal chair in my room had survived most of the carnage, but the back was twisted from my fists—a clear set of handprints visible where I'd gripped it.

I must have made a terrible ruckus , causing all this damage, so it did not surprise me when a knock came on my door. The quick, perfunctory rapping of a set of knuckles was as familiar as the destruction I'd wre a ked on my furniture. I did not want to face my captain, but it was the one promise I'd made when he agreed to let me live aboard the Varakartoom . No hiding, not from him. Everyone else, sure, but not him. As he was easily forty f ee t long, his powerful Naga body covered in extremely tough scales, I'd felt safe agreeing to that. Even a fully fed Hoxiam would have a hard time harming a target like that.

My knuckles were bleeding, but that was the only sign of the damage I'd done. They ached , and I savored that pain as I stepped over the broken table and reached for the panel next to the door. The l ights dimmed at my command, hiding some of the carnage, though I doubted the sharp-eyed Naga would miss a thing. I hated what I'd done, I wasn't even sure what had set me off, but I was finally calm. More settled inside my pelt than I had been in days, ever since we'd started harrying ships and pirating Jalima's cargo.

Pressing my back against the wall next to the door, I allowed it to slide open. Nobody could see me from the hallway, and I knew Asmoded would enter before he spoke. This was our ritual by now. I wondered who'd clued him in on my rage-inspired tantrum. Had the females in the mess hall heard? Had I scared them?

Asmoded slithered into my room quietly. His scales made no sound against the metal floor, his long body coiling over the debris without any problem. The door slid shut behind him, giving us complete privacy, but I did not move from my spot against the wall. Asmoded was tall, and he could rise on his tail to make himself even bigger, but I towered over him right now. I didn't want to give him the slightest reason to think I would attack him. At that moment, there was no fight in me at all.

In the middle of the room, the captain twisted to look around. His expression was neutral — it always was — but I still felt it as disapproval. I'd messed up. I'd failed to control the rage, and it was getting worse. I'd already wrecked another batch of furniture a few days ago. This was his second visit in a week. Normally, I was the one who sought him out for a midnight talk. I wasn't used to all this upheaval and company. Starting with Elyssa, incited by the confrontations with Jalima's ship, and ending with the news of a pregnant human's involvement —it was chaos. I couldn't explain why that had been a trigger, but I felt rage begin to pound through my veins anew, just thinking about her.

Drawing in a deep breath, I clenched my fists and focused on the pain in my knuckles. When Asmoded spoke, I was ready for him. "I don't know why, but it's getting worse. Nearest inhabitable ice planet, you need to drop me off. I can't keep doing this." On the ice, I could sink into my base instincts, just be the beast and not worry about any casualties. It was the only option.

"No," he said firmly. We'd had this discussion a million times before, and his answer was always the same. Always, I'd agreed to stay a little longer, but I knew I wouldn't let him convince me this time. "This is because of Jalima. Any nearness to his males

and his operations sets you off. It sets me off. I get it.” He didn’t get it. He was angry at the crime lord because, for the longest time, he’d believed the male had killed his mate and unborn child. He’d learned that was a lie and had been reunited with his son.

What I’d suffered at the hands of that bastard — including the loss of my entire family — had tainted my youth and given me this rage. It had forced me to be more beast than man. It was not the same. Asmoded was a male with a brain, always cool and calculating, a male with a plan. He could think of the long game, and he excelled at patience. We were nothing alike.

“I am leaving,” I said again, sweeping out my injured, swelling hand to indicate the damage I’d done to everything I could get my hands on. “I will not keep doing this. It’s too dangerous to the crew, especially now that there are females aboard — civilians.” I knew that was a powerful argument, pointing out the threat I posed to his own mate.

With a weary sigh, Asmoded caught my waving hand by looping the tip of his tail around my wrist. I growled, the fur along my shoulders rising in aggression before I could curb the urge to do violence. We’d done this dance before, and I held still as he pulled the tissue regenerator he’d brought out from a pouch at his waist. The device hummed quietly, emitting healing light as he ran it over my split knuckles. I must have broken some bones, too, because he was at it for quite a while. He did not need to tell me to offer the other hand when he was done.

He stroked the fur along my knuckles, exposing a particularly nasty cut on that hand. “You know you’re wrong,” he said, the device humming again as he began to heal the wound. “You went out on a blazing mission a few weeks ago, Brace. You went out to rescue Tass for your friend, and you were perfectly in control the entire time. You are not a danger to anyone; I don’t believe that for a minute.”

Baring my teeth, I opened my mouth to protest, but he raised a hand , and I fell silent. “The only one you are a danger to is yourself. If you would just agree to see Dravion, I am certain he could help you.” Drugs . H e was talking about mind - altering medication to subdue my rage. I refused. That would only last as long as I took the pills or whatever it was that Dravion had in mind. It would involve exposing myself to a medical professional, let ting him see all the scars and wounds beneath my pelt. The only place that was still all mine was the thoughts inside my head, and the empathic half- G norlarnx was not getting his tentacles in it.

“You overheard Mandy and the other females talk ing , didn’t you?” Asmoded continued mildly. He wasn’t looking at me, jus t finishing up the heal job on my hand, his movements brisk and impersonal. I liked it that way, I didn’t need any coddling. I always appreciated how direct the captain was when he spoke to me, no fear. That made me feel more in control , too.

I nodded because it was true. Hearing the females talk about the human they had retrieved from this latest ship of Jalima’s was what had set me off. I recalled it much more clearly now, but I’d already been struggling all morning.

“You’ll be happy to know that she is unharmed, as is her unborn young. And I doubt Jalima even knows of her existence ; she is not involved.” I wasn’t quite sure why those were the words he left me with. I didn’t know why he thought I cared about some unknown pregnant female I’d never met — and would never meet.

“Next ice planet, we’ll talk,” and then he was gone.

Ruby

Sitting on the soft bunk bed inside the small private quarters , I tried to adjust my

thinking to the new situation. I was not a prisoner, apparently, but I also wasn't free to return to the Finix . In my book, that made me a captive anyway. If I wasn't suspected of having dealings with Jalima — according to these mercenaries — why were they keeping me here?

The four women had treated me well , though. They'd taken me to the doctor aboard the ship for a quick medical check - up , and I'd been assured that my baby was in good health and growing at normal rates. He felt big to me, and what had seemed like little flutters I could mistake for gas had begun to morph into definite kicks. I was elated about that part. He was a strong boy, and feeling him move made it real. It made me feel less alone.

“I guess I need to start thinking about a name for you, little one,” I murmured out loud. That made my mind flash to the male I was certain was the father. A Kertinal I'd picked up in a bar at the Yengar S tation in a moment of weakness. I hadn't sought him out with the intention of getting pregnant ; I had not thought that far ahead. The only reason I'd gone to the bar in the first place was because I'd been lonely. He'd seen through my disguise and hadn't ratted me out. Out of everyone there, he'd been shockingly intelligent and educated —s peaking thoughtfully, and handsome , with his amethyst eyes and the purple lines that crisscrossed his black skin. I'd even enjoyed the proud jut of his horns and had discarded the warning signals on them: the notches carve d into the sides that indicated kills. He'd had a dozen of them.

A one-night stand and a few weeks later, I was hanging over the edge of my toilet, puking out my guts. I knew what a huge risk I was taking by keeping a child whose father I didn't even know beyond that single night. Worse, I'd picked him up from a bar on a spaceport known for its lawlessness and criminal activity. Yengar Spaceport was the place to be for slave auctions, and I'd taken a stupid risk going out there with a cloak as a disguise and little else. My baby's father hadn't turned me in, but there was no doubting the fact that he was a crook himself.

My stomach rumbled, and though I was well past my first trimester, a wave of nausea followed. From the start of the pregnancy, the nausea had only hit me at night. Morning sickness my ass, I felt right as rain most of the day. Until I lay down to sleep, and nothing so far had made that go away. I hoped it was a side effect of the baby having mixed parentage, but I couldn't be sure. The doctor on the Varakartoom was the first one I'd seen, and he had no answers for me. I was his first Kertinal/human pregnancy, so all he had to go on were my readings.

I suppose it was no surprise that a doctor from a mercenary outfit had no clue. He probably hadn't assisted in a single birth—and had no desire to do so, either. There was a reason he worked for mercenaries. Yeah, there really was. The male had been half Grolarnx—a most fearful combination. I hadn't even known that the dangerous, feared species was capable of producing half-breeds like that. I had only trusted the doctor as much as I had because his other half was Aderian, and those were universally considered the best doctors in the Zeta Quadrant. Not only that, Aderians were gifted with empathy; they hated violence of any kind.

When the baby gave me another firm kick, the nauseating feeling in my stomach escalated. I was close to puking and hurriedly stumbled into my private lavatory. A luxury I didn't have aboard my own freaking ship, where I had to share the head with my two crew members. Once I was done, I washed my face with cold water and rinsed my mouth thoroughly.

“Fine, I got the message. I'll hunt down some food for us,” I said to the still-kicking baby inside my belly. He was as restless as I was, but was he always that way in the evening and I'd just never felt it before? My words seemed to quiet him down at last, or maybe he'd just exhausted himself with that little tap dance.

My quarters opened quietly and without a problem, proving that the crew's welcoming committee hadn't lied: I was free to move about on the ship. They had placed me in quarters right next to the mess hall, so I'd only have to turn the corner

to find them. Good thing, because this ship was a maze , and every single hallway looked exactly the same. Everything was black and gloomy, and only the number of doorways varied from hallway to hallway. I didn't think I'd ever manage to find my way around here, and it was so freaking huge , too. The Finix only had two narrow hallways and the pathways above the hold to check on the cargo. There was no way you could get lost on my cargo ship, even if it was the same size as this Battle - Class Cruiser.

I turned the indicated corner, which Mandy had helpfully marked by tying a green sash around the nearest handhold. Then , I was staring at the large open doors leading to the mess hall. They had briefly shown it to me and pointed out the food replicator set in one corner. Supposedly, freshly cooked meals were served at set times, and I was free to partake of those. But Mandy, pregnant herself, had assured me that the replicator could make some basics to take care of my needs in between mealtimes.

The mess hall was lit only by some dim lights along the edges of the ceiling. The ship was in its night cycle, which matched the night cycle of the Finix . That was no coincidence; most ships and ports ran on Strewn's cycle—the massive shipyard. There was nobody inside, which suited me just fine. I was still a little dazzled and tired from chatting with four women for hours on end. I was pretty sure they'd done a better job interrogating me than the Naga captain had. I was also certain that was no coincidence, but I had nothing to hide.

Beelining for the food replicator, I scanned the buttons to peruse the selections on offer. It was a much fanc ier machine than the one I had on the Finix . I couldn't afford a chef or spare the space for more than a tiny galley. Our food options were nutritious but very limited. I expected much more from the machine when I started looking , and was sorely disappointed almost immediately. There were snacks and drinks, but most of them weren't geared toward a human. I did not fancy the Sivian Bloodworms that topped the list — a clearly popular choice. They were considered a delicacy on any Rummicarón world, but I wasn't about to try them.

Humming to myself, I began eliminating the choices that definitely wouldn't agree with me. That left two different types of energy bar, porridge, or Haras sticks. What I really wanted was a bite of the chocolate I had stashed beneath my bunk on the Finix. It was hard to come by, and I had been rationing out each expensive bite, but a day like today deserved some chocolate. At least I wasn't dead. Now I just had to convince the scary snake captain to give me back my ship and let me be on my way. Every delay was going to cost me at the end of the line, and we were already late with this shipment.

A sound jerked my attention from the machine and made my skin break out in goosebumps. It had sounded as though there were another person here, but the mess hall looked empty. My eyes locked on the metal rolling hatch that separated the galley from the room. It appeared closed, but now that I was looking at it, I realized it was cracked slightly at the bottom. Was someone on the other side?

"Hello? Anyone there?" I called out. If the chef was in, would he be able to fix me a sandwich? I'd much prefer that over any of the options I did have. Abandoning the food replicator, I made my way to the hatch to get a better look. Oddly enough, I wasn't scared. Honestly, if any of these supposed pirates wanted to harm me, they would have done so already. Instead, they had fed me, given me a room and fresh clothes, and followed that up with a medical check-up of my baby and access to more food. This was not a bad situation, save for my lack of choices right now, but I was going to work on that tomorrow, when I wasn't hungry.

When I got to the hatch, it became obvious it was completely dark on the other side, but I was convinced someone was there. I wasn't sure how I knew, sixth sense, a scent I'd caught maybe, but someone was there. "Hey, are you the chef of this ship?" I asked. Leaning closer, I pressed my hands onto the empty, pristine counter so I could duck my head and peer under the edge. Instantly, I caught an eyeful of fur on the other side. There wasn't a whole lot of light coming from the mess hall, but it was just enough to know that it was blue. There weren't a lot of blue, hairy aliens to pick

from in the Zeta Quadrant, so I was pretty sure I knew what species this guy was: Hoxiam.

If I were smart, I'd turn on my heels right this instant and bolt. Hoxiam were known people - eaters. They had huge maws that could open wide enough to swallow my head whole, and the appetite to back up that kind of desire. The Hoxiam were banned from pretty much every sane place, or at the very least , required to wear a slave collar to control them before they could set foot anywhere. The sane thing to do would definitely be to get out of here as fast as possible.

Unfortunately, my stomach was the one in charge right now. It rumbled very loudly and obnoxiously , and I found myself awkwardly laughing as I patted it, feeling hollow inside, a fresh wave of nausea coming on. I had no clue where the nearest bathroom was , so I fought to hold it in. "Sorry to bother you, sir. Could you help me get something to eat?" In another idiotic move, I patted my stomach and drew attention to its round curve and my obvious pregnancy. Way to go, show the always - hungry flesh-eater that I was an extra tasty snack right now. "I'm eating for two, and nothing on the machine appeals..."

There was nothing but silence for two drawn-out seconds, and then I heard a whispering noise followed by a low growl. The voice that spoke to me through that hatch was deliciously low and hoarse, and it made my clit tingle. It was a wildly inappropriate response to a guy's voice, and I'd never experienced it before. Some wires must have gotten crossed after all of today's chaos, combined with the silly pregnancy hormones. "What are you craving, gravid one?"

Gravid one? Seriously? That was the worst thing I'd ever been called. " Gravid " was a little too close to " gravity " if you asked me, although intellectually , I knew all he meant was that I was with child. So, score one for the sexy voice, minus one for the weird name-calling. I was so flabbergasted that I blurted out what I really wanted, even though I knew there was no way they'd have that — or give that to me. There

was only so much “ charity ” they’d give a random pregnant human. Chocolate, expensive as it was, wouldn’t be part of that deal. But that’s what I asked for.

The husky chuckle made my clit pulse and my nipples perk. “Chocolate? One moment.” I heard more rustling as he began moving around in the dark behind the hatch. It was very tempting to lean back down so I could peek, but I was certain I did not want to offend the possible chocolate - giver/Hoxiam who could eat me if he felt like it.

When something that sounded suspiciously like a plate sliding over the counter reached my ears, my stomach did a happy dance. Or maybe that was Junior attempting another round of exercise. “I made cakes. Will that do?” A plate slid from under the edge of the hatch, and I caught sight of a very large hand covered in a fine blue pelt. He withdrew his fingers immediately, but the image of that large paw and thick digits had engraved itself on my brain. If the rest of him was in proportion to his hand, he was huge.

Then I saw the cake and discovered that , though small , it was a rich chocolate, even better than a hard piece of 70% that would ’ ve been awaiting me on the Finix . I dug in without shame, moaning in delight as I bit into the soft, gooey center. All I could focus on were the amazing flavors and how this was exactly what I’d been craving. When I discovered that my strange Hoxiam companion had slid a cup of fragrant tea over too, I nearly burst into tears from pleasure. It smelled like ginger, and wouldn’t that be exactly what my mom would suggest I drink for the nausea? How had he known?

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Brace

I paced my chambers, feeling like a caged beast, my skin crawling, fur bristling. Anxious energy coursed through me , and no amount of cooking, inventory, or cleaning had helped. My chambers had been swept, and all trash had been disposed of, leaving it a very barren, empty space.

After last night's surprise visitor, I had spent hours scrubbing the galley until every surface gleamed , my head whirring as I cataloged what foods I could make that might please her. Then I'd begun baking and cooking in a frenzy that had left me with seared fingertips, Haras flour all over my fur, and far more food than even the entire crew on the ship could possibly eat in one day. I'd gone nuts, and not in the usual way.

Giving my reflection in the bathroom mirror a bemused smile, I rolled my shoulders and began dusting my fur clean with my favorite brush. What had gotten into me now? I recalled the way the captain had made it a point to mention the pregnant female yesterday —how confused that had made me, and how anxious I'd felt thinking of her. Now I knew her — actually knew her — and it was... different. She was different.

She hadn't been pale and shaken, fearful of Jalima , who controlled her like a puppet master. She'd been lively and vibrant, smiling even though she thought I couldn't see her through the metal mesh of the hatch. Her hair had been dark as night, her skin a beautiful , soft brown, like Ekra syrup. Her eyes — they'd sparkled with her smile, bright like suns and dark at the same time. Gazing into them had felt like she'd lit up my soul, and that was blazing mushy. Elyssa would tell me... stars, what would my

always - romantic friend say? That I'd found my mate.

I growled. Impossible! I was not worthy of a female, I was broken, damaged, and dangerous. There was no way a smiling, soft, and very gravid female could be mine. Even if she was — if my instincts thought she was — I had no right to act on those impulses. She would never know how much I craved to see her again, feed her again, and hear those delightful, sexy moans.

Thinking of her moans made my cock twitch and flush with blood, rising beneath my loincloth just like it had last night when I'd eavesdropped on how she ate the cake. Chocolate was a human favorite, and I had full permission from the captain to stock the Varakartoom with every human delicacy possible—anything to keep his precious, pregnant mate happy. I wondered what he'd think if he discovered I'd given another human his mate's treats. Huffing, I decided that he'd never find out anyway. I'd made so much food last night that Mandy could have her pick, after I'd served my human.

My human. Stars, it had to be true. I was already thinking of her in possessive ways, fantasizing about her curvy body and heavy breasts as if I had every right. I clenched my fists and heard my brush creak and groan as the handle began to splinter under the force. Releasing it immediately, I placed it back on the counter and turned to return to the kitchen. It was almost time for the breakfast rush, and I was not going to miss her.

Aramon and his twin brother arrived first, but for once, the loud Asrai's mate was not tucked under his arm. He was still chatting a mile a minute, then falling silent as he listened to whatever Slear communicated to him telepathically. At the hatch, Aramon did pause to stare, and I felt heat crawl up the back of my neck as embarrassment filled me. I had overdone it — seriously overdone it. Everyone would notice how out of the ordinary this breakfast spread was.

The pilot whistled loudly as he perused what was there. "Whoa, Brace, you really outdid yourself. What's the occasion? We're not done harrying Jalima's ships yet."

He reached for a pile of sausage-stuffed bread rolls, and I had to fight the urge to slap his hand away. I didn't want anyone to touch the food until she'd taken her pick.

When the loudmouth reached next for the chocolate cakes she'd enjoyed so much last night, I slapped his fingers away with a wooden spoon. "Not those!" I snarled. "Humans only." There, that was better than declaring everything off - limits to everyone except my gravid female.

Aramon didn't miss a beat. "And I have a human mate—I'm getting them for her!" He was a liar, and he was full of shit. When I growled, he laughed, undeterred, but he didn't reach for the cakes again. It had made Solear extremely anxious. I could see how he fidgeted on his feet, his sharp teeth bared, and a silent growl vibrating in his chest. If any male aboard this ship understood my battle with rage, it was that one. But I knew we'd never be able to talk about it.

That one time, several weeks ago, when I had left the ship, it had been with him—to help my friend Elyssa save her mate, Tasseloris. It had been a very uneasy alliance, but I also knew it was the only one that would have worked. I could trust that Solear had zero interest in getting close to me—and no compunction about fighting with deadly force if I lost control.

More crew members were beginning to arrive, and that only made the damaged, silent Asrai male more tense. If he could, I was certain he'd prefer hiding in the dark behind my hatch with me. But there was only space for one of us inside my galley. Then Tass showed up with Elyssa, and his cheerful greeting of Solear — before he so much as acknowledged anyone else — settled the male. That was a new development to which everyone was still getting used, but there was no denying that Tass had somehow managed to make friends with the silent, often violent Asrai male.

I did not leave my galley or my quarters, ever. So I could only surmise this from what I'd seen in the mess hall. But it seemed to me that Solear was getting calmer, less

anxious, now that he had not just Aramon in his inner circle, but Evie, Aramon's mate, and Tasseloris as well. I was still pondering that, a good distraction from the males snatching food from my counter, when she showed up.

She was accompanied by Mandy and Harper, the first two humans who had joined the Varakartoom and mated with males aboard the ship. Her hair gleamed under the bright lights in the mess hall this morning, hanging neatly over her shoulders in two long braids. She was radiant and smiling — just like last night.

When they came to the hatch, I couldn't help myself. I hurried to pile a plate with the choicest selection of human - preferred foods and offered it to her. I knew it was too much, that she couldn't possibly eat all of it— and I was certain she was about to laugh in my face. But she took the plate, smiling widely, and our fingers briefly touched. Hers were shockingly small and soft against the rough pad of my finger.

“Thank you. I've learned your name is Brace. I'm Ruby,” she said. She was looking at the gap beneath the hatch, where I'd hurriedly withdrawn my hands before I did something even crazier than the madness that had consumed me since our last encounter. Like open the hatch and leap over the counter so I could haul her in to my arms , o r reach out and touch her fingers again , o r... what if I brushed my mouth to hers in one of those mouth matings — kisses — the humans were so fond of?

Her smile began to falter, and my brain ached as I tried to figure out what was wrong. Had she hurt herself? Was the plate too heavy? Was she s truck with nausea? That had happened to Mandy in the first few months of her pregnancy. A growl rumbled from my chest in discontent, but I wasn't sure what to do other than stand there and wait. Last night, I'd sworn to stay away, feed her, nothing more. It ached, but that's what I'd do.

“Come on, Ruby. It's nice of you to try, but Brace doesn't talk to anyone, don't take it personally.” Elyssa winked at my hatch as she said it, but I knew that she did hurt

each time I failed to respond to her questions. Talk to her like I used to when we knew each other as kids. My eyes skated over Ruby's face, wondering if that's why she'd stopped smiling, because I hadn't answered her. But she hadn't asked a question... What had she expected from me? Unlike with Elyssa, I did want to respond to Ruby if she wanted to talk. That was harmless, through the hatch, wasn't it?

Now it was too late. The females were turning away from my counter, and mercenaries were rushing to take their place and feast on what was left. I could hear Harper exclaim over the pile of food I'd given Ruby, and I felt heat crawl up my spine and fill my belly when my female responded defensively: that she liked it. That it pleased her. Ah, stars... I'd pleased her, and knowing that, it was like she owned me.

I ignored everyone raiding the massive piles of food and sidled all the way to the corner where I could eavesdrop on my Ruby as she talked with the other females. It was wrong, I knew that, but damn it, this was my galley. They spoke of how her crew was still being interrogated. My mate was demanding she be let go, back to her ship, so she could be on her way and make her delivery in time. Mandy was telling her no, but not because she wasn't free to go, but because it wasn't safe. How could it not be safe? I swore I'd find out.

I hated to see her go, but once the mess hall began to empty and the food had been demolished at astonishing rates, she did leave. I cleaned up in silence, steaming over what options I had — what she needed. Then I grabbed my cloak and covered myself from the top of my head all the way to my toes. I never walked the hallways during the day, and even though I was covered so nobody could truly see me, I still felt exposed. Entering the bridge? I didn't think I'd ever been there, but that's where Asmoder was, and it was him I needed to speak to.

"Brace?" Aramon exclaimed in surprise, the first to see me. A dozen eyes swung my

way, and my fur bristled, my pelt twitching along my spine in unease. Jaxin was implacable, his dark Rummicarons eyes peering at me over his large maw. He was possibly the only one not staring at me in surprise—and that was because he couldn't feel surprise.

Ignoring all the stares, I locked eyes with Asmoded, seated in the captain's chair. "We need to talk," I said firmly. A little too firmly, my voice sounded like a snarl, bouncing loudly off the walls. Several of my crewmates winced, and one Elhorian male raised his hands to cover his sensitive ears. Solear began growling back at me immediately, shifting into a feral crouch that made it obvious he would leap over the navigator's seat to get at me if I threatened him further. Ah, stars. This was exactly why I never left my galley.

Pulling in a deep breath didn't help, but, thankfully, the captain was willing to put me out of my misery. "Indeed, why don't we go to the ready room?" He rose sinuously from his seat, standing tall between me and the rattled Solear. Instantly, the Asrai male snapped out of his growl, plunking back in to his seat and turning his back on me. Asmoded began gliding across the bridge then, snapping orders as he went, and, left and right, males ducked their heads and went back to work.

Once the ready room door closed behind me, some of the tension left my body, and I lowered my shoulders. Asmoded hardly looked intimidated by my presence; he even sat down at the large meeting table, making himself seem even smaller next to my eight-foot-tall, towering form. "What is it you came here to discuss, Brace?" he drawled, the tip of his long tail lazily flicking through the air. "We're not at an ice planet or moon yet. What more could you possibly have to say?"

That sounded cold, a little cruel, but I knew how he meant it. I'd never stormed from my galley and onto the bridge before, so, obviously, something had shaken me from my rigid routine. From the sharp glint in his golden eyes, I was pretty sure he already knew what had my fur all ruffled. My stomach went cold, the always-present hollow

feeling there growing stronger, filling me with the pain of hunger. “The pregnant female, why is it not safe for her to return to her ship?” I demanded.

“Ah,” Asmoded said, a smile curling his lips that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Sit down, Brace.” His tail flicked to one of the larger chairs at the end of the table. Since it was still quite a distance from the captain, I felt safe enough to shuffle over and sit down. If I lost control, there was a whole table between us that would give his fast reflexes ample time to get out of my way. I hoped.

“Yes, Captain Ruby González . Quite the conundrum she’s brought us,” Asmoded agreed. “Unlike the other ships we’ve attacked, we can’t return her to her ship alone. She would be dead in space without her crew. And given the parentage of her unborn child... she’d be in grave danger. I’m afraid we’ll have to keep her.”

Keep her? Yes! My instincts vehemently agreed with that statement; keeping my mate here, in my domain , was the ultimate temptation. But this was about her safety, and keeping her with me wasn’t safe. Worse, keeping her trapped would make me as bad as Jalima. I knew all too well how awful it was to be trapped against your will — to be forced to do things you did not wish to do, with no choice in the matter. “No,” I growled, my fists slamming down on the table. Instantly, I winced, hating that I’d slipped like that — and then I slipped up even more: “I’ll keep her company while you sort out Jalima.”

Asmoded tilted his head, his black and green hair sliding over his shoulder with a whisper. He was smiling again, and big as I was — the ultimate predator — I was the one who felt like prey at that moment. “Leave the Varakartoom , leave your galley? To protect one lonely human?”

It was the word lonely that triggered me, and later I’d realize that he’d used that word on purpose. My loudly snarled “yes” sealed the deal, and once said, I knew he’d make me keep my word. I wouldn’t want him to do anything else. I was going with

Ruby back to her ship, and somehow I was going to have to control my rage while I was alone with her. To keep her safe, I'd do anything. The look in Asmoded's eyes told me he knew that better than I did, but that didn't make me feel better. How could I possibly trust myself?

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Ruby

All the food looked good, all of it. Inhaling deeply, I savored the rich scents, savory and sweet mingling into a heady combination. And yet... my mind kept returning to the moment I'd taken the plate from Brace, the Hoxiam chef who — given his species — was possibly the most dangerous creature aboard the entire mercenary vessel. He'd made me a plate, no one else, and our fingers had touched during the transfer. I couldn't get it out of my head, no matter how hard I tried.

Those fingers had felt warm, rough, so much bigger than mine. The strength he had was obvious, even just from seeing — feeling — his hand. It made me feel safe. Not that I had felt particularly unsafe aboard the Varakartoom, if I were being honest. After the initial round of intimidation, they had been...nice. I'd never met another human out here, and to talk with several of them, hear of their experiences, that was amazing. Harper and Mandy had talked to me about the human sanctuary on Ker, and now it felt like I had another option. If I could get there, my baby would be with both his people; a safe place to grow up.

“Are you going to be able to eat all that?” Elyssa said teasingly from where she sat on my left. Her plate had only three things on it, granted, one of them was a rich chocolate lava cake, but compared to mine, she might as well have been eating a tiny salad. Heat crawled up my cheeks because I had seen that piled-high plate Brace was offering and absolutely desired to eat every single bite. Somehow, he'd managed to put foods on there that appealed especially to my senses right now. My favorites. But how could he possibly know any of that?

Harper spoke more loudly before I could answer. “Oh my God, yes, that's so much

food! Brace really took a shine to you , Ruby.” She twisted in her seat to glance at the hatch, and I could see the wheels spinning in her head. As if she were bursting with questions, she was even biting her lip, holding them in.

“I like it,” I mumbled, my eyes searching the rowdy crowd of mercenaries in black armor that had flooded the mess hall. Was I imagining it, or were they staring at me and my plate? “I’m eating for two,” I added a bit more firmly. Then I glanced at Mandy’s plate, which was also piled much higher than Elyssa’s. She was pregnant too . Had Brace given her a plate as well? If he did, I had missed it, but that was the only thing that made sense. “I’m sure he took care of Mandy the same way, because we’re pregnant...” My voice trailed off when all four women started shaking their heads.

“No,” Mandy said around a mouthful of bread and green - fried Alpara. It was not quite the same as bacon, but extremely close and very tasty. “He did go out of his way to stock human foods, like chocolate, and he special - ordered all the fresh ginger I could ever want. It’s being grown in the hydroponics lab now. But Brace never made me a plate like that.” She winked as she jutted her chin at my food, and I felt a blush spread over my cheeks. I was thirty - five, damn it ; I should be well beyond blushing. My skin wasn’t even fair enough to really show them most of the time, but I felt like I’d gone red as a beet. From the amused smiles of the others, they saw it too.

Elyssa swung her arm around my shoulders and squeezed, and a well of emotions opened up inside me at the touch. When was the last time I’d had a friend who did that? Or my mom, or a cousin? Not since I’d left Earth after the fires and run as far and as fast as I could , until I’d ended up in the Zeta Quadrant somehow. To say I was touch - starved was an understatement . No wonder I’d caved and had that one - night stand at Yengar Station. Feeling close to another being like that? I was coming to realize very fast that it was a basic human need, one I hadn’t fed, and now I was starving.

“If anyone deserves to find happiness, it’s Brace. He’s a really good guy, but don’t tell him I said that. Kay?” Elyssa whispered in my ear.

When they took me for a walk around the ship after breakfast, I was still mulling that over. A Hoxiam who was a good guy? Those two things seemed to be mutually exclusive, and yet, everything inside of me said she was right. Brace was a good guy, and for some reason, he’d decided he was going to take care of me. That made my chest flush with warmth, and my baby boy kicked fiercely, showing off his rapidly improving strength. We both liked it.

“I don’t like it either,” Mandy said at some point. “You should be free to go back to your ship. You should have choices. And the last thing any of us want s is to make you feel like you don’t have any, like you’re a prisoner.” She had her hands tucked neatly behind her back to support herself as she waddled along. We were letting her set the pace, as her large belly clearly did n’ t make her feel like going very fast.

“I’ve been running for a long time,” I said quietly. “I think this is the first time I’ve had a chance to consider options. Ker... t hat sounds like a better place to raise my baby than on a cargo ship, at risk of pirates at every turn.” I had been mulling that over ever since the place had been mentioned. The sanctuary was a completely new concept to me, and I was baffled to discover that I’d missed every bit of news about it when the Kertinal rescued thousands of humans over a year ago. Mandy had been one of them, and Harper had dug up several news articles about it on her datapad.

If I could just get back to my ship, I could finish this final cargo run. It would hopefully still pay me enough that I could fly to Ker, sell the Finix , and settle on the planet where I’d be safe. Safety was all that mattered now that I had another life to think about, but the thought of settling in one place made my skin itch. I hadn’t been able to do that ever since I left Earth. I could have settled on Aderia or Rakesh — even Elrohir — if I hadn’t had the itch to keep roaming. All those planets banned slavery ; I would have been safe there , too.

Mandy curled her arm through mine and patted my hand . “That makes sense. I understand. Why don’t we go see if my mate has figured out what he wants to do? I know he’s eager to keep moving, he’s got more targets on his list he plans to hit before Jalima gets wise.” In other words, I was delaying them . And as eager as I was to get back to my ship, that Naga was probably just as eager to get rid of me. I had a feeling that , if he hadn’t had to worry about the feelings of his human mate, he might have simply dumped me on the Finix already. He did not seem like the type to worry all that much about the safety of an innocent bystander.

Only Mandy kept me company as she took me to the bridge; the others all scattered into the dark hallways of the ship. I couldn’t blame them — I wouldn’t want to face that captain either , if I had the choice. He’d been scary as hell, and so was the Talac. If not for the fact that he had a human mate , and she seemed eager to see him, I would have been shaking in my boots right now. But that was a little hard when Mandy was smiling so hugely, her pretty brown eyes sparkling. That wasn’t someone who was scared of her partner, so there had to be a good side to the guy.

The hallway to the bridge looked just like all the others: dark, with no distinguishing features, and only doors and handholds to guide the way. At the end of this hallway, a double door slid open as we approached it, and beyond lay the command center of the entire ship. It was a large bridge, befitting a Battle Class Cruiser like this one — far bigger than the tiny bridge aboard the Finix . To steer a cargo ship, you didn’t need a whole lot of crew, but then my ship wasn’t a maneuverable, heavily armed flying wonder. I peered at the many different stations, manned by a wild array of aliens in their intimidating black armor.

A Rummicaroon was at the tactical station, a winged alien of a kind I’d never seen before manned the coms, and a pair of Asrai sat in the pilot and navigational seats. There were at least three more crew members stationed around the room , watching sensor readings or perhaps just there as extra guards. The Talac male was overseeing all of it with a dark frown, a slinky, silver miniature Fantreal horse lying at his feet. I

did a double take at the sight and almost missed how Mandy greeted the creepy male. When she asked him where her mate was, all he did was curl his lip in a mysterious half-smile, but he did not answer. I wasn't quite sure if he was being rude on purpose, liked playing games, or if it was something else.

Mandy shrugged as if she didn't need his answer anyway and began to walk across the bridge to a door on our left. "Ready room . Asmoded can lock himself in his office for hours on end," she said to me when I hurried to follow. I was not about to stay behind in this den of vipers. None of them looked friendly. Maybe one of those Asrai was attempting to smile warmly, but his skullish features made that look macabre rather than kind.

The winged male was closest to us, and he rose to offer Mandy his arm. "Let me assist you," he said, and a pretty , feathered crest rose on his head like a mohawk. Silver gleamed beside his eye — some kind of implant that blinked with a soft orange light. Mandy placed her hand on his armor - clad wrist, and he guided her to the door. I was not offered such help, but I had new insight into Mandy's position on the ship. The Talac might have been rude, but everyone else seemed to have the utmost respect for her.

I craned my head around to get another look at everyone, and my eyes locked with the dark orbs of the Talac. Rude? No, it was something else—something I couldn't put my finger on. Part of me wanted to run away at the sight of his eyes, feeling like I'd just stared into the face of evil. But it was very hard to hold onto my fear; it slithered from my flesh and dissolved into nothing, but it left me feeling drained and hollow. Then the strange silver horse creature rose to its cleft hooves and opened its maw to display several rows of razor-sharp teeth. That was not what a Sunean Fantreal horse looked like; that was a predator. It had to be my imagination, but it seemed to be getting bigger.

I quickly looked away, settling my eyes on the broad back of the winged mercenary.

His wings were white and brown, but the tips were a deep red; his crest showed a similar color scheme. I wondered what he was, since I'd seen — and been to — so many different places, and I'd never seen anyone like him. He had long, elegant fingers, which he rapped on the door in a decisive manner. I didn't hear a response, but he moved his hand to the door panel to open it anyway. It felt like the entire bridge was holding its breath when the door opened. One of the Asrai was even leaning over the back of his seat as far as he could, nearly falling out of it in the process.

Then the unknown alien guy was ushering Mandy through the door, his wing spreading to hover behind my back. I quickened my pace to fall in line behind Mandy, and then the door shut behind me. It was much darker in here than it had been on the bridge, and I had to blink several times to adjust. The lights had been dimmed, but once my eyes adjusted, I could make out a long table and several chairs; beyond it, another door. The Captain was draped in one of those chairs, his long tail lying in loops along the floor.

His eyes lit up at the sight of his mate, and for the first time, he didn't look so scary and forbidding. That time I'd spent being interrogated (if you could call me blabbering uninterrupted an interrogation) had left me feeling like he didn't have a hint of softness. Mandy rounded the table, but she didn't even make it all the way to him before he snatched her with his tail and lifted her the rest of the way. She was in his lap, his head ducking to press against her belly as he whispered things I couldn't hear. It was such a sweet, domestic sight that it made my chest grow tight. A hint of jealousy, a bit of homesickness, and a deep pang of loneliness.

Their greeting didn't last obnoxiously long, but I still shifted awkwardly on my feet as I looked away. It felt wrong to intrude, and I felt like they'd forgotten I was there. The captain was the first to raise his head, his arms curled protectively — or was that possessively? — around his mate. He met my eyes with a soft expression that slowly became serious and hard to read. "You are just the female I needed to speak with,

Captain González ,” he said. “Have a seat.”

I shuffled to the nearest chair, which, coincidentally, was also furthest away from the Naga male. Tucking my feet underneath the seat, I made sure to keep them out of range of that long tail too, just in case. The skin at the back of my neck prickled with unease, as if there were eyes on me I couldn't see. I checked over my shoulder, but the winged alien had left, closing the door behind him. I also gave the deep shadows in the corners a suspicious look, but they were deep and undecipherable. It was possible someone was there, but I doubted it.

“I want to go back to my ship,” I said, placing my hands on the table to keep them from fidgeting. My tone was bright and cheerful, as if I didn't expect the captain to immediately say no. “I have a shipment to deliver, and it's already late.” I didn't tell him that was because one of the engines had been limping —e ither he already knew or he wouldn't care. “You'll need to give me back my crew, too. I don't care what you do with the Kanfray ; it's not mine.”

There, I said what I wanted. Mandy might even back me up, she was a nice woman ; she didn't want me to feel like a prisoner. She'd as good as said that they all knew I had nothing to do with Jalima, so they really had no reason to keep me. “It is not safe to let you go, human,” the captain said. “And you are not getting back your crew. They were both involved in the smuggling.” Not safe? My mind instantly leaped to my first fear when I'd discovered those drugs : that the crimelord who owned the m would make me pay if they didn't arrive.

He was right, that was still a distinct possibility. I couldn't possibly protect myself if he went after me, let alone my child. Chilled, my hands dropped to my belly to curve protectively around the baby bump. My little one was sleeping right now ; I couldn't feel him move . H e didn't know about the threats that hung over his precious head.

“But I understand keeping schedules,” the captain drawled next. “And I've managed

to work out a solution. Or rather, a solution has presented himself.” Himself? That was an odd way of phrasing things. When the captain tilted his head, his golden gaze shifting from my face to one of the darkened corners behind me, I found myself trembling in my seat. I knew it, there was someone behind me.

Twisting was awkward ; the seat was magnetically locked to the floor and did not swivel. My belly also got in the way, bumping against the table. At first, I didn’t see anything —j ust those large, deep shadows . A nd then I spotted the gleam of a pair of eyes. Blue, so very blue. My heart began to thunder wildly in my chest, and it wasn’t from fear. I didn’t know what this was, because my rational mind was definitely telling me I should be scared out of my mind.

The eyes were floating in darkness, high above my head. I had never been a whiz at math, but even I could estimate that , at that height, this guy had to be eight feet tall. He was a freaking giant. The longer I stared, the more I began to see : t he cloak that wrapped around him, giving me the illusion of all those shadows ; t he wideness of his massive shoulders ; the heat in those icy blue eyes ; and then a hand, big and covered in a fine blue pelt.

My heart didn’t thunder then, it stuttered, followed by a swoop of butterflies in my belly. They were definitely butterflies this time ; there was no mistaking them for the gentle efforts of my baby boy. I didn’t recognize his eyes, but I recognized that hand. My fingers tingled in remembrance of that gentle brush that morning, when he’d passed me my plate of food. That was Brace . I knew it.

The captain and Mandy had quietly waited for me to process the presence of the elusive, hermit chef. Now , Asmoded spoke again: “Brace will accompany you as your protector. He is more than a match for any danger Jalima — or others — could throw your way. The pair of you can make the run to Rumcas while we deal with the final shipments. Then we’ll rendezvous when the problem has resolved itself.”

A Hoxiam protector? That big — nay , giant—beast and me alone aboard the Finix for weeks to come? The captain was crazy. I opened my mouth to say so, because shacking up with a Hoxiam would be tantamount to tying bacon to a cat. He'd freaking eat me before the journey was over... The tingling in my clit told me that some part of my brain had an entirely different kind of "eating" in mind when I thought of Brace. It had to be the pregnancy hormones ; they were making me horny.

"Seriously? That's what you guys thought of behind our backs?" Mandy said before I could speak. She clambered out of her mate 's lap to plant her fists on her hips and stare the male down. Her glare was impressive, and I could see her mate wilt a little beneath that gaze. "Doesn't Ruby get a say in this? What if she doesn't want company?"

My eyes shot from the small spitfire of a woman to the giant Hoxiam hulking in the corner. His eyes were alive with heat . I expected him to object, but he said nothing. I appreciated that Mandy was standing up for me, but when I considered what was in store for me without help... "I'll do it. It's a deal." The words slipped out a little breathlessly, but once said, I found I didn't want to take them back. Call me crazy, but despite all the knowledge I had about his species, I was utterly convinced this guy would never harm me.

I rose to my feet a little clumsily ; my legs felt weak as noodles, and I knew that was his fault. He made me feel all silly, like a schoolgirl with her first crush. Again, I was going to blame that on the pregnancy hormones and the fact that he smelled like freaking chocolate when I approached him. When he stepped back as I got closer, a smile began to curve my mouth unheeded. So that's how it was? I should have remembered that he was the shy one, not me. He was the one hiding in his galley so much that not even his crewmates knew what he looked like.

"There's nothing to fear, Ruby," he said to me in his deep, growly bass as he backed up another step, his big body wedging itself into the corner as if he wanted to

disappear. Fear? Yeah, I was supposed to be scared of him — the big , bad Hoxiam. But it looked to me like he was the one scared of me...

“I know,” I said.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Brace

When I checked the list on my datapad for a third time, even I knew at that point that it was because I was nervous. What was I doing, leaving the Varakartoom to accompany Ruby? We'd be stuck inside the tiny living quarters of the Finix for quite some time, just the two of us. The primal side of me, which was very present nowadays, was pleased with this arrangement. Rationally, I knew it was a risk—a big one. I could only control the rage and my instincts for so long. Once she saw the real me, she'd be terrified.

I still couldn't believe how fearless she'd been back in the captain's ready room. When she discovered I had been in the shadows behind her, her pulse had leaped, but her scent had never turned sour with fear. Groaning, I pressed my fist to my cock and urged it to stand down. She'd been intrigued, she'd smelled like a female in heat. I had to forget about that, but I couldn't. She was gravid ; she wouldn't be interested in another male right now.

Thinking of the round curve of her pregnant belly did nothing to cool the heat running through my veins. I shrugged out of the cumbersome cloak that covered my body, hiding it from view. Nobody needed to see the scars on my back or be reminded of my violent past. My pelt, combined with the cloak, made me overheat, and I panted, hands braced on the edge of the tiny galley counter inside Ruby's ship.

Forcing myself to think of things to cool my ardor took a minute, but when I remembered the data Asmoded had given me, that did the trick. He'd figured out who the father of Ruby's baby was, or rather, Dravion the doctor had. I wasn't happy with the doctor's betrayal of my female's trust, but I understood that his loyalty, like mine

always had been, was solidly with the captain.

It was a Kertinal father ; that was knowledge any doctor could glean with a simple medical scan. You had to have a sample of DNA to compare to in order to know the exact male who had gotten Ruby pregnant. Dravion had had that sample because we'd run into this male several times before —fought him , so that his blood had ended up on the armor of one of us at least once. I curled my lips, baring my sharp teeth until I was snarling loud enough to rattle the jars lined up inside the cabinets. Opening my maw even wider, my mouth filled with saliva as I considered what it would be like to take a bite out of the bastard.

Knowing who he was, I was convinced he'd hurt Ruby. Which meant I had to be extra careful not to scare her. I had to dig inside myself until I found my gentle side, the one not tainted by my rage. How could I do that when the thought of that bastard made my blood boil? The counter creaked beneath my fists, warning me that I was dangerously close to warping the metal edge with my tight grip. I snapped my mouth shut with a click and jerked away from the counter, my back colliding with the wall behind me , which was much closer than I expected it to be. This galley wasn't made to fit a fully grown Hoxiam in his prime.

At the sound of voices , I rushed to yank my cloak back on, my breathing coming in labored bursts. The rage was subsiding , though; I could hear Ruby's cheerful tones , and there was not a single part of me that wished her to see me in a rage. Instincts, body, mind, we were all aligned on that , which was a first in a very long time.

From the sounds of it, Ruby was not alone; she was accompanied by Elyssa and Harper. I could hear how Elyssa was singing my praises, which warmed me and bothered me at the same time. I appreciated that my childhood friend still thought so highly of me and that she was eager to convince Ruby of my goodness. But I knew I didn't deserve it. If Elyssa knew half the things I'd done after I'd been moved to a different stable, or some of the things that had come after I'd escaped, she would

shun me; she wouldn't want to be my friend. Ruby wouldn't say, "I know," when I told her not to fear anything; she'd turn and run the other way.

"When you guys reach Rumcas, you have to give us a call. Okay?" Harper said. "We want to know you made it safely! And you need to stay in touch when you settle in on Ker. We're friends now, understood?" Ruby didn't respond to that with anything but sniffles, and they were echoed by the others, from the sound of it. Suddenly, my sensitive nose picked up more than their scents, I tasted salt on my tongue. Stars, they were crying! Why were they crying? Was Ruby hurt?

Frantic with worry, I forgot all about hiding, about sticking to the shadows. I stuck my head out of the galley before I'd even fully assured myself that my hood was on right. The three women weren't far away, clustered together in the narrow hallway. They were embracing, and Elyssa was tugging gently on one of Ruby's braids. I thought maybe she was teasing her, but then I saw the watery smile on my mate's face. Why were they crying and smiling at the same time?

"I'll stay in touch!" Ruby assured them eventually, her voice all choked up, as if she couldn't get enough air. "I've been so alone all this time. I can't believe it took what I thought was a pirate attack to find friends..." The three of them laughed, and then Harper and Elyssa were leaving. My Elrohirian friend flashed her eyes up to my doorway once, very quickly. Letting me know she'd seen me, that she knew I was there. She did not say goodbye, did not point out my presence to the others, and then they were gone, ducking into the airlock to go back to the Varakartoom.

I was alone with Ruby. The hairs on my back rose in a primal, visceral response to that knowledge. My gut churned as I fought the urge to close the distance and sweep her into my arms, so I could claim her. This was going to go wrong; I should never have agreed to this, insisted on this. Too late now. The airlock had cycled, and my comm was announcing the departure of the Varakartoom in Aramon's cheerful voice.

Ruby

Once Harper and Elyssa had left, I stood in the Finix 's familiar hallway and listened to the sounds of the ship. It had been my home for the past nine years, ever since I'd recklessly flown her from the Alpha Quadrant to here, the Zeta Quadrant. It had been a three - year journey, as I'd had to stop along the way , trading and picking up cargo wherever I went. Swapping in and out crew the further I came , until I didn't recognize the species any longer. But I'd learned . I'd adapted.

I gazed around the quiet ship, her engines idling softly as she kept herself from drifting from her current position. The Finix was big and clunky, but most of her size came from the holds. The living quarters and the bridge were tiny. So where could my new crew member be hiding? He had to be here, or the shuttle wouldn't have left. My heart skipped a beat as I contemplated what this meant for me.

I was now officially alone with a stranger, with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. No, that wasn't strictly true. Having made the Finix my home for as long as I had, I knew every nook and cranny, every hiding place. That was why I'd discovered that blasted Kanfray only two days ago. There were plenty of places I could crawl into for safety , places a guy as big as a Hoxiam — especially this Hoxiam — would never fit. I didn't think I'd need them.

Turning my gaze along the narrow hallway, I assessed the metal hatch that separated it from the bridge at the end. There were two hallways just like this, identical, both with an airlock for docking , and doors that led off these hallways to the shared head, the galley, and the sleeping quarters : a bunkroom for crew, and one stateroom for the captain.

Peering into the open galley as I passed, I saw nobody there, and the door to the

bunkroom was also open, but there was no sign of my protector. I knew with certainty that he'd never have gone into my private room, and that door was locked anyway. That left the bridge, but to my surprise, the small command center was empty too. As the heart of the ship — even if it was located in the bow — this was where I spent most of my time. I knew every scratch, line, and groove on the walls and ceiling. I knew every single button and system.

I'd started out as a pilot, much to the displeasure of my mother, who would have preferred that I study to become a doctor or an accountant. She had wanted me home, but I'd always had the wanderlust, even before the fires that had made going home impossible. Eyeing the pilot seat, which had previously belonged to the young Sune, Kip, I sat down in it with trepidation. I hadn't done any flying myself in years, not since I'd earned enough to start hiring crew. It had felt much safer to have two males aboard, males who could be the face for any buyers, so I didn't have to reveal my gender or my species.

On the viewscreen, I plugged in the sensor data first, so that I could watch the huge black shadow of the Varakartoom as it left. I wasn't quite sure what they were up to — just that they had more pressing places to be, and, likely, it had something to do with more shipments of Jalima's. The Kanfray they'd taken from my ship, I'd learned, had been destroyed. They weren't even going to sell the nasty drug for profit, which would have seemed more in line with their fearsome, notorious reputation.

I had to admit, the pilot and navigator pair of the giant Battle - Class Cruiser did a fine job. They made that ship spin like it was a fucking ballerina. Twirling her through space in a neat curve before leaping away into FTL — Faster-Than-Light — in the blink of an eye. The light of their engines flared blue, searing into my retinas with their afterburn, and then they were truly gone, leaving the Finix behind, adrift in an empty section of space, light - years away from the nearest inhabitable world.

I pressed my fingers to my chest, where I felt a dull ache. That felt like regret, and I

couldn't quite place it. What did I have to regret? I'd survived my encounter with these pirating mercenaries ; I'd even lived through two conversations with their freaky captain. Along the way, the impossible had happened too: I'd made friends, human and Elrohirian. So what was it I had to regret? Nothing. I didn't even feel guilt over leaving Kip and Chawz in the black grasp of the mercenaries. They had betrayed me ; there could be no safety, no trust, if they had conspired together to smuggle something I abhorred aboard my ship.

And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd made a mistake by leaving. My fingers moved purposefully to the navigational console to peer at the course settings. Chawz's previous course should still be in the computer ; I just had to find it and re-engage. For now, autopilot would do the rest, and I'd have time to dust off my rusty flying skills for the docking procedures at Rumcas in a few weeks.

Done and satisfied that I'd left the Finix in good order, I spun around in the chair to rise. I'd meant to get up and find out where my guest was hiding, but he'd found me first. He stood in the left doorway —the one opposite the one through which I'd arrived. His dark cloak hung around him, bathing him in shadow , but his bright blue eyes gleamed at me from beneath the hood. My breathing tightened in my throat, my belly jumped with nerves, and then the baby gave me a solid kick that startled me so much I yelped. "Ouch!"

What happened next was a bit of a blur. All I was concerned with was keeping my balance as I moved around the chair. Suddenly, I found myself cradled in a pair of huge arms, heat blazing against my side. A pair of concerned blue eyes hovered above my face, and for the first time, I could see inside the shadows beneath his hood. Fine blue fur covered his face, his mouth was large but lush somehow, and his features were regal — at least , that's what that firm brow represented to me.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded roughly. I felt the heat of his breath against my cheeks, and it made my nipples perk beneath my shirt. That felt intimate. He was right there,

in my personal space. This wasn't simply a brush of his hand against my fingers; I was in his arms, pressed against his huge, cloak-clad chest. The impression of his fingers on my arm and thigh sent heat sizzling through my veins.

Breathlessly , I told him I was fine, my head tilted so I could keep staring into his pretty blue eyes. They were so warm, so kind, I felt like I was falling into them. Would he kiss me? Did Hoxiam even do that? This was crazy thinking; I did n' t even know if a Hoxiam and a human were compatible. And then the baby kicked again, firmly, insistently , and I jolted in his arms. He growled when it happened, but a smile spread over my face.

"It's just the baby kicking!" I explained, still smiling. Before I knew what I was doing, I curled my fingers around the hand on my arm and tried to pull. Of course, since he was holding me, he couldn't very well move it to touch my belly, where the baby was now making a bit of a ruckus. Not that there was any risk that he'd drop me, I couldn't even budge his finger when I grasped it with my entire hand. Geez, even that one finger was huge.

His arm was even bigger ; he accommodated my pulling by curling his arm further around my shoulders. Suddenly, I had all the leeway I needed to place that huge palm over the bump of my growing belly. Right on cue, the little one firmly kicked outward, hard enough that it came perilously close to hurting. Now Brace was the one startled. I felt his body twitch against mine, but his palm pressed closer, warmth enveloping me. "That's normal?" he asked, his voice rising in pitch with his surprise.

"Oh yeah, he's gotten really strong the past few days. I'm sure it's his half-Kertinal genes." I didn't want to think of my baby's birth father while in Brace's arms ; that seemed wrong somehow. Besides, in a universe this vast, the likelihood that he'd ever find out and come after us was infinitesimal, wasn't it? We'd parted without exchanging information. There was absolutely no way I would be able to locate him, I didn't even want to. This baby was all mine.

Brace abruptly lifted his hand away from my belly, and then he was setting me back down on my feet. I think he would have rushed away too, but he was gentleman enough to hold me steady until I'd found my footing. "That's good," he muttered, his hand slipping from my shoulders, his feet shuffling back until he bumped into the side of the doorway. "I , uh, have to check on our supplies." And then he was gone, and the normally tiny bridge felt huge and empty.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Ruby

It had been a full week since I'd left the Varakartoom and resumed the Finix 's course to Rumcas. A whole week alone with my extremely elusive Hoxiam companion. After that incident on the bridge, I thought we'd been making progress, but I'd seen neither hide nor hair of him ever since. That didn't mean he wasn't taking care of me, though, or pulling his fair share of the work aboard the ship. In fact, he was doing all of it. Which left me with a lot of downtime and no hulking but oh-so-shy companion to talk with.

When I woke up in the morning, there would be a tray of delicious food waiting for me by my door. Everything would still be warm, the ginger tea the perfect temperature for drinking, like he knew when I woke up, and when to have it ready. For lunch and dinner, trays of food would also appear at the door of whatever room I was in, but I never heard him, never saw him. Meanwhile, my ship had never been this clean — scrubbed to insane degrees, every surface gleaming. I had even suspiciously sniffed at the railing overlooking the hold yesterday morning, certain it had gotten a fresh coat of paint.

Though I did not see him, Brace was making himself known to every inch of my ship. I wanted more time to figure out how to reach him, talk to him, but we were making unexpectedly good progress. Whatever hiccup the left engine module had been struggling with during the first leg of the journey, it wasn't present now. Like Brace was giving the interior of my ship a facelift, someone had done the same to my engines. I was pretty sure that wasn't my Hoxiam; the engines had been running smoothly as soon as I'd turned them on, and I doubted he could be a fantastic cook and an engineer at the same time.

Although, why not? I could n' t, for the life of me, figure out why Captain Asmoded and his mercenaries would bother to fix my engine. There was nothing in it for them . I t was already bizarre that they'd given me a bodyguard, but at least that suggested some kind of payback against Jalima for them. Did they just want Brace back as quickly as possible? Considering how good his food was , that was a distinct possibility. Good food was good for the morale of your troops , after all.

In two days, we'd reach Rumcas at this pace. That meant making my delivery, selling my ship, and booking passage to Ker. Reaching my destination would mean saying goodbye to Brace, and it felt like I'd barely gotten to know him at all. I did not want to leave him without at least making one good attempt at breaking through his walls. I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't, of that I was sure.

Currently, I lay on my bunk inside my room, holovids playing on my screen that I was only half watching. The Aderian medical drama was usually a favorite, but it couldn't keep my interest today. It felt like time was running out, and I had to act now or it would be too late. Sitting up, I clambered to my feet and gazed around the room that had been my home for years. It would be weird to leave the Finix behind, but I had to do what was right for my baby, even if the thought of staying in one place felt uncomfortable and made my chest tighten.

I halted by the mirror to check my hair, which , for the longest time , I'd kept in two braids —p ractical, simple. I hadn't given a second thought t o my appearance because I was always on the Finix and rarely went outside. After a moment of hesitation , I pulled the hairbands from my braids and fluffed out my hair. It was wavy and a little wild from having been in braids all this time. A brush only made my hair poofier. Now my stomach was in knots, I looked crazy, and the only way to fix it w as a shower.

Ah, who was I kidding? I was primping for my super shy, mysterious bodyguard chef. He wasn't going to look twice; he was going to hear me coming and run the

other way. I wasn't fast enough to keep up with him inside the Finix , and I was dead certain he was the one who had figured out all the hiding places by now. Despite his huge size, he was making them work, too. I was beginning to suspect he spent all his nights up and his days hiding in his quarters. If that was the case, this was a futile mission, but I wasn't going to give up.

My door slid open silently, and I tried to be equally quiet as I stepped from my room. The narrow metal hallway was dark, the evening lighting guiding the way only by small strips along the floor. I was normally never up and about at this hour , so I hoped that meant I had a chance. One of the cleaning bots came humming around the corner, gently buffing the floor with its polishing disks as it went. I eyed it for a minute, inhaling the pleasant , foresty aroma of the cleaning products it used. And then a plan formed.

Following the bot's paths meant it was slow going, and it meandered around the ship, not going directly where I wanted to go. It made sound and caused a distinct smell , though, which I hoped would cover my tracks. I didn't like sneaking furtively around my own ship, but if that was the only way I could have a conversation, I totally would. Eventually, my feet were getting tired from standing , but the bot had turned back down the hallway and was closing in on the Finix 's galley. I could hear the gentle murmur of something boiling on the stove and the sound of water running; he had to be there.

As the bot passed the open door, I leaned my back against the wall and peered around the doorjamb. I breathed in deeply to suppress the muffled gasp that instinctively wanted to come out. He was there, and he wasn't wearing that big cloak that always covered him from head to toe. For the first time, I got to see all of him. Even though I'd seen a Hoxiam male before, I wasn't prepared for this.

Brace was eight feet tall, huge inside the tiny galley. He could barely turn in the narrow space, but he made it work anyway. Light on his clawed feet, he turned

gracefully as he stirred on the pot before returning to a cutting board with fresh vegetables and herbs. His body was covered in a thick, deep blue pelt, with purple and darker blue feathering along his back and shoulders. Only a small loincloth around his hips covered him; otherwise, he was naked. That made sense — that thick, very soft-looking pelt probably kept him warm. But there was also a part of him that wasn't so covered in that lush fur. Along his lower back and his shoulder blades, scars crisscrossed his skin — lines upon lines of them that interrupted the growth of his fur. Some scars were still pink or red, as if they'd only healed more recently; others were white and faded, stretched and warped.

I must have made a sound after all, or maybe he'd simply sensed my eyes on his back. Abruptly, he froze in place, then slowly craned his head and peered at me over his massive shoulder. His blue eyes glowed brightly. Then he opened his mouth, and I was staring into his maw. That was almost more shocking than the sight of all those scars had been. A Hoxiam was known for its ferocious hunger, for its inhumane appetite to hunt and devour the flesh of sentient beings: like a human, like an Elrhorian.

From the moment I'd met Brace, I had never once believed that he wanted to eat me. Staring into a mouth that had opened impossibly wide and was ringed with far too many razor-sharp teeth, I could finally believe it. An atavistic kind of fear shivered through me, my lizard brain responding before sanity and rational thinking could take control. That was a beast, a monster, and it was a predator far stronger than me. He would kill me; he would eat me if I did not get away from here right now.

My foot shifted along the floor, readying me to turn and run. My toes bumped loudly into the doorframe, echoing in the deadly silence. His mouth snapped shut, and I froze rather than ran. Our eyes met, and what I saw in his gaze pierced me to my core. Such anguish, such loneliness.

Everything in me shifted from fear to instant empathy. I didn't know how it happened

; I don't think Brace knew either. I hurled myself across the short distance between us, my arms digging into the fur around his waist as I hugged him tight. "I know!" I said, tears rising in my throat like a tidal wave. They wet his fur as they coursed down my cheeks, and I only held on more tightly when he remained rigid beneath my grasp. "I understand," I told him. And I did, because I was lonely too — so very lonely.

I don't know how long we stood like that, but eventually, he began to soften beneath my touch. Then he raised his arms and wrapped them around me, enveloping me in his heat and scent. When he hugged me back, it felt huge — it felt life-altering. He held me so gently, like I was precious, or as if he was uncertain what to do. His arms were soft as he bent down to cuddle me against his massive chest. My tears dried quickly then, but I did not step away. For the first time in years, it felt like that big, yearning hole inside my chest was beginning to fill up. This felt like home.

This was the part of me that was used to a big family and lots of noise at home: always someone cooking — be it my mom or my abuela; always one of my cousins over to hang with my brothers or go out on the town with my sister. Loud discussions, sometimes shouted at the top of our lungs just to be heard. The love of always having someone to count on, someone who'd stand in your corner. That space had been so empty for so long, and now he was here, filling it back up with his awkward but quickly improving hug.

A growl suddenly began to swell beneath my ear, vibrating deep inside his chest. It was followed by the sound of a pot boiling over on the stove, water hissing into steam as it splashed out of the pan. My world turned topsy-turvy after that. Like before, back on the bridge, Brace effortlessly swung me into his arm, this time one-handed.

I found myself cradled against his side and hip while he used the other massive paw to turn off the heat and move the pot aside. Raised higher, I was almost at shoulder height with my face, and I couldn't help but find myself intrigued by the abundance

of thick, silky fur that grew there. He was blue, yes, but I had never realized just how many shades of blue there were in a Hoxiam's fur.

Digging my fingers into the softness, I curled them through his pelt and marveled at how soft it was. Then I found the tense muscles beneath it, and it was instinct to push back, to gently massage that heavy trapezoid. "Female!" Brace snarled so loudly that my ears rang, but when I met his shocked gaze, all I could do was smile. Ah, he was so adorable, and clearly so unused to being touched. It made me want to touch him more ; it made me want to give him all the pleasure he'd been missing out on. He was even more starved for sensation than I was. I understood him ; I was certain of that. We were both lonely, and we needed each other.

The word " female " he'd uttered like a reprimand , but I did not let that deter me, not when he was still holding me gently in one arm. Wriggling against him, I managed to raise my arms enough to fling them around his neck. That was difficult; not only was his neck really thick and hairy, it was still a bit of a reach , and he wasn't quite cooperating. My fingers clutched at the fur at the back of his neck, holding it for leverage. And then we were eye to eye, my belly wedged sideways against his chest, and his arm shifting to raise me the way I wanted. Protesting, yet not protesting. He had no clue how badly he wanted me to get even closer.

"What?" I drawled at him. "You don't want to get to know me better? You don't want to kiss me?" I couldn't believe I was being this bold, but that hug, his presence, his pain — all of it — had unlocked something inside of me that I refused to ignore. Too much time had already passed in silence, alone. I was determined to fill that space , starting now.

His other arm came back to me, touching my spine, gliding up it to cup the back of my neck. That palm was so big, it covered the entire width of my back; I felt so tiny in his arms. His blue eyes were glowing with light and heat, desire sparking at my boldness, which made him exhale roughly through his nose. "Kiss me? You want to

put your tiny mouth on mine?” he growled, as if the idea was completely foreign to him. His mouth opened just a fraction, but it was enough to remind me that his maw was huge, like the rest of him. Ah, fuck, why did that just make me more horny for him? I knew the answer—thinking of how huge he was made me wonder about his cock. I was certain it would be massive, and that made wetness slick from my core, my inner muscles squeezing around nothing, my thighs pressing together as I ached for him.

“God , yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” I told him , fighting the laugh that wanted to break out at the surprise on his face. He did not believe me ; he could not wrap his head around this, so I moved to show him , tipping myself forward in his arms and pushing against his shoulders for leverage. There, our lips collided, his warm and a little rough. His mouth was definitely much bigger than mine, with wrinkles creasing the corners beneath the soft fur on his cheeks.

I looked at the soft curve of his upper lip, and taste exploded across my senses. Salt, something savory and tasty, possibly whatever he’d been cooking when I came in. He was frozen in my arms again, his chest rumbling with a deep vibration. It was almost the purr of a cat, but not quite, so low it was beyond my range of hearing. When I scraped my teeth over his bottom lip, it was like I’d lit a fire in him. He groaned, and then he kissed me back.

His mouth became soft and pliable, shaping to mine, and when I darted out my tongue, he did the same. He didn’t let me slick mine beyond his lips, but when he realized what I’d planned, he had no compunction about invading mine. His tongue was thick — way thicker than mine — and as he pushed it deep, it reminded me strongly of a cock. This was far closer to oral sex than kissing. That tongue pushed into my mouth, filling me, claiming my senses with his flavor the way the thick muscle claimed every inch of that wet cavern. I moaned loudly, my clit aching fiercely. I was so close to coming from that kiss that I mindlessly tried to spread my thighs to rub myself against his chest —a nothing to get a little friction.

Things were escalating fast. The world spun, my mind in the same state, and my body on fire. Then I felt the cool metal of the wall against my back, and Brace as he helped me spread my legs. He was big, and pinning me to the wall forced me to stretch wide, so wide. But then I was rubbing against the heavy ridges of his abs and sucking his tongue at the same time. With a muffled shout, I shattered in his arms, but I wasn't scared, because I knew those big, strong arms had me. Brace would never let me fall.

He slicked his tongue back as the last shudder began to ebb, raising his head as far as my tight clasp around his neck allowed. His eyes were still on fire, and I thought I saw things there that made my heart leap with excitement. Then his eyelashes lowered over those bright blue orbs, hiding what he was thinking. "That was..." I began to say, desperate to keep him with me. "Amazing."

The baby kicked firmly in my belly, roused from his nap. He kicked so hard that I was certain Brace could feel the thump against his chest. It broke the moment as if someone had dunked ice water down my big Hoxiam's furred back. He raised a hand to gently break my hold around his neck, and then he was setting me down on the edge of the galley's limited counter space, swiping an overflowing cutting board aside as he did so. I only became aware of the way he'd gripped my ass to hold me up when his warm hand was abruptly replaced with cool, slightly damp metal.

I wanted to hold onto him, keep him with me, but there was no stopping a male as big as Brace. As soon as he'd safely put me down, he fled the galley, his clawed feet slapping against the floor. That was more noise than he'd made for two whole weeks. If not for the fact that his loincloth had shifted, rising and struggling to contain an absolutely massive erection, I would have thought he hated every minute we'd just spent together.

"Whelp," I said to the empty air. "Way to go, Ruby." Not only had I failed to start a real conversation with him, like I'd planned, I'd sprung a surprise hug on him, followed by humping him like a dog in heat. What was he thinking? Had I scared him

off for good? I looked a little helplessly around the galley, which was probably the room aboard the ship I spent the least time in. I didn't know how to cook, no matter how hard my madre or my abuela had tried.

Snatching up some freshly cut veggies, I munched on them as I contemplated what to do next. A shower, probably, a cold one. Then I was going to research pregnancy details on the Kertinal. I had a feeling this baby was growing a little faster than he should. That kick was way too strong, considering how recently I'd just started feeling it.

I stuck my head around the corner to see if Brace was anywhere, but the door to his bunk room was closed, and only a few scattered hairs remained in the hallway. The cleaning bot was coming back around to scoop those up, leaving no trace of my big, hairy, and apparently very shy Hoxiam.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:58 am

Brace

Every muscle inside my body was tensed, and still my cock would not subside. I wanted to roar in frustration, pound something till it bled. Ruby, my beautiful gravid mate, had sought me out and set my careful grip on control on fire. I ached for her; my cock was so hard that even the slightest touch would set me off. I thought of how eager she'd been in my arms, even after seeing my scars, seeing the reality of a full-grown Hoxiam.

With a yank, I ripped my loincloth from my hips and fisted my cock with one big paw. Three tugs, and my seedpods rose along my shaft, hard and firm, they blazed a trail of pleasure before jett ing from the tip with force and clatter ing to the ground. Heaving from exertion, as if I'd just run a marathon, I gazed blearily around the small quarters with its four stacked bunks. Two on one wall, two on the other. I stumbled to the nearest one and fell down, my head colliding with the wall. This was a tight space, not big enough to fit a male of my size.

Size. That made me think of my Ruby again and how delicate and tiny she'd felt in my arms. Her curvy rear fit in one palm, and to kiss her, I'd had to raise her halfway up my chest. We were a terrible fit, and she was insane for not fearing me like a normal person. I wanted her. I wanted her so badly that, despite my release, my cock rose again, firm and hard, ready to expel more seed pods, all for her. Such a tiny, precious female, and she was braver than many, and somehow attracted to me.

I had been thinking in circles, working myself into exhaustion since the moment I'd stepped aboard the Finix. The only way I could stick to my plan was to avoid her, so she could leave, free of entanglements. Growling, I gripped my cock again and

squeezed it hard. NO! It was too late now. I did not deserve her — I was dangerous — so this was beyond selfish . B ut I had her taste in my system now. She was going to be mine.

Thinking of claiming her was enough to send me over the edge a second time, and I growled so loudly that the bunk rattled on its bolts. She had to have heard me, and all I could think was g ood. Let her know that I was desperate for the pleasure she had to offer me, and that I was going to come for her and her alone.

Afterward, I briefly fell into a fitful daze. Then I rose and cleaned up, gazing around the bunkroom again and noting with surprise that I had not clawed any of its surfaces, nor had I broken the furniture. I'd been here two weeks, that was a record. After what had happened in the galley, it was also a complete surprise. I'd kept control — sort of — enough to channel all those intense feelings in a safe manner.

When I left the room to finish what I'd been cooking in the galley, I did not kid myself into thinking that meant I was cured. It didn't work that way . I had not been truly tested yet, and until I was, I could not guarantee my mate's safety.

The galley still smelled of her release, a delicious scent I deeply inhaled. It overpowered the other aroma s of the food I'd been preparing, or maybe I was simply that sensitive to it. I wanted to finish this savory pie, make sure the Haras wheat crust got the perfect crunch. Then I was going to march over to her door and deliver that food without hiding around the corner. It was time I spelled out the risks to my bold female — let her have all the facts so she could make up her mind. And once she did, I'd make sure she knew I'd never let her go.

I should have known that she found me first. Her hair was a curly brown halo around her head, her expression sleepy. She even yawned as she stepped into the tiny galley, but then followed i t with a bright-eyed smile. “You're not running away this time? No cloak?” I rolled a shoulder, my mouth opening in a ferocious grin. No, she'd seen

me, and she was still here. There was no point. The fact was, I had not felt as untethered and enraged as I had aboard the Varakartoom . Taking care of her needs felt good, it settled me, gave me something good to focus on.

“No,” I said gruffly. Then I floundered for words. I was going to tell her about my past — about why she shouldn’t pursue me as a mate — but I couldn’t get the words past my lips. She tried to move past me , as if she wanted to reach the cooler for a drink, but the space was too small , and we bumped together. Instantly, my cock recalled what we’d been up to a few hours ago — how it had felt to sink my tongue deep into her mouth and feel her cunt ride against my chest until she found her release.

Picking her up, I sat her on the counter with a warning look . “Stay!” Then I twisted to open the cooler for her and pulled out her favorite morning drink. “I’ll make tea as well,” I said, moving through the by - now immensely familiar tiny galley. It was poorly outfitted, but I’d made do. She hadn’t complained once about the food, and I’d made sure to feed her only the very best. I’d pillaged the Varakartoom ’s fresh supplies to stock the Finix , and I hadn’t told the captain about it. Wasn’t like they’d need the supplies without a chef — they were running on rations from the food replicator in my absence.

My Ruby was smiling so widely her jaw had to ache when I handed her the drink. Her pretty browns were twinkling, and her heels were kicking against the cupboard beneath the counter, the soft tap-tap calling forth a merriment inside my own chest. Okay, this was good, so far. I could do this, even if it was a little strange to have someone else in my domain after so long. When I got back to work finishing the breakfast pie, it felt nice not to be alone. She was talking to me, babbling brightly about how she’d bought the Finix in the Alpha quadrant before flying it here. I loved listening to the cadence of her voice, her accent different from that of the humans aboard the Varakartoom .

Eventually, I had her sit down at the tiny fold - out table so she could eat, and that's when I noticed the fluffy blue slippers on her feet. They were textured and colored almost exactly like Hoxiam fur, like mine. The sight was such a surprise that I had to look twice. "Oh no," she exclaimed. "That's not real fur. It's not some relative of yours, I swear! I would never..."

"Relative?" I barked out a surprised laugh, and the deep sound rocked through my chest with an ache, pulling on muscles not used to moving that way. I could not remember the last time I'd laughed, but the worried expression — combined with the absurd notion that someone would make slippers out of Hoxiam fur — set me off. She was so sweet to worry about that, and so silly at the same time. I would worry that I'd offended her by laughing, but she was smiling, too, then chuckling and holding the round curve of her pregnant belly as if she feared she'd shake the baby out of it if she wasn't careful.

"No," I said, my voice raw after that much sound. I was not used to this much talking, and it was showing. Normally, I growled more than I spoke, and I hadn't even been doing much of that over the past two weeks. Now, I'd roared my release, actually had a conversation, and I'd laughed. "I know that. I was just noticing how good blue fur looks on you."

"Why, Brace, are you flirting with me?" she said, her smile as radiant as that day I'd first seen her. It punched me in the chest, punched me in the gut, replacing the always - gnawing sense of hunger there with something much warmer, much brighter —something I had no name for.

I fought to hold back a grin, not wanting to spook her with how wide it was, but that was impossible. I could n't hold it in, and I clearly could n't spook her with it either. "Yeah, I am," I said firmly. "Now eat, before it gets cold." I pushed her plate across the table with a finger, and she ducked her head, pink stealing across her cheeks as she dug in. I did n't want her to see me eat, but when she flapped her hand at the

remaining three - quarters of pie, I could n' t resist. That was the curse of a Hoxiam, we were always hungry, for food or for sex. Better I fill myself with food, for now.

An alarm began blaring just as Ruby was scraping her last bite of food off her plate. Her eyes grew wide, and then she swore, catching me by surprise. "That means we've reached Rumcas," she bemoaned, as if reaching her destination on time was the last thing she wanted. If I recalled correctly, she'd been jumping to leave the Varakartoom not that long ago, so what had changed? I knew Ysa had fixed the engine , so she was back on schedule, was that it? I tried really hard not to believe that it was because she wanted to spend more time with me.

She rose to her feet and brought her empty dish to the sink, her gait a little ungainly. Over the past two weeks, she'd definitely gotten much bigger, her baby was growing fast. I did n' t know if that was normal or not, and I realized I should have found out. What if she was about to give birth? Dravion wasn't here ; I'd have to be the one to help her. A cold panic set in at the thought. That was life or death! I was usually the one dealing death; I'd never even considered being responsible for new life.

Hurrying to her side, I was forced to squeeze past her delicious rump to reach the sink and snatch the plate from her hand. "No," she protested immediately, but her body went soft against me, her scent spiking with heat. Damn it, my cock instantly began to stiffen, pressing against her back , where she could definitely feel it. Her next words were husky with desire. "You should finish your meal. I have to get us docked."

I didn't know I could consider the word 'docked' dirty, but I was definitely thinking of docking her. Shaking my head, I smoothed down the fur on the back of my head with one hand, reining in my wayward thoughts. "Eat?" I told her, and to distract myself, I reached out to the table and grabbed the last, large slice of crispy, savory breakfast pie. I opened my maw wide and tossed it in, swallowing the piece whole. "Done. Now let me do the dishes, you dock the ship." It was a miracle I didn't choke

on the word 'dock.' Blazing stars, she smelled like she was in heat, but I felt like I was, too. After that one taste, I was addicted.

She was sitting in the pilot seat and talking to the Rumcas Control Tower for its main port when I stepped onto the bridge a short while later. Unlike earlier, when I'd shared breakfast with her, she looked tired, no longer glowing with happiness. Stepping carefully into her field of view felt a little odd, after how much effort I'd put in to hiding from her sight, hers and many others. When she saw me, her eyes lit up, and her smile made the gesture worthwhile.

I was certain that even the dull - sounding Rummicaroon from the control tower could hear the shift in her tone. She sounded much happier when she continued bargaining for a landing slot. She looked a little nervous at the controls not much later, when she had to take the huge Long Hauler in for a landing. I would have gladly done the job for her, but my only experience was with landing shuttles; she was, without a doubt, the better candidate. I didn't know what to do to help, and I hated how restless that made me feel, anger bubbling through my veins. Thoughts of self - recrimination following soon after. I should have paid more attention to the flight lessons Asmoded had given me. I should have learned how to land the Varakartoom so I could land the Finix now. I was an idiot, untrained and uneducated, and only one male was to blame for that: Jalima. He'd held me captive and turned me into a killing machine, robbing me of my childhood, robbing me of my chance at a future.

"There," Ruby said suddenly, jarring me from my thoughts. She sounded bright again, and, like sunshine after rain, that voice seemed to chase away the darkness in my head. We had landed, and I'd spent the entire time berating myself in my head while she did all the work. She rose stiffly from the pilot seat, cracking her back and rubbing at the lower muscles as if they pained her. "Now I've got to step outside and sell that gray fabric. Will you be all right on your own in here?"

That innocent question sparked all kinds of things inside my brain. Okay, I sucked at

flying ships, but now she wanted me to sit on my ass instead of doing the one thing I was good at? “You can’t go out,” I snarled, wincing when I realized how badly I had snapped at her but unable to hold the violent feelings back. “I am here for your protection, remember? Where you go, I go!” A Hoxiam bared his teeth in aggression, but I’d grown up away from my homeworld. I’d learned that many species also bared their teeth to express happiness. Ruby’s smile did not make me feel threatened, but her teeth were little and blunt. Now I’d bared my teeth at her, opening my maw wide in a threatening display. She knew the difference, just like I did.

Stubborn female just crossed her arms over her chest , and blazing stars, she smiled. “I know why you’re here. I just thought you’d be more comfortable aboard the Finix . I need to speak with the supply master at the Rummicarons military base. I’m sure I’d be safe there.” Safe? On Rumcas? She was crazy. They ha d not ban ned slavery inside Rummicarons space, and any male would be crazy not to try to snatch up a pregnant human as pretty as my Ruby.

How had she survived on her own all this time? I could not wrap my head around this, and it wasn’t going to happen on my watch. “No,” I said, and damn it, I snapped my teeth at her again, maw opening wide. This was exactly what I feared would happen if I left my galley ; I was acting like a raving beast. All control gone, nothing but instinct, posturing, snarling, biting. “I am coming with you.”

Ruby nodded slowly, her expression turning thoughtful. Then her hands went back to the small of her back, rubbing again. I pushed her fingers away with one hand before I could think better of it, pressing gently against the tense muscles, then slowly rubbing until she sighed with relief. “Okay, you are coming,” she said. I felt wild , like the icy oceans — unbalanced — when those words tipped my brain back into the gutter. Heated thoughts sp un through my mind. Coming? Yes , please. I’d come for her so hard , several times last night...

Ruby was confusing me and putting all my vows to the test. I had sworn I’d keep her

safe, nothing more. I'd sworn to myself to keep my distance. Instead, I swept her into my arms, lifting her off her feet so I could cradle her—and the large mound of her belly—against my chest. “First, I need to put on a disguise,” I told her. She was not helping me keep my head straight when she went all soft and pliant against me. This female either had no protective instincts, or her instincts about me were really good. I'd rather die than harm a precious hair on her pretty head.

Her expression wilted a little at the word “disguise.” “You don't need to hide from me, Brace. I saw your scars, but they don't bother me. You should wear them with pride. You're a survivor, that's nothing to be ashamed of.” Her words took me by surprise, and for a moment, I froze right there in the doorway leading off the bridge. She was kind for saying that, but it was not the scars that made me hide; not really. In this case, the disguise was something else entirely.

“I'm talking about a slave collar,” I said gruffly. It was a sore point for any Hoxiam. We were not free to visit any planet, with a rare few exceptions—not unless we were enslaved and could be controlled with pain at the flick of a button. All because a certain amount of my species failed to control their everlasting hunger and turned to devouring any flesh they could hunt. That included sentient beings. I had never done such a heinous thing myself, but most of the other Hoxiam I had met had taken that step. Especially those kept in captivity, starved to fit a certain weight class for the arena sands. I remembered well the absolute agony of being starved, of feeling my flesh diminish and waste away. A Hoxiam could take a lot of that, at least, their body could, but the mind... that was a very different story.

Many of them snapped, and because of that, we had a bad name and a Quadrant-wide ban, which only made the problem worse. I could see in Ruby's eyes that she'd understood the meaning of the slave collar right away. Her pretty brown eyes grew wide, and she began to shake her head in denial. “Oh no, I can't do that to you! Don't ask me to do that.” She sounded so upset that I wanted to tell her she didn't have to, but there was no other way. I could not set foot on Rumcas without a collar

around my neck and the control firmly in her hand.

“You can,” I said to her, my chest rumbling in discontent at her distress. I didn’t like it either, but she was my mate ; there was no one I’d trust with a remote like that. I’d brought a real collar, not a fake one either, because I did not want to risk tampering charges. The Rummicarons were very strict about the rules and highly advanced. Of course mine did have a safety feature installed, courtesy of Mitnick, but one that only activated under certain circumstances. The remote Ruby would have was very real.

I made a stop at my bunkroom, reluctantly putting her back on her feet by the door. “Stay,” I told her, which made her sad smile twist into something more cheerful again. She must have enjoyed the irony of my ordering her around, when I was about to pretend to be her slave. She was straightening her ruffled jumpsuit when I ducked into the room to dig the collar from my small pack of personal belongings. When I came back out, ducking low to fit through the doorway, she had shifted to smoothing her hands over the fabric stretched tightly over her belly.

“I swear,” she muttered when she saw me, “that baby has put on ten pounds since last week... I feel like I’m about to pop. I can’t believe there are still at least three more months of this!” My eyes went wide as I assessed her tiny body and the large bulge her pregnant belly made. How much bigger would the baby be by then? Any concerns about the collar fled my mind as I contemplated that she’d have to give birth to that baby at some point.

Dropping to my knees, I couldn’t control the impulse to curl myself protectively around her and press my ear to her belly. I could hear the little one in there, the rapid pulsing of his tiny heart combined in beautiful harmony with the slower pulse of his mother. “Stop growing,” I growled. “You’re going to hurt your mom.”

Ruby’s hands found their way to my shoulders, gently rubbing through the fur there. “It’s okay, that’s normal,” she told me, but she did not sound like she was certain

about it. “I’m going to be fine . W e all are.” That made it sound like she was including me, but I knew better. Once she was safe — far removed from Jalima’s influence — I had to leave. I’d failed at keeping my distance, but I would not fail at protecting her, even from me. The longer I stayed with her, the great er the chance that my control would slip and I ’d g i ve into the rage always simmering in my gut. The rage that had its hooks firmly in my Hoxiam hunger, the rage that could turn me into the flesheater everyone already thought I was.

“Let’s go,” I told my female. Rising to my feet, I snapped the collar around my neck and stuck the remote in her hand. She almost dropped it, revulsion clear on her face, but she squared her shoulders and held on.

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Ruby

Not in my wildest dreams had I been able to predict what would happen if I followed one simple cleaning bot to the galley and snuck up on my Hoxiam companion. Now, I wasn't just a captain about to sell her cargo ; I was a captain with a slave for a bodyguard — one that I'd humped to orgasm not that long ago . M y brain kept helpfully supplying that information whenever I looked at the brawny, hulking shadow at my back.

Brace didn't look remotely like the shy, sweet male I'd shared breakfast with that morning. Now he wore a grim, dark expression on his handsome face, his maw pulled in to something that closely resembled a snarl. His blue eyes were ice - cold, holding not even a hint of the heat with which he usually looked at me. It even seemed like he was taller, bigger. Like his fur had fluffed out and given him an extra few inches. It was no wonder that anyone nearby chose to cross the street or hurried in the other direction.

Not even the sample bolt of gray fabric he was carrying , tucked beneath one arm, made him look less intimidating. You could also barely see the collar he'd slapped around his own neck ; i t was partially hidden beneath his thick pelt, and only a few blinking lights at his throat betrayed its presence. I had to admit that if I didn't know him like I did, I would have been one of the ones running the other way at the sight of him. He looked exactly like the flesh - eating Hoxiam boogeyman that everyone feared.

That had me thinking: How well did I actually know my protector? All I had to go on were his actions, not his words, because we'd spoken so few of them. Even now that

he'd stopped hiding, we still hadn't had much in the way of conversation. Again, my brain helpfully pulled out the steamy encounter in the galley last night. An encounter that had woken me, achy and wet for him, this morning after struggling to fall asleep. So, we knew each other carnally, a little—that was not a good basis for trust. Or was it?

The fact was, from the moment I'd run into him back aboard the mercenary ship, I'd felt safe with him. Like he was the only one in the entire quadrant I could trust, without fail, forever. I knew what that kind of thinking could indicate, were I any species other than human. But humans didn't have mates, especially not the fated type. I wondered if Hoxiam did ; nobody seemed to know. All anyone talking about Hoxiams in the vast data streams seemed to care about was that they ate sentient flesh. Any meat would do, but they took great delight in meat that feared them for the monsters they were.

Rumcas was a planet I'd visited many times before, but it always surprised me how colorful the place was. The port's tarmac and layout were practical and in straight lines, and yet purple curled sinuously in waves over the pathways. Blue water sat in pools or ran in delightfully curling little channels alongside. The channels were big enough for a Rummicaroon to swim through, though that was not a common occurrence in the port itself. Not so once you hit the city, Avur. There, the channels were wider and regularly traveled. Tiled with extensive, beautiful mosaics, they were an explosion of artistry and color —made all the more delightful to see when schools of children passed, swimming and darting left and right through the water. Shark-like, but also playful like a dolphin. Not that I'd ever dare say to a Rummicaroon's face that their children were cute and playful.

They had banned flying vessels from the city limits and made everything accessible on foot or through public transportation. We had to take a "bus" to get to the nearby military base. Normally, I found that walk peaceful. Rumcas was a very safe port, which was why it felt strange to have Brace at my side for protection. I couldn't

really see how Jalima would dare strike me as I walked to a military base , of all places. But I liked being with Brace too much to complain.

I pointed out my favorite little restaurant when I was in port . “We should eat there on the way back. You’ll love the food.” There was no terrace to sit on, but that didn’t matter, it was the winter season, and the air was crisp and cool. I’d never been to Rumcas in winter, but I’d heard it could be very bitter, so I was surprised at how mild it still seemed on the streets. No cutting winds, no snow, and only a slight nip in the air. I’d still be happy to duck into the warm interior of Kali’s Bread and Fish. I’d gone in the first time only because the name had made me homesick for fish ‘n chips, which I’d loved to eat while in college.

All Brace did was huff in response, his snort blowing steam into the air. So it was colder than it felt , perhaps, or maybe I just wasn’t feeling the cold as much as I normally would. I had been unusually warm lately, but I’d been attributing that to having the hots for Brace. I eyed him again over my shoulder, and my heart started racing in my chest. He was so big, and he was hovering protectively behind me as we walked, his large stride adjusted to match mine. Come to think of it, maybe he was blocking the wind with his body, and he was pumping off all kinds of heat. It was no wonder I wasn’t feeling the chill, my bodyguard was going the extra mile.

On the bus, people scattered to sit at the front, while Brace remained standing at my side at the back. I felt bad when that meant people didn’t have seats, even though there were plenty of empty ones next to us, but it was their choice. I knew Brace would never harm them, but he wasn’t making them feel safe by giving them the coldest glare I’d ever seen.

I thought maybe the reception at the base would be less frightful and more disciplined. Rummicaron suppressed their emotions, so they should not have been so sensitive to basic fear and intimidation. The guard at the gate took one look at my escort and , with a fearful — definitely fearful — glance , stammered out a “Please

wait here. ” I’d made this particular fabric run twice before and had never required a full squad as an escort. This time, the guard returned with a dozen soldiers to guide us to their boss’s office.

The quartermaster I’d dealt with before was not alone either ; standing uneasily beside him were two more guards. The male I was supposed to barter with was offering me a chair and drinks, bending over backward to be polite. I had never been offered a drink before, not once. It was making me a little uncomfortable when I realized how terrified they were of me now that I was bringing a ‘leashed’ Hoxiam. The worst part came when the quartermaster offered to buy not just my bolts of gray fabric, but my slave.

I was not cut out for this kind of acting, and if he were n’t Rummicarón , I was certain he would be staring at me in confusion by now. Savvy captain, bargaining for good prices for my goods, sure. Hardened slave owner and bully? Definitely not. “You want to buy Brace from me ? ” I said, stunned. “Why would you want to buy him?” That just didn’t make sense to me. This was the military of a very established species in the Zeta Quadrant. They had power, they had numbers , and territory. Why would they want to buy a Hoxiam?

I found myself picturing Brace deployed in battle, incited to fight under pain of the collar —possibly starved to make him more feral in combat . The imagery made my stomach turn, and I had to clasp my hand over my mouth to hold in a wave of nausea.

The Rummicarón q uarter m aster pinched his brows with two fingers, his mouth twisting in distaste. He did not enjoy having to explain himself, and he wasn’t going to. “Is he for sale or not?” he demanded. He rose to his feet and moved to a lockbox on the cabinet behind him. The guards in the room shifted uneasily on their feet when Brace rattled with a growl.

“Ah, excuse me, I think I have to throw up,” I found myself saying faintly. It was too

much for me, thinking of people just callously wanting to buy another being. Combined with a restless, kicking baby and pregnancy hormones, the nausea won. As I clambered to my feet, Brace caught me with one hand and helped me up by my elbow. Then I was grabbing the windowsill and sticking my head out of the open window. Out came partially digested savory pie.

I was pale and wobbly when Brace gently escorted me back to the chair. He snatched the water glass from the desk and pressed it into my clammy fingers. “You pay my mistress now!” he snarled at the quarter master. The male was already a pale gray, but at the corners of his eyes, his thick, shark-like skin went almost white. He fumbled with the lockbox, then pulled out stacks of credits and shoved them in to a bag. I saw the piles that went in, and I knew it was more than I’d ever been paid for that much fabric.

My ears were whooshing with the sound of the blood rushing, my voice a little tremulous. “I’ll inform the port master that your men have clearance to unload the cargo.” More firmly, I added, “My Hoxiam is not for sale.” If that made the males uncomfortable, they did not show it, and they did not protest either. I could see how the guard who opened the door for us pulled up his nose and felt heat flash over my face. He thought I was sleeping with my slave; he thought I was disgusting for doing so. On par with sleeping with livestock. Embarrassment made way for anger. Screw him. I definitely wanted to sleep with Brace, and there was nothing wrong with that.

Out in the hallway, Brace swept me off my feet and cradled me against his chest. He snarled again when that made the waiting escort of a dozen soldiers all raise their guns at his head. “Ah, stand down,” I said to them, waving my hand. “He’s just helping me down the steps.” I flapped my hand at my protruding belly, and that was enough. Even emotionally stunted males understood not to get in the way when a pregnant woman made demands. Certainly not these young males, fresh out of school and still in basic training.

By the time we'd left the base and entered the city's outskirts again, I asked Brace to put me down. The nausea had passed, and though I liked how toasty warm it was in his brawny arms, I was starting to feel a little too much like an invalid. I didn't mind getting preferential treatment on occasion — Brace was very good at making me feel pampered — but I didn't need to feel useless. I had been pretty useless in that meeting. Considering the hefty bag of credits Brace was carelessly lugging, as well as my person, I knew I'd gotten far more than I normally would just because he was there. They had been scared of him, and , thus, of me. I wasn't sure I liked that. That's not how I wanted to do business, even if I could use the extra money.

“There's no need to walk,” he said casually, with none of the growling or menace he'd shown back at the military base. He definitely knew how to put on a show. His warm hands shifted along my body, lifting me higher so easily that I felt light as a feather, even though I was as big as a whale right now. He dipped his head to peer into my eyes with his pretty blue orbs, a twinkle dancing there that made my breath catch in my throat. A playful Brace—that was a surprise. He was showing sides of himself I never believed he'd be willing to share. The fact that he was showing them to me made me feel so special.

“Exercise is good too, you know,” I told him, starting with my most powerful argument, hoping to score a hit. I was pretty sure he'd do anything, as long as he thought it was in my best interest. He huffed, still amused, but began to put me down, slowly sliding me along the soft pelt that covered his chest. Feeling positively tiny when my toes touched the ground, I felt precious again. He was so gentle in the way he touched me, and that felt extra special because he was so big and so very strong.

Standing on the ground, I only came up to his freaking belly button, not that I could see it, on account of his fur. He kept his arm around my shoulders, holding me close to his side, and then he carefully matched his huge stride to mine. That forced him to shuffle along awkwardly, but he was still smiling, as if he were happy. Now I felt bad for making him shuffle so slowly, but at least we were coming up on the short shuttle

bus ride to reach the port.

It was over all too soon, and this time I hardly paid attention to the stares Brace was getting. My head was filled with thoughts of the future—of what I'd do once I reached Ker—and I wondered why that kept feeling more and more claustrophobic. I was determined to do right by my child, and settling in one place, with humans and Kertinals to play with, seemed right. It just felt so lonely, so boring, so dangerous.

I was thinking of my family, the family I'd lost in the fires on Earth. My head grew heavy and somber as I recalled my abuela's empanadas and my mama's pedre recipe. I couldn't get the ingredients for any of those dishes here, and I missed them. Not that I'd be able to cook any of it either—I sucked in the kitchen.

“Are your thoughts heavy?” Brace asked in a quiet murmur as he helped me step off the Rummicarons' ever-so-efficient public transportation. It was a short walk back to port now, and I was eager to get back to the Finix's safe confines. There did not appear to be any danger lurking around, and I was feeling silly for having been assigned a “protective detail” by a mercenary captain with no stakes in my survival.

“Yes,” I sighed, halting for a moment to catch my breath. It was getting late in the day, and the air was growing cooler. My breath misted in the air, just as Brace's had been doing all day. “I miss my family. I was thinking about the foods my abuela used to make.”

I found myself talking about my family to Brace as we continued walking through the busy port. As ships came and went, getting loaded and unloaded by port drones and workers, I explained to him my Chilean heritage—the rich culture, the food, the family life. I talked about my brothers and sisters, my many cousins, aunts, and uncles, and how much my family had filled my life—until one day it didn't, because they were all gone.

I couldn't get through the part about the horrible citywide fire without crying, so all I said was that they were dead. That's why I'd left Earth, left the UAR, and eventually even left the Alpha Quadrant. I couldn't stand being in one place long enough to remember what I missed so much. I had never told anyone the full story. On Earth, all I had to say was where I came from, and people would look at me with sympathy. In the Alpha Quadrant, saying I had no family was enough to bring on the pity. But out here, in the Zeta Quadrant, nobody gave a shit about a lonely human.

"I'm sorry," he said when I fell silent, left with tears on my tongue and a knot in my throat. "I know what it's like to lose your family. Mine are all dead too." I reached out to curl my fingers around his, his huge hand dwarfing mine and then some. His fingers were rough with calluses but deliciously warm. He was getting better at accepting my affection, too, his fingers squeezed with gentle pressure.

"I..." Brace began, his blue eyes locked on my face with that familiar tenderness. I was all too willing to fall into that gaze, to let myself forget the past and think only of the future—a future with him in it. "Blazing stars, stay here, Ruby. There's someone on the ship." The abrupt change in his behavior threw me. He picked me up and pushed me between two tall metal crates recently unloaded from the Finix . I recognized them because the brand of the fabric merchant I'd gotten them from was emblazoned on the side.

"Take this," Brace growled roughly, pulling a laser pistol from a pouch dangling from the belt that held up his loincloth. The metal of the grip was warm against my fingers, but I fumbled the heavy weapon before I righted it. I had never suspected he'd been carrying a gun around, and I didn't think anyone else had either. We would never have gotten onto the military base with that gun if they'd known about it.

"What's happening?" I asked, but he took up so much space in front of the impromptu hiding spot that there was no way I could see around him. He didn't answer, his face dark and his expression edging on feral as he spun away and stalked

toward the airlock of the Finix . Now I could see what he'd already noticed: the airlock had been opened and left ajar, wedged that way by a narrow metal bar. My stomach went as cold as the crisp evening air around me. Someone had broken into my ship?

This was Jalima. Had to be. Not him personally, of course, but goons sent by the crime lord, certainly. Now I was extra glad that Brace had come with me. The gun in my fingers began shaking again, and I bit my lip and sternly told myself to keep it together. Brace was here—he'd take care of this. I was perfectly safe out here, hidden, with a loaded weapon. Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Brace

I did not like leaving my pretty mate behind in the cold, but taking her into the ship when there were unknown assailants was an even worse idea. I could smell them — three males. Two were locals : Rummicaron , with their salty scent and their cool thoughts. The other was warm - blooded, something sharp and tangy to his scent that made me think he might like to tinker with blades and knives. An Asrai or Xurtal male , perhaps.

Pushing open the airlock went silently, and I closed it all the way behind me, pulling free their metal bar so they could n' t easily slip past me. I planned to put an end to this problem as soon as it started. Nobody got to threaten my mate, and once they fled to their master with their tails between their legs, they'd get the message : t here were no drugs here, and no reparations.

I followed my nose as I moved through the ship on silent feet, my claws retracted so they would not clack against the metal floor paneling. They were searching the place, and from the sounds and smells, they'd gotten into our food supplies , too. I did not like that, not one bit. That was my domain, my way of taking care of Ruby when I couldn't let myself get closer to pleasure her in other ways. They were not tarnishing that with their grubby, greedy paws.

I came upon the first male, a Rummicaron, just like I'd suspected. The rage that swallowed me at the sight of him chugging Ruby's favorite morning drink was horrible and fast. Red tinged my vision , and I knew nothing except the fight — the need to punish him — for several seconds. When it was over, I did not remember what I'd done, but blood dripped from my claws and was splattered all across my

pelt. Then I was on the hunt, chasing the next male through the ship and catching him before he could slip through the airlock on the other side. This one I slammed into the wall headfirst, managing to control the rage just enough not to start tearing into him with my claws.

His body became a sprawled pile of limbs, gleaming red in the artificial light. He was Asrai, just as I suspected. Since he wasn't moving, I left him to search for the final male. He was on the bridge, rummaging through a panel beneath the navigational console. The sharp jut of the fin rising from his back was his tallest point in this position. Too much temptation not to grab him there and lift him in to the air, kicking and screaming. I dodged the slash of a knife, caught a kick to the chest, and then another knife bit into my arm.

With a growl, I tossed him, red again coming down over my vision. I leaped after the flying male, and this time my claws and my teeth ruled the fight. Once the red inside my brain began to recede, I was left with the red that coated my fur and the walls of the bridge. Staring at the mess, it was not the rage that kept boiling in my veins, but the icy cold of deep shame. I'd lost control, I'd killed without hesitation and without a shred of dignity. The mess I'd made was overkill, and then some. I could never let my precious Ruby see this.

Spinning on my heels, I raced from the bridge to locate the one male I'd managed to keep alive. He was not where I'd left him, but I was certain that this airlock had been locked down. He would have needed more than a minute to crack the lock and escape, which meant... Ah, stars, he'd doubled back to exit through the airlock on the other side of the ship — the airlock at which my mate was waiting. Had I felt rage before? It was a joke compared to what flooded my system then. The fear that something had happened to Ruby was all-consuming, and it blacked out everything else. I felt no pain, not even the always-present, gnawing hunger in my gut. All I felt was fear for my mate.

Ruby

It had been several minutes , but there was no sign of Brace or danger. I shuffled back and forth on my feet as I contemplated what to do. Go in? Disobey Brace's order to stay here so I could find out what was happening? Or wait? The baby kicked furiously , as if to emphasize my impatience, and I winced when he scored a hit against my bladder. Now I really needed to pee, and the cold wasn't helping with that.

My gaze turned to the laser pistol in my hands. I knew how to shoot one, contrary to how I'd fumbled with the gun when Brace handed it to me, I was even quite competent. Not exactly a sharpshooter, but I'd found it prudent to learn how to shoot as a lone woman in the Zeta Quadrant. I'd scared of f at least three different overzealous crewmembers on a long journey. It was the i r last journey with me, and they never tried it again. I could shoot just fine, and that's what made me decide to slip from between the two large crates so I could enter the ship.

That was , of course , the moment the airlock opened with a hiss. I began to smile, foolishly lowering the gun because I fully expected it to be Brace who stepped out. Then I was suddenly eye to eye with an Asrai male. His red eyes gleamed, and his ghoulish features were extra macabre because of the blood gushing from a cut across his forehead. I screamed, because who wouldn't scream when face to face with a guy w hose head looke d like a skull, and that skull was all bloody?

He winced back, but then he began to grin , and damn if his teeth weren't all bloody too. He was the scariest thing I'd ever seen, and I began backpedaling in a hurry. The port's tarmac was unexpectedly slippery from the cold, and I began to slip. I had the presence of mind to raise the laster pistol , but I knew my aim was going to be all over the place. When I began to fall, I knew I had to make a choice. There was only one

option, really : I had to catch my fall and protect my baby as I hit the icy ground.

In my panic, my finger must have tightened around the trigger. A shot whizzed through the air and , by sheer luck, blazed a path along the outside of the Asrai's shoulder. He growled in fury and began to pounce on me just as I struck the ground. Pain blazoned up my spine and hip, but I curled and rolled, avoiding a hit to my belly. My elbow was agony, my fingers going numb, and the gun fell from my hand and skittered across the ground , out of sight.

I rolled and braced myself for my attacker, but the Asrai male never struck me. Roaring filled the air as Brace charged from the airlock, and the Asrai twisted to roll past me instead of hitting me. Brace was barreling toward him, and the male made the wise choice of running , his long legs booking it across the tarmac and ducking around crates to get out of sight. Brace was all fury and rage as he ran after him. He was much bigger than the fearful Asrai, and eating up the ground rapidly.

Whimpering, I began to roll to my knees so I could get up. My arm ached so badly that I could not put any weight on it. If I could get aboard the Finix and stumble my way to my room, I knew I'd be able to fix myself — at least somewhat — with the first aid kit there. Getting to my feet was doable only with the help of the airlock's handle.

Where had Brace gone? Having been on my own as long as I had, it was strange to suddenly rely on someone else, but I really wanted him right now. Everything hurt, and I didn't want him to get in trouble out there. What if he was hurt himself? There had been red in his fur when he'd streaked past me in pursuit of the Asrai. Twisting, I looked over my shoulder with a groan, certain that I'd see chaos behind me — dockworkers fighting with my poor Brace as he tried to punish that Asrai for hurting me. They'd call the police — port security — and they'd shoot to kill, because he was Hoxiam.

My breath shuddered when I looked, and all was quiet. Then there he was, rushing around the stack of crates he'd hidden me in earlier. He was doubled over, running like a real beast, using both his hands and his feet. It was a gallop faster than any horse I'd seen, and he was on me so quickly that I'd barely had time to register his presence.

"Are you hurt?" he snarled, demanding rather than asking. Blood coated the fur on his chest, his chin, and his neck. I did not see his claws until he reached past my head to open the airlock. His blue eyes were frantic as they searched my body. Then he was running massive — but ever so gentle — hands over my belly, sighing with relief when the baby obliged by kicking into his palm. "You need to get out of the cold."

Everything moved fast, the world spun around me, and when it began to right itself again, I was in his arms, pressed against his warm — but oh-so-bloody — chest. We were through the airlock in moments, and though I tried to look around to see what the damage was to my ship, he pressed my head to a clean spot of fur on his shoulder with one palm, firmly preventing me from seeing anything at all.

"My elbow and my hip," I gritted out through clenched teeth. They were on fire, hurting worse and worse by the moment. I was supposed to be the tough girl, the loner who was making it out in the big Zeta Quadrant on her own. Instead, I was fighting tears and wishing — really badly — that someone would ease that pain soon. It sucked, really bad. But all that blood on Brace, that made it worse. "Are you hurt, Brace? Is that blood yours? Please tell me it's not yours?"

He pushed his way into my private room, a place that should be totally off-limits to anyone but me. Somehow, he had access. I wasn't going to worry about that now, not when both of us were injured and someone had just broken into my home, into my ship. "Not mine," he snarled, and my body shook against his chest from the vibrations. He was still furious, still enraged, but every touch of his big hands was so very gentle that I knew I had no need to fear him. I was certain I never had to fear

him, my Brace. He was the safest person to be around, for me at least. That belief was unshakable.

Reaching up with my good arm, I cupped the side of his jaw. My hand was too small, his jaw too big for me to cover the entire side, but he nuzzled his head against my fingers. "My medkit is in that cubbyhole over there," I told him, and I pointed. The tears from before were beginning to fade a little. The pain was still awful, but knowing that I was safe, and that Brace was okay, that helped.

He was very gentle as he placed me on my bed, and then he was on the medkit, cursing when he did not find it up to his standards. He dashed from the room, only to return hauling a large duffel bag with him. That had to be his, and he came out with a smaller, sleeker, and much more expensive-looking version of the outdated kit I had. Kneeling on the floor at my side, he loomed over me, tall as fuck, feral, and wild with all the blood in his fur.

He ran a handheld scanner over my belly first, and I felt warmth unfurl in my chest, which further numbed the pain. He was taking care of my baby first, making sure that what mattered most to me was safe. He was such a good guy. It hurt when he worked on my elbow, gently rotating it back into position and stimulating healing with a top-of-the-line tissue regenerator. Eventually, the pain began to ease, and I realized that while my hip hurt, it was just bruising, nothing serious.

Of course, when I began to protest that I wanted him to check himself for injuries, he ignored me. "You first," he warned darkly, and that was all he said. It wasn't like I could wrest the scanner or tissue regenerator from his hands, he dwarfed those little devices with his big paws. I satisfied myself with a visual check, scanning his fur to make sure there were no wounds beneath the silky pelt. Two suspicious spots drew my attention, but when he realized I was staring at them, he shifted his body so I couldn't see.

Huffing in frustration, I began to talk again — not so much nervous as expelling the nervous energy from before. “I thought you were hurt when I saw all that blood. When you’re done, I get to check every inch of you too, you got that ? Every inch!” I caught him offguard with that, and he snorted a laugh that he tried to muffle. Giving me a stern look didn’t work either, amusement now danced in his pretty sapphire eyes.

Eventually , even he had to concede that he had done as much as he could for now. I was a little achy, but that was all, and the baby was fine. That was not what I could say about Brace. He was still covered in blood, and I wasn’t convinced that some of it wasn’t his own. When I reached out to touch him, he began to back away. Frustration burst through me . Not this again, weren’t we past the avoiding stage by now? Didn’t he know how much I had begun to care for him? And that he didn’t scare me? Not one bit? Why could he take care of me, but wouldn’t let me do the same for him?

“I am covered in blood,” he said. Then his expression went bleak — beyond bleak — and I knew he’d gone to a very dark place inside his head. I feared that I couldn’t follow him there, but when he backed up another step, he had reached the end of the available space. Putting his back against a wall didn’t make him feel better ; that was clear. Suddenly , my room aboard the Finix was achingly small, a cage around my big, scarred Hoxiam.

Moving slowly was the only way to reach him; it felt like I was trying to get to a wounded animal. He snarled, his fur fluffing up along his shoulders , the mane of vibrant cobalt around his head rising, and his maw opening to bare far too many teeth down to a bottomless well. I didn’t falter, ignoring any twinges of pain my hip or elbow gave me. Holding out my hand , I told him to take it, that it was okay. At this point, I wasn’t even sure if he could hear me, but he wasn’t attacking, just like I knew he wouldn’t.

Beneath the pelt on his legs and abdomen, his muscles twitched and quivered with

tension. Either he was restraining the urge to flee, or he was holding back the desire to lash out. I still didn't fear him. "Come on, take my hand , Brace. You took care of me, now it's my turn. Let's wash that blood of f you, okay?" I felt like I'd aged ten years by the time he lifted one of his paws and curled his fingers around mine. My hand trembled from holding it out that long, but all that faded away when we touched. He trusted me. "Come on, this way," I said, and I began leading him from my far - too - small bedroom down the hall to the shared head. It was an even tinier space, but I was pretty sure I'd be able to distract him from that fact.

He came slowly, his growl fading away, his eyes wounded and wild as he began to come back from wherever he'd gone. I smiled at him . "That's it. That's right. I'm here with you, Ruby. Come on, Brace. You're safe , and I'll take good care of you, I promise."

Brace

My thick pelt was soaked — a feeling I hated. Water sluiced down my spine, plastering my mane to my head and dribbling into one of my sensitive ears. I couldn't remember how I'd gotten into the tight shower stall, but there I was, my shoulders wedged between the wall and the transparent side panel. I blinked water from my eyes, trying to make sense of it all.

Then, everything made even less sense. There was my Ruby, standing in the open stall doorway, water streaming down her silky braids. Her round belly was outlined by the wet jumpsuit she wore, and her breasts... Ah, stars, those too. Big, lush, the nipples perked. My cock leaped inside the wet, snug confines of my loincloth. I glanced down. Loincloth? Why was I dressed inside the shower stall?

The water running off my body and down into the drain was rust red. Blood, I had been coated in it, and now it was all washing away. I wished that it would wash away the darkness and the holes inside my memory too, but it couldn't. When I raised my head again to look at my mate, there was nothing but warmth and sympathy in her eyes. "It's okay. It's almost gone. Then I'll take care of that nasty cut. You're going to be fine." Ruby's singsong tone was as warm and kind as always, and I felt doubly like I did not deserve it. I couldn't remember what I'd done to those burglars, but it was bad. Had to be, for there to be this much blood on me. It had gotten on her too, smeared along her side from when I'd carried her. Some was smudged on her face.

My arousal had dampened with the surge of guilt, and my hand trembled as I raised a finger to brush her silky skin. The blood was wet from the shower water, but it had dried before and now clung stubbornly. "I'm a mess, Ruby," I said. "I'm not safe,

look what I did..." I shrugged helplessly, but the motion barely translated, stuck as I was inside the tiny shower. Indicating the blood still washing from my pelt, I tried to make it clear to her that she should back away.

The stubborn female just smiled at me, all bright and warm. I knew she understood me, she was smart. Yet instead of backing away, she did the opposite, pressing forward into the tiny space. Now our bodies were pressed together under the stream of water, and I thanked the stars that the water had begun to run clear.

"You did that to protect me, Brace. How could I object to that? You kept me safe." I wanted to believe that was all this was, but I didn't remember what I'd done to the males who had invaded her ship, her domain. The last I truly remembered was the Rummicarón with Ruby's favorite drink in his grubby palm. I could also vaguely recall an Asrai male and the sense of imminent danger to my mate. For all I knew, I'd eaten the males I'd defeated. I didn't feel any hunger now, and that was rare, and a very bad sign.

When she began running her fingers through the fur on my chest, I could no longer concentrate on the negative. Her fingers felt divine; I could not recall the last time anyone had touched me like that. This close together, I could no longer smell the blood either, all I smelled was her. How was it that she smelled so fresh and sweet, after all that had happened today?

Groaning, I gave in to the temptation to hold her, to please her. My mind filled with smoke and flames as it recalled an instance that was crystal clear: that kiss, and the way she'd pressed against me, searching for her pleasure. The beautiful expression on her face as she came—came because she was in my arms and no one else's. She was gliding her hands up, but it was awkward in the tight space, and she could not reach all the way to my shoulders. I hunched forward, meeting her halfway, and when her mouth met mine, lightning sparked inside my brain.

I hauled her up, careful of her pregnant belly, and cradled her high against my chest as I continued to taste her lips. Stay away ? That was impossible, it wasn't even a thought in my brain once I had her inside of me. Her taste was everything : delicate, sweet, unique, and so very addictive. When she parted her lips and let me fill her with my tongue, it was as if she had let me between her thighs , and my cock surged and pulsed, aching with need for her. She did nothing to stop me, did not seem in the least bothered by our differences.

My size compared to hers, her soft, furless skin, and especially our mouths. I could not understand why she'd want to be with me after I'd come to her covered in blood. Blood from slain foes I 'd lost control with. But all that mattered was that she was here with me, my beautiful, tempting mate. Turning off the water spray with a flick of one hand, I held my female against me with the other. She was easily cradled in the crook of my arm, and I never had to raise my mouth from hers.

She whimpered as the warm water receded, and I felt how she began to shiver against me. Even wet, my pelt kept me warm, dual-layered as it was. My mate had no such protections ; she was not made for cold climates. I could have turned on the dryer function inside the stall, but it was far more delightful to dry her myself. With my claws, I cut through the wet fabric of her jumpsuit, taking extra care — and delight — when I pulled the fabric from her lush breasts.

Her skin was the same light brown all over, slightly paler over her breasts, though those were tipped with dark nipples that tempted me. When I raised her in my arms and closed my mouth over one, she shouted and writhed in my grip. Her hands gripped the mane on my head, tugging as she rode the wave of pleasure I had unleashed. “Yes,” I growled when I raised my head and looked into her face. She was glowing pink along her cheeks, her long black lashes draped low over her pretty brown eyes.

Striding from the bathroom, I carried her through the cold hallway. A smear of blood

there reminded me of the earlier carnage, and I quickly turned both of us so we wouldn't have to see what I'd done. Inside her bedroom, I pulled back the sheets, then gently laid her down. "Don't move!" I warned her as I tucked the blanket over her. Then I hurried away to dry myself and fetch what I needed to take care of my mate.

Ruby

When Brace ripped my wet clothing from my body, I thought he'd make love to me right then and there. Inside that tiny shower stall. Of course, that made no sense, he barely fit, let alone the two of us together. He was far too much of a caring gentleman, beneath that wild-man exterior. Now I found myself still damp, tucked into my bed, while he ran off — but I didn't fear that he'd change his mind. This was different from last time, very different. I felt like I'd gotten to see a part of him that he fought to hide from the world, and somehow I'd gotten through to him. After this, everything was going to be different. I was sure of it.

Tingling, a little cold, and a whole lot excited, I waited for him to return, my mind already picturing all the things I wanted to do with him. After that kiss — after the way he'd sucked my sensitive nipples until I saw stars — I knew he'd be back for more. What would it be like to have sex with him? Would we even fit? I was trying to figure that part out, and beginning to grow a little uncertain, when the door to my room opened again.

Brace ducked through the portal, hunching down to fit inside the Finix's tiny, economical spaces. His blue pelt was shiny and dry again, and he was carrying a brush in his large paw. His blue eyes were gleaming with heat, and when he grinned at me, his mouth split, too wide to be human. It only turned me on to know that I was about to dance with a beast, with a male as feral, but more than that, as sweet as he

was.

He came to kneel beside my bed and gently began stroking my wet hair with that brush until it was dry and tangle - free. Then he used his hands to assault my senses with tender strokes along my flesh. First, he cupped my shoulders, warming me as they glided down my arms, engulfing my limbs and heating my fingers. He did the same with my legs, starting at my feet, and he spent extra time stroking my distended belly , with something close to a purr rumbling from his chest.

I thought it all felt good, but he was moving too slowly, and I was getting impatient . From the gleam in his eyes, I knew he knew it. The devilish man had found the playful side of himself, and now he was ready to tease. “You are so tiny, female,” he said. I could only wordlessly agree with him, nodding my head. It was nothing but the truth; I was tiny next to him, even with a belly the size of a beach ball. “You can’t take me,” he added, and his tone turned dark. My body clenched with heat at that phrase, not a fear response, but arousal. He was that big? I couldn’t wait to find out.

“I’ll stretch,” I said through dry lips, and I darted out my tongue to wet them, swallowing roughly. “Humans are very stretchy,” I added. That made him grin again, his large mouth spreading wide, hinting at the danger that lay behind that maw — the rows of sharp teeth. He cupped my thighs with both hands and pulled them apart, then ducked his head and peered at my glistening folds. I heard him suck in a deep breath and knew he was inhaling my scent. The deep , satisfied growl told me he liked what he smelled, very much.

“You think you ’ ll stretch to fit this?” he snarled, the sound almost furious , but I knew it was impatience. Rising to his feet, he snatched the loincloth from his hips , and finally, I got my first proper look at what he was packing. Oh god... Now , I wasn’t sure, but I wanted to say yes very desperately. He was thicker than my wrist and as long as my forearm, definitely in proportion to the rest of his hulking size. He was also very veiny, ridged almost by the thick network of vessels. The tip was a dark

blue that bordered on black, while the rest of his bulky shaft was a rich cobalt.

I bared my teeth at him —something I knew he took as a sign of aggression . “Yes.” A challenge , maybe, but I simply couldn’t help myself. Everything about Brace appealed, every time, all the time. I had never been as attracted to a guy before as I was to him, scars , feral mood swings, and all. How could I not adore the tender heart inside him? My answer made him growl again, and then he took two hulking steps across the room before passing back to me , his heavy cock swaying above a pair of deep blue balls as big as my fist. Nervous energy, excitement, all of it was making him feel wild, but he was trying to control it, for me.

Rolling to my knees was a little ungainly, my center of gravity not quite where it used to be. “Come here, sweetheart,” I said, gesturing with my hand. “Let me take the edge off, and then you can play. How does that sound?” He froze next to me, his cock inches from my outstretched hand, his eyes glowing as they met mine. He wasn’t sure what to make of this, and now I wondered if he even knew what I meant. His mouth was awfully big and filled with sharp teeth; he probably didn’t want to put his sensitive cock near such a mouth on a female of his species.

Curling my fingers in a come - hither motion was just enough to make him twist his hips. Maybe he was eager for the touch, couldn’t restrain the urge. His tip was leaking a clear, oily substance. It felt silky and slick when I brushed my fingers through it, and his cock blazed with heat, far warmer than I expected. He growled, his cock bucking in my fist when I curled my fingers around his length just beneath the tip. It was too large to properly fit, so I leaned further forward to reach with both hands. Almost losing my balance, I began to topple forward, and he caught me by the shoulders.

I loved that, my core aching with desire. His big hands held me in place, slightly unbalanced as I leaned forward , their warmth seeping into my skin and down my spine, big enough to cover much of my shoulder blades as well. His cock was right in

front of my face, pretty blue and leaking with desire. I rubbed him with both hands, learning his texture, the way he twitched and bucked in my grip , like he couldn't control it. Then I dipped my head just a little more and , with a flat tongue, dragged it across the wide tip. He tasted sweet, which caught me by surprise. His growl was sweeter because it told me how much he liked it.

There was no way I could make that massive cock fit in my mouth, but I made it work —s ucking on the tip, licking the slit with my tongue, and using both hands to pump his length with firm, steady pressure. Withi n seconds, I felt a bump beg i n to swell at the base of his cock, and then that bump rose along his length. Curling along those thick veins until , with a ferocious shout , he came. A round, hard bead jetted from the tip and collided with the roof of my mouth —i t was like he'd ejected a marble, and I had only just managed not to choke on it.

He sank to his knees immediately after, his legs trembling, his hands rubbing me. It took me a moment to realize that he was talking to me; I was too surprised and distracted by his odd release. I'd expected a massive gush of seed, not this bead. Sticking out my tongue, I realized it had adhered to it, not in a bad way ; it just didn't roll off. "Blazing stars, Ruby. Ah, no... What did you do? That is..." He growled, his hands moving me until I was back in a more comfortable position on the bed, his head leaning close to peer at my tongue with huge eyes. "That is so sexy I can't even..." H e ran out of words then, still staring, his cock still a rock - hard rod between his big thighs.

I pulled my tongue back in and sucked on the marble . I t was beginning to soften and dissolve, and it still tasted sweet. A bit like caramelized honey. "Nobody ever went down on you before?" I asked. I was not objecting to this at all ; it tasted really good, and now that I knew what to expect, I wouldn't be so surprised or risk nearly choking.

He shook his head, his mouth opening so he could run his thick tongue along his

sharp teeth. I knew he was just thinking about the why, not explaining it to me. “Did it help?” I asked, and when he nodded, his grin came back. Oh , boy, I was in for a ride now, wasn’t I?

Ruby

My reward for giving Brace his first - ever blowjob was better than I could have dreamed. With his control restored — at least somewhat — he set out to pleasure me with his tongue , r eturning the favor and then some. I loved how big his hands were on my thighs when he positioned me backward on the bed and spread my legs. This time, peering at my wet folds did not make him jump with excited energy ; instead , he seemed to settle in with a type of focus I found intense and sexy.

Dragging his thick tongue through my folds, I writhed with pleasure. He took his time learning my taste and how I responded to gentle, probing touches. His tongue was much thicker than a human' s , and when he found my opening and began pressing inside, it felt like more than a finger, but nicer at the same time. His tongue was malleable and wet, and it slid right in. I curled off the mattress, my fingers digging into the sheets with a shout. He'd found all the sensitive nerves inside and lit them on fire with a flick of his tongue.

Once he'd wound me tighter than a bowstring with his tongue, he changed tactics. Rising over me on one elbow, his free hand press ed between my thighs to probe my opening with his finger. Now he was truly testing me, seeing if I had spoke n the truth about stretching. Discovering he could press two of his thick fingers inside of me made him purr with satisfaction . T hen he pressed his tongue against my clit , and those vibrations traveled through me. I came, hard and fast, my body clenching on his fingers. Afterward, I heard him murmur in satisfaction, but he was not ready to let me go, not yet. When I relaxed, he was ready with another finger, and when I managed to take that, his growl became feral with excitement.

“You are right. Almost there,” he said approvingly. I had reached down to curl one hand around my ankle to hold myself open for him, and he dropped his hand down to stroke my fingers. A touch that made me all too aware of how small my hand was compared to his. “Just the head,” he demanded, rather than asked. I liked that, and I whimpered and canted my hips to receive him.

His silky pelt brushed my legs as he wedged himself between my thighs, and then that massive cock came down on my folds with a thud. Landing firmly, I jolted as it struck against my clit. Heat, silky wetness from the oily substance he secreted. It made everything tingle, and I felt myself go soft and pliant beneath him. “That’s it,” he agreed, his eyes not on his cock rubbing through my folds but on my face. I was the one who couldn’t look away, awkwardly craning to the side to peer around my pregnant belly. That thick blue length, all those bumpy veins, contrasting with my small pink folds, it was obscene, and it was so freaking hot.

Fucking against my folds, he teased me at first, until I was mad with pleasure again. Only then did he slide his cock down, pressing the massive head against my small opening. I felt pressure and heat, but everything was slick and pliant. I didn’t think he’d slide in, but he sank an inch, and then another. His mouth was pulled open wide, and for the first time, I could see how monstrous he was when he did that, and I did not fucking care. Not a bit. I just wanted him to sink his cock deeper.

Pumping his hips, I watched that length sink into me a little more each time he pushed, until my body stopped giving. All it took was a swipe of his thumb over my clit, and I shattered for him, shouting his name in pleasure. I knew I clenched up then, squeezing around his invasion. It must have been enough for him, because soon I felt the head twitch and swell—the pressure of something jetting from his tip. We stared at each other as he came, eyes locked, his snarl silent as he held back from pressing in deeper.

I forgot to breathe from it all, and darkness edged in from the sides of my vision.

Letting my head collapse against the bed, I gave in to the exhaustion, the aftershocks, and simply went limp. Afterward, he cleaned me. Getting up to fetch a cloth, wiping through my folds to gather everything. One hand never left my core, pressing against my opening as if he meant to hold his seed in. When he rolled me and climbed onto the bed behind me, his hand remained cupped over me, wedged between my thighs, warm and possessive.

I was too sleepy to protest, and frankly, I didn't mind. I had just enough presence of mind to mutter, "You know I'm already pregnant, right?" I think he replied with a single word—"Instinct"—but that might have been a figment of my imagination as I sank into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Brace

My mate was sleeping, a tiny, delicate snore rising and falling with the cadence of her breathing. It was not a word I thought of often, but "adorable" was the only one that came to mind. My mate was adorable, and I wanted her to rest soundly and deeply. After the long walk through port and the disaster of finding thugs in her home, I needed her to be okay. Having a meltdown about what I might or might not have done in front of her must have been taxing, too, but she'd gotten me out of it without getting harmed. I felt a tiny spark of hope at that discovery.

Red had descended, but it had not clouded my judgment when it came to her. Did that mean I didn't have to fear harming her at all? Even if it did, that wasn't the main reason; I could still end up a true flesheater. I might already be. That was a sin I could never come back from, and a burden I could never put on her. It wouldn't be right.

For now, though, I could pleasure her, pamper her, care for her. That started with getting out of bed and cleaning up the mess I'd made. It was time to confront what I'd

done and find out if I had crossed that horrible line, the one I never wanted to cross. Rising from my mate's soft bed and warm embrace was difficult ; letting go of the pretty cunt I'd seeded was even harder. When I stood by her bed, dark memories swam up from the recesses of my brain. Again. They said I had never wanted to cross that line again. I wanted to deny that thought, but I knew it was true, and I could not face that, so I turned away.

Cleaning, then food prep, and I needed to report in with the Varakartoom . If I spoke to Asmoded, I might be able to make sense of all these feelings roiling through my chest. Was it always like this with a mate? This intense? Only one way to find out, but I did not relish the thought of asking such a sensitive question of the captain. I let him into my quarters after an episode only because I knew he was not big on the chitchat either. That, and my promise that I would.

There were footprints through the blood near both bodies that were too small to be mine. With a sinking heart, I knew that meant that sometime during my rage-induced blackout, Ruby had walked past them. I needed only to check the airlocks to know that she'd gone to make sure the ship was locked down. Indeed, she'd even gone to the bridge and engaged the Finix 's mediocre shielding capabilities. Usually, those were only there to assist with space debris, meteors, and the like. They'd drain the ship's power while in port, but it was a good safety measure. It would keep people out more surely than the locked doors would.

I dragged the bodies to the engine room and made sure they were completely incinerated in the stationary - running engines. Then I reached for my com as I began to take stock of the supplies remaining in the galley. They'd pulled everything out of the cupboards in search of the smuggled Kanfray shipping , and that included everything from inside the cooler. They had not even left the cans of my mate's sweet drink, but those were , thankfully , salvageable. The rest of the fresh food, however, was not.

“Come in, Brace. You’ve reached us just in time,” Mitnick’s voice reached me when my call to the Varakartoom went through. His voice was hushed with tension, and I knew that meant they were about to strike another of Jalima’s shipments. There had been half a dozen left on the list of possibles after the intel that Elyssa had brought us. I still felt guilty that I hadn’t been the one to go to that first meeting like I was supposed to. Tass and my friend had been in terrible danger . I f I’d been there like I said I would, I could have helped.

“Mitnick, this is just a quick status report. We’ve reached Rumcas, sold the shipment, and had a break-in by some of Jalima’s men. It’s been taken care of.” I hesitated . T he plan had been for me to get off at Rumcas, while Ruby either sold the Finix here and booked passage to Ker, or I saw her off — ship and all — with a new crew. All she needed to be safe was to get away from Rumcas. At least, in theory. Once she was off the crimelord’s radar, even the parentage of her child should not be a problem.

“Good to hear your voice,” Mitnick responded, which was funny , because I had never really spoken to the male at all. It was n’ t like we’d ever had a conversation. I considered that now, too. Ruby was easy to talk to, she never seemed to judge me, and she was always so cheerful that it felt like she lifted my spirits , too. I could not leave her alone . N ot now. Not after what we’d shared. I was going to tell her I would see her all the way to Ker. I started by explaining that to Mitnick, and though I heard the laughter in the male’s voice, he did not ask me for an explanation. Maybe he didn’t need one.

Ruby

I woke up slowly, rising from such a deep slumber that I struggled to open my eyes and recall where I was and what had happened. All I had to do was roll to my side

and feel the twinges between my legs to remember. Brace — and the incredibly tender way in which he'd made love to me, prepared me for him, even if we hadn't managed to take it all the way. I remembered vividly what it had felt like to fall asleep in his arms, embraced by his solid bulk and warmth. It was probably the best sleep I'd had in weeks, and that was saying something after all the upheaval I'd been through.

I frowned when I realized that Brace was not in bed with me — a tight squeeze as it was — that was obvious almost right away. From the coldness of the sheets, I had to guess that he'd been gone a while. It made me realize that, sweet as this had been, I was about to leave and he was going to stay behind. It felt wrong, and I was struggling to come up with reasons to stay when he knocked on my door and entered. Of course, he had a tray of food in one hand, and delicious smells were wafting from it.

“Good morning,” he said in a gravelly voice, as if he were either choked with emotion or had not spoken yet all morning. I was betting on the latter; Brace was not a man of many words. He ducked through the doorway, his shoulders brushing the door frame in a tight squeeze. Then he came to my side, one hand assisting me to sit up so he could place the tray in my lap.

Some kind of Haras wheat pancakes, they were doused liberally in Ekra, if I wasn't mistaken. A mix between maple syrup and honey, Ekra was a very expensive sweetener in the Zeta Quadrant. I definitely did not own any, and I had only tasted it once before. Trust Brace to have brought it with him when he came to protect me aboard the Finix. This male appeared to live to pamper me with amazing foods, if I wasn't pregnant, I would be worried about my weight. Right now, I felt like I was excused to eat as much as I wanted, so I was going to.

“I'm staying with you,” Brace said, just as I stuffed my mouth with the first bite. I nearly choked on the food, spluttering in surprise and staring at him with watery eyes

from the shock. I was certain I had heard him wrong . What did he mean — stay with me? For how long? My foolish heart was almost entirely convinced he meant forever, but that couldn't be true. If I was his mate, he'd have said so, wouldn't he? Unless Hoxiam didn't have true mates, like many other species did. I really wished I knew.

“Okay,” I managed. “For how long?” Best I clear that up right away, before I gained false expectations. No point setting myself up for disappointment later down the line. Brace did not seem to have an answer to that question ; he opened his mouth twice before finally shrugging his massive shoulders. I tried not to be disappointed and veered straight back into extremely hopeful. Brace didn't know how to express himself, and neither , it seemed, did I. We'd figure it out eventually.

I ate in silence, and Brace retreated halfway through the meal. Was this post - sex awkwardness an indication that we were making a mistake? Or were we both just being awkward because we had no clue how to say what we really wanted? I was going to firmly believe it was that, and that if I managed to tell him I wanted him to stay, this would all work out. Showered and dressed, I headed for the bridge not much later and discovered it was empty.

I did not know what the plan was now, but I could at least reach out to ground control to inquire about new cargo and a slot for departure . My fingers were sure as I moved through the familiar protocols, but they went clammy and shaky as soon as the male Rummicaroon official spoke. His tone was cool and impersonal, which was no different from usual — and yet... it felt like there was a nastiness to it that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Then he told me the Finix was grounded until further notice, and , with no further explanations, he disconnected me.

Brace's warm hand on my shoulder startled me, but I leaned into that touch with a grateful sigh. “It must be Jalima's handiwork,” he said darkly , his free hand flying in to the air in a rough slashing motion. “Your ship has done nothing wrong, but he has many officials in his pocket here. He wants to know what happened to his cargo .

He wants to know if it was us.” He did not have to explain which “ us ” he meant—he was talking about the Varakartoom and the captain who ran it.

He’d only just said it when an alarm went off, indicating activity at the starboard airlock. I twisted in my seat, my fingers reaching up to clutch Brace’s hand. I knew my eyes were huge, and my heart began pounding in my chest with fear. That had to be more of Jalima’s men, or at the very least, one of his enforcers sent to intimidate us. Had Brace’s confrontation with those three last night really not been enough? Maybe all three had died—Brace had chased after that last one, after all—and they had no clue what had happened.

“We’ll go see what they want,” Brace said firmly. He reached past my shoulder to flick to the right exterior cameras on the viewscreen. There they were, a group of half a dozen males, all in dark clothing and with bulges under their jackets that indicated weapons. I saw the flash of purple on a Kertinal; at least three were locals, and one could never be mistaken for anything other than a Hoxiam. They’d brought the big guns to match Brace, so they did know who was with me. That meant the last guy had escaped, but I was not surprised. Brace had come back for me so quickly, he’d heard my sounds of pain, and it had drawn him back, even when so enraged that he himself claimed he’d lost control.

Rising to my feet, Brace kept me behind him as we walked through the narrow hallways of my ship. I eyed it with a different perspective now, no longer seeing it as safety and home, but as the old, banged-up clunker that she was. It had already been invaded twice, though the first time had, as it turned out, been by “good” guys, at least to me. Brace did n’t seem to trust the surroundings either, and he was extra cautious the closer we got to the airlock.

With good reason, as it turned out. The airlock was hissing open just as we turned the corner into that hallway. They should n’t have been able to do that, because I’d engaged the Finix’s meteor shields. Nobody should have been able to so much as

touch the outer hull. The protective measure had failed, proving that whoever was coming through that door had far more resources than the three from last night. Brace hissed in synchrony with the airlock, backing up a step and pressing me into the wall at the corner. “Get your gun,” he warned, but I did n’ t have the one he’d given me on me — nor my own — which was very stupid in hindsight.

Widening his stance, Brace formed my own personal shield, filling up the entire hallway with his big body. This felt a bit like last time, only I wasn’t alone facing invaders. The first one out of the airlock was not dressed in sleek black armor, but he did move like a soldier. Ducking low, he rolled into the hallway and came up with his gun aimed our way. It was a big laser pistol, one that would harm even Brace if it hit him square in the chest. In tight confines like these, he could never move fast enough to get out of the way . W e were in serious trouble.

The Hoxiam wore a blinking slave collar as he ducked through the airlock behind the first male. Tall and imposing, he had a kind of pudginess to him that I didn’t expect —n ot when I knew how lean and sleek Brace’s body was beneath his soft, blue pelt. He snarled, opening his mouth so wide that it almost seemed as if his head split in two . Then he hunched forward and roared, allowing me to see straight into his gullet : b lackness, dripping saliva, rows of razor-sharp teeth. It seemed insane, but looking into Brace’s maw, which had to be just as big, had not been nearly as disgusting or terrifying. It felt like this male was an entirely different creature, a true monster. Nothing like my extremely hug g able protector.

Brace responded to all that aggression with his own roar, which thundered through the narrow hallway in a deep, sonic bass that made my teeth rattle. It was a far more primordial sound than that of the other male — the challenger — and from the way the invading Hoxiam stepped back, it was obvious it struck a chord.

“There’s no need for that,” a voice responded, not from the two already inside my ship. It was one of those deep, sub-harmonic voices that could only belong to a

Kertinal male : two layers of low tones blending into a sound that, like Brace's roar, could shiver through flesh and make you shake in fear. "All we want is our cargo or, if you don't have it, payment for damages. This is just a simple business transaction." The voice was direct but cultured, educated, and something tingled at the back of my brain.

The Kertinal stepped out of the airlock as if he had n't a care in the world, completely certain that he was safe. His sleeveless body armor was top of the line and left his black, muscular arms exposed. Amethyst eyes peered at us from beneath a shock of purple and black hair, horns curling from his proud forehead. The bioluminescent lines on his body glowed like purple lightning in jagged streaks across that deep - black skin, which I knew was smooth yet tough as nails.

My belly swooped, then my baby kicked and shifted, as if he were responding to this new presence. As if he knew, as well as I did, that his father had just stepped aboard the Finix. I gasped — I couldn't help it — the surprise was too much for me. Brace shifted in front of me, blocking any chance the others could see me, but I was certain that De'tor knew anyway. "Hoxiam, tell me where my cargo is," he demanded coolly, "or pay for it. Least you can do after all the trouble you caused me." Me, he said, as if it were personal. This left no doubt that the male I'd so impulsively slept with months ago was part of Jalima's empire of crime. I'd really picked a winner. How could I have been that stupid?

There were a million justifications for picking him out of that bar on the Yengar Spacestation in a fit of loneliness. He had seemed cultured and smart; thus, he wasn't a crook. He still seemed like a straight arrow when he told Brace all would be well as long as he handed over the Kanfray or paid the exorbitant amount it was worth. I'd never had that much money, the Finix was worth only a fraction of it. There was no way we could pay them off for this perceived debt. I cursed Kip and Chawz's greed, but that didn't make this any better.

Brace only snarled at De'tor, wordlessly rejecting the male's very unlikely offer. It did not seem like anything was changing, as if we were in a standoff, tension wrought and dangerous. Yet I felt Brace's body press back against mine. Ever so slowly, he was backing up. So the plan was to run, but how? That gun aimed at my guy's chest was sure to go off if Brace so much as twitched wrong. They did not want Brace, though I'd learned only yesterday that he was worth a hell of a lot himself on the slave market. They didn't want me either, did they?

Peering under Brace's arm, I saw the way De'tor's expression grew tighter, and I realized that yes, maybe they did want us. A Hoxiam and a pregnant, breedable human, of course they wanted to capture and sell us to recoup their losses. They knew we didn't have the money to pay them back for the Kanfray. How could we? If I had five million credits lying around, I wouldn't be flying this junker of a ship for marginal profits.

What happened next went so fast, I barely had time to breathe. Blinking was enough to have missed the first part, and then everything became a dizzying, crazy blur. There was a roaring noise, my baby kicked and twitched in response, and my body was suddenly up in the air. No, not in the air, I was yanked into Brace's arms, and then he was running with me down the Finix's hallways. He'd hunched his shoulders down around me, his head ducked low so that he fit as best he could through the tight spaces. We were at the portside airlock before I'd realized what had happened. It did not open fast enough, there were footsteps right on our heels, and I heard the whiz of laser fire, which was followed by the smell of burning hair. Brace used one clawed paw to yank the metal door open, clear of its hinges, and then we were through. There was another door, but it was as if the metal was butter to his paws, wrenching apart despite being made of several inches of thick, space-proof alloy.

Cold air slapped me in the face when Brace leaped outside with me in his arms. I could hear shouting, saw dockworkers at the next berthed ship looking up in surprise, and then heard another blast of laserfire. Brace landed on the tarmac with a jolt, then

took off running so fast that the ground blurred. I felt all jumbled and seasick, cradled low against his chest in one arm, and then it got worse. He shifted forward and used one hand to help run . His speed picked up, but my body was now almost perpendicular to the ground, and it did not like that.

I clutched at the fur on his shoulders, one arm thrown tightly around his neck. If I tried my best, I could peer over his shoulder, back the way we'd come, and see the Finix in the distance. Males were coming after us, including that other bulky Hoxiam. He was running on all fours like a bear, galloping after us with a speed that would surely catch up to us if we didn't shake him. If I squinted, I could see the figures of the others , but they were tiny against the Finix 's large shape and were growing smaller as the distance widened.

Then I saw a flash of light, followed by a thundering boom. An explosion rocked us, even from this far away. It sent Brace tumbling , and the world spun and twirled as he rolled with me. Not once did I strike the ground, but even hitting Brace knocked the air from my lungs. I was fighting for breath , and fighting back tears of pain and shock, when Brace righted himself and leaped back to his feet.

He never paused, never looked back, but the angry roar told me he knew exactly what had happened. It was a fitting expression of the pain I felt in my chest.

Brace

I had shaken the other Hoxiam male. Luck had been with us when the Finix blew up, it had struck our pursuer with more force than it had hit me, and he'd taken longer to recover. Zigzagging between crates of cargo, slogging through water channels, and diving into the warren of Av u r's slums had done the rest. At some point , I'd managed to snatch a long cloak from a stand of wares and wrapped my tiny mate in it so she was warm and hidden from view. But things were far from good : I had failed to protect her ship, and now she was without a livelihood or money.

It seemed a disproportionate response to the loss of a small amount of Kanfray. They would have tried to capture us or take the ship and sell it, not blow it up. Why had they done that? Or was it an accident? De'tor and the rest of his men had been far closer to the blast than we had been. It was unlikely the male would have risked his life like that , if he could help it.

My steps had slowed once I'd shaken the Hoxiam chasing us, and now I meandered through the slums in search of a safe place to go. Temperatures were dropping as the afternoon wore on — the air brisk and pleasant to me, but probably freezing to my female. I was not a male with contacts in every port — not like Flack , who seemed to know anyone and everyone. A useful tra it for a Quarter m aster, he could source anything your heart desired. He'd brought me the coveted chocolate and Mandy's fresh ginger to be cultivated in our hydroponic growing facilities. Now I really wished I could pick the male's brain for a good place to hide out. My com had secured lines, courtesy of Mitnick — but could I risk an outgoing signal just yet?

No, I was better off relying on my own skills than on those of others who weren't

even here. And what was I good at? Taking care of my mate's hunger, cooking her anything her heart desired, and keeping her warm. As a Hoxiam, I also knew these temperatures and how to survive in them. A Rumcas winter was mild compared to the brutal cold on my homeworld, where I'd been raised in a small town and taught everything about survival by my father. I needed to get out of the city and back on familiar ground.

"I'm tired," Ruby whispered against my chest. "I'm sorry, Brace. You're the one doing all the walking, but I feel so tired... Can we find a place to rest?" She sounded so small and apologetic that my heart ached for her. It was no wonder she was tired, not after I'd kept her up half the night, and not after the only home she had in the Zeta Quadrant had been blown to pieces. On advertising signs and in storefronts, news feeds interrupted normal broadcasting to show the devastation at the port every few minutes. There was no way I could have shielded her from every screen. She knew that the authorities were looking for her, and that now, not one but two parties wanted to skin her for every penny she had to repay "damages."

The port damage, at least, was real, but she was as much a victim as the port itself. At least the news feeds had reported no deaths and only mild injuries among dockworkers in the area. The damage to the robots that mostly manned the port, and to the ships that had berthed near the Finix, was far more substantial. We would never be able to show our faces there again; the only way off the planet would be if I managed to find someone to smuggle us out—or if the Varakartoom came for us.

"I'll take care of you," I husked at the tired female in my arms. Tucking her higher against my chest, I made sure the top of her head was properly covered. "Sleep while I walk. You are safe." I had located the way out of the city, and as I stepped through the city gate, I turned off the beaten path, where hover vehicles zoomed, and straight into the snow-covered woods.

My steps left deep tracks in the white powder, and for the first few miles, I did not

bother to cover the m . Then I pulled on every bit of hunting skill ingrained into m e by my father. It had been so long since I'd walked through frozen woods, with nothing but the icy air and my wits to keep me company. It felt good, it felt healing, and I felt strong every time I glanced down at the drowsing female in my arms. Ruby trusted me to protect her, and so I would, with every breath in my body, with every beat of my heart, I would keep her safe.

Concealing my path became easier when I used my rusty skills and honed them to f it our need s . My ears twitched as I kept a careful ear o ut for any sounds behind us, and with my nose , I inhaled and filtered each scent I picked up : s moke, animals, running water, and every new but distinct plant or tree. The city still hummed in the distance, but I could no long er hear the sounds of the busy road I'd abandoned as soon as I'd gone out the gate.

The sound of some prey animal, its scent rich with watchfulness, made me veer to the right. Hunger sat in my belly — it was always there — but it had been hours since I'd last eaten, and it was growing especially fierce. The prey animal was four-legged and tall ; I had no name for it , but it reminded me of the Saigrat from my homeworld. My mouth watered at the thought , but I kept a tight lid on the hunger . F or now, getting my mate somewhere warm and safe was all that mattered.

The Saigrat - like animal had left a trail in the snow with dainty, three - pronged hoofs. It was possibly a game trail , well traveled by it and its ilk. When I caught sight of some kind of blind up in the hills not far away, I knew this was a good hunting spot. Someone else came here from time to time to do exactly that. Which meant... Yes, a deep inhale brought me back the scent of smoke, old, like cold ashes. There had to be a cabin nearby.

When I found it, it was partially buried beneath the snow — the roof piled high, drifts blown up against the sides. A chimney barely managed to raise its head at the top, and the one window I could see was completely frosted over. I'd have to dig out the

door — a sure indication that no one had been inside this place in quite some time. It would be nearly as cold inside as it was outside, but four walls and a fireplace would be easy to warm. If we were lucky, there would be supplies inside.

Digging with one arm was not ideal, and it roused my mate from her light slumber. I tried my best to keep her dry as I cleared a path to the door, raising her as high as I could against my chest. “Where are we?” she murmured sleepily, her long lashes drooping low over her soft brown eyes. My Ruby needed food and rest as soon as possible, good rest, not the kind of stolen moments she’d had during the hike here. Her fingers were also disconcertingly cold where she dug them into my fur and held on.

“Somewhere safe, for now. I’ll get you warm soon.” Almost, I added mate, my tongue aching to call her that out loud. My claws hooked against the door handle then, distracting me from the ever - growing desire to claim her. After last night, it was nearly impossible to stay away. If I’d fit, I would have s u n k into her completely, and there would have been no leaving, not for either of us. But I hadn’t filled her fully ; she could still slip away to safety when this was over . I just had to stay strong.

The interior of the cabin st a n k when I opened the door , like stale air and something dead and rotting. Out of the wind, it was warmer , though, but there was nowhere to put down my mate that wasn’t absolutely filthy. This cabin had been abandoned for a long while, which made the possibility of supplies extremely unlikely. With a sweep of my hand, I cleared debris off the flagstones in front of the hearth. Bundled deep inside the stolen cloak, my mate looked like she c ould m a n a g e sitting down in the cleared spot for a while. She didn’t protest but hunched around her pregnant belly. Despite that, her big brown eyes looked at me imploringly. “Can I help with anything?”

I gazed around the small, dark room, hiding my dismay. “No,” I said to her, “ j u s t

stay warm. I will clear the hearth first and start a fire, then tackle the rest so we'll have a safe place to sleep for the night." I had already sniffed out where the dead thing was, and I suspected its frozen state had prevented Ruby from smelling it, which was good. The hearth was piled high with old ashes , but when I peered up the chimney , I saw clear sky. With my paws , I dragged everything out, and then I slipped outside to toss the dead rodent and gather firewood. In no time , a fire was going, and my shiver ing mate sighed with relief, wriggling her fingers over the fire to heat them.

"Stay," I told her again. She was too tired after all this, and I was strong ; I could do the work. She gave me a frown that was half - smile and made my chest feel tight. "I mean it," I warned her again as I began sweeping away leaves and debris and pushing it all into a corner. There was a counter with cupboards in one corner, and I'd discovered a still - intact pail to use. I was filling that with snow to melt by the fire ; we'd need water to drink.

"Okay," she said, " b ut Brace, even pregnant, I can stand to skip a meal. Don't worry , okay? I'm strong . Y ou don't have to do everything alone." The growl that rose from my chest was instinct, but it wasn't because I was upset with her. Rather, I felt so full of emotions I didn't know what I was thinking. It wasn't the usual red of rage, no, this was more like confusion. Her words made me feel like she cared, like she had her own pride, and as if I should do more to prove that I was the right male for her at the same time. Well, I would. And stars, I knew how stupid that thought was when I knew just how wrong I was for her, but I couldn't stop my actions any more than I could stop being attracted to that tiny, shivering human with her bright smile and pretty braids.

Ruby

I really hated how tired I was, but ever since the Finix had been blown to smithereens, I'd felt completely overwhelmed and adrift. Until it was gone, I had not realized just how much the ship meant to me. It wasn't strange that I'd grown attached to my home of seven years, even if it had felt like a prison of loneliness at times. I was made of sterner stuff, had armored myself against heartbreak and fear since the day of the fire, so this caught me completely by surprise.

The fire Brace had made was warming my hands and front, but I was careful not to lean too close with my belly. I didn't want to accidentally fry the baby. With the ship gone, everything had to be about him now more than ever. I had to get to Ker and find sanctuary and safety there. Now that I knew De'tor wasn't just some random, intelligent male I'd met in a bar, Ker seemed less safe than I had first thought. He was a high-placed criminal — Jalima's current right-hand man, according to Brace — and he'd have his fingers in many pies. But where could I go if Ker was out? Aderia? The Aderians were empathic and kind, but no pushovers. Since they were the best physicians in the quadrant, the baby would be in good hands being born there.

My eyes went from the fire back to Brace, who was using his big hands to sweep all the clutter from the cabin in a surprisingly quick and handy fashion. He had already placed a bucket of snow by the fire, and though he'd tried to hide it, I'd seen him toss something very close to a dead rat. I was not as skeeved out by that as I thought I'd be, but then I'd had a rodent infestation aboard the Finix two years ago and gotten really good at shooting them. It's why I had switched to exclusively running non-edible cargo on my ship. Ah, damn it! My throat closed up, and I fought back a sob. No more ship, no more Finix. A name that so often had reminded me of Phoenix, and that had seemed fitting, because in a way I had risen from the ashes of my past.

When Brace left the cabin, warning me yet again that I wasn't to lift a finger, I let out some of those tears. I knew he'd be understanding about it, that he'd comfort me if he saw my grief, but we had bigger things to worry about. What a colossal mess I'd made of my life. After seven years of staying ahead of everything, of managing my

own safety, I'd ended up making some very big mistakes. Starting with that night with what I'd thought was a nice guy, and ending with the decision to keep on Chawz because I knew him, and to hire Kip. Three criminals I'd let into my life, three times the charm. Now I had nothing except the credits in my bank, and that wasn't enough to start a life anywhere. Piloting was the only skill I had, and that was hardly a stable profession to raise a child. I'd be gone so much, or have to take him on a ship with me.

This was far more worrying and whining than I ever wanted, and I firmly blamed my spiraling thoughts on the explosion and the cold. Time to do something, or I'd sit here and mope until I fell asleep again. Tempting, but I was made of sterner stuff than this, even if I was beginning to feel incredibly ungainly and heavy. This baby had put on so much weight in the past couple of days that I was starting to fear what size he'd be by the time he was ready to be born.

The cabin was lit only by the crackling of the fire, but the small room heated quickly. When I peered at the walls, I realized that cobwebs were the worst of the dirt. This cabin was built well, and the insulation had to be top tier. There was a bed against one wall, slightly wider than what would fit a single person. It would be a tight fit for Brace and me together, but I wouldn't mind some cuddling. It had already been swept clean, and when I inspected the mattress, I realized it was made of a type of foam common on spaceships. Extremely durable and guaranteed vermin-free. This one had been covered to protect it, and when I pulled that off, the mattress was intact.

Brace found me not much later, rummaging through a locked metal crate I'd pulled from under the bed. "What are you doing?" he demanded, sounding both accusatory and offended. I couldn't help but smile at him over my shoulder, my sadness fading to the back because he was here. Being with Brace made everything seem a little lighter, a little better, because I knew I could trust him. Holding up the clean blankets and pillows I had found was good enough for him.

I had never truly seen him smile, but I was pretty sure this was a genuine Brace smile. His mouth tilted, though he never opened it to show his many teeth. There was a twinkle in his blue eyes that danced with the reflection of the fire light I saw there. “Good,” he agreed. Only then did I become aware of the bloody creature lying in a heap by the door. “I will skin our dinner and start cooking. You lie down again.” Then he was gone.

Brace

After Ruby had eaten her fill from the meat I'd cooked over the fire and seasoned with what ever else edible I'd recognized, she'd gone straight to sleep. That was good because I hadn't wanted an audience when I devoured the rest of the prey animal raw, bones and all. I'd left nothing, and now my belly felt as close to full as it could be.

Stepping outside, I distracted myself from the growing desire to lie down with my mate. First, I'd wash any dirt and blood off with a snow bath, and then I'd dare a call to the Varakartoom . It was extremely unlikely the call could be traced, as I had Mitnick's upgrades on it. But De'tor and his men had not appeared to be carrying anything that could have lifted our com IDs, anyway , s o they probably had nothing to track us with. I froze with a handful of snow midway to my face. Unless... Ruby might have given her com details to De'tor that night at the Yengar Spacestation.

I was partially turned to gaze at the cabin, ready to barge in there and smash the com on her wrist to pieces. I halted myself just before the impulse could set me in motion. That com device and the clothes on her back were the only things she owned right now. It could be the only device she had that held pictures of her past, of her family. Knowing how much I'd give to have something like that, I could not bring myself to destroy it.

I raised the Varakartoom instead, my back pressed against a cool drift of snow, which soaked into my flesh as it began to melt from my body heat. The snow was cleansing, and I reveled in that feeling, pushing all other worries away as I waited. It was the Sineater who eventually picked up the call. "Brace, tired of playing bodyguard yet?" he drawled darkly.

I had always found the Sineater a male to steer clear of. He would come into the mess hall on some days and just stand beside the hatch to the galley, looking straight at me, even though he was n' t supposed to be able to see me. He was creepy and strange, and so was his symbiont , with its ever - shifting form. But hearing his familiar voice unlocked something inside my chest that I didn't expect to feel. I was happy—actually happy — to hear Sin's voice, sardonic drawl and all. I also remembered something I'd never put together before : a fter the Sineater's odd visits, I always felt better, more settled.

“I don't think I ever will,” I said to him truthfully. That did not earn me a mocking joke, derision, or even surprise. Sineater moved on to business as if I had not made a vague reference to how much Ruby meant to me. I gave him the rundown on her situation, and not long after, Mitnick joined the call and took Ruby's com information so he could make an attempt to secure it from tracing. I did not have faith in that ; it was better if the winged male had his hands on the device itself, but anything was better than nothing.

“Sit tight,” was the Sineater's last advice. “We have finished our final run with great success and are headed for Rumcas. Six days.” The call disconnected immediately afterward, and I sat in the snow a moment longer as I appraised our options. Six days with a gravid female was a long time to hunker down in a cabin like this. She would need more supplies than meat, water, and blankets. What if the baby came while we were out here? Ruby did not seem to think that was a possibility yet, but I was not so sure . She looked big enough for it.

When I entered the cabin not much later, I had cleaned up , but my worries had not washed away. The cabin felt very warm to me, but I could tell the fire had burned low. I hurriedly fed it more wood, stoking the flames until it burned brightly again. Ruby was shivering beneath her blankets, so I climbed onto the firm mattress beside her and curled her into my arms. She settled down immediately, a soft sigh escaping her mouth, her head nuzzling into the fur beneath my throat. I could feel her baby

kick firmly against my ribs, where her belly pressed into my side. A smile stretched across my face again, hope pounding in my chest. Maybe I could stay with her after all — both of them.

I fell asleep thinking about a future with Ruby and her child, and for once, my dreams were warm and pleasant. My slumber was not deep, there was too much danger looming over our heads for that, but when I woke several hours later, I did feel refreshed.

My mind was slow to rise to the surface and become aware of everything around me. The coolness in the cabin, the low light that indicated the fire had gone out. Ruby's fingers were stroking along my chest, her hand sliding over my pectorals, then down along my abs, growing bolder with each stroke of her hand. These weren't motions she was making in her sleep, and as soon as I realized that, my eyes leapt open. Part of my brain was saying, No, stay away; give in now and I'd be forever tied to her. The other part — the bigger part — knew it was already too late for that. The question was, could I stay at her side and not harm her? Would she want to stay by my side if she knew what kind of monster I truly was?

My ears told me all was silent outside, nothing but the faint call of a bird and the rustling of wind through empty tree branches. That left me with the sound of Ruby's beating heart, threaded through with the rapid pulse of her unborn child. I also heard her breathing, and my nose picked up the scent of her growing arousal. My mate was in heat, for me.

Reaching down, I slid my hand along her spine until I could cup her rear with my palm. She hissed, shifting against me, and I saw the flash of heat in her eyes when she tilted her face up to look at me. "Good morning," she said, her voice breathy, causing my cock to swell with the stirrings of my own heat. She was so beautiful, and so sweet. Dipping down, I caught her chin with my other hand and kissed her while kneading her soft ass.

She moaned outright then, and the sound set me on fire for her. It seemed to light her flames too, for she ran her hand down my chest again, and this time she did not stop until she'd slid her hand into my loincloth and curled her fingers around the tip of my cock. I saw stars at the silky touch; my cock grew even harder, and lubricant leaked from the tip eagerly. If I could not bury myself inside of her tight heat soon, I'd explode. Though my mind eagerly supplied me with images of how my mate had taken my cock into her mouth last time, I did not want that now. I wanted to claim her ; I could no longer hold myself back from doing so.

With each stroke of her fingers along my thick length, I was reminded of how small she was compared to me. With every pass of her hand, pleasure sparked and spiraled, weakening any semblance of control until there was only the desire to claim. Not a red haze of rage, but a haze all the same. Pleasuring my female was the only thing left on my mind. First, I'd eat her tasty, sweet cunt, and then I'd stretch her like she'd never been stretched—filling her with my cock until there was nothing left to take, then filling her with my seed pods until I was spent and she was quaking in pleasure

A last firm stroke of her hand along the sensitive, weeping tip of my cock, and I snapped. A growl rattled from my chest, vibrating through the cool air inside the cabin. My mate was not cold now ; she was all heat and flames as I rolled her to her back and began stripping her clothes from her silky skin. “You are mine, Ruby!” I warned her when I'd bared her to my eyes . Spreading her legs, I cupped her folds — already wet — and made sure she knew what I was laying claim to.

Her breasts were large, the nipples tempting and full; her belly , a beautiful curve that protected her child. The moment turned tender as I gazed at her belly button. Sliding my hand from between her legs, I stroked her skin and imagined holding her baby in my hand. “He's mine too,” I said . “I claim you both.” She did not protest . Her eyes grew suspiciously shiny instead, and I felt like I had been granted the greatest gift of all. A chance at a family, and it was so close that I could already feel what it would be like to hold it — them. I had to make this work . I had to find away to control

myself . A nd I had to tell her the truth, about me. That had to be her choice.

“Then take me,” she invited, and that was that. She had sealed her fate with those words, and even if she did not have all the facts yet, I could not care less . Only triumph filled my chest when I looked back at her glistening folds. Yeah, take her, I would. But first, I’d feast , so she knew exactly what she had gotten herself into.

Ruby

Waking Brace up by getting all handsy had not been the plan, but I’d been so toasty warm in his arms. All I’d been thinking about was how badly I wanted him, and how sexy he was. Built like a tank, yet soft and cuddly at the same time . A nd on top of that, he was so sweet and protective. I had never realized how badly I craved someone to have my back until suddenly I had Brace. A singed mark had shorn some of his pelt over one shoulder — courtesy , no doubt , of the shoot-out prior to my ship blowing up. Otherwise, he was marked only by his past. I knew that weighed on him, but I thought he was only stronger —and kinder—for it.

Touching his cock was like last time, it set him off, igniting the heat he always seemed to keep banked behind his eyes. He wanted me, and touching him shredded any control he had to hold that impulse back. I wanted that . I wanted him to know how much I craved him, so I told him , u rging him on when he spread me wide with his huge hands and began lapping at my clit with his thick tongue. I s hout ed his name in pleasure when he pierced me with that tongue, spearing deep before curling with delicious results.

“Brace!” I shouted when my first orgasm crested and fell, but he was not done. As determined as I was to let him know that I wanted him and no one else, he seemed equally determined to show me how much pleasure he could bring me. Panting, my

body slick with release and aching to be filled, I dug my fingers into his mane and pulled. Finally, that made him lift his head, his tongue slicking from his wide mouth to lick at the glistening juices on his lips with relish. “Stretch me, fill me, please! I need you.” I almost said I love you, but I held that back at the last moment. I didn’t know how he’d respond to that, so I’d tell him after.

He raised himself above me, his eyes sliding from my center, across my belly, to reach my face. They were glowing brightly, and I could see him struggling to form words. I didn’t need any, that he’d said he wanted me and my baby, that was enough. I didn’t know what it meant yet for the future, but that claim he’d roughly growled at me said enough. We would sort out the rest later. This had been inevitable from the start anyway; I’d known he was my safety the moment we met, before I’d even seen him.

Giving up on speaking, he reached down and freed his cock from his loincloth with a rough yank. I propped myself up on my elbows as much as I could, then had to lean to the side to get a gratifying look at that massive dick. Just as pretty as last time, with a dark blue head and a lighter cobalt shaft. Now that I knew he ejaculated some kind of marbles, the thick ‘veins’ along the exterior made much more sense. That’s what those beads traveled through, and they were going to feel fantastic once inside me. If he fit.

He fisted his cock with one hand and ran it up and down his length until it glistened with the oily substance he secreted at the head. Last time, he’d stretched me with his fingers first and then managed to fit that big, sleek head. Now, he’d only stretched me with his tongue. Would he be able to fit that thick shaft anyway? I breathed deeply when he lined us up, his cock blazing hot. There was no fear, to my surprise, only excitement that we could make this work despite the massive differences in size. I was certain that whatever he coated that thick member with was a relaxant as well as a lubricant. Last time had been far easier than it should have been, and this time was no different.

He sank in an inch, grunted, and began to pull back out. I felt it burn as I stretched, but it was so little that I knew it would work. Out and back in, deeper this time. That was fuller, and I knew the hard part was yet to come. Was I going to fit that entire shaft? Thickness - wise, yes, but could he go deep enough? He pushed in, pulled back out, and more disappeared into my body. His eyes were locked on my folds, which had already stretched wide around his invasion, pink, exposed, so tiny compared to his huge shaft. It was obscene, and I wished I could see it better, but my belly was in the way.

Spreading my legs, I pressed my heels down into the mattress and arched my hips for a better angle. Just like that, my body sucked him in another inch, and he snarled in victory. Yes, I could take him — I knew I could — but he had several more inches to go. His hand came down on my neck then, tilting my chin so I was looking up at him, not down at our entwining bodies. I liked that too; felt claimed, possessed not just by his cock, but by his eyes. When he knew he had my full attention, he slid that hand down, tweaked a nipple, and pinched my clit with a slight amount of pressure.

Stars instantly exploded, and I came, my body clenching down hard around his thick shaft. I was so full, and I knew he wasn't all the way in yet, but now he couldn't move; I was holding him too tightly. His cock was twitching and growing thicker too, stretching me wide, and I felt a bump twist against my flesh. His expression was so fierce, his huge mouth pulled in to a snarl as he fought for control. He was close to coming, but he wasn't going to let himself — not yet.

With a sigh and the soft thrumming of his thumb against my clit, I went soft again around him. My release had eased his way, and when he pushed back in, his eyes went wide. I had never been this full, but he pushed, and more went in. Then I felt the brush of his pelvis against mine, and I knew he'd gotten it all. Filled to the max, my body was a tight vise around his cock. He snarled as he thrust, and every ridge and vein, every delicious inch, inflamed my sensitive flesh. Another orgasm was right there, but it did not crest until Brace came with a last, firm push. The beads rose

along his shaft, then jetted from his tip. I could feel them, count them , even. Three, one after the other.

We stared at each other as the pleasure faded. His hands were wrapped around my thighs, holding me wide for him, and I felt engulfed by his big palms. I trembled, not from the cold but from the force of all these feelings and emotions. My body felt like it had been taken to the brink, but my heart felt whole. So I whispered what I'd been thinking earlier, and that whisper was loud in the quiet cabin. "I love you, Brace."

His eyes were soft from the sex, and now that sparkle I knew so well had returned. His way of smiling, of showing happiness , was back . "And I love you, mate," he said, his voice more gravelly than his normally already rough tones. Mate, there, he said it. The big one that assured me I hadn't been imagining things, hoping for a bond that didn't exist in his species. Then he confirmed it out loud , and any last worries fell away. "Hoxiam mate for life . You' re stuck with me now."

Ruby

I was not fond of snowbaths, but I had to admit that getting cleaned up did feel nice. Brace never left my side, keeping one arm around me at all times, and now he had me curled against his chest, his hand between my thighs again. It had to be instinct to do that after sex ; he seemed very fond of holding my core while cuddling. I kind of liked it, it felt warm and caring, and that warmth even eased some of the soreness after that round of sex. Though a residual ache had settled low in my back, likely from lying with my legs up, not from his cock.

The flames crackled merrily and covered, I thought, the sound of my rumbling stomach. Brace had good ears , though, and I heard his husk y laugh after a particularly loud rumble. “I’ll get you food, my sweet mate, soon.” He patted my folds , and I squirmed against him when that darted pleasure through my system, the soft , languorous kind that did not need to go anywhere, but was pleasant anyway. “I have to tell you something first ; it ’ s only fair.”

I did not like the sound of that, and when I tried to raise my head so I could see him better , he helped me scoot higher. His eyes were serious, but his hands kept gently petting me, soothing me. When I raised an eyebrow at him, he began talking , and I listened with bated breath and growing horror as he described his past : h is captivity by Jalima, stolen from his homeworld when he was just thirteen years old ; h is time on the sands as a gladiator ; and the endless hunger he had endured so he remained manageable to his handlers and could fit a certain weight class in his fights. Then he hesitated, but I knew this was the part he had been leading up to.

“I escaped just before I became an adult and would have been pitted in fights to the

death.” That was good ; I assumed that meant he had never been forced to kill for the entertainment of the many sickos in this quadrant. “I was so hungry,” he admitted with a pained moan. Shaking his head, he shut his eyes and began to turn away. I grabbed the lush, silky fur on his chest and held on, refusing to let him retreat. He had to get it out, I was certain that whatever he was about to say, I wouldn’t blame him. How could I blame him when he’d been treated like a tortured, wounded animal, no humanity, no sympathy ? Whatever he’d done, they had gotten what they deserved.

On a pained breath , he admitted to biting the hand off his handler and eating it —along with the pain controller to his slave collar. Then he’d killed the male , and if he hadn’t been interrupted, he was certain he’d have eaten the rest of him too. I knew where he was going with this now, and still , I felt only sadness for what had happened to him. He’d lost his family, he’d been tortured and starved, forced to fight or endure terrible pain. So what if he took a bite out of those who did it to him? But Hoxiams had a reputation for exactly this type of thing : making a sport out of eating sentient beings.

“But you haven’t tried to eat anyone since,” I said firmly. “So it’s okay. That guard deserved it, and you were starving. You did what you had to do to survive.” I patted his chest, and when he still wouldn’t look at me, I reached up and pressed my hand against his jawline. “Still love you . Y ou can’t scare me away. I don’t think anything can. I know you’ll always protect me.”

The sliver of blue as he opened his eyes made my heart pound in my chest, and I wanted to cry when he blinked and the sparkle returned . There he was, my Brace. My sweet male thought he was a monster, but I knew better.

“I don’t think you quite understand what it means,” he said, but he sounded more relieved than worried. “If a Hoxiam gets a taste of flesh... t he hunger starts , and it can only be satisfied with another bite. That’s when we become the flesheaters everyone fears.” He rolled a shoulder and began to lift me so we could sit up . H e

was careful to keep the blankets over me, but he did slide his hand right along my breasts as he did so. Not that worried then, if he was willing to cop a feel . T he tease.

“Are you saying that these ‘flesheaters’ are starved beyond reason and snap before they turn into one? That’s awful! To blame a species for a defense mechanism they are driven to by cruel torture...” I racked my brain as he said thi s and realized that any of the “Hoxiam on the lo o se” warnings I’d ever seen while visiting ports had related to males who had already been slaves, already been gladiators. It matched what he said, but then again, there weren’t many Hoxiam out in the quadrant who hadn’t been stolen from their planet in the first place. They kept completely to themselves.

Brace shuddered with a sigh, hugging me to his chest and rocking sideways , left and right. He didn’t answer , but the bleak look was back in his eyes. It was then that I realized what that meant for him : h e’d bitten his guard, swallowed that hand, and thus the hunger had started in him. A hunger that hadn’t gone away. He was an addict, always teetering on the edge, craving another fix. It must have taken immense willpower not to give into that urge, that hunger. “So strong,” I said to him, “so much willpower. How can you think I wouldn’t want you? You’re the best male I know.” And that was not a lie . H e really was the best man I’d ever met in two quadrants of the galaxy. All he’d done was survive, and he’d been punished, and was still punishing himself for it ever since.

“I don’t deserve you,” Brace said, but then he smiled. It was just the slightest tilt at the corner of his mouth, but I saw it. Saw the pleased twinkle in his pretty sapphire eyes. “But I will keep you anyway,” he added. Yes, I liked that. Cocking my head , I considered what that meant for us, and could suddenly vividly picture myself back on the Varakartoom . I could maybe help Brace out in his galley there, or... I could even be a secondary pilot with a little refresher course. Once the idea was in my head, I liked it very much. Living on the Varakartoom would be so safe — surrounded by all these badass guys — and on top of that , I’d be with Brace and other humans. Human

girls I'd already met and liked very much.

"Let me put new wood on the fire, and then I will go out and catch our food. I shouldn't be long," Brace said, and he picked me up and carried me to the hearth in a blanket - wrapped bundle. Then he did exactly as he said, plus a few bonus kisses, before he went out the door and left me alone inside the cabin.

The silence he left behind wasn't filled by the merry cackle of the fire. I missed him already, and I wasn't even a tiny bit ashamed of that. For the first time in ages, I could smile when it made me remember my mom, who always said I trusted slowly, but when I did, I trusted fully. She wasn't wrong, and it might have been lonely along the way, but the reward was worthwhile.

It felt awkward to be alone and naked under the blankets without Brace there, so I got up and located my clothing to get dressed, warming my boots by the fire for a minute so my toes wouldn't freeze inside the black leather. I felt better knowing that I was ready, but that just left me anxious for Brace to come back. Was he taking long, or did it just seem that way? What if something had happened to him?

When my fire began to burn low, I knew it had been too long. I had to go look for him.

Brace

As soon as I ducked out of the small cabin, I was up to my knees in soft, powdery snow. The skies above were still dark and gloomy from their recent snow deluge, but they were clearing again. Inhaling deeply, I drew freezing air into my body and felt something settle inside of me.

After sharing the monstrous truth about myself with my mate, I felt lighter — better — than I had in a long time. She did not condemn me for what I was ; she had been...angry on my behalf. As if what had happened — what I'd denied wanting to know so long ago — was not my fault. When I looked at it rationally, I could almost see that, but that didn't make it right.

Stroking a hand down my belly, I focused on the deep pit of hunger that was always there, always pulling on me. It , too , felt lighter, less intense, as if admitting what it was, and that it was real, had satisfied it. Or maybe it was the love, the mate bond that had been sealed between Ruby and me now. I had something much brighter, much better to hold onto now. Hope was strange like that, I supposed. I hadn't had any for so long that the horrible hunger and the accompanying rage it brought were all I could see and feel. Now, I saw other parts of myself, and the y were not so bad.

Being back in the deep cold of winter and walking through the snow was also good for me. It brought back the good memories of my childhood on Hoxiam —of my parents and siblings before they were killed in the raid. Ruby had not explained exactly how she had lost her family, but I knew we understood each other on that front.

Casting all distracting thoughts from my head, I focused on the forest in front of me. With a deep sniff , I knew which way to go, crouching low on all fours to silently stalk into the forest in search of my prey. Another of those Saigrat - like creatures would do very well ; it was big enough to satisfy me, and I could give the choicest pieces to my mate. Hoxiam were not picky eaters when it came down to it, though I had worked hard to refine my pal a te in the kitchen.

I heard him before I smelled him, downwind , which was exactly what I'd been doing to the herd of not-Saigrat I was stalking. The sound of the snow shifting beneath his feet gave him away. Twisting to the side, I pretended not to have noticed him, but I changed the angle of my path just enough that I would be able to search for him in

my peripheral vision. There he was, the light blue of his fur blending against the deep snow and the leafless shrubs and trees. He wasn't alone — the Hoxiam from before — but the male hunkering low next to him was an even better hunter. Wrapped in a white cloak and sturdy winter gear, he was nearly invisible except for the pair of black horns spiraling upward from his forehead. De'tor. I knew it even when I could not catch his scent.

They were focused on me, that was good . I would not be able to stay this cool if they had been threatening my mate. Bending down, I began to lay my trap, pretending to be fully submerged in whatever was in front of me. The ultimate distraction. The Hoxiam would not use a gun ; that would make him too dangerous to his handler. De'tor was too much of a bastard not to want to see me suffer for touching what was his . He would not shoot either, not to kill.

No, he sent in his ultimate weapon : a male like me. Only this one was a flesheater, one who had fed regularly. That was the other side of the coin : to eat the flesh not of mindless beasts but of our enemies . It made us stronger than ever. This male was almost pudgy, which meant he had had a steady diet of whatever creature he preferred. When he leaped at me with deadly silence, I was ready for him.

The nape of my neck was the juiciest target, bite down on it, and it was all over in seconds. It was instinct to go for it ; that's how I hunted the not-Saigrat out here. When I twisted at the last moment, he was exactly where I expected him to be, coming down on top of me with his maw wide open. My claws caught him in his vulnerable belly, rending and tearing before he could alter his course. Hot blood sprayed all over me, steaming in the air before freezing instantly where it struck the snow.

I landed hard on my back, the other male on top of me, a heavy, suffocating weight. He wasn't moving, and I shoved him away fast, leaping to my feet and ducking behind the thick trunk of a tree just as De'tor fired a shot. It went wide ; he had not

expected me to move as fast as I had, and I heard him swear. Ducking low, I called out to him with a taunt, but he was not a male easily provoked. That was what made him dangerous, cruel but clever, and not afraid to get into the thick of things. It was no wonder he'd become Jalima's right - hand man, rising quickly through the crimelord's ranks.

Picking up a rock, I was ready for him when he fired the next shot. It blazed along the trunk of my tree with such force that I knew he'd upped the settings on his laser pistol. My rock was thrown with a sharp curve, and it struck true, clashing with the barrel of his gun. It went spinning through the air and fell in to the snow, sinking deep because it was hot and the snow melted with a hiss. De'tor growled in that deep, subharmonic way the Kertinal had. It was a very effective intimidation tactic, and even my pulse hammered louder in my ears in response.

He drew a pair of gleaming swords with a heated edge that would cauterize wounds. A very effective weapon to harm without letting an opponent bleed out, to torture them before they died. When we met on the battlefield, I was all rage and power, and he was a fast, dancing opponent with a very dangerous, clever tail, the blade at its tip scoring several strikes when I had no choice but to focus on his swords instead.

There was no denying that De'tor was a fantastic warrior, one who surely would have been a prime fighter in the arena had he been a gladiator. But his skills had been honed in the Kertinillian army before he'd joined up with Jalima, not in the arena, like mine. If there was one thing I'd been taught, it was endurance, and I had plenty of that. I would not go down, not when I had my pregnant mate to protect. I would save her; there was no doubt in my mind.

I punched De'tor in the face with my fist, fury swallowing me — so close to the red wash of rage that I felt myself getting lost. The male snapped back, rolling with the blow, then struck a rock horn - first with such force that the tip of one broke clean off. He roared, but when he staggered to his feet, it was clear he was dazed. With

blood dripping into his eyes, he squinted at me, hands raised defensively in front of him. He was done for, and he knew it.

The sound of a door opening with a creak made us both twist and look. I yanked my eyes back immediately, aware that he'd use any opening he could get. It was already too late, his bloodstained form was darting through the trees, retreating, fleeing. Part of me was satisfied to see the male run for his life ; a bigger part of me knew that until he was dead, he would always be a threat. I crouched down, ready to leap after him, my body coiled tight like a spring. The worried call of my mate yanked me back from the brink , and by then , sanity told me that De'tor's headstart was too big anyway. I would not catch him now.

I turned back to Ruby, catching her silhouette in the distance, huddled beneath a blanket. Then a ray of light broke through the clouds, pointing its bright finger right at her. Her brown hair was haloed with gold, her cheeks pink from the cold, and even from this far away , I could see the relief in her eyes when she saw me.

Ruby

I wasn't sure if I'd made a mistake by going outside to look for Brace or not. He told me it was fine, but I could see how anxious he was about De'tor's escape. That was my fault, if I hadn't distracted my mate, De'tor wouldn't have gotten away. Curling my hands around my belly, I wondered how I felt about this. I really didn't like the thought that my baby's father was an awful murderer. Was that a nature or nurture thing? Brace was proof that one could go against nature with a lot of willpower. He was doing it every day.

Shivering, I tucked the blankets more tightly around myself and fed another piece of wood to my campfire. This place was drafty and cold compared to the cabin, but I'd agreed with Brace that we couldn't stay there after De'tor had found us. It could have been the Hoxiam's tracking abilities, but Brace hadn't been certain. He'd been a little disparaging of the male's survival skills, actually, which left some kind of tracking trickery from De'tor himself. A gadget, a com-device trace. I'd turned off my com to be certain, but I had never handed out my details to De'tor, not even back on the Yengar Spacestation.

When my toes were going numb, I got up to pace in circles around the fire to get them warm. My back was still aching a little, too, and now I was without a soft bed to lie down on. It sucked, but I was going to deal. This was only temporary. All we had to do was wait until the Varakartoom reached Rumcas. They'd sent a party to pick up Brace and me, and all would be well.

Unable to help myself, I ducked my head out of the narrow crevice that led into this small cavern. Snow was falling in gentle, huge flakes from the sky, soaring and

tumbling slowly , as there was barely any wind. They looked like fat little snow fairies, or maybe marshmallows. My belly rumbled hungrily in response to that thought, but there was no food to be had right now. That's what Brace had gone out to get, the promised breakfast.

In a repeat from earlier that morning, it felt like he was taking forever. I'd already added wood to my fire three times, and the pile we'd brought into the cave was rapidly dwindling. After we'd hiked here, Brace also had to erase our tracks in the snow, which took time. He had even talked of running back to the city to get better things for me, to keep me warm. What we'd 'borrowed' from the abandoned cabin was not going to be enough for me to last another couple of days. The cold was already getting to me, and I furiously wriggled my toes and fingers.

By the time night began to fall, I knew something had happened to my mate. He would never have left me alone this long. I'd had to go out to find more wood for my fire, and melted snow from the pail beside the fire was the only thing in my belly. My baby boy was asleep now, but he'd danced up a storm not that long ago , so I knew he was fine. Brace , however, there was no way he hadn't run into trouble.

For the umpteenth time, I peered out of the cave and cursed in frustration when I saw no sign of him. I did not even know in which direction he'd gone or how to begin searching for him. With darkness beginning to fall, it would also become much colder, and thus , much more dangerous to start looking.

I debated what to do over and over, but in the end, I decided there was only one option. Pulling out my com, I hesitated over the on button for a second. If this was how De'tor had found us before, turning it on now could lead him straight back to me. I only had to think of Brace lying somewhere in the snow, bleeding to death, and my finger pressed down. I had to help him.

Once my com turned on, I scrolled to my most recently added contact and pressed to

call it. I held my breath the entire time, cold air blowing into my face from the entrance to the cave. My eyes searched the dark, the snow glowing beneath the light of a moon and a million stars. Still no sign of Brace, no sign of any life at all. In the distance, though, the city glowed against the night sky, some of its tallest buildings rising like gem-studded spires above the snow-covered forest. Ships also came and went, blips of light against the darkness that moved too fast to be stars.

“This is the Varakartoom. Who is calling?” an unfriendly voice said in curt tones. I didn’t know who it was, but it wasn’t the Talacan second-in-command. Licking my dry lips was instantly punished by the cold biting into the wet flesh. I swallowed, then forced myself to speak and make my case. I had to believe they’d want to help their crewmate—that they were loyal enough to hurry to his rescue—but they were mercenaries. They just as easily might not give a damn.

“This is Ruby González,” I said. “I believe Brace has been captured.” Captured or dying—but captured was the more hopeful of the two. I refused to believe that he was already gone. In hurried sentences, I explained the situation to the male on the other side of the connection. His accent was completely foreign to me, and if I listened closely, the words of his actual language were even stranger. But my translator did have his language.

“I protected your com against tracking,” the male said firmly. “It is not compromised. I am locating Brace’s signal now and will send it to your device.” When he went on to explain that they were on the way but still several days out, he sounded much kinder. His confident tone also made me feel at ease. If Brace’s com had a signal this male could trace, then I could go out and find him.

By the time the com connection ended, I had both direction and a plan. Biting my lip, I darted back into the cave, knuckles digging into my lower back to ease the mild ache there. I needed to wrap myself up as best as I could, gather any supplies we had, and set out as fast as possible. Brace’s signal indicated that he was back in the city,

and the male on the Varakartoom had even pinpointed his position to a building from the port authorities. We had calculated that hiking back to Avur would take me eight hours, ten if I took regular breaks. That would allow me to reach the port in the morning, as soon as the offices opened.

Tying every single blanket we had around my body left me feeling like a snowman — poofy and ungainly. My feet and hands were most at risk from the exposure, but I'd managed to fashion a hood from one blanket to protect my head and face. That left me with no good place to stash De'tor's gun, which Brace had pulled from the snow that morning. I ended up simply holding it beneath the poncho - like blankets as I set out.

Within an hour of walking, I knew it was going to take me longer than ten hours. I was not making good progress through the deep snow at all, and exhaustion dogged my heels, along with that persistent , low-grade back pain. Six hours into the hike, my breathing was growing tight, and my legs burned and ached, but I didn't feel cold. The back pain was increasing, and a niggle at the back of my head wondered if it wasn't some kind of contraction - type thing. I dismissed it, because this was only in my back . Surely , it was just because I was tired and walking so much. It was far too early for me to give birth. I still had at least two months to go.

The sound of low , muttering voices had me duck behind a tree. My breathing was too rapid and too loud in the dark; pressing a fist to my mouth, I tried to silence the noise. Where were they? Who were they? I cursed my useless eyes in the dark. Sure, the bright snow helped a little — it caused the light from the stars and moon to reflect back — but it wasn't enough for me to see far. Just enough not to trip and break my fucking neck.

The sound of low voices came again, and I waited, my head turning to figure out from which direction it came. There, from the city, which I could no longer see beneath the trees. When I focused, I realized the voices were coming closer, marching

with very precise steps. A military patrol. That was not a surprise. Rumcas had a very heavy military presence, being a border planet. These could be soldiers out on a simple night training mission, or they could be searching for the culprits who blew up the i r port. Not that it was my fault, but the Rummicarons would only care that I was the owner of the ship.

I waited, hunkering down, my toes going numb in my boots. Pain stabbed at my back, and now it was radiating around, making my belly feel hard and tight. “Not now!” I urged under my breath to my baby. “This is a really bad moment to decide to come.” He kicked me , as if to say he’d make up his own damn mind.

The patrol was passing on my left; I could see them now and hear their Rummicarons tongue. Two dozen, walking two by two in a line, their pace precise and unbothered by the deep snow. It was not nearly so deep on them as it was on me, of course. They were wearing snow camouflage and heavy backpacks, laser rifles slung in front of their bodies at the exact same angle for all of them. A training patrol, not an actual search party, I hoped.

I was a frozen, achy mess by the time I dared to rise again and continue my journey. The walk would heat me back up, I told myself ; the walk would get the blood flowing again. Fervently, I wriggled my toes and fingers as I went, but I couldn’t feel my fingertips, freezing against the cold grip of the gun. What was I going to do when I reached the city? I had credits that were still good, a little savings left. Would they be enough to buy Brace’s freedom from the port authorities? Make some kind of reparation arrangements for the damage to their port?

I reached the gate and its busy roadway when dawn had streaked the skies blue and pink. A heavy purple fog lay to the east, the direction in which the road , with its hordes of hover vehicles and land vehicles , w as going. Guards manned the gate, armed to the teeth, which had not been the case the previous times I’d been here. That was courtesy of the disaster at the port.

Worse, I was pretty sure that the male pacing along the side of the road , smoking something with purple smoke, was one of De'tor's men. He was far enough away from the road not to be noticed by the guards, and on my side of the woods, his eyes scanned the trees as if he were waiting for someone. Me. I couldn't tell what species he was, but he didn't have the distinct back fin that the Rummicaron had, so , not a local.

Luck struck when some kind of vehicular crash drew the attention of the guards and De'tor's spy. I dashed for it as fast as I could through heavy snow, my hands clutching the gun around my belly as if that would help. My speed was not great, but I made it to a dense clutch of shrubbery near the road without being noticed. By then, the pile - up appeared to have been resolved, though traffic into the city was still at a standstill. The nearest vehicles were all on wheels, and one had a low back for cargo that did not appear properly secured. Would I be able to make it?

There was no further distraction to hide my movements, but De'tor's male was watching the woods, not the side of the road. The guards were moving back into position at the gate, their backs turned; it was now or never. I rushed the vehicle, flicked the latch, and , with a pained grunt, rolled myself inside. I was lucky the cab was closed off from this cargo area, or the driver would have noticed my very non-stealthy entry.

Pushing myself up on my elbows, I fumbled to shut the hatch with fingers that ached as they touched the icy metal. I stared directly into the eyes of the driver of the vehicle behind this one , then. A Rummicaron woman, her expression as cool as ice . She blinked twice , then looked away. The latch snicked as I shut it fully, and for the first time in hours, I was completely out of the cold wind. It almost felt...warm , in comparison , but I knew not to let that trick me into sitting still. Hypothermia or frostbite were serious risks until I managed to get warmed up properly. I wriggled my fingers again, massaging them , and did the same for my toes.

The vehicle rocked gently as it began driving again, and I did not dare open the hatch until it had come to another full stop. My com device let me know exactly where we were, and it had traveled the closed circuit around the city to somewhere almost directly across from the port. That meant another long hike ahead of me, or to risk public transportation, which the Rummicarons were so fond of inside their city.

In all my planning, I had forgotten to think about what would happen if the driver of this vehicle opened the hatch and saw me. I was not fast enough to get it myself — my frozen fingers were clumsy — and then I found myself staring into the sharkish snout of a Rummicarons male. He looked startled, which was technically, according to the Rummicarons not an emotion. The expression smoothed out quickly anyway, replaced by a snarky, what are you doing here?

I struggled upright to heave myself out of the back, and my pregnancy must have been obvious enough for him. He reached out and helped me out with impersonal but gentle hands. Once I was on my feet, my legs ached, and that backache was so fierce now that I had to grit my teeth against the pain. “I’m sorry, I didn’t take anything, I was just so tired of walking.” He narrowed his eyes at me, as if he didn’t quite believe me, and I hoped he didn’t recognize me from the port authorities’ arrest warrant that had flashed all over the city before. He was from out of town, though, so maybe he hadn’t seen it.

Looking pitiful wasn’t all that hard, and it was not something the male was equipped to deal with. It made most Rummicarons very uneasy to deal with any overt expression of emotion, as they suppressed all of their own. This male was no different, hurriedly stepping away. He was businesslike enough to quickly inspect the back of his truck before demanding a small amount of credits in compensation for used fuel. It almost made me laugh, but this was truly the best outcome, you could almost call that a kindness.

Having paid up, I started walking again, my eyes flicking to the tracking program

open on my com every so often to make sure I was still on track. It was warmer inside the city, the stones capturing the sun ' s heat and the buildings blocking the winds that swept through the bare woods outside . Because of that, I felt I could tough it out a little longer, even in pain as I was. I just needed to reach those offices where they were holding Brace. At least he wasn't in De'tor's clutches, so I hoped that meant I could talk them into releasing him to me.

When I passed Kali's Bread and Fish shop, the exhaustion and pain were too much. I eyed Brace's blip guiltily but ducked inside anyway so I could sit down someplace warm for just a minute. Food, I needed food so badly that I ordered a pile of it from Kali's menu. All my favorites. It felt too much like I was ordering my last meal, and though it warmed me, restoring feeling to my fingers and toes , n one of it tasted the way it should. Every bite was like ashes in my mouth, and I knew that was my guilt talking. I should be in that office already . W hat if they executed Brace for his perceived role in the explosion? What if they gave him to that greedy military q uarter m aster I'd sold my bolts of fabric to? What if De'tor was there after all?

Getting up after sitting down felt impossible. Tears leaped to my eyes when the pain crescendo e d so badly that I couldn't breath e . This wasn't good ; something really awful was happening. What if the baby was in danger? What if I was going into labor prematurely? So much stress lately... i t wasn't unreasonable to think that.

Wobbling on unsteady feet, I debated what my course of action should be : r escue my mate or find a doctor to help my baby . Then the pain ebbed, and for a moment , I felt almost normal. I turned in the direction of the port and started walking.

Ruby

Sweat coated my forehead with a fine sheen by the time I'd reached the port office building. On my com device, the signal from Brace's com blinked right over the spot, this had to be it. At least, this was the place where his com was, and I hoped it wasn't far from where he was. I hoped the communications officer from the Varakartoom was right.

Two Rummicarons in port authority uniforms flanked the entrance to the building. The crest of the Rummicarons port authority was a fish-like creature and a sickle, with a row of stars below them. It was emblazoned in gold above the door and decorated each glass pane set into the building. The guards also had it on their uniforms, but only as a discreet patch on their left breast pocket. Backed by such pomp, the males were puffed up and gave me suspicious looks as I walked up to them.

I could not blame them for staring at me like I was dirt. Wrapped up in those blankets to stay warm, I was a frumpy mess with a big belly. The cramps and back pain made me sweaty and pale, and I shuffled awkwardly. I was the weirdest rescue party there had ever been, and to them, I probably looked homeless. The guard closest to me eyed me up and down, his beady black eyes narrowing on my face. The other seemed more compassionate, as far as he could even feel such a thing. "Can we help you, miss?" he said.

I nodded firmly, trying to look more authoritative than I felt, when I was pretty sure I was either in early labor or something was wrong. If not for the occasional kick or shift from the baby, I would have been terrified. But he was moving regularly, so I

knew he was alive, which made Brace my priority. I owed it to my sweet Hoxiam to save him, even if that meant going in to massive debt and paying all the credits I did have.

They recognized me just as I said I was here to pay my fines and reclaim my property. The first guard reached for his gun, as if he thought he had to force me inside, but his shoulders lowered again almost immediately after. I was no threat, obviously, and they both knew it.

“Right this way, miss,” the second male said, still sounding softer, kinder. He took me gently by the elbow and adjusted his pace to guide me through the door, his large stride matching my much slower steps. A blast of warmer air hit me in the face, but it was only warm in comparison to the outside temperatures. The Rummicarons did not need comfy, warm rooms in a foyer; they probably didn’t have comfortable temperatures in their offices, either. They weren’t fans of soft things, it was a miracle their city was so beautifully decorated and their food so tasty, if you ignored some of the more risqué delicacies they liked, like the bloodworms.

The first guard remained at his post, but my escort guided me past the reception area and, with purpose, deeper into the building. He didn’t talk until we were almost there, but my comm indicated I was still getting closer to Brace, and that was all that mattered. “Officer Javano has been assigned the explosion fall-out situation. That includes your part in it, miss,” the male said in a low tone that did not carry far. “I understand your ship was blown up? Do you know who did it?” His head was big, shaped like a shark’s, so it was hard to read any kind of friendliness in his expressions when so many teeth flickered your way. Still, there was a softness to the brown-hued gray of his skin, and an obvious attempt was made to minimize the amount of razor-sharp teeth he showed me.

It was not his place, as a simple guard, to ask me what I knew of the explosion. There had to be some other motive here, but I saw no reason not to be honest. It could not

harm my reputation any more than this situation already had. I would not be welcome as a trader in any Rummicaroon port ever again. “My crew — which I ditched before arriving here — tried to smuggle goods for the crimelord Jalima. Those goods are not on my ship ; I’d never do something illegal . B ut Jalima wanted them back. He blew it up as payback , t hough I had nothing to do with any of it.”

He frowned but said nothing else, simply kept us walking as fast as my tired, sore feet could manage. How long had I been up? I’d walked through the entire night, missed sleeping, and was growing more and more concerned that I wasn’t in labor — which would be bad. The pain had swelled twice since I’d left Kali’s eatery, and I could feel another wave coming on now. If they were contractions, they were still far apart, but how much longer would that last?

We eventually reached an office , though. There were no guards, and the walls were all glass that had been turned opaque, a milky white I couldn’t see through. My escort knocked on the door and then gave me a final , piercing look with his small, black eyes. “Officer Javano will take your situation into account if you are honest. You did good coming in yourself ; that shows good faith. Good luck, miss.” His eyes darted to my belly, and when I reached down and reflexively clutched it with the advancing pain, his eyes narrowed even more. But he walked off before the door opened, leaving me to face this new officer all by myself.

The door made no sound when it slid sideways into the wall to grant me access. The office beyond was d im ly lit but sleek and gray. A hard, uncomfortable - looking couch, a large desk with a small, low chair in front of it, and a much larger swivel chair behind it occupied the room . Someone was sitting in that chair, but they had turned away from the door , and I could not see them. Very dramatic, very villain-like. I would have laughed if it w ere n’t so dire, and if I didn’t feel like someone was trying to squeeze me in two.

I panted through the pain, forcing myself to step inside , even though I wanted to just

lie down and curl up in a fetal position. “I’m here,” I said through gritted teeth, making my way through the office with firm steps, forcing myself forward so I wouldn’t back out and run. No, I wouldn’t run, running was beyond me at this point. Outside this office, only more danger waited. De’tor was still looking for me. He knew I was pregnant, knew it was his baby I was carrying , somehow. This was no longer about the missing Kanfray for him.

The person in the chair did not respond, and my labored breathing had to be drawing his attention. I ached so bad ly , and I was so tired from everything, but I had to see this through. In my mind, I was certain that if I could just get them to release Brace back to me, everything would be all right. My pained gasp finally drew out this Javano, the officer who held the fa te of my Brace in his hands. The chair began to swivel, turning until I was face to face with another Rummicar on male.

It’s curious, I had never seen a Rummicar on before who was scared out of his mind. That’s probably why it took me a few seconds to process what I was seeing. They were hard to tell apart because they were all gray and hairless. Each Rummicar on was different, of course, different shapes, different shades of color. To someone who hadn’t grown up seeing all these minute differences, it took even longer to read their expressions, to recognize what w as going on.

Javano — if that’s who he was — had his brow crunched up in a tight frown, his mouth pulled in to an even tighter line, and his fists curled around his armrests with knuckle-straining force. He looked identical to the guard who had brought me here at first, identical to pretty much any male I’d seen on the street. And then I realized he had a tiny scar by his left eye, a little V- notch — and that wasn’t distaste or anger ; it was fear. An emotion that a Rummicar on could feel and express under certain circumstances. An emotion even they could not fully suppress.

I turned, realizing too late that the threat was not in front of me , but at my back. My movements were sluggish from exhaustion and pain, and I saw him but could not

dodge. De'tor was so suddenly at my side that it felt like he'd appeared as if by magic. His purple glowing lines highlighted every tight muscle on his body. Amethyst eyes bored into me with something detached, something colder than the icy weather outside. "There you are, female," he said, his deep voice rumbling with sub-harmonics that made my stomach twist. No, maybe that was just my baby responding to the sound of his father's voice.

"You shouldn't have come here, but I knew you'd be back for him, for your ship. Where else would you go?" he said to me, but he didn't seem to want an answer. I stubbornly kept my mouth shut and tried to glare, but that was hard on the heels of the fading wave of pain, ebbing out of me until my body felt slack and limp.

He lifted his chin, and I was left staring at the hard, sharp angle of it. "Thank you for the use of your office, Javano. I will be taking this one into custody, if you don't mind." The Rummicarón officer made some kind of noise in the back of his throat that was probably meant to be consent, but De'tor did not need an answer from him either. "Expect your payment in your account today," the crimelord's right-hand man said as he dragged me to the door, a comment thrown casually over his shoulder.

So this Javano was in Jalima's pocket, but he clearly did not enjoy the position. With the fading wave of pain, a little more clarity and stamina came back to me, too. Not a lot, but enough to spark a mutinous fall of words. "Where is Brace? I came back here for Brace! What did you do with him?" I didn't need to ask him what he wanted from me, he knew I didn't have the money to repay him for the Kanfray. He was here for his son, and he couldn't have him. Over my dead body. Which it very well was going to be, because how could I possibly fight him?

I had his gun, still clutched awkwardly in one hand beneath the blankets. All I had to do was raise it and fire. Then what? I'd be a murderer, trapped in a building full of people with the ability to arrest and disarm me on the spot. I'd go to prison, and

Brace would still be stuck. My mind filled with images of my poor guy in a cell, back to being starved so he could be controlled. It would be his worst nightmare, and he'd be pushed to the brink again, and snap. He'd hate himself when that happened.

My fingers tightened around the gun, clutching it beneath the blanket against my side. When I thought I could shoot him, I would. De'tor didn't deserve anything but death for willingly putting my male in danger, for wanting to steal my child from me. How had I not seen what an asshole he was back then? I'd let myself be tempted by smart conversation and sexy muscles. Not that I found any part of him attractive now, not after I'd been with Brace and knew how sexy it was to add love and tenderness to the mix.

"You mean the Hoxiam?" De'tor said, his pace slowing when he realized I could not keep up and he'd nearly made me fall over twice. His grip on my arm shifted to my elbow, and now he was still holding me but also lifting me a little, easing my steps. He shook his head, his free hand going up to touch one of his horns. It was broken, the tip snapped off, and from the looks of it. His handsome face pulled into a mean snarl for a second, rage flashing in his amethyst eyes. "Sheer luck that a Rummicaroon patrol caught him. Idiot didn't want to hurt innocent bystanders and let them take him." He tilted his head my way, a sneer on his face. "He abandoned you."

If he thought that would drive a wedge between me and my mate — the male I loved with every aching, sweat-soaked part of me — he was wrong. "Javano informed me of the situation, and here we are. I knew you'd come back for him. Humans are always sentimental." Then he shocked the hell out of me by adding, "But I'll take you to him. Soon. Don't worry." He laughed loudly, head tossed back as if he found my reunion with Brace the most amusing thing in the world.

"First, you're going to hand me my child, then you can see him." We'd reached a hallway with a set of stairs — metal and dark — with only small red lights at intervals along the steps. I drew in a painful, tired breath at the sight of them, e

xhausted just thinking about being forced to climb down .

“You can’t have him,” I said numbly, though I didn’t know how I could stop him. “He’s not ready to be born yet, it takes nine months,” I added. A wave of pain was rising again, sharp and hard ; it began low in my back and radiated to my front as if someone were clamping down on me. This was definitely a contraction, and I wanted to laugh and curse at the same time. Here I was , trying to convince the bad guy I wasn’t ready to have my baby yet, while my body was doing everything in its power to expel my child. Fuck , it hurt, and the timing couldn’t be worse.

“News flash,” De’tor said, his deep voice turning darker with his sadistic glee. “Kertinal only gestate for four months . Y ou are ready.” And, in the ultimate betrayal, that’s when my water broke. Proving what he said was true . I t gushed out, a shocking fall of water, instantly cooling against my flesh. Most of it was absorbed by my clothes, but it ran down my pant leg and splattered onto the floor.

De’tor’s long, blade-tipped tail swung around, nudging under my chin so I had to look away from those telltale drops and face him. “See? You will give me my child, and then I will give you to that beast of yours. It’s a win - win,” he said. I knew it wasn’t , but the pain of this next contraction was overwhelming, I couldn’t think straight.

My hands were digging into his arm, blunt nails biting against his tough skin. Vaguely, I knew that meant I’d dropped the gun, but I hadn’t heard it fall and didn’t recall doing it. I shouted with this one, a scream of pain , rage , and impotence. He was going to win ; he was going to get away with this.

Brace

I knew nothing but the red wash of rage for a long time. It pounded through my veins, throbbed inside my head, and clouded my vision. I saw nothing, heard nothing, only felt the ache of my fists as they hit against metal and stone.

In the back of my mind, another seed sat — something brighter than the red rage. Something honest and pure, that wanted to call to me and warn me of important things, of urgent things I had to take care of. The snap of bone against metal made me howl, tossing back my head, my mouth open as wide as it could go.

I tasted things then. Scents and flavors: metal, blood, damp mold, and stone. The dust of disuse and the sharp tang of fear. Rummicaron flesh would taste like salt and tears. It wouldn't be pleasant to eat, but it would feed the gnawing hunger in the pit of my belly, that hunger that was growing larger with every passing moment, fanning the flames of rage. The hunger was the source—I knew that—but I was so deep in its grasp now that I couldn't care.

Then I smelled something else, something softer and sweeter. I smelled pain and blood, despair and tears. I smelled the ice and snow from my homeworld. No, not from the home of a childhood long ago, but it was the scent of home. Her name whispered through my mind slowly: Ruby —an echo of a memory that stirred deeper, pulling at that bright seed that sat at the back of my brain and held onto good things, important things.

Ruby.

That scent was Ruby, my mate. She smelled of pain and despair ; she smelled of tears. The rage swelled then, furious that my mate was hurting. Why was she hurting? Why had I not protected her? But this rage was not the same as the rage of hunger, this one was colder, sharper, and...clearer. My mind filled with other thoughts now, remembering how I'd gotten here.

The need to get supplies, food, water, blankets, it had been overwhelming. Something in Ruby's scent had told me that I had to be prepared for anything, for her baby. I had been filled with the urge to make her nest as warm and perfect as I could , to give her everything she needed. I'd gone out to hunt so I could finally still the rumbling in her stomach. Then I'd run into the patrol, and they had some kind of heat tracker. I thought that if I went with them, they'd contact the Varakartoom and smooth things over. If I fought them, many would die, I'd fall to the rage, and then Ruby would be in even more danger.

My head ached as I forced myself to remember how I'd gotten trapped in this dark, damp cell. De'tor — I was certain he'd been there. That he'd watched me get hauled into the port authority's offices. That was what had set off the true rage , because I knew then that Ruby was in terrible danger.

Now I smelled her, and worst of all, I smelled her pain. I had failed her every step of the way : failed to protect her, failed to protect her ship, and her baby. I'd gotten so involved that my judgment had been clouded, and that had put her in danger. This was my fault. All of it. I never should have left my galley. A better, safer male should have been the one to protect her. Stars, if I hadn't offered to escort her, the Captain might never have let her leave the Varakartoom ...

I felt awash again with rage ; it filled me like a tidal wave. This rage was all directed at myself, and I roared out my pain. Trapped in this prison, I could not even help my mate now, when she needed me the most. The shuffle of footsteps, the groaning of a metal door, it made me roar louder . It made me fight against the metal bars of my

cell until my hands ached and I did not care.

They had left the lights off, but when they flicked on now, they blinded me. I could not see, but I still heard the steps coming closer. At first, it sounded like a struggle — slow, dragging — and then there was a sudden sound, followed by faster steps. I shook my head, wiping a palm over my eyes, and my vision started to clear. The flash of black and purple made my heart leap in my chest; that was him! That was the bastard who hurt my mate, who put me in here. De'tor, I would kill him.

He was speaking, but the words were slow to filter through my mind. I'd flung out my arms, trying to reach for him through the bars, and in the back of my mind, I knew that it was useless, but I did it anyway. "Here he is, as promised. I find it very poetic that he will be your executioner, don't you think? He'll be marvelous on the arena sands once again, after he's eaten his fill of you."

Arena sands, eating, executioner? The words rattled around in my head without meaning, but they ached in my chest. De'tor said them to hurt, and I could not remember why they did. I snarled at his retreating form, arms outstretched as far as they could go, joints aching. Again, my prey escaped me. Why had I let him slip away from me before? I did not remember. I didn't remember a lot of things. Shaking my head, snarling my fury, I tried to make sense of a world still awash in red. Then the lights blinked back out, and I was plunged into darkness.

A seed at the back of my mind, light, soft, as bright as the sun. A feather-touch against my arm, a scent in my nose that was delicate and sweet. Pain. I smelled pain and blood. A sound, soft and quiet; it did not rise above the roar of my snarling. My ears twitched toward it, and the pain of the hunger deep in my gut vanished, replaced by a far greater pain deep inside my chest. Ruby.

She sobbed again, a muffled, desperate sound so full of agony that it broke something inside of me. I felt shattered, torn in two, certain I would crumble with the slightest

breath of air. The bars of my cell were lowering, sliding away so that I could step into the hallway. Darkness claimed everything, and without a speck of light, even my eyes struggled to see. Still, I knew exactly where she was, sweeping her into my arms and pulling her close.

“Ruby, sweet mate. Ruby,” I whispered into her hair. I was back, but I was not whole, not when my mate was crying like her heart was broken. She felt wrong in my arms, shaped wrong, different. I lifted her, and she clung to me, hands digging into the fur on my shoulders, her face turning into my chest, and tears soaked my pelt right down to the skin.

She did not answer, but as I sank to my knees, cradling her against me, I knew what had happened anyway. My hands, stroking across her body, found no injuries, no source of the blood I’d smelled on her. But her once - taut, round belly was soft and different : flatter, softer, empty.

A shot of rage so sharp and profound lanced through me that I saw stars dance in front of my eyes. He took her baby. How could the male do that? That was the cruelest, most heartless act I could think of, to steal a baby from its mother. To steal Ruby’s baby. De’tor had made a mistake giving her back to me, and now he was going to pay. It was only then that I realized what he had meant by execution, and a sick feeling washed over me at the thought. No, I could never hurt Ruby. Never.

They had let me out of my cell because they had been too cowardly to open the door and toss Ruby in. They had known that I would have hurt anyone I could ; they thought I’d tear into my mate, enraged as I was. Well, they were wrong, and that truth was healing, even as my rage for what they’d done to Ruby was overpowering. Even angry, even with my mind covered by red, I had not hurt her. She was safe with me, just like she’d always said she was.

They had made a mistake letting me out. With the door open, I could get to its

hinges —my sharp claw slicing through the weak spots like butter, wrenching the door off simply to make sure they could n't try to lock me behind it again. Now, the only thing between us and freedom was that thick metal door De'tor had left through.

Sitting down with her on the floor, I began rocking her gently back and forth while murmuring to her. Anything to soothe her, to draw her back from her despair. I swore to her that I would get her baby back, and unless he was dead, I knew I'd make good on that promise. I did not think De'tor had killed his own offspring; he had wanted the child in his control. He was not going to kill the boy.

"Brace," she eventually said with a shudder, her voice reedy and thin. It was music to my ears anyway, a sign that she was beginning to respond, to come out of her shock. I had already assured myself that she was not wounded; there were some smears of fluid — blood and other things — that had dried on the shirt she wore. But they had cleaned her up, healed her after she'd given birth, so that no marks remained other than her still - soft and so - very - empty belly. "They let me hold him. He was perfect," she whispered eventually. She patted her chest, where some of the smears on her medical gown had concentrated. They had let her put him against her breast, hold him, that was something.

"Then De'tor took him," she said with a shudder. "I wanted to come for you, but I failed him, and I failed you. Now we're both going to die, and my baby is going to be raised without his mother." That was too much for her to contemplate, and she shook with new tears, crying inconsolably. I tried to comfort her, but there was no comfort here. The longer her quiet crying lasted, the more the rage got hold of me again. I roared, feeling her pain like it was my own, cursing the male that had caused this.

And then, a plan formed in my mind. He wanted her dead by my hand, did he not? He wanted her to suffer, and me to suffer when I realized what I'd done. I was going to give him exactly what he wanted when he came back here. Whispering my plan to Ruby did what my murmurs of comfort had not: it brought back her focus, it gave

her hope. “I swear, you will hold him in your arms again, my sweet mate. I swear we’ll be united.”

Her eyes gleamed at me in the darkness, shiny with tears but now filled with determination. She did not say anything — just listened — but I saw the spark again, that fire that had caused her to fight, to survive all this time.

When De’tor came back several hours later, it was with a contingent of armed men, hiding behind protective shields and shocksticks. They knew I was out of my cage, and they were ready for me, at least, they thought they were. Finding me “sleeping” on the floor, Ruby hidden from their eyes, it was a struggle not to respond until the very last moment, to act as if I was out cold after eating myself into a coma. They bought it because they did not think of me as anything but a mindless, hungry beast. Ruled by hunger. They were wrong. I knew better now.

“Steady,” I whispered, near soundless, against the crown of Ruby’s hair. “Almost there,” I added. She was trembling beneath me, her body shaking with tension. If she rattled any more, they’d hear the clattering of her teeth as they clicked together, or the pounding of her frantic heart. I rumbled with a low growl to cover her noises, and I could hear the fear shiver through the approaching males. The soft murmur of their voices as they noticed what I’d done to the door of my cell.

“He has a collar,” De’tor snarled. “Use it!” That was true, but they had never exchanged the collar I’d worn as a ruse for Ruby. And while it was real enough in almost every way, it had been altered by Mitnick—it couldn’t harm me. Twisting my head, I glared at the males hiding behind their shields and weapons, watching for the telltale flick of a switch on the pain control. I didn’t remember them syncing their own device to my collar, but that was what would set off Mitnick’s alteration. They had to have done it, because Ruby hadn’t been here before with her controller.

My sharp ears picked up the flick of the switch, and I acted as if I’d just been struck

by lightning. Howling, twitching , and t h rashing, my claws digging furrows into the stone floor. Beneath me, Ruby shook harder , a whimper muffled by her tiny fist, shoved against her mouth. She knew it was an act, but I could tell she hated every minute.

It felt like forever as I faked the pain I was supposedly subjected to by the collar. But once I deemed it long enough, I slumped back down, pretending to pass out. They did not move for long seconds, staring in silence as if they didn't trust that I was fully out. It was De'tor who shoved through the ranks to approach my side with the heavy thud of his boots. I could even hear the way his tail , tipped with a sharp knife , whipped through the air behind him.

Ruby and I both held our breaths , then, waiting for him to come as close as he dared. His toes nudged against my leg with vicious force; I forced myself not to respond to the sharp pain. This was going better than planned, getting hold of De'tor was much better than capturing one of his goons. I waited until he hissed in satisfaction and moved closer to my head, crouching down so he could run his hand along my arm and poke my ribs.

Right as he withdrew his hand, I struck. Rising fast, I caught his neck in my hand and squeezed. As if we'd rehearsed this, Ruby flowed with me when I tackled the male and yanked him against my chest. With o ne hand around his neck, cutting of f his air and preventing him from using his horns, my other hand snatch ed that dangerous tail from the air and snapp ed the blade off the tip. Ruby was right behind me, pressed against my back so she offered no target for the armed males in the hallway. I felt her small hand slide along my flank, snatching a laser pistol from De'tor's hip. The v icious thing squeezed off three lethally precise shots before the armed males could regroup and hunker down behind their shields.

"It's over, De'tor," I snarled into the male's ear. "You lose. Tell me where Ruby's baby is , and I might give you a quick death." He did not shake or tremble in my grip,

he did not fight the tight squeeze around his throat, and he had not howled in pain when I broke the tip of his tail. Now , I felt a deep vibration start in his chest, knew it for the laughter that it was. He didn't fear death, and he did not fear pain either.

“Shoot him,” De'tor ordered . “Both of them. That's an order. Shoot to kill.” He knew he was in the way, but he would rather see me dead at the cost of his own life. It would ensure he won. The shuffling of the remaining guards and their shields told me they were not quite as sure as I was about the order f rom their boss. Their mistake. Driven by so much protective rage, I abruptly shoved De'tor forward. He hadn't anticipated the release and nearly went headfirst into the row of shields. I was after him so fast that only two males got off a shot.

It was chaos after that, and the fury took over, controlling my every move until no one was left standing. This time, I was not alone in that fight, not alone in my rage. Ruby was with me every step of the way , her pistol fire suppressing theirs, picking them off while I destroyed their shields and their master. But I didn't kill him — couldn't — not until I had answers.

Standing in the carnage afterward, I pressed my foot to De'tor's throat and leaned low to stare deep into his glowing purple eyes. Then I opened my mouth as wide as it could go and let him stare into the abyss of death, like he wanted. “Tell me where he is, and I will not eat you , tiny bite by bite, starting with your blasted toes. You'll be alive a long time, and I'll make sure you stay conscious for every minute of it.” The threat was hollow, I would never eat the bastard . I would not sully my soul that way. I didn' t even feel the all-consuming hunger of the Hoxiam. But he didn't know that, and it was obvious he feared that fate, who wouldn't?

It wasn't until Ruby crouched next to his head and leaned in, fearlessly using my shoulder for support, that he caved. His fear overruled by what was possibly a tiny shred of decency when a desperate mother implored him with her tear - stained eyes.

“Jalima has him,” he coughed through a partially crushed throat. “Mansion southwest of Avur, aleyard.” He bared his teeth, the sharp , pearly white fangs stained with blood. “You’ll never get him back.” I gave him a firm shove, his head crashing against the stone , and that was it, De’tor was no more.

“Let’s get your son,” I said to Ruby, sweeping her into my arms and shifting her so she could cling to my shoulders. Then I busted down the door to the cell block.

Ruby

Everything was a blur. My mind simply couldn't keep up with all that was going on. All I knew was that Brace was with me, and he was going to fix everything. He had sworn that he would, and I believed him. If anyone could rescue my sweet baby boy, I knew he could.

With De'tor dead, some clarity pushed away the fog of grief, and I could see how remarkable what Brace and I had was. Even in a rage, he had not harmed a hair on my head ; instead, he had snapped out of it to offer me comfort and make a calculated plan. There was something peaceful in knowing that I had that kind of effect on him — on this powerful, dangerous alien feared all across the Zeta Quadrant. That strength was focused entirely on giving me what I needed, and that made me lucky, despite what had happened.

My arms ached in remembrance of holding my baby, a perfect little boy. A blend of genes , both human and Kertinal, who had come out beautiful. The sound of his first sniffles , and the loud wailing as he'd been taken from me, were engraved on my brain. They fueled me as I held my stolen laser pistol and clung to Brace's back while he barreled out of the bowels of the Rummicaron port offices.

We'd passed a few guards he'd knocked out, the males caught completely by surprise. Now, we were passing offices, and the males and females who saw us fled from our path — office workers, not warriors. I stared at them but felt completely disconnected from their fear or their plight. If not for the rather bloodless way my mate got around them, and their lack of resistance, I would have happily opened fire on them. Something at the back of my brain told me that wasn't my normal response ,

but until I held my baby back in my arms, I did not care enough to investigate that line of thinking.

At the entrance to the building, I caught sight of something wholly unexpected, and it did make me blink twice. My mind whirled back into more normal thinking patterns, no longer clouded by rage and despair. Beyond the glass doors stood the same two guards who had greeted me that morning. I recognized the male who had escorted me to the office where De'tor had been waiting. Ships came and went, large hulking shapes being loaded and unloaded in the distance, but right on the tarmac in front of the office, a sleek black shuttle had landed.

At the doors, the large, imposing shape of the Varakartoom's Naga captain took up far too much space. He was animatedly talking with several uniform-clad Rummicarons officers. They looked small, their backfins wilted beneath his furious golden gaze. So many coils of black, gleaming scales sprawled through the foyer, and still the captain had raised himself tall on the thick base of his tail, towering over the handful of officials and thoroughly intimidating them. They weren't supposed to feel fear, but it stirred so powerfully that they couldn't suppress it.

The commotion of Brace and me bursting through the doors into the large entrance hall made every pair of eyes turn our way. The Naga captain here? How had they made it this fast? I was certain they were still days out when I'd spoken to Mitnick. My brain struggled to recall how long ago that was — maybe it had been days ... So much had happened since then.

The Naga male turned our way, and I saw relief flicker over his harsh features. "There you are, Brace. Get in the shuttle; I will sort this out." He waved his hand at the black shuttle parked — surely illegally — in front of the port authority offices. It was then I realized that it wasn't one Naga, but two. That's why there were so many coils of black scales and glimmering hints of gold. The second Naga was right behind the captain, a laser rifle cradled in his arms. He looked so much like the captain that I

knew they had to be related.

“Bastard stole her child,” Brace snarled as he strode with me across the foyer. He stepped over the coils of his captain’s long tail without hesitation and never paused, even though several guns went up and aimed our way. “They let that happen, right here!” he added, snapping his teeth in the direction of the officials his captain had been intimidating. Then we burst through the front door and headed directly for the shuttle. Yes, my mind shouted, that shuttle could take us to the location where De’tor said my baby was.

The hatch of the shuttle was open, and males in black armor, customary for the Varakartoom crew, stood at the entrance. They were exchanging menacing glances with the pair of Rummicaron guards, but when the one who had escorted me in saw me, he paled and stepped back, yanking his buddy back with him with a rough shove.

I recognized some of the Varakartoom’s crew from before. The Talac male was in the lead, standing with his arms crossed, his aura menacing and dark. A silver beast the size of a small pony stood at his side—hound-like, with ears like a jackal. A Gracka, native to his homeworld but probably unknown here in the Zeta Quadrant. His gray eyes clashed with mine, and I felt a sweeping pull in my body, my head. My body felt lighter, empty, but also... less sad.

Brace swept past the Talac male without a word, nodding at the Sune male and the green Viridara male. Then we were inside the shuttle, and I spotted a pair of Asrai males at the front — pilot and navigator — strapped in and ready to go. There was also a winged male aboard the small shuttle, his red and white feathers taking up far too much space. Everyone was piling in behind us, including the long, coiled body of one Naga, but it wasn’t the captain. The hatch shut on the last coil and limb with a quiet thud, and then the shuttle shot into the air.

“Where to, bro?” the pilot Asrai asked in a tone that was more subdued than I

expected, though I wasn't sure why. I thought I'd met him, but my brain was struggling to put names to the faces that surrounded me, overwhelmed, exhausted. Brace was talking, relaying what De'tor had said on his dying breath. My eyes had locked onto the other Asrai, and something twisted in my stomach.

It wasn't my baby — my baby was gone — but we'd get him back . I knew that ; I had to believe that. No, it was unease, because there was something very, very off about that male. Asrai often — nearly always — came in twins or triplets , e specially the males. This pair was no different, and very likely telepathically linked . Asrai navigator - pilot pairs were kind of fabled for their insane skills. But the navigator, his mind plugged into the shuttle computers via a thin black cable attached to the nav-port installed in his head, he was not normal.

Vibrating with energy, he didn't speak, his ghoulish death mask pulled in to an aggressive, macabre grin. Blood had dried inside his ears , and I spotted it at the corners of his eyes too. It was a sign that he'd burned himself out navigating, but nobody told him to stop what he was doing. Nobody seemed willing to get to o close to the viciously sharp row of teeth he bared at anyone who got to o close, even his twin. Maybe I hadn't been mistaken about how far out the Varakartoom still was, but this navigator had risked frying his mind to get them here, to save us. To save Brace. Now that was loyalty.

My mate sat down in one of the jumpseats that lined the walls of the shuttle, his huge body spilling out of the seat, barely fitting. He pulled me into his lap, cradling me against his chest, his hands stroking along my arm until t hey reached my shaking hand. He gently pulled the laser pistol I still clutched from my numb fingers, handing it off to someone o n his left without a word.

“We will take care of this, sweet mate. I will bring back your baby, I swear it.” He'd said it before, and I still believed it, so I nodded. A wave of pain and fear began to swell inside my chest, but it swept away abruptly before it could crest and overwhelm

me. My eyes shot from Brace to the Talac and his strange silver beast, certain he'd done something, though I didn't know how.

With the tide of emotions abruptly halted, I felt more rational and stronger. Part of me could even feel a hint of amusement at knowing how boldly Brace had stated I was his mate, right in front of his crewmates. My eyes swept over faces, some of them familiar, like the Sune, Flack. That was the ship's quarter master, and he'd assigned me my quarters, handed me fresh clothing. They were surprised, but they were smart enough not to say anything. The Viridara smirked, though, looking pleased as he gazed from me to Brace.

"Someone better inform the Captain that Jalima might be there. He'll want in on the kill," Brace said darkly, smugly. I saw him glance left and right, piercing every male with a firm stare. He wasn't hiding now; he wasn't worried about being a danger to anyone but the crimelord whose mansion we were about to storm.

"Done," the winged male said almost immediately. "Pulling up schematics of the building now." He waved a hand, and a drone whizzed up from where it had been locked magnetically to his belt. Hovering in the air, it projected a holographic map against the ceiling. "This appears to be our best point of incursion. And this is where I think the baby will be held."

My eyes locked onto the tiny, three-dimensional image—rendered in blue glowing lines—of a room at the back of the large house. That was where my baby was. I began tracing every path, every route to that room, my heart pounding in my chest. That's where he was, and I'd get him.

The Talac was laying out a plan to everyone inside the shuttle, but I wasn't paying attention. I'd heard words like "You guard the female and the shuttle," so I knew they intended to leave me behind once they attacked. No way, I was getting my baby. They couldn't stop me. He needed me. My fingers twitched, searching for a weapon

that wasn't there. I realized then that I was harboring far more aggressive impulses than I had expected. Motherly instinct, I was certain. They were not going to leave me behind, I'd make sure of it.

The shuttle hummed gently, and tension rose inside it as we got closer. Through the front of the shuttle, viewscreens displayed the landscape : snow and forest, and a sharply rising mountain , all jagged and black-edged. Fields stretched beneath us, crisscrossed by strange zigzagging lines, barren beneath the otherwise pristine layer of snow. When my eyes landed on the cluster of buildings, my heart rate shot through the roof. That was it, that was where my baby was.

The pilot overshot the buildings, circling high. "They'll know we're coming," he said. "They ' re ready for us." His words pulled me from my fruitless search of the many windows . Now I spotted the armed vehicle parked out front and the small towers strategically placed around the perimeter. I didn't need to see one shift open its domed top and aim a barrel to know that those were defensive turrets. They weren't so different from the meteor protection lasers mounted on the Finix .

The turret ' s laser fire streaked in front of the shuttle ; the pilot whooped as if that was fun, and then the small vessel abruptly swerved. I clutched Brace's fur, my body rebelling against the sudden forces. He held me tight, his arm engulfing me, his big body wedged tight against the too-small seat. Across from me, the silver Gracka bared its sharp teeth, and then it smoothly glided closer despite the rocking of the ship. Its head was in my lap, pressing warmly against my so - very - empty belly.

How long had it been? How long since my tiny boy had to go without me? That warm pressure reminded me too much of what it had felt like to hold him. Hours? A day? My body — my breasts — they ached. The silver Gracka was not the same as the actual beast, which I'd had the fortune of seeing once as someone ' s pet. That one had been covered in a thick, luscious pelt , much like Brace was. This creature was smooth as silk, warm like flesh, but at the same time, its skin felt like skin-

warmed metal. I stroked my fingers over its head, its ears twitching as I did so, and I felt hollow inside.

“Brace and I will escort her . M y symbiont will be her shadow , ” t he voice said abruptly, a snap like a whip in the tense air as the shuttle spun left with force. I was pressed into Brace, wedged between him and the head of the silver beast. My head shot up as the pressure faded and the shuttle lowered gentl y to the ground behind a thicket of trees. That wasn’t what he’d said earlier. I distinctly remembered someone being ordered to guard me and the shuttle.

Brace growled, speaking up for the first time , as if he did not agree with his superior officer ’s plans . I wasn’t quite sure if it worked like that on a mercenary ship, but I had the impression that everyone knew that Talac was in charge when the captain was n’ t around. “No, she’s not even dressed! She has no shoes!” I glanced abruptly down at my bare legs, sticking out from beneath the edge of the medical gown they’d put me in when I gave birth. I shuddered, repressing the memory almost immediately, it came too close to remembering how De’tor had taken my boy, and I couldn’t face that.

“That’s not an issue,” the Talac snapped back. While I appreciated his change of plans, nothing would stop me from going into that house to find my child. But going barefoot in the snow was a bit of a problem. I’d lose my toes before I reached the entrance, and my body was already weak and exhausted after going through labor—part of it while I hiked through deep snow at night.

“It is . M y female will not lose any of her tiny toes,” Brace snapped back. His hand shot down to stroke along my leg, cupping both my feet. It wasn’t until he did so that I realized how cold they were. The rest of my body was kept warm by his, curled in his arm as I was, and cradled in his lap. Not so for my feet. I wriggled them against his palm, and my toes felt stiff and bruised.

“My symbiont will take care of it,” the Talac answered. “We’re here. Spread out, follow the plan.” He tapped the collar of his suit, and a helmet unfurled, dark, the visor opaque. He turned to the hatch, the other males all following his lead, guns cradled in their arms, their helmets sliding into place over serious, focused expressions.

Brace didn’t have armor like theirs. All he wore was a loincloth, that hardly seemed fair in a fight. The pilot passed us, winking jauntily just before his helmet snicked shut. I shifted, ready to get up and follow after the males thumping down the gangplank in practiced formation. Brace held me firm; he didn’t want to let me go. I twisted against him, the strange Gracka still with his head against my belly. I felt a little trapped, but I understood his worry. “Let me go, Brace. He needs me, you know this is best.”

I eyed the snow beyond the hatch. Only one black-armored male remained outside the door; the others had all scattered, vanished. If that was the Talac, then he was my only ally in this, but he did not open his mouth. I shoved against Brace’s arm, and he finally let me go. My legs were wobbly as I stood, but Brace kept one hand on my hip to steady me, while the silver Gracka flowed back, still keeping his snout against my abdomen. “Let’s go. Give me my gun back.”

There was a flash of something — not quite light, not quite a glimmer. It shimmered in the eyes of the silver beast, and then the most bizarre thing happened. Those eyes were not quite eyes, as they were the exact shade of silver as the rest of him. It felt like I fell into them when I looked, though, as if the shiny silver surface was a mirror. Then it began to melt, not just its head, but all of its body, too. It would have been horrifying if it wasn’t oddly beautiful at the same time. Silver liquid flowed and spread, sliding around my belly, my hips, up my chest, and down my legs.

Brace hissed, and I heard him growl words in fury above my head somewhere, his towering shape hunched around me. The Talac answered, but my ears were rushing,

as if filled with water. I didn't hear any words—just garbled noise. Silver flowed as high as my throat, and a part of my brain feared the worst: that it was going to keep rising and smother me. It didn't. And when it curled around my bare toes too, I understood. The symbiont would take care of me—that's what the Talac said. It had reshaped itself into a suit of armor, boots warmer than anything I'd ever worn, because they were alive .

Not all of the Gracka had covered me; it was too big a beast for that. What remained of the silver creature began to reshape, settling into something smaller and slinky. A Riho. A coveted pet in the Zeta Quadrant. The Riho were like a cross between an otter and a kitten: adorable, very clever, and a tiny bit dangerous. This one flashed extra-sharp teeth and swished the tip of its tail, where fluffy silver fur hid a poisoned barb.

“Let's go. Mitnick took care of the nearest turrets.” With that barked command, the figure outside the hatch turned and slipped around the corner. The slinky, silver Riho followed, running low along the ground, and, with a chirp, dived into a big snowdrift, completely disappearing.

I took a tentative step to follow and was halted by Brace's hand on my shoulder. “Fine, shoes means you can go,” he said, a sad twist to his mouth that might have been an attempt at a smile. “But you stay close to me at all times, okay?” I nodded immediately, and my hands did not shake when he placed a laser pistol back in my grip.

Brace

The com I hooked over my ear instantly let me hear the chatter of the others as they spread out and began disabling the targets Sineater had given them. I had not realized that when the Varakartoom 's second - in - command changed the plans to take Ruby with us, that also meant the shuttle was going to be left unguarded. But its hatch softly slid shut , which meant that all of Mitnick's special security features would engage. Soon, Jal i m a 's guards would be too busy to worry about one lonesome shuttle anyway.

I kept my hand on Ruby's back, fighting the urge to pick her up in my arms. She was moving smoothly, and , covered in sleek silver , she looked like a brighter version of my brothers - in - arms. Dark circles sat beneath her eyes, and her braids were a little ragged, but she was moving far better than I expected — a s if the exhaustion had fallen away from her with the promise of a reunion ahead .

The snow seemed to melt away around her steps, not bothering her as she followed Sin's careful, circuitous path toward the back entrance of the mansion. I was right on her heels, my paws digging deep and leaving a much deeper trail, the cool snow calming my anxious anger. I felt torn in two, wanting to haul my mate to safety and wanting her to have this so she'd be with her baby sooner. I would do anything to never hear her desperate cries again.

Huffing, I watched the air fog in front of my face. My eyes were half on my mate and half on the danger around us. The others were clearing a path, and Mitnick was taking care of the electronic security systems. Cameras powered down before my eyes, and the hum of his drones preceded a strike o n a turret tower before its weapon abruptly

ceased firing.

We passed a male entangled in crisp , dark vines, and I knew Tass had been ahead of us —his footsteps dogged by those of either Solear or Aramon, maybe even both. The twins had a habit of moving in such synchronicity that I couldn't be sure. In any case, they'd left the door of f its hinges at the back of the house. The Sineater had squared up beside it, peering in carefully before proceeding, and Ruby was following his example.

Just before I followed my mate into the dark interior of a supply cellar, I saw the silhouette of the captain's son. The younger Naga male was the spitting image of his father, and while he'd taken a while to adjust to life aboard the Varakartoom , there was no denying his skill with a long - distance rifle. His long body coiled up the recently disabled turret, finding a high vantage point at the top of the tower. His armor and thick scales afforded him protection against any threat. He was settling in to provide cover fire through the scope of that high - powered weapon. Even inside the manor, he'd be able to track us with his heat sensors and provide cover should we need it.

"I am surprised the captain let Saisir out for a mission," I muttered under my breath. I knew Sin would hear me — he was only a few steps ahead as we slunk our way around supply crates and headed for a door that would lead into the mansion. He kept his son close, refusing to put the young male at risk. Asmoded had ruefully mentioned it as one of his shortcomings during one of our last talks , after I'd gotten into a rage. I understood that sentiment very much. The urge to haul Ruby out of here was beginning to win out, and we had yet to encounter resistance.

Others definitely had, and I could hear pistol fire being exchanged outside. Flack and Tass were delivering smack talk in cheerful, dry voices as they engaged with the enemies outside. Saisir was quiet, and , uncharacteristically, so was Aramon.

Sin braced himself in the door way, his symbiont slinking ahead and out of sight. “Stairs to the left,” he said. Over the com, Saisir responded by rattling off nearby heat signatures. I braced myself for a fight — there were over a dozen between us and the stairs. Ruby did not protest when I slipped ahead of her, my hand gripping her arm to keep her right behind me. We followed Sin, who took advantage of the distraction his symbiont created by leaping into the room first. A fight ensued, and that was when I realized just how much control the second-in-command had over his silver companion.

Ruby tried to come into the room after us when I joined the fight, then howled in frustration when she abruptly became rooted to the spot. I’d never seen the Sineater use his companion as armor for another before—himself, plenty of times. But this was another means of control, and part of me was furious at seeing it in action. It wasn’t right that he had that kind of power over my mate, but he was doing what I would have done in his place: keep her safe.

“Captain is here,” Mitnick announced. The com picked up the beating of his wings, but it was followed by the sound of a shuttle flying overhead. No turret fire answered, which meant the communications specialist had taken every single one of them out. I scanned the opponents, armed guards with hardened eyes. These were males with more than a few skills under their belts : Jalima’s personal guard. Jalima himself was not there, but their presence meant he was hiding somewhere. The captain would find him.

My skin itched ; red began to crowd in from the edges of my mind. Being this close to the bastard responsible for what had happened to me was worse than attacking his ships. I never thought I’d be able to keep control of myself in this situation, but I had only to glance over my shoulder and see my mate’s tired, fearful face to know what I was fighting for. Not revenge . Not payback . This was a rescue mission, and getting to Ruby’s baby was the only objective I had to focus on. The dangerous power of all-consuming rage faded, and then it was just me and the fight — tactfully disabling my

opponents in the quickest fashion . Not beast, but cool, calculating male.

Sin and I moved through the dozen males and the room in unison. I had never fought with another at my side, and it did something to me. I had always entered the arena alone, let the rage fill me and power me through the fight. Afterward, I would not remember anything—and I didn't want to. But this? Fighting with the sleek, quicksilver-fast male? It was a revelation. When I ducked to avoid a blow, he was there to fill the void. When I was not fast enough to avoid a strike, his symbiont was there to shield me. I learned to watch for his openings too, and suddenly, I discovered this was almost fun.

Then we reached the stairs, and there he was — the male who had ruined my life and caused the deaths of my family with his greed. When raiders had stolen me from my homeworld at his orders, they'd killed everyone they couldn't take. Rage threatened to overtake me when my eyes landed on his hated face. Instead, I spoke into my com. "Eyes on Jalima, Captain. Bastard is right here." The wordless snarl that answered my declaration embodied the rage I used to feel. Asmodeus would be here, and he deserved to kill the bastard as much as I did. I'd let him have it.

Jalima was still a prime fighter himself, standing defiantly at the top of the stairs, all four of his arms spread wide. As a Pretorian, he was an excellent climber and a dangerous opponent in close combat. His four arms would match even my Hoxiam strength if it came down to hand - to - hand between the two of us. He was shouting, bargaining , perhaps. Didn't matter . I didn't care.

Dropping to my hands, I bounded up the stairs in three powerful leaps. I'd just keep him busy until the captain got here —mess him up so he'd get a taste of what he'd done to me.

Ruby

I cursed and swore, raged against the silver armor that covered me, but it didn't help. As soon as the Talacan male and Brace had engaged in a fight with Jalima's men, that thing had frozen me in place against the wall, my silver "boots" hooking into the wooden floor and literally pinning me in place. I could lean to the side, though, peer around the door jamb to see what was going on. I could even raise my pistol and squeeze off a few shots; most of them glancing shots because I could not risk hitting Brace or the second-in-command of the Varakartoom.

"You're a bitch," I said to the silver armor, patting my chest, which felt as if I'd rapped my knuckles against a metal panel. "Why won't you help me? I need to rescue my baby, damn it!" The fight was taking too long. What if someone was smuggling him out while we were occupied here? What if they were getting away with him right now? I'd memorized every route on that map, there was a way to go around them. I had to try something. I couldn't just stand here.

Brace was handling himself in there, dominating the fight with his size and strength. He didn't need my pistol as backup while that Talac had his back. He'd told me to stay close, but surely I could sneak around them and find that room more easily on my own. Everyone was here, distracted by the fighting.

If only I could pry my feet off the floor and move. "Come on, let me go!" I urged again. It was useless; if the suit could understand or even hear me, it didn't respond. The other half of the silver creature was in that room, fighting in the shape of a silver Riho. I had no clue what this thing was that encased me. They called it a symbiont, but what did that mean? How was it connected to the Talac? He came from my part of the universe, the Alpha Quadrant, and yet I'd never heard of anything like this.

They had cleared the room, but it did not appear that that mattered to my prison guard. As Brace and his companion advanced toward the stairs beyond, I was forced

to stay in place. Now I couldn't see much beyond a glimpse of the fighting, but my hearing picked up everything, adding to my imagination. A commanding voice was ordering Brace to stand down while jeering taunts at him at the same time. I expected Brace to surrender to that rage he so feared, but there wasn't so much as a roar. I didn't know who it was that spoke, but he was definitely in charge. Jalima himself?

He was here? I had not expected that, though I vaguely recalled De'tor saying my boy was at Jalima's home. I just hadn't realized that Jalima was in residence. But if he was there, fighting with Brace, that meant he wasn't with my son, did it? That improved my chances of getting to my baby, if only I could convince these stupid boots to let me move. "Please," I whispered, "let me go! I'll be careful."

The sound of something huge — and made of glass — shattering into a million pieces was loud, punching through the sounds of combat. I jerked to ward the door, awkwardly leaning around the corner to see what had happened. The chaos was absolute up there now, but I couldn't see a thing. Had something — or someone — crashed through the window? Had they gone in or out?

Only one shadow moved in the doorway across the room. A dark figure that stepped out to look at me through the wreckage of what had once been a well-appointed sitting room of some kind. A broken couch lay on its side, bookshelves had been ripped from the walls, and a viewscreen lay in smoldering pieces on the thick carpet.

The male who stepped into view wore the Varakartoom's black armor, but I did not recognize which male it was until he touched his helmet and the visor slid back. The grayish features of the Talac appeared, dark eyes undecipherable, a little sinister. He nodded once, and abruptly my boots came unglued from the floorboards. I did not wait for any more ; that was permission. I spun on my heels and jogged in the other direction.

My legs moved silently, and my body felt lighter than it should. Ever since that silvery liquid had poured over my flesh, it felt like the exhaustion just fell away. Like I'd drank a whole pot of extra - black coffee. Only, it was more than that ; it just didn't make a lot of sense. I'd given birth probably less than twenty hours ago . I'd felt weak, my body still all floppy and soft. Now I felt strong. I felt the way I had pre-pregnancy, but that made no sense. Even the best modern medical science couldn't do that in five minutes. But this symbiont thing, it sure made me feel that way.

“Left, then right, there's another stairs there,” I muttered to myself, certain of my recollection of the map. Brace was going to be furious that I'd disobeyed his order, but he'd deal . A ll that mattered was my son. I bit my lip, pressing my back against the wall at the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching. I'd ducked back behind a wardrobe that lined this hallway, out of si ght of whoever had just c o me around the corner. They clattered past me without seeing me, and I spun, aimed my gun, and shot the bastard in the back without hesitation. He went down like a ton of bricks — a large Kertinal — his tail limp, his horns thudding into the wall and g o uging two big furrows in the plaster.

I saw the silver Riho pounce over his shoulder, and then it silently moved past me, tail swishing. As it passed , it ai med a satisfied look my way . I followed it, as it was going in the right direction. I wouldn't say no to a little extra help, and I was certain that's what this was. We found the stairs without further hostile encounters, but the sounds of fighting were fierce and loud. The silver creature went up first, bounding in slinky, slee k steps up the stairs. I followed lightly, my breathing easy and my thoughts still calm. So close I could almost taste it, he had to be here.

I was going to name him after my dad, I'd decided that months ago, when I first learned the gender of my baby. It had felt like I'd jinx things if I called him that in my thoughts, especially now. Silly , maybe. Then I crested the top of the narrow servant stairs and stared straight into the open door of a room. The room.

A nursemaid stood beside a crib. She was a Ulinial, her blue skin and long braid giving her away. That was good, her species tended to be pacifists. Nobody else appeared to be in the small room with her, but I crossed the red carpet that lined the hallway silently, holding my pistol at the ready. This could be a trap, though for the life of me I couldn't see why Jalima would care about my baby. De'tor had cared, but he was dead.

"Give him to me," I demanded as soon as I stepped over the threshold. She was trembling, her head shooting up to glance at me, eyes wide. "That's my baby. Give him to me," I said more firmly. She backed away, hands raised, shaking her head but not speaking. It was unclear whether she was a slave or a paid servant, but no collar graced her slender neck. I couldn't count her out as a threat.

Then my eyes landed on my son, lying quietly inside the crib. He seemed so small, and he was wide awake but silent. His eyes were a silky brown, his skin black like his father's, but streaked with copper. The shock of hair he had was also a coppery brown, with hints of gold. Soft nubs sat on his forehead, an indication that he'd grow horns one day. He was holding his tail in his tiny fists, the pointed tip in his mouth as if it were a pacifier.

My chest ached; my breasts ached even more. I forgot about the woman in the room with me, entranced by the sight of my son. "Hey there, Mateo. Mama's here. I've got you now," I whispered. I placed the pistol on the edge of the crib, then leaned in to pick him up carefully. He didn't make a sound until I nestled him against my chest. Then there was a pop as his tail left his mouth, and the little appendage curled around my wrist instead. A deep sigh seemed to run through him when I rocked him gently in my arms, one that I mirrored as everything inside me righted itself.

A curious thing happened then. The silver armor that encased me so snugly melted away at the front of my body, no longer a barrier between my son and me. I felt the warmth of his small body, felt him press against my swollen breasts, where he

belonged. I could not look away from his face, or the way he seemed to know he was with his mama , r elaxing into a peaceful slumber , with what had to be a smile gracing his tiny, perfect little mouth. Babies didn't smile — not on day one ; I knew that — but it sure looked like Mateo did.

There was a clatter behind me . I spun in reflex, pressing my baby to my chest with one hand, the other snatching up my gun. I gasped in surprise when I spotted the large figure in black standing over the sprawled body of the Ulinial female. She was out cold but still breathing, and the Varakartoom male was flexing his fist at his side. His helmet was open, allowing me to see the skull-like markings of his Asrai face. “What happened?” I asked, shocked. The female looked unarmed, but when he jabbed his finger down and pointed, I had to concede that she hadn't been safe. A com device lay at her side, as if she'd been about to sound the alarm. Maybe she already had.

I started moving immediately, and the silver armor shifted back over me, this time pinning my arm and my baby into a protective shell against my chest. I stumbled by the doorway, a wave of weakness crashing through me and catching me by surprise. I'd felt so strong until now, so ready to face anything, but now it felt like the rug had been pulled out from under me.

The Asrai hissed furiously, but he caught my elbow with his hand and held me up. His shoulders twitched as if he w ere full of anxious energy , but his grip was steady as he propelled me down the hallway. The fighting was still going strong, the sounds had not abated, not even a little. He was taking me straight toward those noises, and I began to shake my head. “No, we have to get back to the shuttle. I have to protect my son. Unless...” A cold wave of fear ran down my spine like icewater. With it came an unexpected surge of strength, my legs straightening. I sped up, rather than let the Asrai take the lead. “Brace is hurt, isn't he?”

The Asrai snarled silently, shaking his head, but his feral red eyes told me nothing. He said even less. There was nothing reassuring about staring into a face like a skull,

with dried blood in the corners of his eyes and by his ears. Nothing reassuring at all.

Ruby

I found the strength to run, carefully, with my hand folded around Mateo's head so he wouldn't shake. He looked peaceful, happy, and completely unaware of the chaos around him. Sleeping now that he was back with me. The wave of happiness and relief that had filled me when I first picked him up had been replaced by fear. He didn't know that his daddy was in danger, but I did, and I knew I had to save my mate. Brace had claimed us, both of us, and I was going to hold him to that promise, come hell or high water.

The Asrai clattered down the stairs in front of me, but he wasn't moving fast enough. I had to be careful — for Mateo's sake. My hand trembled around my gun as we chased after the sounds of the fighting. The mansion might have been beautiful once, a testament to taste and money, but it was a mess now. Windows broken and furniture shattered. Bodies lay left and right, and smoke was beginning to fill the air. Something was on fire, and if that fire wasn't stopped soon, it would engulf the entire building.

We reached a large room then — a ballroom, maybe — though it had far too many couches and pillows scattered throughout. A pedestal sat at the end, with what could only be described as a throne atop it. So this was where Jalima presided over his subjects: a lord in more ways than one. Not just a clever drug smuggler, but a king, at least in his own mind.

There was fighting going on near the dais. I saw Brace's blue fur immediately and drew in a relieved breath when I realized he was okay. I tried to make sense of what I saw, realized there was a massive snake grappling with a Pretorian. They were rolling

along the ground, and those around them were trying to get out of their way or help.

Brace raised his head abruptly, and our eyes met across the large room. Then his gaze lowered, and he saw the baby in my arms. Instantly, something softened in his blue eyes, his relief obvious. He began to shove around people to get to me, but a sudden shout of pain made everyone freeze. There had been grunts, the burn of laserfire, the thuds of fists on flesh, but this scream was visceral.

My mate turned toward the grappling pair, and now I recognized them. Captain Asmoded was at the bottom of the pile, his long body partially coiled around his opponent. The four-armed Pretorian was fighting the squeeze of those coils, his brute strength managing to avert a fatal crushing, for now. But a wound was blooming on his shoulder, blood spurting from the circular hole. Smoke also curled into the air from his flesh; a laser burn, one that had not cauterized all the veins : an interrupted shot.

It felt like everyone held their breath for a long second, the entire fight falling silent as all eyes locked onto the scene . And then there was an explosion of activity. The Pretorian male twisted abruptly and slammed a fist into the mercenary captain's face. Coils instantly slackened, and amid the rush of many bodies — including Brace — leaping for the Pretorian, he leaped away. Another shot blasted through the air from outside, but the four-armed male yanked one of his own men in to the path . Brace would have caught him, I knew he would have . His hands were outstretched, ready to snatch at a foot before the male could leap through the broken window. I didn't see the gun in time. It was suddenly right in my mate's face, a blast going off that would echo in my dreams for eternity.

“No!” I screamed, and my poor baby wailed. I jerked forward, needing to cross that huge room to where Brace was falling to the ground as fast as possible. Everyone was moving so slowly, like I could see everything happening in freeze - frames — snapshots : Brace falling, the Pretorian male tumbling agilely out the window, and his

gun coming up for another shot.

The Varakartoom 's mercenaries and the criminals working for Jalima all clashed with shouts, but nobody was close enough to help my falling mate. Nobody moved toward the slack, unconscious body of the Naga captain , either. "Brace!" I shouted. I hadn't even registered that th e second shot from the escaping male hadn't been aimed at Brace. Not until the mercenary who brought me here abruptly threw himself in front of me. He grunted, his body moving back, careening into me.

Then the Pretorian was gone, his escape echoed by the percussion of a high - powered rifle going off again and again. My mercenary escort righted himself with a furious , howling sound. His hand clutched the side of his neck , where a laser burn had drawn a furrow through his flesh. Across the room, the remaining enemies were beginning to surrender.

I brushed past the injured mercenary, grateful for what he'd done . B ut he was upright and standing — Brace was not. My footsteps felt hollow and heavy as I skidded around broken couches and sprays of pillow stuffing amid the last of the fight winding down. When I crashed to my knees at Brace's side, the Talacan male was already next to him , a high-tec h pressure bandage pressed to the wound over Brace's chest. Blood had soaked his cobalt fur, but the bandage was doing its job, keeping him from bleeding out. "He'll be fine," the Talac said firmly, but his voice came to me as through a fog. "Dravion arrived with the captain . H e'll take good care of your mate."

The name Dravion meant very little to me ; it stirred some vague recollection of a medical check - up aboard the mercenary ship, that was it. I hoped he was the doctor. It was not until Brace opened his eyes a crack, those pretty blue orbs shooting my way, that I believed him.

Brace

My body ached fiercely ; my chest felt like Aramon had parked a shuttle on it. Stars, it hurt to breathe, which meant at least a few ribs were cracked. I was lying on my back, the cool stone beneath me soaking pleasantly into my flesh. A voice was also whispering to me, and I was drawn to those melodic tones. They felt like a sunbeam had suddenly landed on my face, drawing me to the surface. Blinking, I forced myself to look, because I was certain that looking for the source of that voice would make everything worthwhile.

I saw her then, my Ruby. My mate. She was kneeling at my side, her pale face framed by her dark brown braids. Tear stains had dried on her cheeks , but she wasn't crying now. "That's it, wake up for me, Brace. Come back to us. You've got to meet your son. This is Mateo . W e did it — we saved him." My eyes trailed from her beloved face down to her chest, then widened when I took in the tiny bundle she was cradl ing in her arms. He was impossibly small, and he was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen — except for his mom, of course.

The ache in my chest was swallowed by something else, something new and huge , a f eeling so big and strong that i t made me tremble. My hand shook when I raised it to cup my mate's delicate chin, folding around the side of her head. I didn't dare touch that tiny baby, certain I'd hurt him if I tried. "We did it," I agreed. "I love you, Ruby." My eyes dropped again to the tiny miracle in her arms, and I knew I loved him too. He was a part of her, how could I not? Tiny horn nubs r ose proudly from a scrunched - up, adorable little face. He blinked open his eyes, and they were a curious shade of copper. Those eyes were so innocent, lacking any form of judgment. That baby didn't see the beast everyone saw when they looked at me, and he never would.

I'd love him like my own, and like Ruby, he would never fear me.

"The shot missed your heart, but you need to take it easy. Get to the shuttle and park your ass —both you and your mate." I twisted my head in surprise, shocked that there was anyone there with us. I'd been so caught up in Ruby and her baby, our son, that I had not noticed anything else. With Dravion's words, the spell was broken, and I became aware once again of the pain in my chest. So that's what happened. I'd never been shot before. That was new. I couldn't say I liked it.

"Noted," I agreed. "Did you check on my mate and son?" That made the doctor huff a laugh, and I saw a tentacle reach over my head, a handheld scanner clutched in the tip. Like me, Dravion was considered a dangerous, unsafe monster anywhere he went. Like me, he'd chosen to hide away aboard the Varakartoom. But Dravion was half-Aderian, an empath who craved social contact, who spoke easily, charmed easily. We were polar opposites in that.

The scanner was aimed at my son first, and he watched it move with slowly blinking eyes, fighting sleep. Then Dravion checked my mate and, with a hum, injected her with a mix of his replenishing stimulants. A special dose of nutrients to help a healing body recover, and I knew she needed it after what she'd been through. Dravion had probably already injected me while I was still out cold.

With his help, I rose slowly, and then he moved away. Tass took his place, giving me a supporting shoulder to haul myself to my feet. The Viridara male was lanky and tall, but I was still a head taller than him. He carried my extra weight easily and, with a handy vine, held me steady when my knees threatened to buckle for a moment. Ruby rose next to me, pressing to my other side as if she intended to help.

I surveyed the aftermath of the fight with a sense of loss. I'd failed to get Jalima when he made a run for it. Asmoded was probably feeling as furious about that as I was. He certainly wasn't gracefully letting Dravion examine his head injury, but was snarling

at the doctor when he approached. A handful of Jalima's males lay in restraints on the floor, guarded by Flack in his hybrid form. Jaxin, our Weaponmaster, was shouting orders and overseeing the cleanup of bodies. It did not appear as though there were any losses on our side.

Raukesh, the recent Tarkan recruit, was sitting with a scowl on the sidelines, a bandage wrapped around his head. Solear was pacing in front of him, while peeking at the edge of his throat where he was holding the patch himself. I doubted Dravion had seen to him; he looked too riled up to let anyone near. Not even Aramon was able to approach, though it was clear he was trying. Bouncing on his feet, he was frowning deeply in his brother's direction, rattling a mile a minute telepathically — if I had to guess.

"I need to thank him," Ruby whispered, and she nodded at Solear. "That shot was meant for me. It would have hit me in the head if he hadn't gotten in between." She ducked out from under my arm before I could stop her, and Tass shouted a warning after her that she did not heed.

"Go!" I snarled at the Viridara male. Unlikely as it was, he was probably the closest thing to a friend for Solear. Like Aramon, he had a better chance of getting through to him than anyone here. Except maybe the captain, but he was in no shape to intervene, and neither was I, unfortunately. I stumbled to my knees when Tass dropped me to dart after Ruby with a long-legged stride.

I winced, then snarled furiously when Solear got in Ruby's face and snapped his sharp teeth at her. I heard her shudder in surprise, and then Tass swept his arm around her waist and pulled her back. Aramon leapt between his brother and my mate, arms wide. The two of them grappled as if Solear wanted to tear my mate to shreds.

She was still trembling and shaking a few minutes later, when Tass — having

enlisted the surly Raukesh for help — had finally gotten us to the nearest shuttle. We were sitting side by side in the jumpseats, and she had tucked herself against my arm, her head heavy, as if she were ready to fall asleep — if not for the shock. “He looked like he wanted to kill me. Why? He saved me before...”

I held her tight, my eyes torn between wanting to look at her face and at our son. My body hurt, but I would heal, and Dravion had given my mate and son a clean bill of health. That was all that mattered. Now I just needed to ease her nerves, to warn her that she should steer clear of Solear in the future. In a hushed whisper, I explained that he was feral, that he was dangerous. I did not expect the suddenly mutinous expression on her face.

“Brace! How’s that different from you? You thought you were a danger to everyone until I proved you different, didn’t I? He deserves a chance too.” Ah, stars, she was right — and I loved her for it. Cupping her face, I kissed her, our breathing mingling, our souls entwined so deeply that I knew I’d never get her out of my system. She was right. She had never given up on me, and because of that, I’d learned that I could control the rage; that even in my darkest moments, I could not harm her. Maybe there was a woman out there who could do the same for Solear. If any male deserved to find his way out of the dark... it was the male who’d taken laser fire for my female — and saved her life.

Ruby sighed against my mouth, her hand gliding along my shoulder and gently petting me. Then she yelped, and I yanked my eyes from her to search for any threat inside the shuttle. Nothing — until I looked at my female and discovered that her silver armor was melting. It was sliding right off her skin and pooling in a shimmering puddle at her feet. Her skin broke out in goosebumps where it was exposed to the cold Rumcas air blowing in through the open hatch. Left in only a medical gown, she was instantly shaking with cold. I snarled at the sight of Sin standing at the foot of the hatch. “You should have warned her!”

He rolled a casual shoulder and stepped into the shuttle just enough to yank a blanket from a cubby of supplies. It was tossed sharply my way, and I caught it by reflex, my chest groaning in pain from the movement. "I did not need to do anything," he said coolly. He turned on his heel and disappeared, the shape of a large hound forming behind him and trotting after him into the snow. I tried to recall if he'd been there already before Ruby's armor began melting or if he'd shown up after... I wasn't sure.

Ruby

I felt this crazy seesawing between happy and worried, but after Brace kissed me, the needle definitely settled on happy. He was going to be okay, Mateo was in my arms — unharmed and safe. All in all, he had probably not been away from my side for more than a few hours. And the doctor had declared him healthy. What more could I want?

Then the moment had been ruined by the symbiont dripping off my body, leaving me a shivering, cold mess. Even with the blanket now wrapped around me, I was shaking with cold. The upside was that I could now shift Mateo under my gown and allow him to attempt his first drink from my sore, aching breasts. It was making Brace extra protective when mercenaries started to climb aboard the shuttle with us. He growled at anyone who dared to look, not that much was visible. They strapped in quietly, and by the time the hatch shut and we were flying away from this place, Mateo was done and fast asleep.

The males aboard the shuttle were talking, and, tired myself, I only drowsily paid attention as I huddled against Brace. Jalima had somehow gotten away, but he was badly injured, clipped twice by shots from Saisir, the captain's son and apparently a gifted sharpshooter. The captain was injured too, but he would recover, and it appeared that my debt and name had been cleared at the Rumcas port, too. That last

bit of info, Flack, the quartermaster, specifically told Brace once Mateo had fallen asleep.

So now I was sans a ship — the Finix lost — but at least the issue had been resolved with the Rummicaron officials. Jalima and De'tor must have had their fingers in too many pockets for things to have been fair, until, apparently, one mercenary captain made a stink. I thought the loss of the Finix would hit harder, but I kept feeling so happy. Mateo and Brace did that. I was no longer alone. I had a family.

When we docked with the Varakartoom a little while later, it was with a very different feeling from my previous visit. I was not boarding this ship as if I were a criminal under suspicion. The mercenaries were not my enemies — not pirates and thieves — and Brace was right at my side.

Then the doors opened, and I was greeted by several human women and one extra cheerful Elrohirian. I knew I'd found my place, I could stop running.

Ruby

Mateo had fallen asleep after nursing, his warm, gentle weight lying against my shoulder after he'd burped. His tail was curled around my wrist, holding me snugly even in his sleep. I stroked my fingers through the downy tuft of coppery hair on top of his precious head, and sighed with happiness.

He was growing like cabbage, healthy as a horse, and already able to hold up his own head. Maybe that was normal for Kertinal babies, but at three weeks old, it still caught me by surprise. He looked like a wise little man when he stared at me with his pretty eyes, too, and that always made me smile.

Fitting into Brace's life aboard the Varakartoom was strange, but I couldn't complain. For so long, my job, running cargo with the Finix — had been all I had to focus on. To sit still and just be Mateo's mom and Brace's mate for a while was nice. And after all that adventure, I needed the rest.

The doctor had declared me healthy but exhausted and ordered me to take it easy. To Brace, that had meant as much bed rest as possible — and damn it, no sex either. I was healed, I felt strong again, and Mateo could go without his mom when he napped, sometimes. In fact, I was going to try to put him in his crib right now.

Rising slowly, I shuffled across the room to the small bed that Flack had procured for us on the first day back. It was a beautiful crib, and Mateo loved lying in it and staring at the mobile of stars that could be projected above it. It was the most decorative part of Brace's quarters — the rest still quite bare — but I didn't mind that. Brace didn't worry that he'd end up clawing a chair to pieces at any moment now, and we

were going to take our time decorating the place the way we liked, together.

My baby sighed, his body slack when I put him down. He rolled his head to the left, then settled, still fast asleep. It took a minute longer to extract my wrist from the clutch of his tail, but he was happy to curl it around one of the bars of his crib instead. Smoothing my shirt down over my leggings, I checked , but I was clear of any stains — somehow.

Opening the bedroom door, I peeked into the living room. It was directly adjacent to the galley and fairly spacious, especially compared to how most of the crew was bunking —a perk of dating the ship's chef. Good food was apparently important enough to keep the cook happy. Not a bad deal. This area had already gotten a new couch , and Tass and Elyssa had brought in a whole selection of pretty potted plants last week. They were gorgeous, lighting up one corner. I also loved that Brace had allowed them — and their cute plant girl, Nelly — to visit his domain.

The salon table still had a glued and badly fixed leg, making it a tiny bit wobbly. Now , it looked like it could barely stay upright under the massive spread of foods that covered it —plates and plates of them, their scents curling into the air and pulling at the strings of my memories. How had he done this? It smelled just right! I leapt onto the couch , yanked a plate of empanadas toward me , and stuffed one into my mouth without hesitation. Every dish on the table was one I'd mentioned my abuela or mama making.

I was crying with happiness over the flavors when he came through the door a moment later , his smile so huge it nearly split his handsome face in two. “Ah, I see you found my surprise. Do you like it , sweet mate?” I nodded with a full mouth, rising to throw myself in to his arms. Of course I liked it. This was the best gift ever. I already knew I was home, but now he'd gone out of his way to remind me of my family — to give me a piece of my past back.

He caught me in his arms, raised me high against his massive chest, and nuzzled my

head with his mouth. Then we were kissing, and for a long while I forgot about that precious food — lost to his touch. Getting boarded by pirates had never been so rewarding.

THE END