



The Mercenary's Hidden Heir

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I was sent to kill for him.

Instead, I saw her.

Caged. Controlled. Burning under silk.

She was never a reward.

She was mine the second I laid eyes on her.

I left to keep her safe.

But while I was gone, she gave birth to my children... alone.

And bled for it.

Now I'm back.

And I'll burn this empire to ash just to watch her breathe free again.

She can hate me.

Fight me.

Lie to my face.

But she's not leaving.

Not with my sons.

Not ever again.

Read on for: secret baby, alien mercenary obsession, fated mates, revenge, captivity, betrayal, and a man who only speaks one language—mine. HEA guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 30

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

TRAZ

Glimmer stinks like rust and rotting ambition.

I crouch on the edge of the broadcast tower, the wind cutting across the city's night like a blade.

The skyline shimmers with filth-drenched light—neon pulsing in time with the heartbeat of crime.

Below, hovercars hum between broken spires and gangland shrines.

Somewhere in that glowing hellhole is the man Petru wants dead.

I don't ask questions. I get names. I get locations. I get paid.

But Petru didn't keep his mouth shut this time. Too proud. Too twitchy.

"He's a senator," Petru spat two nights ago, pacing his office with that glass of glowing blue swill he calls wine. "Human. The new breed—talks soft, but he's organizing resistance. Wants to put 'limits' on Kiphian territory rights. Limits, Traz. Like we're some parasite he can control."

I didn't blink.

Petru kept going.

“He's not just dangerous because of what he says. He's dangerous because he's clean. Untouchable. No bribes. No dirt. Just a soft-eyed revolutionary with too much influence and too much damned hope.”

That's the thing Petru hates most—hope. It disrupts the economy of fear he's worked so hard to build.

“Make it clean,” he said, pushing a data chip across the table. “Make it final.”

I took it. Not because I care about Petru's politics, or his empire of back-alley slaves and smuggled tech. I took it because the money's good, and because putting my blade in the spine of someone who thinks he's untouchable still gives me a flicker of satisfaction.

Now I'm here.

Three blocks down, across from the diplomatic compound where the senator likes to sleep like a goddamn prince while his guards sweat in shifts.

His suite's on the top floor. Private balcony.

Only two exits. One guarded. One facing a sheer drop.

Petru said he wanted it done tonight—no explosions, no trace.

He wants the man to just stop breathing.

I check my PerComm. Countdown synced to the senator's daily schedule. He eats the same late meal, listens to old Terran jazz, takes a shower, then checks messages in his study. Every night. Like clockwork.

I wait for the right beat, then hook into the side of the building with magnetic boots and drop to the balcony.

The guard's inside, back turned. Rookie mistake.

I slide open the glass just enough to fire a dart. It hisses—quiet, efficient. The guard twitches and folds like wet cloth. No sound.

I'm in.

The suite is a monument to hypocrisy. Vials of aged Kiphian wine. A statue from Seleron. An Earth painting on the wall—"Starry Night," I think. I never understood humans and their obsession with chaos frozen in color.

The senator is where I expect him. Back turned, hunched over a console, ranting quietly into a recording device.

"I've confirmed Petru's weapon shipments to the Outer Rings," he's saying. "The merc he's working with is?"

He doesn't hear me.

I move silent.

The blade's out before he finishes the sentence. I don't hesitate. Don't give him time to look back and understand. I slip it between his ribs, under the shoulder blade. Twist. His breath catches, eyes wide. No scream. Just shock.

Then nothing.

I ease him down, close his eyes. Doesn't matter that he was clean. Doesn't matter that

he was trying to fix this system. He got in the way of power—and power doesn't negotiate.

I clean the blade on his cloak.

Slip out the way I came.

The night swallows me whole.

I melt into the night, boots kissing rusted metal and stained concrete. Glimner's arteries pulse with crime—steam hisses from sewer grates, shadows shift in doorways. Somewhere, a woman screams. Somewhere else, someone laughs at it.

This place never sleeps. Doesn't even blink.

I take back alleys, stick to the darker veins of the city. Less eyes. Less noise. There's no alarm yet. The senator's guards won't find the body until morning, maybe later. The way I left it—hell, they might think it was natural at first.

The credstick's heavy in my pocket. Clean transfer, top-tier coin. Could disappear for a year, maybe two. Drift between planets. Pick up side work. Drink somewhere warm. Find a reason to forget.

But I never do.

I stop beside a rusted vendor stall. The owner, a one-eyed Vakutan, nods once. He knows me. Or knows the kind of man I am. Doesn't speak, doesn't ask. Just sells me a bottle of Garlis fire and goes back to pretending he doesn't live on a dying rock held together by corruption and blood money.

I take a swig. The liquor burns hot down my throat, a familiar ache that doesn't do a

damn thing to dull the voice in my head.

Used to be I didn't think about the jobs after they were done.

Now... sometimes they linger.

Not the faces. Not the names. Just the silence that follows.

I keep walking. Past a strip of clubs glowing with pink and blue haze, past a row of dead-eyed girls in glass booths pretending they're enjoying themselves. I glance at one. She flinches.

I look away.

I didn't come from money. Didn't come from much of anything. Kalei was war-torn when I was born. A planet of soldiers. My blood was sharpened before I ever learned to speak. Loyalty was measured in kills. Compassion got you left behind.

Mercenary life suited me. I didn't ask questions. I didn't care who wanted who dead. You hire me, you get results. That was the rule.

Still is.

But lately... something's shifted. Small things. My knife doesn't slide quite as clean. I notice more than I should. I'm starting to care what happens after.

That's dangerous.

I pause under a flickering streetlight, watching two Kiphian boys kick a half-broken drone across the alley like it's a game. Their laughter echoes. Pure. Honest. The kind I haven't heard in years.

One of them stops and stares at me. His eyes go wide. He nudges his friend and they scatter like leaves.

I can't even blame them.

To them, I'm a monster in a leather jacket. A hired blade. A ghost that walks through war zones and leaves silence in his wake.

I finish the bottle and toss it in a trash bin already overflowing with someone else's regrets.

Petru will want to talk. Throw a party maybe. Show me off like some exotic animal that just brought down a senator. He'll have his lies ready. His offers. His strings.

But I don't belong to anyone.

I never have.

The truth is, I'm tired. Not in my bones. In my head. My soul, if I've still got one. There's a weight I can't shake lately. The kind that makes me wonder what happens when all the contracts run out.

What's left for a man like me when there's no one else left to kill?

The street curves, leads toward the Spine—Petru's fortress dressed up as a palace. I can already see the glow of it in the distance. Hear the pulse of music, the fake laughter.

He'll have something new waiting. He always does.

I straighten my spine, square my shoulders, and walk into the lion's mouth.

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KELLI

The lights in this place never turn off. They just dim. Like Glimner's trying to pretend it knows what sleep is, when really it's just waiting for the next body to drop.

I lie on the cot—if you can call it that—and stare up at the ceiling that's peeling like old skin. There's a leak near the vent that drips every thirty-two seconds. I counted. It's the kind of thing that would drive a normal person mad. But I passed normal a long time ago.

Petru's compound is a maze of iron and filth dressed up in velvet and lies.

On the outside, it looks like power. Inside, it smells like fear.

Burnt metal, perfume, and sweat. People like to romanticize crime syndicates—call them empires, make them sound regal.

But this? This is just a dressed-up cage. And I'm the showpiece.

They call me "The Pure One." Like I'm some rare relic. A porcelain doll nobody's allowed to touch. My skin's pale, my hair's kept long and blonde like some kind of stupid fairy tale. But the only story here is the one they made up—that I'm clean. Virginal. Perfect.

Petru likes that word. Perfect.

What he means is I'm untouched. Marketable. Exotic in a planet crawling with blood

and bad intentions. Humans are rare here. One like me? Raised in captivity, molded to be docile?

Gold.

I was twelve the first time I figured out what I was. A prize. Not a person. Not anymore.

He'd just finished gutting some guy in the atrium—another gang leader who got brave—and came back dripping in green blood. Looked me in the eye and said, “Don’t worry, sweet thing. You’re safe. You’re not like them.”

I should’ve been afraid. I wasn’t. I was numb. And I’ve stayed that way ever since.

Now I’m twenty-three, and this place has grown roots around my spine. The other girls come and go. Some work the clubs. Some end up in boxes. I stay in silk and glass. I’m shown off at meetings like a status symbol. “Petru’s human.” Like I’m a damn collector’s item.

Only person who sees me as anything but a painting is Silpha.

Petru’s sister is sharp around the edges. She doesn’t like me. Never has. But lately... she’s different. Less venom, more silence. I think she’s starting to see the bars on her own cage. I don’t blame her. We’re both ornaments—just dressed in different costumes.

“Kelli,” she says now, knocking once before barging in. She never waits for permission.

I sit up. “It’s barely morning.”

“You’re being summoned. Clean up. Wear the silver.”

My gut twists. Silver means something’s happening. Big meeting, maybe. New client. Or worse—another offer.

“Who’s here?” I ask.

She looks at me, really looks, like she’s deciding whether I deserve the truth. Her lips press thin.

“Someone Petru wants to impress.”

I don’t ask more. She wouldn’t answer anyway.

She tosses the dress onto the bed. It’s thin. Practically see-through. Typical. I change in silence. The air is cold, the fabric colder. I’ve learned not to shiver. Petru doesn’t like weakness. Neither do the guards.

Silpha watches me in the mirror, arms crossed. “You could make this easier, you know.”

“What? Smile pretty? Say thank you for the privilege?”

She doesn’t flinch. “I’m not your enemy, Kelli.”

“Sure,” I mutter. “You just manage the keys to my cage.”

She leaves after that. I don’t blame her.

I finish tying the dress and brush out my hair. No makeup. Petru says I look “more innocent” without it. I stare at my reflection. Pale face, dark eyes. I don’t see

innocence. I see a weapon carved out of obedience.

I walk the halls alone. Guards posted at every corner, pretending not to notice me. They always look, though. Even if they try not to. Being human here makes me rare. Being Petru's property makes me dangerous.

I reach the viewing chamber and wait by the side wall. The floors gleam with obsidian tile, polished so bright I can see my face in it. Velvet drapes hang from the ceiling. Everything in here whispers money. Money built from blood and bones.

I cross my arms, ignoring the cold.

I don't know what's worse—being paraded in front of gang leaders who want to barter for me, or being ignored completely. One makes my skin crawl. The other makes me forget I ever existed.

But the worst part?

Hope.

Hope's a knife. And I've been carving it into my ribs for years.

Every once in a while, someone new shows up. A merc. A smuggler. Someone with fire behind their eyes. And I think—Maybe this is it. Maybe they'll see me. Maybe they'll help.

They never do.

The last one barely looked at me. Just grunted and left. Maybe he was smart. Maybe he saw what this place does and didn't want to catch the infection.

I don't even know what I'd do if someone offered freedom. I talk a big game. But truth is, I've been caged so long, I'm not sure I remember how to fly.

Still. I wait.

Because there's a part of me—a stupid, stubborn little flame—that refuses to go out. I keep it buried deep, beneath the layers of silk and submission. I feed it with every small act of rebellion. Every time I roll my eyes when Petru isn't looking. Every time I let Silpha see I'm not broken.

That fire? It's all I've got left.

And someday, it's gonna burn this whole place down.

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TRAZ

G limner's poison doesn't hit you in the lungs—it settles in your bones.

The Spine rises like a scar in the middle of it, all jagged metal and gleaming ego. Petru's fortress hasn't changed—still trying too hard. Security cameras like spider eyes, armed guards itching for movement. Doesn't matter. They know who I am. I don't knock. I walk in.

The guards don't speak. One of them twitches like he wants to. Thinks better of it.

Good choice.

Inside, it's hotter. Louder. The bassline of a synth band I don't recognize thumps against the walls like a pulse trying to escape. Lights dimmed just enough to pretend it's atmosphere, not just hiding the filth.

I know the way.

They've dressed the place up tonight—gold trim on the doors, draped banners of black with the Bleached Skull emblem stitched in bloodred thread. Subtle as a blaster shot to the chest.

The Lounge opens ahead, and Petru is exactly where I expect him—on his mock-throne, drink in hand, surrounded by orbiting flattery. His grin widens when he sees me.

“Traz. You glorious bastard.” He rises like he’s welcoming a god.

“Petru.” I nod once, keep walking. “You’re still breathing.”

“Thanks to you.” He laughs too loud. “You never disappoint.”

He doesn’t offer his hand. Smart man. We’ve worked together long enough to skip the pageantry. Instead, he tosses a signal to a server, and a drink lands in my hand before the blood on my boots is dry.

“Join me,” he says, gesturing to the private booth beside his elevated seat.

I follow. Might as well see what tonight’s bribe looks like.

We sit. Music blaring below, conversation buzzing like flies. The booth dims around us, privacy screen flickering up with a faint hum.

“I heard it was clean,” he says.

“It was.”

“Did he beg?”

“He blinked.”

Petru chuckles. “You always did know how to send a message.”

He leans in, voice dropping like we’re in on a secret. “This senator... He thought he was untouchable. Thought he could put chains on Kiphian trade, like we’re pests to be exterminated. Idiot didn’t realize he was chewing glass.”

“Now he’s choking on it.”

His eyes gleam. He loves this part. The talking. The gloating. Like the kill was a political masterpiece instead of a quick job in a dark room.

That’s when the curtain behind us rustles and someone steps in.

Silpha.

She’s aged, but not soft. Lines around her mouth like they were carved with a blade, sharp eyes always calculating. She wears administrative grays, unadorned, like armor against the nonsense her brother cloaks himself in.

“Traz,” she says, cool as ever.

“Silpha.” I nod once.

“You’re late,” she says to Petru.

He waves her off. “We’re celebrating.”

She doesn’t look at me. Not directly. But I can feel the way her eyes linger. Measuring. Judging. Like she’s still not sure what category to put me in—tool or threat.

She leans toward her brother. “The vaults need review. You’re three shipments behind on rotation and the workers are starting to?—”

“Later,” Petru says, waving a jeweled hand. “I have a guest.”

“I’m aware.” She shoots him a thin smile. “You usually bring out the wine when

you're feeling nervous."

He scowls. "Don't ruin the mood."

"I'd never dream of it."

She turns and walks away without another word.

Petru watches her go, expression unreadable for a moment.

"Useful, but joyless," he mutters. "That's Silpha. She runs numbers like a droid and has the charm of a cold knife. But I suppose that's what you get when you promise your dying mother you'll keep your baby sister safe forever."

I say nothing.

Petru finishes his drink. "She's been tense lately. Worrying about the books, the shipments, power balances. She forgets sometimes that fear is the only currency that matters out here."

I finish mine in one swallow. "That why you called me back?"

A flash of something darker moves through his eyes. "Partly."

He pours us both another round, and I can feel it—that shift in the air. The moment before a deal changes shape.

He's building up to something.

And it's not just about money.

Petru refills our glasses, but I don't touch mine. He leans back, appraising me like he's working up to a punchline.

"You know," he starts, "you've always been efficient. Reliable. Not much for indulgence."

"Shouldn't have to bribe a man you trust."

He grins like I told a joke. "It's not a bribe, Traz. It's a reward. A celebration. And maybe a... proposition."

There it is.

He signals to someone just outside the booth. I hear the soft shhhh of the curtain, the faintest footsteps. I don't look yet. I already know what this is. He's played this card before, just not like this.

Then Petru stands.

"Gentlemen like us," he says loud enough to be heard past the curtain, "we deal in blood and power. But sometimes... sometimes beauty is the highest form of wealth."

He gestures grandly, and I finally turn my head.

And there she is.

Kelli.

Draped in silver that clings like smoke. Pale hair shining under the dim lights. Eyes like frost cut with steel. Still as ever. Silent.

I've seen her before—kept on Petru's arm during high-stakes meetings like she was part of the decor. Never spoke. Never smiled. Just stood there, a breathing trophy. The human. Petru's pure one. Rumors followed her like scent trails—virgin, unspoiled, bred in captivity like a prize hound.

She looks different tonight.

Sharper. Tired maybe, but not wilted. There's heat beneath the quiet. Fire that hasn't been snuffed, just banked for survival.

Petru spreads his arms toward her like a game show host revealing a grand prize.

“This,” he says, “is Kelli. The jewel of my collection. Human. Untouched. A symbol of prestige. Every man in this sector has begged for a night with her.”

He leans closer to me, his voice dropping again. “I've refused them all. But for you... tonight, I make an exception.”

My stomach knots, slow and cold.

“You're offering her to me?”

“Not offering.” His grin turns cruel. “I'm giving. A token of my gratitude. She's yours for the night.”

I glance back at her. She doesn't flinch. Doesn't move. But her eyes meet mine—and now, there's something there. Not fear. Not hope.

A test.

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KELLI

S ometimes, I try to remember my mother's voice.

Not the way she screamed when they came—when the gang stormed our compound, rifles up, masks down—but before that. Soft and warm. Like sunlight through linen.

She used to hum while she worked. I think it was a song from Earth. Something old. Something sad.

I hum it sometimes under my breath, when no one's around. Just to remind myself I'm not from here. That I came from something better, even if it didn't last.

They died fast. I think. That's what I hope. Father went first—shot trying to reach for his sidearm. Mother didn't run. She held onto me like she could still protect me. She couldn't.

I was eight. Small. Breakable. Perfect cargo for the black market.

Petru didn't find me. He bought me.

Sometimes I wonder if that's worse.

I think about them most before nights like this. Nights where I have to dress up like a doll and smile like my bones aren't splintered under silk. I imagine my parents watching. I wonder if they'd recognize me.

I hope they wouldn't.

Because this version of me? She's not theirs.

She belongs to the Bleached Skull.

The knock isn't loud. That's how I know it's bad.

Soft knocks mean orders. Sharp knocks mean punishment. But this—this half-hearted, ghost-knuckle tap? That's what they do when they're about to ruin you and want you calm about it.

Silpha walks in before I answer. Of course.

Her mouth is pinched, like always, like it hurts her to speak to me.

"You're wanted," she says flatly, tossing a thin bundle of silver fabric onto the cot.

My fingers twitch at the sight of it.

The silver dress.

I stand slowly. "What for?"

She looks at me, expression carefully blank. "Petru's got a guest. High-priority."

I feel my chest tighten. It's not new, this feeling. That clench of dread right under my ribs. I've worn that dress four times. Always for show. Always to be paraded like some kind of alien collectible, never touched, never spoken to except in third-person.

But this time... something's off.

Silpha shifts like she's waiting for me to break. I don't give her the satisfaction.

"Is it a party?"

She pauses. "You'll be... entertaining him privately."

The words don't hit all at once. They slither in. Slow and cold.

I sit down hard on the cot.

Silpha turns to go, maybe to avoid watching whatever my face is doing.

"How long have you known?" I ask.

She stops at the door.

"A few days," she says, too quickly. "Petru's been planning something. Trying to impress him."

"Do I even get a say?"

Silpha doesn't turn around. "You never have."

She leaves.

I stare at the silver dress. Shiny, cheap, thin enough to dissolve in moonlight.

So this is it.

Not a parade. Not another smug show of control. This time, he's done waiting. Petru's ready to cash in.

I press my hands to my face. It's shaking. My whole body's shaking.

I always knew this day would come. I just didn't think it'd feel like this.

Not rage. Not even fear.

Just a hollow space. Like something inside me just stepped out.

I stand up and pick up the dress. It slinks through my fingers like a lie.

I get ready slowly. Every movement mechanical. Hair brushed, face rinsed. The dress clings in all the wrong places. I don't look in the mirror. I don't need to see the mask Petru likes best.

But as I sit back down on the cot, waiting for the guard who'll escort me wherever I'm supposed to go, something sparks. Small. Stupid. Defiant.

If Petru's really handing me over to some mercenary—someone new, someone who's never been part of this sick little fantasy—then maybe this is my chance.

Maybe if I'm not "pure" anymore, he'll get bored. Toss me out. Sell me off. Let me rot with the others. And maybe—just maybe—I'll find a crack big enough to slip through.

I can't fight my way out. I know that.

But maybe I can ruin what he values.

I've never had a weapon before. But maybe this body—this stupid, polished, untouched thing—is a weapon.

And tonight, I get to aim it.

The guards come right on cue. Two Kiphians, bulky and grim. One gestures with a nod. “You know where to go.”

Yeah. I know.

I follow in silence.

The halls are humming louder tonight. Music from below, the scent of alcohol and perfume curling through the vents. The party’s already started.

They lead me through back corridors, then up a private stairwell. Higher than I’ve been before. I feel every step in my bones. Every inch of carpet under my bare feet.

They stop outside a velvet-draped door.

One guard knocks. The other mutters something into a commlink.

A moment later, the door hisses open.

“Go,” one says.

I walk in.

And immediately, the air shifts.

Low lighting. Private table. Lux wine on crystal. Petru sitting like a smug king, and across from him...

The merc.

I see the back of him first. Broad shoulders, silver hair tied tight, dark jacket stretched over a body that's seen combat more than comfort. He's a wall of silence.

Petru turns to me, face lit up like he's handing out medals. "Kelli. Look at this. Doesn't she shine like starlight?"

The merc turns his head, just slightly.

His eyes lock on mine.

Green. Sharp. Older than they should be.

He says nothing. But he looks. Really looks.

And I feel that look in my stomach.

Not like hunger.

Like a warning.

Like he sees everything.

Petru gestures. "Tonight, she's yours. A gift. No need to thank me."

I stand there, back straight, chin up. The merc says nothing.

And somehow, that silence is louder than anything Petru's ever said.

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TRAZ

She doesn't move.

She stands there like a statue carved from stormlight—pale skin wrapped in silver that clings like it's got something to prove. Her chin is lifted, her mouth tight, but her eyes... her eyes are dangerous.

They're watching me like I'm the one on display.

I look away first. Not because I'm weak. Because I know myself. And if I stare too long, I'll do something I can't take back.

Petru's still talking. Something about gratitude. About legacy. His voice blurs into background noise. All I hear now is the sound of my blood pounding in my ears.

I drain the rest of my drink and motion for another.

The server rushes over, pours fast, and retreats like he's afraid of proximity.

Smart man.

"She's not going to bite," Petru says, smirking. "Unless you ask."

I grunt. "You sure you're not selling a ghost story?"

That earns a snort. "She's real enough. But careful—she's got fire. You like fire,

don't you, Traz?"

I don't answer.

He laughs, claps me on the shoulder, and turns to schmooze a politician I wouldn't mind cutting in half.

She's still standing there.

I glance at her again—just once, quick. She hasn't blinked. But now her eyes are narrowed. Like she's trying to read my face the same way I've been reading hers.

No one looks at me like that. Not here.

Not with challenge.

I rise from my seat and walk away. I don't owe anyone my patience, and certainly not my attention. I need space. Distance. Clarity.

But I don't make it far.

Her voice stops me.

"Is that it?" she says, loud enough for only me to hear. "You're just gonna walk off after the grand unveiling?"

I turn slow.

She hasn't moved. Still wrapped in silver and fire and bad decisions.

"You expected what?" I say. "Applause?"

“I expected something,” she replies, voice low and sharp. “You’re supposed to be dangerous. Right now, you just look... bored.”

I walk back to her, slowly, one deliberate step at a time. The party noise dulls around us, like the whole room is holding its breath.

“I am dangerous,” I say quietly. “You just haven’t given me a reason yet.”

Her lips twitch, not quite a smile. “Guess I’ll have to try harder.”

I study her. She doesn’t lower her gaze. Doesn’t flinch. It’s not bravado. It’s something else—something layered in pain and polish, survival disguised as sass.

“You think this is a game?” I murmur.

“I think this is a cage,” she says. “And I think you don’t know what to do with a woman who rattles the bars.”

That lands.

She steps closer, just a hair. I feel her heat like a weapon.

“You always talk this much?” I ask.

“Only when I’m trying to piss someone off.”

“It’s working.”

She finally smiles. Not sweet. Not polite. A little feral.

“Then I’m doing something right.”

Gods help me, I laugh.

It's low, quick. The first real sound I've made in hours that didn't involve blood or threats.

I step back.

I can't be this close. Not yet. Not without losing something I'm not ready to give.

I leave her standing there, still as a torch in windless air, and duck behind one of the velvet partitions near the wall. Alone for a breath. Alone for a lie.

But I can still feel her.

Like a wire running under my skin. Buzzing. Burning.

I've seen a thousand beautiful women across a thousand planets. Most of them didn't make it past the edge of my notice.

But her?

She's carved into me now.

Everything about her is a contradiction—delicate and defiant, poised like a weapon dressed up as a gift.

That silver dress clings like fog, and I hate that I noticed how the light hit her collarbone.

Hate that I'm still seeing her lips. Still hearing that voice.

That voice with no right being that calm.

I was fine before she walked in. Cold. Controlled.

Now?

Now I'm unraveling.

And I don't even know her name.

I grip the edge of the curtain until the frame creaks under my hand.

I shouldn't go back.

I have to go back.

I return.

She hasn't moved.

And that's when it hits me.

The shift.

Like gravity doubling in my chest. Like a wave cresting, rising, crashing down. I feel the pull—deep, magnetic, ancient.

Jalshagar.

My heart thunders. My breath stutters.

No. No, not her. Not now.

But the truth digs in, brutal and final. I feel it in my skin. In the air between us. This woman—the one Petru handed to me like a bottle of cheap wine—is my mate.

Fated.

Chosen by whatever cruel gods still play dice in the void.

She notices the change. Her smile falters.

“What?” she says.

I shake my head and down my drink in a single swallow.

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

I lean in, close enough for only her to hear. “You don’t want to know what just happened.”

“Try me.”

I look at her one last time. Really look. She’s gorgeous—yes—but it’s more than that. There’s steel under the silk. A core that hasn’t cracked, even after years of captivity. She’s not broken.

She’s burning.

And she’s mine.

I want to tear down every wall in this place. Kill Petru. Drag her out. Lock the galaxy behind us.

But I can't. Not yet. Not here.

So instead, I hold out a hand.

“Come with me.”

She hesitates for half a second. Then places her hand in mine.

It's like static—sharp and hot and final.

And just like that, we walk out of the room together.

Not a word spoken.

But everything changed.

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KELLI

The air in Traz's quarters hangs thick with the sharp scent of oiled leather and something warmer, like smoldering cedar.

His fingers brush the strap of my dress, calloused but deliberate, pausing as if testing the weight of the silence.

My breath hitches—not from fear, but the raw thrill of control slipping from my hands, willingly.

The fabric falls beneath his touch, cool air kissing my collarbone. I don't look at him. Not yet.

His voice rumbles low, a graveled hum. "You're shaking."

"Not from cold." My reply is softer than I intend. The second strap slips free, his knuckles grazing the hollow of my throat. I tilt my head, daring to meet his gaze. Green eyes flicker, a storm trapped behind glass.

He doesn't smile. Doesn't flinch. His palm flattens against my ribcage, heat seeping through the thin fabric. "Why now?"

The question isn't a challenge. It's a key turning in a lock.

I step closer, my bare foot brushing his boot. "I know you. What people here say about you. You don't ask for things. You take them."

A muscle tightens in his jaw. His thumb traces the curve of my hip, possessive yet hesitant, as if mapping terrain he's sworn not to claim. The dress pools at my waist, his breath catching when I reach for his wrist. Not to stop him. To anchor him.

"My name's Kelli. Say it." My name fractures on his tongue, rough-edged, unfamiliar.

"Kelli. You're not what I expected," he murmurs.

I press his hand to my pulse, a wild rhythm beneath his palm. "Neither are you."

The confession hangs between us, fragile as the space before a fall. His lips graze my temple, a ghost of contact, and for a heartbeat, the mercenary vanishes. What remains is a man unmoored, his armor cracked by the quiet rebellion of a touch.

The dress falls completely; a golden halo around my naked toes. My nipples perk as cold air brushes them. My silk panties are all that's keeping me as Petru's prized pet.

The air shifts as Traz steps closer, his shadow swallowing the dim light. His voice is a low command, not unkind, but unyielding. "Now you. Undress me."

My fingers tremble as they find the first buckle of his pauldron, the leather worn smooth from years of battle.

The metal falls away with a heavy thud, revealing a collarbone dusted with silver scars.

I work methodically, each piece of armor a puzzle piece to his body—the vambrace etched with constellations, the gloves still warm from his skin.

He stands statue-still, watching me through half-lidded eyes as I kneel to unbuckle his

greaves.

"Did he make you do this often?" Traz asks, the question slicing through the quiet. "Petru. Dressing him like a king."

"Only when he wanted to feel like one." The last strap releases, and his breastplate clatters to the floor. My breath catches as I reach for the linen undershirt, the fabric clinging to him like a second skin. "He preferred an audience when he... displayed his treasures."

Traz's jaw tightens as I peel the shirt over his shoulders. "And you? Did you prefer it?"

The truth tastes like ash. "I preferred surviving." His torso is a map of violence—ridges of old wounds, the taut muscle of a man carved by war. My hands hover at the waistband of his trousers, the only barrier left. A nod from him, silent permission. The laces unravel like a sigh.

When he steps free of the fabric, I don't gasp. Don't look away. His arousal is undeniable, a heavy curve that makes my throat dry. Not the crude weapon I expected, but something almost reverent in its power. My fingers brush the inside of his thigh by accident, and he inhales sharply.

"You're staring." His voice is rougher now, a riverbed scraped dry.

"Would you prefer I lie?" My palm skims the air above him, not touching, just tracing the heat. "It's like the rest of you. Made to command."

He catches my wrist, sudden but not cruel. Brings my knuckles to his mouth. The kiss he presses there is softer than I thought him capable of.

His hands guide me toward the bed, fingertips tracing the curve of my spine.

The sheets are cool beneath my back, the scent of him—smoke and salt—filling my lungs as he leans over me.

His thumb hooks the edge of my panties, hesitating.

I nod into the silence, my pulse a wild thing caged between my ribs.

The fabric slips away, a whisper of silk against skin, and the air kisses parts of me that have never known light.

He moves slowly, mapping me with his palms—the dip of my waist, the arch of a foot, the flutter of my breath against his collarbone.

Every touch is a language I'm learning. His mouth follows, warm and patient, pressing promises into the hollow of my throat, the curve of my shoulder.

I tremble, not from fear, but from the weight of something tender unraveling in my chest.

When he settles between my thighs, his gaze holds mine.

No words. Just the press of his forehead to mine, the shared breath that bridges the space between our lips.

He's careful. So careful. The ache blooms like a flower unfurling, slow and inevitable, his hands cradling my hips as if I'm something fragile.

I clutch the sheets, then his shoulders, anchoring myself to the heat of him.

There's no sharpness, only the steady press of his cock filling me. A tear slips free—not from pain, but the shock of being known. He kisses it away, his mouth soft as a sigh.

The room dissolves. Time becomes the creak of the bed, the catch of my gasp, the low groan he muffles against my neck. His fingers lace with mine, pinning them to the pillow as he arches, as I arch, as the universe fractures into light.

I come. There's no other possible word for it: the feeling of the universe falling on me in ecstasy. My body pulses around his cock as he continues to drive into me, faster and harder. Just when I think I can't take anymore, everything starts building up again.

"Good girl," he purrs as I reward his efforts with moans of pleasure.

"Please don't stop," I beg, feeling that tension begin to build in me once again.
"Please, Trax, I'm gonna-!"

The world goes dark once again, filling me pure bliss as he fills me with his seed.

"Not done with you yet," Traz murmurs, his voice a low growl that sends a shiver down my spine.

He shifts, his lips trailing down my body with a precision that feels almost practiced, yet somehow achingly personal.

My fingers tangle in the sheets, clutching them as he settles between my legs, his breath warm against my sensitive skin.

"Traz—" My voice cracks, a mix of disbelief and anticipation tightening my throat.

I've never... no one's ever... The thought fractures as his mouth finds my clit, slow and deliberate, like he's savoring every inch of me.

My hips jerk involuntarily, a moan tearing loose from my lips before I can swallow it.

His hands grip my thighs, firm but not unkind, holding me steady.

"Relax," he orders, the word vibrating against me. I try, but it's impossible—every nerve in my body is alight, every sensation amplified until I'm drowning in it. His tongue flicks, exact and unhurried, and I gasp, arching off the bed.

"Is this... is this normal?" The question spills out, shaky and breathless, as if my brain is trying to make sense of the impossible.

He pauses, lifting his head just enough to meet my eyes. "Normal's overrated." The corner of his mouth quirks, a flicker of something—amusement, maybe—before he dips back down, his tongue working in a rhythm that leaves me writhing.

My hands fly to his hair, fingers tangling in the silver strands. "Traz, I can't—I'm—" The words dissolve into a cry as the pressure builds, relentless and consuming. He doesn't stop, doesn't slow, his hands tightening on my hips as if anchoring me to the moment.

When it hits, it's like a detonation—a wave of pure, unbridled ecstasy that leaves me gasping, my body shuddering beneath him. He doesn't pull away, doesn't give me a chance to recover, his mouth coaxing every last tremor from me until I'm boneless, trembling, spent.

I collapse back onto the bed, my breaths coming in ragged bursts. Traz wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, his gaze heavy-lidded but sharp. "Still think you're just a trophy?" he drawls, his voice rough.

I laugh, the sound breathy and disbelieving. “I don’t know what I am right now.”

“Good.” He leans over me, his shadow falling across my face. “That’s the point.”

After, he doesn’t pull away. His weight anchors me to the earth, his lips brushing my temple again and again, wordless.

I trace the scar on his shoulder, the ridge of it a story I’ll ask for later.

For now, the quiet is enough. The warmth.

The way his breath evens into sleep, our legs tangled like roots.

I’ve never felt so safe, so complete. Being here at Traz’s side — it feels like it’s right where I was meant to be. Anything he’d ask me to, anywhere he’d ask me to go, I’d obey without question.

As I fall asleep, I pray he asks me to follow him to the stars.

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KELLI

He's gone.

I don't hear it from him. Of course not.

I wake up to silence. No guards at the door. No summons. Just the cold tick of nothing.

It's not until I try to step outside my quarters and two of Petru's muscleheads block the hall that I realize something's changed.

"Where's Traz?" I ask, already knowing.

The taller one snorts. "Off-world. Took a contract."

I blink. "He left?"

The other guy shrugs. "Didn't say goodbye if that's what you're fishing for."

I step back inside, pulse ringing in my ears.

So that's it.

One night of tension, of looks that said too much and touches that said more—and he's gone like I never happened. Like I'm just another job he walked away from.

I shouldn't care. I don't care.

But it feels like something cracked wide open and no one bothered to clean up the mess.

I sit on the edge of the cot, hands clenching in my lap.

I knew better. Always have. Men like him don't stay. They come through like storms—loud, fast, unforgettable. And then they're gone.

Still, some part of me—the soft, stupid part—thought maybe he'd say something. A nod. A word. A warning.

Something.

But no. Nothing.

That's what I get for hoping.

I glance around the room. My room.

The silk's still hanging by the mirror. The perfume tray untouched. The fake crystal on the windowsill catching filtered sunlight like it matters.

But I know. I feel it.

This place isn't mine anymore.

Something's shifted. I'm no longer the delicate flower Petru parades around. No longer the gleaming gem in his gallery.

And if I'm not a prize, then I'm a problem.

What does Petru do with problems?

I don't want to find out.

The summons comes three hours later.

Two guards. No words. Just a hard knock and harder eyes.

They march me down to the lower floors—no corridor glitz, no synth-scent in the air. Just cold, hard metal and the stench of sweat. Places I've never been, because I was never meant to come down here.

Until now.

Petru's waiting. Slouched in a metal chair that looks out of place in the damp concrete room. No throne, no luxury. Just bare walls and raw fury.

He doesn't speak at first. Just watches me like I'm dirt under his boot.

Then he smiles.

It's not kind.

"Did you think he'd take you?" he asks.

I don't answer.

"Did you open those little legs and think he'd rescue you like some storybook merc?"

Still, I say nothing. But my spine goes stiff.

He laughs. Loud, ugly. “You had one job. Be pretty. Be tempting. You couldn’t even do that.”

My throat burns, but I keep my voice even. “Maybe he saw through the act.”

His face twists.

Then he stands and backhands me across the face.

I stagger but don’t fall. Blood fills my mouth. Tastes like pennies and pride.

“You’re done playing dress-up,” he growls. “No more silk. No more special treatment. You wanted to be something else? Fine.”

He gestures.

Silpha steps out from the shadows.

Her mouth is tight, but her eyes are ice.

“You’ll report to my team starting tonight,” she says. “Kitchen detail, then floor rotation. No exceptions.”

I look between them.

“You’re throwing me in with the laborers?”

“Not throwing,” Silpha says. “Reassigning.”

“I was never part of them.”

She smiles, just a little. “Now you are.”

They don’t even let me back to my room. One of the guards drags me to the supply room where they hand me a gray uniform, two sizes too big, still damp from wash. I change in silence, biting down the bile crawling up my throat.

The hallway smells like bleach and rot. My feet are bare.

By the time I step into the main kitchen block, heads turn. Not for the usual reasons. No awe. No hunger.

Pity.

The other slaves look away fast, like I’m cursed. And maybe I am.

I don’t speak. Don’t make eye contact. I grab a scrub brush and drop to the floor like the rest of them.

I don’t cry.

I just scrub.

Let the anger boil. Let the humiliation burn.

Because if Petru thinks this breaks me, he’s wrong.

I’m not silk anymore.

I’m steel.

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KELLI

The kitchen heat slams into me like a punch every morning.

Hot, greasy, foul. Sweat clings to every inch of me before I even reach the first station. The steam from the vats rises in wet waves, curling against my skin, soaking into the ratty gray uniform clinging to my back.

The work isn't complicated.

Scrub the vats. Chop the vegetables. Stir the slop. Haul the crates.

Repeat.

All day. No breaks unless you want a baton across the ribs.

At first, I keep up. Barely. Pride pushes me through. Rage too. I make myself scrub harder, lift faster, move quicker. I don't look at the guards. Don't look at the other slaves. Don't let them see the cracks.

But the days blur, one bleeding into the next, and the cracks start splitting wide.

The blisters on my hands pop. Raw skin screams every time I grip a scrub brush. My knees are a mess of bruises. My back's a knot of pain that no stretch or breath can fix.

And now?

Now there's something worse.

A cold that started in my bones and hasn't left.

It creeps deeper every day, stealing my strength little by little. My arms shake lifting even the smallest crates. My legs go rubbery after an hour on my feet. My head pounds so bad sometimes I can't see straight.

I'm getting sick.

Really sick.

And there's no one here who'll care enough to notice until I'm a body to drag off.

It hits hardest three days after the summons.

I'm hauling a bucket of greasy water across the kitchen floor when my knees buckle without warning.

I drop hard, slamming into the tiles. The bucket tips, filthy water sloshing everywhere.

The room spins.

Someone laughs. I hear it, distant and cruel.

"Pathetic," a guard mutters.

I grit my teeth and push myself up. My arms scream. My head pulses with white-hot pain.

But I get to my feet.

I will not stay down.

Not here.

Not in front of them.

“Pick it up,” the guard barks.

I do. Bite down the groan that wants to rip free. Force my legs to move, one stubborn step at a time.

They want me broken.

Petru wants me erased.

Silpha wants me forgotten.

But I’m still here.

Even if my body’s trying its damndest to betray me.

Later, in the sleeping cells, I curl up on my bunk and shiver under the threadbare blanket.

The fever’s burning me up from the inside now. Sweat slicks my skin. Every muscle in my body aches like I’ve been beaten with rods.

I press my forehead against the cool metal of the wall, breathing slow through the nausea.

I can hear the other laborers whispering.

Not about me. No one dares waste breath on me anymore.

But they know.

They know the signs.

Sick slaves don't last long in the Spine.

Too weak to work? You're dead weight. Dead weight gets cut.

I ball my hands into fists under the blanket.

I'm not dying here.

I refuse.

I don't care if my lungs collapse and my bones snap.

I'm not giving Petru that satisfaction.

I close my eyes, gritting my teeth against the tremors ripping through my body.

I just have to survive. One more night. One more shift. One more breath.

One more.

And another.

And another.

The next morning, Silpha herself comes to the cells.

She never comes down here.

Her heels click like gunshots on the floor. The doors creak open and every head snaps down in a practiced move.

She stops by my bunk.

I don't lift my head. I don't speak.

Not because I'm scared.

Because I know how this game works.

She stands there for a long minute, probably cataloging how far I've fallen.

Then her voice cuts through the silence.

“Get up.”

It's a test.

She wants to see if I can.

I peel myself off the mattress, slow, deliberate.

The fever makes my vision swim. My knees wobble. But I lock them tight and plant my bare feet on the cold floor.

I stand.

Barely.

Silpha's lips twitch—almost a smile. Cold. Mocking.

“Follow me.”

She doesn't look back to see if I obey.

I do.

Because I have no choice.

Because whatever comes next—I'll face it on my feet.

Even if it kills me.

The halls blur as I follow Silpha.

I keep my head down. My hands tremble with every step, but I grind my teeth and make my legs move.

We're not heading toward the kitchens.

We're going deeper.

Lower levels. Medical bay.

The smell changes down here. Sterile. Burned-clean. Fear woven into the walls.

My gut twists.

Silpha pushes open a side door without bothering to knock.

Inside, a sour-faced medic looks up from his desk. His skin's the gray-green shade of someone who's been locked underground too long.

"Scan her," Silpha orders, flat.

The medic grunts, waves me over.

I move stiffly, every joint screaming.

The scanner hums to life. Cold light sweeps over my body, pausing at my abdomen longer than the rest.

I catch the way his brows pinch.

Catch the flicker of something sharp in his eyes.

The scanner beeps once, final.

He glances at Silpha. Hesitates.

"What?" she snaps.

The medic clears his throat. "She's... not just sick."

Silpha stiffens. "Explain."

He taps a few keys, brings up the readout on a grimy screen.

"She's pregnant."

Silence detonates in the room.

I feel the words hit me before they make any sense.

Pregnant.

It echoes like gunshots in my skull.

“No,” Silpha says, voice cold and sharp. “That’s impossible.”

The medic shrugs helplessly. “Scan doesn’t lie.”

Silpha wheels on me so fast I flinch.

Her face is twisted into something savage.

“You little whore,” she hisses. “You planned this.”

I stagger back a step, the walls tilting around me.

“No,” I croak, voice rough and broken.

“This is a trick,” she spits. “A way to get favor. To stay out of labor duty. You think we’ll coddle you now?”

“No,” I say louder, choking on the word.

Tears sting my eyes, but I blink them back hard.

“It’s not a trick,” I gasp out. “It’s real. It’s—” My voice breaks. “It’s Traz’s.”

Silpha's eyes narrow to slits.

For a second, there's real rage there. Real fear, too.

Because a child tied to Traz? That's dangerous. That's political dynamite.

She grabs the front of my filthy uniform, yanking me close.

"You think anyone will believe you?" she snarls into my face. "You think anyone will care?"

I stare back at her, breathing hard, every part of me trembling.

"I don't care if they believe me," I whisper. "It's his."

And it's mine.

And no matter what they do to me now... they can't take that away.

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KELLI

M orning comes heavy and mean.

I don't sleep anymore. I just drift in and out of fever dreams, floating somewhere between pain and cold reality.

My stomach knots before I even sit up. Sweat slicks my forehead. I swallow hard, breathing through my nose like it'll help.

It doesn't.

The nausea surges so fast I barely make it to the rusted drain in the corner before I'm heaving everything I don't have onto the cracked tile.

The sound echoes. Loud. Ugly.

Someone curses from the other side of the bunk rows. A few muttered insults. No one moves to help.

I don't blame them.

I wipe my mouth on the sleeve of my uniform and sit back on my heels, shaking.

The world spins.

Through the dizzy haze, I catch movement at the doorway.

Silpha.

Arms crossed. Eyes sharp. Boots gleaming even in this pit.

I brace for it—a slap, a barked order, another humiliation to layer onto the growing pile.

But she just stands there.

Watching.

Silent.

For a long moment, neither of us speaks.

Then she steps into the room, her steps slower than usual, deliberate. Her gaze doesn't sweep over the others. Doesn't bark for attention.

It's all trained on me.

"You're pathetic," she says, voice low and biting.

I lift my chin. Force my spine straight even though every cell in my body is screaming.

"I'm still standing," I rasp.

Something flickers in her eyes.

Not pity.

Not anger.

Something heavier. More dangerous.

Recognition.

Silpha exhales through her nose, like the weight of the whole Spine just settled on her narrow shoulders.

"You think you're special because you're stubborn?" she says, but her tone's off. Like she's not aiming at me anymore. Like she's aiming at herself.

I don't answer.

I don't need to.

She knows.

Silpha glances around the cellblock, eyes narrowing at the filth, the stink, the hopeless faces turned away from us.

She shifts her weight. Arms tight around herself now, like she's holding something in.

"I used to be like you," she says, voice flat. "Before Petru."

The confession drops between us, heavy as a hammer.

I blink, unsure if I heard right.

She laughs—sharp, humorless. Like glass breaking.

"Didn't matter how smart I was. How fast I learned. Petru decided what I was worth."
Her jaw tightens. "Just like he decided for you."

"You chose to stay," I whisper, the words scraping out before I can swallow them.

She snaps her eyes back to me, and for a second, I think she's gonna hit me.

But she doesn't.

Instead, her face crumples—only for a blink, just a crack—and then she locks it back down so tight you'd think it never happened.

"You think there's a choice?" she snarls. "You survive, or you die."

I drag myself to my feet, dizzy and shaking but upright.

"I'm surviving," I say, voice steady even if my knees wobble.

"At what cost?" she spits.

Her words are a slap, but they're not cruel. They're raw.

Bitter.

Like she's talking to herself more than me.

A long silence stretches.

Silpha's hands tighten at her sides, nails digging into her palms.

Quieter, "It never leaves you, you know. The shame."

I meet her eyes.

For the first time, she doesn't look like Petru's iron lieutenant.

She looks like a prisoner.

Just like me.

The nausea claws up again, but I swallow it back.

"I'm not ashamed," I say, even if my voice cracks. "I'm still fighting."

Her mouth twists like she wants to call me a liar.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she turns sharply on her heel and strides out of the cell, the door slamming behind her like a gunshot.

I slump against the wall, sliding down until I'm crouched on the floor, every muscle trembling.

But inside?

Inside there's a small, stubborn spark lighting up again.

Because I saw it.

Silpha looked at me—and didn't see a pawn.

She saw herself.

And that's a crack I can work with.

One breath at a time.

One heartbeat at a time.

I'm not done yet.

Not by a long damn shot.

The next night, everything changes.

It happens fast. Quiet.

I'm half-asleep, curled into the thinnest shape I can manage on the filthy bunk, when I hear it—soft steps. No boots. No shouting.

Just a figure slipping through the dark like a ghost.

Silpha.

She taps my shoulder once, hard and fast.

"Move," she mutters.

For a heartbeat, I think I'm dreaming. Fevered. Hallucinating.

But then her fingers dig into my arm, urgent.

"I said move, girl."

I stumble to my feet, heart hammering.

No one else stirs. No alarms blare. Somehow, she's made it so the guards don't see. Or maybe they've been paid off. Or threatened. I don't know.

I don't ask.

Silpha presses a finger to her lips, signaling silence.

Then she pulls me along through the dark corridors, through winding maintenance tunnels that smell like rust and old water. Every few feet, she glances over her shoulder, tension locked tight in every line of her body.

I don't speak. Don't dare.

We pass through old service doors, ones I didn't even know existed. Down past kitchens, past storage rooms, deeper into the guts of the Spine.

We reach a small, forgotten maintenance chamber.

The walls are cracked. The air's damp. But it's dry. Hidden. Empty.

Safe.

Silpha shoves me inside.

"This is where you stay now," she says, voice sharp. "At least until I figure something better out."

I blink at her, still shivering, still waiting for the catch.

"Why?" I rasp.

She looks away, jaw tight.

"Because you're carrying something bigger than you understand," she says. "And because... I'm tired of watching Petru destroy everything he touches."

Her voice breaks a little on the last word. Just a hairline fracture, but it's there.

She tosses a bundle onto the floor—blankets, two protein packs, a battered canteen of water.

It looks like nothing.

It feels like salvation.

"Eat," she snaps. "Drink. Rest."

I nod, throat thick with something I can't name.

Gratitude.

Fear.

Hope.

All tangled up so tight I can barely breathe.

Before she leaves, she pauses in the doorway.

"You tell no one," she says. "Not a word. Not a whisper."

I meet her eyes, fierce and sure even as my body shakes.

"I won't."

She studies me a second longer, something unreadable flashing across her face.

Then she slips away into the dark.

I'm alone.

But not abandoned.

And maybe that spark in my chest isn't so small after all.

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TRAZ

Gur stinks of blood and desperation.

Always has.

I stalk through the slum streets, boots crunching over broken glass and old bones, my pulse hammering in time with the low hum of the city's dying lights.

The contract's fresh in my ear.

High-value target. No questions asked. Double bonus for making it messy.

Just how I like it lately.

The weight of my sidearm is solid against my thigh. Comforting. Familiar.

Violence doesn't ask for explanations. Doesn't demand you dig up parts of yourself you'd rather keep buried.

Violence just is.

I turn a corner and shoulder through a crowd of junk peddlers. They scatter fast. Nobody wants to be in a merc's way, not on Gur, not when the streets run red before the suns even set.

A kid looks up at me—too skinny, too scared. I keep walking. I don't stop. I don't

look back.

Mercy's a luxury I burned out of myself a long time ago.

Or so I tell myself.

I find the target in a rusted-out bar on the outskirts of the Warrens.

He's loud, drunk, boasting to anyone who'll listen about his "deal of a lifetime."
Probably selling weapons to the wrong side.

Doesn't matter.

What matters is he's marked.

What matters is he breathes in and out, and someone out there's paying good credits
to make sure he stops.

I step inside, letting the door creak shut behind me.

A few heads turn. Then turn away fast.

Smart.

I cross the room slow, deliberate. Every stride calculated. Every muscle ready.

The guy sees me too late.

Recognition flares in his bloodshot eyes, and he fumbles for the blaster at his hip.

Amateur move.

I shoot him in the kneecap before he clears the holster.

He screams. Collapses hard against the filthy floor.

The bar goes silent.

Good.

I crouch down beside him, pressing the muzzle of my pistol against his sweat-slick temple.

“This is how it ends,” I say low, deadly.

“N-no—please—” he babbles.

I pull the trigger.

One shot. Clean. Final.

The body twitches once. Then stills.

I stand, holster the pistol, and walk out the door without looking back.

Another ghost for the streets to swallow.

Another job done.

Another few minutes I don't have to think about her.

But I do.

Every time.

No matter how many bodies hit the ground.

No matter how much blood soaks my hands.

Kelli's still there.

In the back of my mind.

In the tightness in my chest I can't breathe through.

In the way my hand sometimes flexes, aching for something it can't reach.

I curse under my breath and shove the thoughts down where they belong—deep and dark and chained tight.

She's better off without me.

Safer.

I'm a weapon. Not a man. Not anymore.

And weapons don't get happy endings.

Later, I sit in a dive apartment, lights low, drink cheap and burning down my throat.

The city hums outside—low, angry.

I scrub a hand over my face, staring at the battered wall like it'll offer answers.

It doesn't.

Nothing does.

I think about her eyes.

The fire in them.

The way she looked at me like she saw past the blood on my hands and didn't flinch.

Nobody's ever looked at me like that.

Not once.

I slam the glass down hard enough to crack it.

No.

Thinking gets you killed.

Feeling gets you killed.

I came to Gur to forget.

To bleed out the pieces of me that still believe in things like fate, like bonds, like destiny.

But fate's stubborn.

Destiny's cruel.

And bonds?

Bonds don't break just because you're too much of a coward to face them.

I lean back in the chair, staring up at the cracked ceiling.

I wonder if maybe...

Maybe leaving her wasn't protecting her.

Maybe it was just another way to run.

The bond gnaws at me.

Quiet at first.

Then louder.

Until it's a roar under my skin I can't silence.

I feel her even now—like a tug behind my ribs, like something vital's been ripped out and keeps bleeding no matter how many times I stitch it shut.

Every breath is a reminder.

Every beat of my heart is a betrayal.

The Jalshagar wasn't supposed to be real.

A myth. A relic of an older, weaker time.

But it's real enough that even light-years away, she haunts me.

The way she looked at me—brave and stubborn, even when she should've been afraid.

The way she stood her ground, silver and fire wrapped into something I didn't deserve to touch.

The way, for one goddamn night, I felt like maybe there was something in me worth saving.

I smash my fist into the cheap metal table, the force rattling the whole frame.

I can't get her out of my head.

And it's making me dangerous.

Even more than usual.

The jobs get bloodier.

The risks get steeper.

I take contracts no sane merc would touch—storming drug dens solo, dismantling rival syndicates one bullet at a time.

Every time I step into a fight, part of me hopes it'll be the last.

That someone faster, meaner, more desperate will finally end it.

But they never do.

I'm too good at staying alive.

Too stubborn to quit.

And the anger—the empty, gnawing rage—it only grows.

People start whispering about me on Gur.

The Skull-Taker.

The Ghost with the Green Eyes.

Stories spread. Body counts rise.

And I don't give a damn.

Let them fear me.

Fear keeps idiots from getting close.

Fear keeps me from doing something even dumber than what I've already done.

I sit in another dingy bar, back to the wall, nursing a drink that tastes like paint thinner and regret.

A job broker approaches—young, cocky, reeking of ambition.

He slides into the booth without asking.

Bad move.

“What do you want?” I growl.

He flinches, but masks it quick.

“I got work,” he says. “High profile. Big money.”

I glare at him over the rim of the glass.

“Not interested.”

“You didn’t even hear it yet.”

I set the glass down slow.

“Didn’t have to.”

He hesitates, then leans in like we’re old friends. Like we share something.

“Word is, you’re not picky anymore,” he says, voice low. “Word is, you’ll take anything.”

I stare at him, letting the silence stretch until it’s suffocating.

Then I smile.

It’s not a nice smile.

It’s a promise.

He swallows hard and scrambles out of the booth, muttering an apology.

Smart boy.

I finish my drink, toss a few dirty credits on the table, and walk out into the sickly green twilight.

The streets pulse with neon and rot.

I breathe it in like punishment.

Maybe that's all I deserve now.

Rot.

Decay.

Forgotten places and forgotten people.

Because the truth is brutal.

No matter how many jobs I take.

No matter how many throats I cut.

No matter how cold I force myself to become.

I can't kill the bond.

I can't kill what's tethered me to her.

And one day soon...

Either it'll drive me back to her or it'll drive me straight into the grave.

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TRAZ

The bullets scream past my head, close enough to rattle my teeth.

I dive behind a crumbling pillar, gritting my teeth as the old stone chips apart under another barrage.

Dust fills my lungs. Blood pumps hot in my ears.

Too hot.

Too fast.

This wasn't supposed to be messy.

Quick infiltration. Quick kill. Quick getaway.

Instead, I'm pinned under fire by mercs that look better equipped and better paid than the idiots who hired me.

Figures.

I check the mag on my sidearm. Light.

No time to be delicate.

I slam a new clip home and roll out from behind the pillar, firing blind toward the

muzzle flashes.

Two bodies drop.

A third clips me across the ribs.

I snarl, more from anger than pain, and keep moving.

Can't stop.

Can't think.

Thinking is the enemy out here.

A grenade arcs through the air—slow-motion in the smoky haze.

I spot it too late.

The blast slams into me like a sledgehammer, ripping the ground apart, flinging me backward like a rag doll.

I hit the dirt hard.

Hard enough to knock the air out of my lungs.

Hard enough to make the world spin and shrink all at once.

I try to push up, but my arms won't cooperate.

The sky overhead is a dirty smear, the green suns bleeding into each other.

Somewhere in the distance, boots crunch closer.

Shouts. Orders.

They think they got me.

Maybe they did.

My vision tunnels, dark around the edges.

Pain throbs through me in thick, heavy waves.

Then I see her.

Kelli.

Not here. Not real.

But so clear it guts me.

Her hair tangled across the pillow, soft and defiant. Those fierce, stubborn eyes cutting straight through me. The way she looked that night—scared but brave, fragile but burning.

The memory slams into me harder than the grenade.

I reach out without meaning to. My hand lifts off the wrecked ground, reaching for something that isn't there.

"Kelli," I choke out.

It's not a prayer.

It's not even a word.

It's a lifeline.

The world narrows to that one thought.

Her.

And the crushing, sickening certainty that I left her in hell to rot while I bled for nothing out here.

The boots get closer.

A voice barks something in a language I don't recognize.

I blink hard.

Force my body to move.

Not here.

Not like this.

Not dying in the gutter like a dog while she's still out there.

I grind my teeth and drag myself to my knees.

The world tilts sideways, but I stay upright.

Barely.

My pistol's gone, blasted somewhere into the rubble.

Doesn't matter.

I'm still a weapon.

I always have been.

I snatch a jagged piece of rebar off the ground, my fingers slick with blood.

The first merc rounds the corner, rifle up.

I throw the bar like a spear.

It drives into his throat.

He gurgles and drops.

The others hesitate.

Good.

Hesitation gets you killed.

I lunge forward, half-crawling, half-running, blind rage and raw instinct propelling me faster than my body should allow.

Another shot cracks past my ear.

I duck low and barrel into the second merc, driving my shoulder into his gut. We hit the ground in a tangle of limbs and swears.

I get my hands around his throat.

Squeeze until he stops struggling.

Until the last ragged breath wheezes out.

Only when he goes limp do I roll off him, gasping, my vision swimming in and out of black.

Two down.

One more shouting orders behind cover.

I can barely stand.

Barely breathe.

But I shove forward.

One broken, staggering step at a time.

Because if I die here, she'll never know.

She'll never know that she mattered.

That she changed everything.

That the man who walked away from her wasn't half as strong as he thought he was.

Another shot grazes my shoulder.

Burns hot and sharp.

I grunt and keep moving.

The last merc sees me coming and panics.

Bad move.

I tackle him before he can aim right.

We crash to the ground, and I hammer my fists into his face until he stops moving.

Until there's nothing left but the sound of my ragged breathing and the thud of my broken heart.

I stagger back.

Survey the mess.

Dead men.

Broken stone.

Burning air.

And me, barely alive and bleeding out into the dirt.

I stagger toward the street, clutching my ribs.

The world tilts.

Colors smear.

Noise filters in—boots pounding. Shouts I can't quite make out.

Then strong hands grab me.

I snarl on instinct, swinging wild, but a sharp voice cuts through the haze.

"Stand down, Traz! It's us!"

Through the blur, I make out familiar faces—my fallback team. Contractors I hire when a job's too messy to clean up solo.

They haul me up, half-carrying, half-dragging.

I hate it.

Hate the weakness.

Hate that I needed saving.

Hate even more the reason why.

Because somewhere in the broken mess of my mind, as the grenades exploded and the bullets flew, I wasn't thinking about escape routes or tactics.

I was thinking about her.

Kelli.

Soft skin.

Fierce eyes.

A ghost in my blood, clouding my reflexes, slowing my hands.

I clench my jaw so hard my teeth ache.

One of the contractors—Vesh, big and mean—grunts as he shoves me into a battered evac runner.

“You’re slipping, boss,” he mutters under his breath. “Didn’t think you were the sentimental type.”

I snap my head toward him, glare hard enough to shut him up.

But the words stick anyway.

Slipping.

Detachment used to be my shield. My weapon.

Now it’s cracking.

Worse than cracking.

It’s breaking.

And in this business, that gets you dead real fast.

I slump back against the seat as the runner roars to life, rattling down the alleyway.

The pain's sharp. Alive. Real.

But the bigger wound is the one under my skin—the bond pulling, stretching, weakening everything I thought made me strong.

I stare out the filthy window at the dying lights of Gur.

Fear coils low in my gut, unusual and unwanted.

Not fear of dying.

I've made peace with that.

Fear of caring.

Fear that I'm losing the one thing that kept me alive all these years, my edge.

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TRAZ

T hree years.

Three goddamn years.

Since I last saw her.

Since I turned my back on the only thing that ever felt real and told myself it was for her own good.

Most days now, she's a shadow.

A fading ghost tucked into the corners of my mind where even the blood and the smoke can't touch.

I tell myself that's a good thing.

Tell myself it's proof I'm finally getting my edge back.

Finally putting the pieces in the right places again.

No more weakness.

No more hesitation.

Only work.

Only survival.

And I almost believe it.

Until nights like this.

When the black is too deep, and the ship creaks around me like an old wound, and I catch myself wondering what color her hair would look like now under the sickly lights of Gur.

Or if she ever thinks about me at all.

I snarl under my breath and shove the thought away.

Dead weight.

Ghosts.

Memories don't keep you alive in places like this.

Only skill does.

Only sharp, brutal purpose.

I slam the butt of my pistol onto the cracked table, rattling the comm unit back to life.

A single pulse of static.

A new message waiting.

Maybe this time, something worth chasing.

Maybe this time, something that'll bury her memory for good.

The comm flickers to life with a single pulse of static.

I sit up slow, the battered cot creaking under my weight. The room's dark, lit only by the weak green glow of the cracked comm unit hanging crooked on the wall.

One message.

No sender.

No signature.

Just coordinates.

And a payout number big enough to make most mercs lose their damn minds.

I scrub a hand over my jaw, staring at it.

Glimner.

Of course it's Glimner.

Of course the universe would twist the knife just a little deeper.

I lean back, weighing it.

Every instinct in me growls low, warning.

Too easy.

Too fast.

Jobs like this don't fall into your lap unless someone's trying to bait a trap.

But credits like that... that buys a lot of things.

Freedom. Silence. Distance from the ghosts clawing up my spine.

I could disappear somewhere. Forget everything.

Forget her.

Right.

Like that's working so well already.

I set my jaw, clenching until the bone aches.

"I won't even go near Petru," I mutter under my breath.

I say it out loud like it'll make it true.

I'll land, grab the cargo, get out.

No complications.

No detours.

No her.

Just another ghost route.

Simple.

Quick.

Clean.

The ship rumbles under me as it powers up.

Old freighter. Fast engines. More weapons than a vessel this size should legally have.

Just the way I like it.

I slide into the pilot's seat, fingers moving automatically over the controls.

The nav screen glows.

Glimmer.

Not far.

One jump out.

The gut warning flares again, sharp and bitter.

I slam it down.

Tighten it up.

Fear makes you sloppy. Doubt makes you dead.

I'm not that man.

Not yet.

I strap in, flip the ignition, and punch the coordinates.

The engines roar, rattling every bolt loose.

The ship shudders, then leaps into the black, stars smearing into long threads of light.

No turning back now.

I lean my head back against the seat, letting the vibrations hum through me.

The cabin's too quiet.

Just me and the weight of bad decisions.

I think about the offer again.

Coded. Anonymous. High pay. No names.

Could be anyone.

Could be nothing.

Could be Petru.

My lips curl in a humorless smirk.

Wouldn't that be just my luck?

That bastard always did know how to pull strings even from the shadows.

Still.

This isn't about him.

This is about a job.

One job.

One paycheck.

One step further from the mess gnawing at my soul.

The nav screen beeps.

Closer now.

I watch the planet grow in the viewport—a dirty swirl of rust-red storms and gray oceans.

Industrial hellhole.

Same as I remember.

A place where people disappear if they know the wrong secrets... or the right ones.

I tighten my hands on the controls.

This time, I tell myself, I won't look for her.

This time, I won't let the bond yank me around like a puppet on a broken string.

This time, I'm stronger.

But the lie tastes like ash in my mouth.

Because even as I set the descent sequence...

Even as the ship pierces Glimner's thick, greasy clouds...

Even as the cargo bay doors whine open...

I know.

Some part of me knows.

There's no such thing as a clean escape anymore.

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TRAZ

The second I break Glimner's atmosphere, I know something's wrong.

The comm crackles.

Then a burst of static.

Lock-on alerts scream across the dash.

Missile locks.

Multiple.

Fast.

My gut clenches.

I slam the controls sideways, sending the freighter into a gut-churning roll just as the first projectile blazes past the viewport, a white-hot streak of death.

Another one slams into the rear stabilizer.

The ship shudders so hard the bones in my teeth rattle.

Sparks shower from the console.

Alarms shriek, red lights flashing like war drums in the cramped cockpit.

“Shit,” I snarl under my breath, hands flying over the controls, trying to stabilize the spin.

But it’s too late.

The freighter’s nose tips down, hard, and the world outside whirls into a dizzy blur of ground, sky, and smoke.

They recognized me.

Of course they did.

Petru’s people never forget a threat.

And I left too many scars last time to blend in now.

The ship groans as I fight the controls, trying to angle the crash.

Better to hit dirt than smash straight into one of the Spine’s outer barricades.

Metal screams as the hull rips open somewhere in the back.

Pressure drops fast, a roaring in my ears.

I can barely see through the smoke.

No choice.

I brace hard.

Yank the emergency crash harness tight.

And pray to gods I stopped believing in years ago.

The freighter slams into the ground like a falling star.

The impact punches the air out of my lungs.

Pain detonates through my ribs, sharp and raw.

The world goes black for half a second.

When I blink back to life, the cockpit's sideways.

Flames lick the cracked edges of the viewport.

The smell of burning metal and leaking fuel chokes me.

I unhook the harness, drop hard onto the tilted floor.

Every part of me screams in protest.

Doesn't matter.

Gotta move.

Gotta get out before the whole wreck goes up.

I stumble toward the hatch, kicking debris out of my path.

The control panel sparks and dies when I slam my hand against it, so I plant my boots

and slam my shoulder into the emergency lever.

It groans.

Sticks.

I grit my teeth and heave harder.

With a screech of abused metal, the hatch pops open, smoke and hot wind blasting in.

I haul myself out onto the cracked, dusty ground and collapse to one knee, coughing hard.

The freighter groans behind me.

I don't look back.

No time.

Already I can hear the rumble of engines—scout bikes, by the sound of them.

Petru's cleanup crew.

Coming fast.

They're not here to offer surrender.

They're here to finish what their missiles started.

I push to my feet, muscles screaming, and start moving.

Every step hurts.

But I keep going.

Because that's what you do when the world's burning around you.

You move.

You survive.

I stagger through the outskirts—half-fallen shanties, crumbling walls, scavenger nests.

The Spine looms in the distance, jagged and ugly against the sickly sky.

I'm not thinking about her.

I'm not.

But part of me—the part that still dreams when I'm too stupid to stay awake—wonders if she's somewhere behind those black walls.

Still breathing.

Still fighting.

Still waiting.

No.

Don't think.

Don't hope.

Hope is a blade that carves you from the inside out.

Focus.

One step.

One breath.

Get clear.

Find a ship.

Get out.

That's the plan.

Simple.

Clean.

But deep down, buried under all the grit and blood, I know better.

Nothing about this is gonna be clean.

Not this time.

Not with her still pulling at my soul like gravity itself.

And if I don't get my head straight fast...

I'm gonna burn right alongside this wrecked world.

My side's on fire.

I don't notice it right away.

Adrenaline blinds you to pain when you're fighting to breathe.

But as I limp farther from the crash, weaving through twisted metal and half-dead trees, the fire grows sharper.

Hot and deep and ugly.

I glance down.

Blood.

Dark and heavy, soaking through the side of my shirt.

The shot from the crash—or maybe shrapnel—must've caught me worse than I thought.

Every step pulls at it. Every breath is a goddamn battle.

I slow down, pressing a hand hard against the wound.

It's a mistake.

Standing still.

Thinking.

Because the second I pause, the second my brain catches up, the truth lands hard:

This was never about the cargo.

Never about the money.

It's a setup.

Has been from the start.

Glimner. The easy offer. The no-names contract.

All of it designed to lure me back here.

Back where they could finally kill me clean.

I curse under my breath, eyes scanning the ruins around me.

Could still cut and run.

Could still find a sewer entrance, a tunnel, a path to vanish down.

But the perimeter's closing fast.

Engines growl.

Boots thud.

The noose tightens.

I reach for my sidearm, breathing hard, ready to make them work for it.

When a shadow drops into the road ahead of me.

Quick.

Silent.

I jerk back, leveling the gun out of instinct.

The figure raises their hands slowly.

No weapon drawn.

No immediate threat.

My vision's swimming, but I blink hard and refocus.

It's a woman.

Tall. Lean. Armor battered but serviceable.

Blonde hair twisted into a harsh knot.

Cold gray eyes sharp enough to cut steel.

Recognition slams into me like another blow to the ribs.

Silpha.

Alone.

No guards.

No backup.

Just her.

Standing between me and whatever future's still bleeding out through my fingers.

And she's not smiling.

Not gloating.

Just staring.

Like she's been waiting a long, long time for this.

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TRAZ

Silpha doesn't move.

Neither do I.

The dust from the wreck swirls between us, thick and choking, the heat from the crashed freighter licking at my back.

I keep the barrel of my gun locked on her chest, finger tight on the trigger.

"Ten seconds," I rasp, voice jagged. "Say something real good."

Her hands stay up. Slow. Steady.

"I'm not here to fight."

"Bullshit," I growl, shifting just enough to keep my wounded side out of her sight.

She steps forward once, careful, like she's approaching a wild animal.

"Listen to me, Traz," she says quickly. "It's about Kelli."

The name punches a hole clean through my gut.

I show nothing.

Just cock the gun back a hair more.

"Talk," I bark.

Silpha's face twists—grim, almost desperate.

"Kelli's alive."

The ground rocks under my boots.

Alive.

The word keeps echoing, louder every time.

"And..." Silpha falters for the first time since I've known her. "You have children."

I stagger a half step, blood roaring in my ears louder than the burning wreckage behind me.

"You're lying," I rasp, because the alternative would split me in two.

"I'm not." Her voice slices through the smoke and chaos. "Twins."

My grip on the gun slips for half a second before I clamp down.

I can't breathe.

I can't think.

"Petru—?" I start, my voice barely more than a growl.

Silpha cuts in quick. "She hid it while it's growing. We hid it."

My vision tunnels, black creeping at the edges.

Silpha steps closer again, careful, deliberate.

"She knew it wasn't safe. Not inside the Spine. Not with Petru watching. Once I realized she was pregnant... I made moves."

Moves.

I narrow my eyes, heart pounding so loud it drowns out everything else.

"What moves?"

"I got her out," she says, fierce. "I staged it. Made it look like she died during a punishment detail. Slipped her out through the trade tunnels."

The words hit like a punch.

"You moved her?" I grind out.

Silpha nods.

"She's been hidden. Living in one of the scrap sectors outside the city grids. Quiet. Off the books. Safe."

Safe.

For three years.

Without me.

Without knowing if I was alive or dead.

My hands shake, and I don't even bother to hide it.

"And the kids?" I manage.

"They're with her," Silpha says. "Both of them. Healthy. Strong. Fighters, just like their mother."

I press a bloodied hand against my side to steady myself.

Everything inside me cracks.

Splits wide open.

Kelli.

A boy.

A girl.

Alive.

Waiting.

Silpha's voice drops lower.

"I came to find you because it's getting harder to keep them hidden. Petru's new dogs—mean bastards—are sniffing too close. If you want to save them, you need to

move fast."

I grind my teeth until my jaw screams.

"You should've come sooner," I bite out.

"I couldn't," she snaps back, raw. "Not until now. Not until I was sure you were strong enough to do something about it."

I glare at her.

Long and hard.

But the rage isn't for her.

Not really.

It's for the years lost.

The time stolen.

The life I could've had.

I lower the gun.

Slow.

Trembling.

"I'm going to her," I say, voice rougher than I've ever heard it.

Silpha nods.

"I'll take you."

I start to move, but she lifts a hand.

"And Traz?" she says, voice razor sharp.

I stop.

"You're bleeding bad," she says. "If you don't pull yourself together, you won't make it two blocks."

I grunt.

"Doesn't matter," I growl.

Because dead or breathing, I'm not leaving this planet without her.

Without them.

Not again.

Silpha watches me, sharp and wary, like she half-expects me to turn around and put a bullet between her eyes anyway.

I don't.

I can't.

I'm too busy trying to shove all the broken pieces of myself back into some kind of

shape that can move forward.

She steps closer, voice low but urgent. "You don't understand, Traz. They don't have much time."

I stare at her, fists clenched so tight my nails cut into my palms.

"Explain," I grind out.

"Petru's men are spreading," she says fast. "New blood. Paranoid. Aggressive. They're sniffing around the old districts. Asking too many questions. It's only a matter of time before they find her. Before they find the twins."

The word twins hits me again, raw and brutal.

Kids.

My kids.

Out there, hidden under the filth and rust of Glimner, thinking nobody's coming for them.

Thinking they've been left behind.

Just like Kelli probably thinks.

My stomach twists, acid and guilt burning a hole straight through me.

"I got them this far," Silpha says, voice rough. "But I can't hold it together much longer. I don't have the pull I used to."

Her jaw tightens, eyes flashing.

"You're the only one strong enough to get them out."

I turn away, dragging a hand through my filthy hair, staring at the horizon burning red under the planet's dying sun.

The easy thing—the smart thing—is to walk away.

Cut ties.

Let the past rot where it belongs.

But as I stand there, fists shaking, blood leaking from my side, I know the truth.

There's no walking away.

Not from this.

Not from them.

Not anymore.

I spin back to her, jaw set.

"Where are they?" I rasp.

Silpha exhales, shoulders sagging for just a second, like she'd been holding her breath all this time.

"In the scavenger quarter," she says. "Sector Six. Old freight tunnels under the scrap

fields."

"And Kelli?" I snap.

She meets my eyes.

"Fighting every damn day to keep those kids fed and hidden. Same as she's always done."

Pride. Sadness. Something sharp flickers across Silpha's face.

"They're hers, through and through," she says, voice hitching. "But they're yours too."

The words land like hammer blows.

Mine.

A future I never believed I deserved.

A future I sure as hell don't deserve now.

But fate doesn't care about what you think you've earned.

It just keeps coming.

I tighten my grip on the gun.

"Take me to them," I say.

"Now."

Silpha nods once, fast.

Urgent.

Relief and fear bleeding across her battered face.

I stagger a step, pain flashing white behind my eyes.

Silpha grabs my arm to steady me.

I jerk away.

"I'm fine," I snarl.

"You're not," she says coldly. "But you're stubborn enough to fake it."

A rough laugh slips from my throat, half-cough, half-growl.

"Then let's get this over with."

Because if anyone lays a finger on Kelli or those kids before I get there.

I'll burn this entire goddamn planet to ash.

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TRAZ

The tunnel stinks of rust and mold.

My boots hit the cracked concrete in a slow, deliberate rhythm, each step sending shockwaves through the wound stitched up under my jacket.

Hurts like hell.

Don't matter.

I barely feel it.

All I feel is the bond thrumming under my skin, tighter and hotter with every step deeper into the dark.

Silpha moves ahead of me, silent but quick, slipping through broken doorways and crumbling halls like a ghost.

She stops at a bent metal door half-hidden behind a pile of scrap.

Turns.

Looks at me.

"This is it," she says, voice rough.

I don't answer.

I can't.

My throat's a knot too tight to breathe through.

She taps a coded knock—three soft, two sharp—and the door groans open a crack.

A narrow strip of light spills into the hallway.

I see a shadow move inside.

Small.

Cautious.

Then a voice—low, tight with fear.

"Silpha?"

Kelli.

My knees damn near give out right there.

Silpha steps aside without a word.

I move forward before I can think too hard about it.

Push the door wider.

Step inside.

The room's barely bigger than a cargo cell.

Dim lights buzz overhead.

Old blankets, makeshift furniture, crates stacked like barricades against the walls.

And there she is.

Kelli.

Standing stiff, holding a broken piece of pipe like it's a sword.

Her hair's longer now, tangled around her shoulders, a shade darker than I remember.

Her body's different too—sharper angles, leaner muscle under thin clothes worn from too many hard nights.

But her eyes, those damn eyes.

Stronger than I ever remembered.

Steel and fire.

She stares at me like I'm a dream she doesn't trust.

I open my mouth to speak.

Nothing comes out.

Kelli's fingers tighten around the pipe, knuckles white.

"You're real," she whispers.

It's not a question.

Still, I nod once.

Rough.

Choked.

"Yeah, angel," I rasp. "It's me."

The pipe clatters to the floor.

Before I can even move, she's in front of me, fists pounding against my chest.

"You left!" she cries, voice breaking into jagged pieces. "You left me there to rot!"

Every hit is a gut punch I take without flinching.

"I know," I grind out.

"I thought you were dead, Traz!" she shouts, fury blazing out of her. "I thought—you didn't come back—you didn't even look!"

"I know," I say again, voice shredded.

I grab her wrists, gentle but firm, pulling her closer.

"I was a goddamn coward," I admit, each word cutting deeper than any blade.

"I thought leaving would keep you safe."

She stares up at me, trembling, eyes glossy with tears she refuses to shed.

"I didn't need safe," she whispers. "I needed you."

Something breaks loose inside me.

I pull her against me, arms wrapping around her tight, so tight, like I could fuse us back together if I just held on hard enough.

She doesn't fight it.

Not this time.

She melts into my chest, shaking.

"I'm sorry," I murmur into her hair. "I'm so damn sorry."

We stand there for a long time, breathing each other in like lifelines.

A small noise pulls me back.

A tiny cough.

I look up.

Two figures stand behind a stack of crates, half-hidden.

Tiny.

Wide-eyed.

One little girl—wild silver curls, fierce little scowl.

One little boy—dark hair, bright green eyes exactly like mine.

They clutch each other's hands, staring at me like I'm some ghost clawed up from the deep.

Kelli pulls back just enough to follow my gaze.

She wipes her face, straightens her spine.

"Aria," she says softly. "Joren."

Their names gut me more than any blade ever could.

She beckons them forward.

Slow.

Soft.

"It's okay," she says. "Come meet someone."

They hesitate.

Aria narrows her eyes like she doesn't trust a damn thing about me.

Smart girl.

Joren clutches his sister's hand tighter, but they shuffle forward together.

My chest's a bomb ready to blow.

They stop a few feet away.

Close enough for me to see everything.

The Kaleidian markings faint along their necks.

The stubborn tilt of Aria's chin.

The haunted, too-old-for-his-years look in Joren's eyes.

My blood.

My kin.

I drop to one knee, ignoring the way my side screams in protest.

Try to make myself smaller.

Less dangerous.

They stare at me, silent, studying.

Sizing me up.

Smart.

Cautious.

Perfect.

"Hey there," I say rough. "Name's Traz."

Joren edges a little closer, peering up at me.

"You got eyes like mine," he says solemnly.

My throat clamps shut.

I nod.

"Yeah, kid. Guess you got yours from me."

Aria crosses her arms, scowling harder.

"You left Mama," she accuses, fierce and unafraid.

I blink.

Then I laugh—raw, broken.

"Yeah," I say. "I did."

Her little chin wobbles, but she holds my stare like a damn warrior.

"You gonna leave again?"

I look at her.

At Joren.

At Kelli.

And something inside me locks into place.

Unbreakable.

Unshakeable.

"Never," I swear.

Their eyes flicker.

Hope, raw and dangerous, sparks between us.

Somehow, I don't feel hollow anymore.

I feel full.

Full of rage.

Full of love.

Full of a purpose I thought I buried long ago.

My family.

And hell itself's gonna bleed before I let anyone take them from me again.

I stay there, kneeling.

Not because I'm too hurt to stand.

Not because of the blood soaking my side.

But because looking up at them—at her—feels right.

Feels like the only damn thing I deserve.

Kelli steps closer, slow and wary, her hand brushing over Aria's head, pulling the little girl against her side.

She looks down at me, her face a map of every battle she's fought without me.

Every night she cried alone.

Every smile she forced for those kids when the world tried to crush her.

And I left her to it.

I left her to it.

I bow my head, fists planted in the dirt and scrap under me, teeth gritted so hard it's a wonder they don't shatter.

"I..." I choke, the words ripping up my throat raw.

"I don't deserve you," I rasp.

Not her.

Not the kids.

Not any of it.

I hear a breath catch above me.

Maybe hers.

Maybe the kids'.

I don't lift my head.

Can't.

My heart pounds, a raw, aching thing inside my ribs, louder than the creaks of the broken shelter around us.

I feel a small hand—tiny, tentative—press against the side of my face.

Aria.

I risk looking up.

Her little brow is furrowed, mouth set in a serious line way too old for her size.

"You gonna be good now?" she asks, like she's laying down a damn law.

I huff a broken laugh, chest squeezing so tight it hurts worse than any wound.

"Yeah, little warrior," I say hoarsely. "I'm gonna be good."

Joren shuffles closer, clutching a battered toy ship in his free hand.

He stares at me with those green eyes that could've been mine at his age.

Silence settles between us—thick, but not as sharp now.

Not slicing me open at every breath.

Just heavy.

Real.

Kelli crouches too, knees creaking from too many years of hard living.

She reaches out, fingertips ghosting along my battered cheek.

"You're late," she says, voice thick but teasing.

I grab her wrist—careful, reverent—and press a kiss against the inside of her wrist, feeling her pulse hammer against my lips.

"I'm here now," I vow.

Whatever comes next.

Whatever hell we have to walk through.

I'm not letting go again.

Not of her.

Not of them.

Not of this blood and bone that finally feels like home.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

KELLI

The second I shut the battered door behind us, the air feels too thick to breathe.

The kids settle onto the torn cushions in the corner, clutching their little toy pieces, watching us with wide, wary eyes.

Watching him.

Watching me.

I can feel the heat of their stares burning through my spine.

Traz leans heavy against the wall, hand pressed to his side.

I see the dark stain blooming under his jacket, and my stomach twists.

"Sit down before you fall down," I snap, grabbing the old med kit from the shelf.

He doesn't argue.

That's how I know he's worse than he's letting on.

He sinks onto the crate, jaw tight, skin pale under the dirt and blood.

I crouch in front of him, popping the cracked latch on the kit with shaking fingers.

Old habits kick in, and I push the fear down deep.

Keep my hands steady.

Keep my face blank.

I peel back his jacket, ripping it when it sticks to the blood-soaked fabric underneath.

He flinches, barely.

The wound's bad—ugly gash along his ribs, still weeping red.

Could've killed him easy if it were an inch deeper.

I don't let my hands tremble.

I don't let my voice break.

I dip the cloth in the little flask of liquor we keep for emergencies and press it to the wound.

He sucks in a sharp breath.

"Go ahead," I mutter. "Yell if you want. Not like the kids haven't heard worse."

He grunts something under his breath—maybe a curse, maybe a thank you, I can't tell.

I clean him up as best I can, working fast, working hard.

Because if I stop moving...

If I stop pretending like he's just another patient...

I'll break.

And if I break, I don't know if I'll ever be able to piece myself back together again.

"Why?" I whisper before I even realize the word's left my mouth.

Traz stiffens.

"Why'd you leave?" I ask, louder now, the dam starting to crack.

His eyes stay locked on mine, steady, stubborn.

"You wouldn't have been safe if I stayed," he says rough.

"Safe?" I spit, slamming the bloody cloth down onto the floor. "You think hiding under Petru's thumb was safe? You think raising two half-blood kids in a goddamn death pit was safe?"

His jaw flexes.

"You think I didn't want to stay?" he growls. "You think it didn't kill me to walk away?"

"You didn't even say goodbye!" I shout, voice breaking.

The kids flinch in the corner, huddling closer together.

Guilt slices through me, but I can't stop.

Not now.

"You didn't give me a choice!" I cry, chest heaving. "You just—left. You disappeared. Like we didn't matter."

"You did matter!" he roars back, fists clenching at his sides.

"Then why wasn't I enough?" I choke out.

The silence after that is brutal.

Raw.

Traz drags his hands down his face, like he's trying to peel himself out of his own damn skin.

"I was scared," he mutters.

The words are so soft I almost miss them.

I blink.

"You?" I sneer, bitterness coating every syllable. "The big bad mercenary? Scared?"

He lifts his head, meeting my stare without flinching.

"Yeah," he says. "Scared I'd ruin you. Scared Petru would use you against me. Scared you'd die because of me."

Tears blur my vision.

I swipe them away with the back of my hand, furious at myself.

"Newsflash, Traz," I hiss. "You ruined me anyway."

His shoulders sag, like the fight's bleeding out of him.

Like he knows he deserves every damn word.

The kids watch us, silent and scared, their little bodies pressed together for protection.

I see it—see the fear we're feeding them—and it twists the knife deeper.

I turn away, wrapping my arms around myself, holding in the sob clawing up my throat.

"You think fear makes you a man?" I whisper, voice shaking. "It makes you a coward."

The word hangs there.

Heavy.

Final.

Traz doesn't defend himself.

Doesn't argue.

Just sits there, bleeding and broken, watching me like he's drowning.

The kids don't move.

Neither do I.

The room feels like it's caving in.

Crushing us all under the weight of everything we never said.

Everything we can't take back.

Everything we still don't know how to fix.

The silence drags so long it feels like a living thing, coiling around my throat.

Aria lets out a soft, broken sound.

A hiccup first.

Then a choked little sob.

I whip around just in time to see her crumble—face crumpling, tiny fists rubbing at her eyes.

It guts me.

But before I can move, Traz is already there.

Fast for a man so battered.

He scoops her up gentle as you please, cradling her against his chest like she's made of something precious and fragile.

Aria buries her face in his neck, sobs wracking her tiny body.

Traz just holds her.

No words.

No false promises.

Just solid, steady strength.

Joren edges closer too, clinging to Traz's arm like he's afraid if he lets go, the whole world will fall apart.

Traz shifts, pulling them both into his lap, wrapping those big arms around them tight.

Protective.

Fierce.

Unyielding.

I press a hand over my mouth, swallowing back the sob burning in my chest.

Watching them—this big, broken man who once walked away from us now holding our babies like they're the only things keeping him breathing?—

It shatters something inside me.

Something hard and bitter I didn't even know I was still clinging to.

I sink down onto the crate across from them, hands shaking, heart twisting in my chest.

I don't say a word.

I don't have to.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

KELLI

The next morning creeps in slow and ugly, dragging pale light through the cracked windows.

I don't sleep.

I don't think Traz does either.

He sits against the far wall, legs stretched out in front of him, Aria tucked into one side, Joren draped half across his chest like a little barnacle.

I watch them from my place across the room, knees drawn to my chest, arms locked around them like I can keep the world at bay if I just squeeze tight enough.

It's stupid.

Petty.

But part of me doesn't know how to crawl over there and fit myself into that picture.

Not after everything.

So I stay where I am.

Silent.

Watching.

Waiting.

Traz stirs first.

He shifts, careful not to wake the kids.

His eyes find me across the room.

He doesn't say anything.

Doesn't have to.

That look—raw, steady, stubborn—says it all.

I'm here.

I'm not leaving.

Not this time.

The tension between us stretches taut, tight as wire, but since he kicked open that door, it doesn't feel like it's choking me.

Feels like maybe, just maybe, we're learning how to breathe the same broken air again.

Later, after a breakfast of stale ration biscuits and weak tea, the kids tug him outside.

Out into the wreck yard, where scraps of metal and twisted junk form a crooked

playground.

I follow, leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, watching them.

Aria's already dragging him toward a half-crushed transport shell, waving her hands, talking a mile a minute.

"That's my ship," she declares, pointing proudly. "We're gonna fix it up and fly away someday!"

Traz raises an eyebrow at the battered heap.

"That so?" he says, voice rough but warm.

"Yup," she says, puffing her little chest out. "Joren's my engineer. I'm the captain."

Joren peeks out from behind her, quiet and wide-eyed.

Traz crouches down, big and careful, so he's eye level with them.

"Good setup," he says. "But every captain needs a good gunner too."

Aria's eyes light up.

"You wanna be my gunner?" she demands, hands on her hips.

Traz chuckles low, the sound rumbling through the yard.

"Best shot you'll ever have, little warrior," he promises.

She beams like he hung the damn sun.

Joren stays back, shy.

Nervous.

I recognize that fear—the instinct to hold yourself small, to stay quiet so you don't get hurt.

I lived it.

Still living it, some days.

Traz notices too.

He doesn't push.

Just lets Aria chatter and climb and boss him around while Joren watches from a safe distance.

He throws glances at the boy, small and patient, like he's laying a bridge stone by stone instead of trying to drag him across.

And somehow... somehow that hurts more than anything.

Because he gets it.

He gets them.

He gets me.

Even after all the time and distance and pain.

He still knows how to reach the broken parts.

Later, when Aria's occupied building some kind of "turbo blaster" out of pipe scraps, Joren drifts closer to Traz.

He fiddles with the frayed hem of his shirt, not looking up.

"Did you really fly ships?" he mumbles.

Traz crouches down again, arms resting on his knees.

"Yeah," he says. "Flew a lotta junk heaps worse than this one."

Joren's eyes flicker up, wide with wonder.

"Did you ever go to the stars?" he asks, voice small.

Traz nods slow.

"Been to places where the suns burn blue and the ground floats under your boots."

Joren sucks in a breath, like Traz just told him magic was real.

"You think... we could go someday?" he whispers.

Something cracks wide open inside me.

Hope.

Raw and terrifying.

Traz's voice goes low, serious.

"You stick close to your mama," he says. "You learn everything she's gotta teach you. And one day... yeah. We'll get you there."

Joren's whole face lights up.

He grins—a real, unguarded grin—and my heart damn near shatters all over again.

I retreat into the shelter for a minute, under the excuse of cleaning up.

Really, I just need a breath.

Need to keep myself from running across the yard and collapsing into Traz's arms like a fool.

Because it's easy, watching him like this.

Too easy.

Makes me forget the years I spent fighting for air.

Makes me forget how bad it hurt when he didn't come back.

But I can't forget.

I won't.

Even if some stubborn, broken piece of me wants to.

When I step back out, Joren's perched on Traz's shoulders, laughing soft while Aria

clammers up the side of the freighter.

Traz looks up, catches my eye.

He smiles.

Small.

Crooked.

Real.

The anger that's been strangling me for so long loosens its grip just a little.

Not gone.

Not yet.

But maybe...

Maybe there's a chance to find something better in all this wreckage we call a life and we're not as broken as we think.

Maybe we're still worth saving.

The scrap yard is peaceful in a broken kind of way.

That's when I hear the scuff of boots behind me.

I stiffen.

Turn.

Silpha stands there, hands full—one carrying a battered crate stuffed with food supplies, the other tucked awkwardly into her belt.

I don't move.

Neither does she.

"Thought you might need this," she says, voice rough like gravel.

I glare at her.

Hard.

"What I needed," I snap low, keeping my voice just shy of yelling so the kids don't hear, "was a little damn warning."

Silpha's mouth tightens.

"I didn't have the luxury," she says flat.

"You had time enough to find him," I hiss. "You had time enough to drag him halfway across the planet?—"

"He deserved to know," she bites out.

"So do I!" I shoot back, stabbing a finger into her chest. "This was my life. My kids. My pain. You don't get to shove him back into it like nothing happened."

We stand there, breathing hard, the wreckage around us humming with the weight of

everything unsaid.

Silpha's shoulders sag.

She steps closer, lowering her voice.

"You're right," she says. "Should've told you. Should've given you the choice."

She looks past me, into the yard.

I follow her gaze.

Traz is laughing now, low and warm, spinning Aria around while Joren squeals with delight from his perch.

Silpha watches them for a long moment.

Then she turns back to me, eyes sharp, searching.

"But," she says, voice soft but deadly serious, "if I'd given you that choice... would you have said yes?"

I open my mouth.

Close it.

Swallow hard against the lump rising up.

I look back at the scene in front of me.

At the man I hated and loved in the same breath.

At the babies we made who somehow still found a way to laugh even in a world this broken.

I press a hand over my heart, grounding myself.

Then I meet her gaze.

And I nod.

"Yeah," I whisper. "I'd have said yes."

Silpha smiles.

Just a little.

Just enough.

She drops the crate onto the ground between us with a grunt.

"Good," she says. "Then we don't have to kill each other today."

I huff out a laugh that feels too big for my chest.

"Maybe tomorrow," I mutter.

She smirks and disappears back into the shadows, leaving me standing there with the weight of a new future heavy in my hands.

I don't know what comes next.

I don't know how we heal this.

But watching Traz cradle our babies like they're the whole damn universe?

It feels like the first real thing in a long, long time.

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TRAZ

The kids pass out early, worn down from hours of playing and belly-laughing like they didn't have a care in the world.

Wish I could say the same.

I sit on the floor, back against the cracked wall, legs stretched out, the stitched gash in my side throbbing in time with my heartbeat.

Kelli moves around the room slow, deliberate, picking up stray bits of food wrappers and tossed toys.

The quiet between us isn't comfortable.

It's a live thing.

Breathing.

Waiting.

She tosses the last scrap into the trash heap and leans against the opposite wall, arms folded, staring at the ground like it's got all the answers she's never gotten.

"You gonna keep runnin'?" she says, voice low but not sharp.

Not angry.

Just tired.

I shake my head.

Slow.

"I'm here."

She laughs, soft and brittle.

"Yeah," she says. "You're here now."

The way she says it—like it's almost too late—cuts deeper than any knife.

I don't say anything.

I just sit there.

Let her have the floor.

She deserves it.

She crosses her arms tighter, biting at her bottom lip, like she's wrestling herself.

Then she lets out a breath so shaky it hurts to hear.

"You wanna know what it was like after you left?" she asks.

I nod once.

Hard.

She lifts her chin, eyes glittering like broken glass.

"First week, I thought you were dead," she says, voice calm in that terrifying way people sound when they're too numb to feel. "Or maybe locked up. Tortured. Something."

I grind my molars together, fists curling on my thighs.

"But you weren't," she says, staring straight through me. "You just left."

I swallow the thousand apologies clawing up my throat.

Because words are cheap.

She keeps going, steady as a blade.

"Petru paraded me around like a trophy after that," she says. "Dressed me up. Showed me off. Whispered to his men about how I was the last gift the great mercenary Traz rejected."

My stomach knots.

She smiles, bitter and hollow.

"Had to stand there and smile while they stared. While they laughed."

The rage that coils inside me is cold.

Deadly.

But I lock it down.

She needs this.

Not my anger.

Not my guilt.

Just the space to bleed out the wounds she's had to hide too long.

"I found out I was pregnant two months later," she says, voice cracking under the weight of the memory.

Her hand drifts to her stomach, like she's remembering carrying them inside her.

"Thought about killing myself," she says blunt. "Figured Petru'd kill the babies anyway. Figured it'd be easier if I did it first."

I flinch.

Can't help it.

The thought of her alone, scared, carrying our blood, wanting to end it all.

It shatters something inside me I didn't even know was still whole.

"But I didn't," she says, shrugging one shoulder.

Her mouth quirks into something that might be a smile if you squint hard enough.

"I stayed alive out of pure spite," she mutters. "Wasn't gonna let Petru win."

I breathe out slow, clenching my fists tighter, nails digging into my palms.

"You fought," I say hoarse.

"Damn right I fought," she snaps, finally looking at me. "Fought for them. For me. For whatever scraps of dignity I had left."

Silence stretches out.

Thick.

Heavy.

I feel every inch of it pressing down on my chest.

"And then," she says softer, "Silpha helped me fake my death. Got me out. Got me here."

She sweeps her hand around the busted room.

"This is it, Traz," she says. "The grand empire your babies were born into. Rust. Dirt. Running scared every damn day."

I open my mouth.

Nothing comes out.

Because what the hell do you say to that?

What words could possibly fix the years I let rot away between us?

So I don't say anything.

I just sit there.

Let her see it.

The regret.

The shame.

The broken parts of me laid bare.

She sighs.

Long and rough.

"You wanna know the worst part?" she asks.

I nod once, jaw so tight it feels like it might snap.

"I hated you," she says. "God, I hated you."

Every word is a dagger.

"And I loved you," she says, softer now. "Even when it would've been easier to forget you."

Tears shimmer in her eyes, but she blinks them away.

Feisty to the end.

God, I missed her fire.

Her fight.

Her everything.

She pushes off the wall, crossing the small space between us.

Stands over me, arms loose at her sides, jaw trembling.

"I don't know if I can forgive you," she says, voice raw.

I nod.

"I don't expect you to," I say.

Her eyes flicker.

Something inside them shifts.

Breaks open.

She crouches down slowly, sitting cross-legged in front of me.

Close enough I can see every tiny scar, every freckle, every crack life carved into her.

We sit there.

No touching.

No false promises.

Just breathing.

Together.

It feels like we're standing in the ashes of everything we lost.

And maybe, we've got enough fight left to build something new.

We sit there in the dim, broken room, breathing the same air, letting the silence settle around us like a new kind of armor.

Different from the sharp-edged silence we used to wear.

This one's softer.

Warmer.

Hopeful, maybe.

Kelli shifts first, brushing her hair back from her face in a nervous little motion I remember all too well.

She leans in without really meaning to, her knee bumping mine.

She freezes.

I don't move.

Don't dare.

I watch her—steady, patient—as she studies me like she's trying to find the pieces of the man she used to know.

Slowly, like the tide pulling at the sand, she reaches out.

Her fingers brush the side of my face—soft, hesitant.

I close my eyes.

Let it happen.

Let her touch me.

Because gods know I don't deserve it.

But I'll take it.

I'll take anything she's willing to give.

I open my eyes again.

Find her closer now.

Her breath warm against my mouth.

Her gaze flicks down.

My heart slams hard against my ribs, but I don't push.

Don't chase.

Just wait.

She closes the distance.

Her mouth brushes mine—barely a whisper of contact.

Soft.

Testing.

Breaking me open.

I groan low, reaching up, tangling a hand in her hair, pulling her closer.

Kissing her like she's the only real thing in the goddamn universe.

She kisses me back—hungry and hesitant all at once.

Like she's fighting herself and losing.

Good.

Because I'm already lost.

Hopelessly, stupidly lost for her.

Always have been.

Always will be.

When she finally pulls back, her forehead rests against mine, both of us breathing hard.

"You staying?" she whispers, voice small and raw.

My fingers tighten gently against the back of her neck.

"I'll stay," I rasp.

She nods against me, like she's holding onto that little promise with both hands.

Without another word, she stands, offering me her hand.

I take it.

Of course I take it.

She leads me across the cracked floor, past the kids sleeping sound, past the shattered dreams we've both carried too long.

Into the little back room where she sleeps.

It isn't much.

Barely a mattress, a few thin blankets.

But when she curls into my side and lets out a soft, shaky breath against my chest...

It feels like the finest place I've ever been.

Home.

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TRAZ

I feel the weight of her body against mine, the way her breath hitches when my fingers trace the curve of her jaw.

The mattress creaks beneath us, a fragile symphony of rusted springs.

Her lips are tentative at first—a featherlight press that tastes of salt and unspoken years.

I let her set the rhythm, my hands trembling as they hover above her hips, afraid to shatter this fragile thing we're rebuilding.

Her fingers curl into the fabric of my shirt, pulling me closer until our chests collide.

The kiss deepens, slow and searching, her mouth opening beneath mine like a question.

I answer with a groan, my palm sliding up her spine to cradle the base of her skull.

She arches into me, a broken sound escaping her throat that I swallow whole.

The air thickens with heat, our movements growing urgent.

Her nails scrape my scalp as she fists a hand in my hair, dragging me down into the storm of her.

I taste desperation in the way her teeth catch my lip, in the way her hips roll against mine like she's trying to erase every empty night we spent apart.

The world narrows to the slick slide of skin, the ragged symphony of our breathing, the way her pulse flutters beneath my thumb when I brush her throat.

She tears at my shirt, fabric ripping as we fumble with buttons.

I let her strip me bare, her palms mapping every scar and ridge like she's memorizing a battlefield.

When her lips find the hollow of my collarbone, I shudder, my hands gripping the thin mattress to keep from crushing her.

She's everywhere—her scent, her warmth, the soft whimpers muffled against my skin—until I can't tell where I end and she begins.

The last thread of restraint snaps when she whispers my name, raw and pleading.

"Traz..."

My mouth crashes into hers again, hungry and unyielding, as if we could devour the years of silence between us. Her legs wrap around my waist, anchoring me to this moment, to her, as the world outside this room dissolves into nothing.

Her fingers fumble with my belt. I catch her wrists—too rough, maybe—but she jerks against my grip.

"You think I don't know how to do this?" Her laugh cracks midair, brittle as the bulb filament sputtering above us.

My thumbs swipe the saltwater streaks under her eyes before I mean to. Neither of us mention it.

The shirt peels away next, her nails catching on cotton seams. I watch her lips part when I tug the hem of her tunic upward—slow, giving her time to bolt. Her ribs press against my palms as the fabric clears her head. Scars lattice her stomach like henna. I don't ask. Not tonight.

She shivers when my mouth finds the hinge of her jaw. Works open my fly with practiced tugs that make my spine lock. For someone kept in lace and parlor smiles, she undoes a man like demolition work. The last of our clothes hit the floorboards as she hooks a leg over my hip.

I push her back.

Her gasp splinters when I slide down the bunk, calluses catching on her inner thighs. She smells like antiseptic soap — harsh, chemical—but underneath it, warm musk and panic. My tongue drags a slow line. Her heel slams into my shoulder blade. "Fuck. Tr?—"

"No talking." I bite the crease where hip meets groin. She whines through clenched teeth. Her hands find my hair, not gentle now.

Tastes shift—sharp sweat, salt tides, the metallic zing every time she bucks. Memorizing the cadence of her gasps feels tactical. Necessary. When she arches hard enough to lift us both off the mattress, I pin her hips and let her throttle the rhythm she needs.

Her thighs quake. Radio static fills my skull.

My tongue drags a slow circle, savoring the hitch in her breath.

She tastes like desperation and iron, her thighs trembling against my shoulders.

I map her with my mouth—every twitch, every stifled gasp a roadmap to unraveling her.

Her fingers claw at the sheets, knuckles white as she arches into me.

I don't rush. Mercenaries learn patience.

Her breath fractures into a whine, sharp and high. I press deeper, relentless, until her hips buck. She tries to grind against me, but I pin her down with a hand on her stomach. Control is the currency here. She whimpers, a sound that's half protest, half plea.

“Traz—”

I ignore it. My teeth graze the soft skin of her inner thigh, and she jerks. Her heel digs into my back, urging. I let her squirm, let the tension coil tighter. When her moans turn ragged, I finally relent.

Her climax hits like a detonation. She seizes, back bowing off the mattress, a choked scream tearing from her throat. I ride it out, relentless, until she's gasping, her body shuddering beneath me.

She collapses, chest heaving. Sweat glistens on her collarbone. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, watching her come undone. Her eyes flutter open, pupils blown wide.

I don't give her time to recover.

Climbing over her, I grip her hips and yank her against me. She's still trembling, her

breath hot against my neck as I push my cock inside. Her nails rake down my back, drawing blood. I bite back a groan.

Her pussy's tight, heat wrapping around me like a vise. Her legs lock around my waist, pulling my cock deeper. Every thrust is a battle—her gasps, the creak of the mattress, the raw scrape of skin on skin.

Her head thrashes against the pillow. “Faster?—”

I ignore her. Slow. Methodical. Let her feel every inch.

She curses, her voice breaking as she cries my name behind her hand.

"Traz," she whispers, hoarse and desperate. "Fuck, Traz, I missed this. I needed this."

"I know," I reply against her ear. "I know you did, Kelli."

A single tear rolls down her cheek. I lean down and lick it away, refusing to ever let her feel such sorrow ever again.

"Fuck, Traz..." she whines in response.

Her body clenches, dragging me closer to the edge. I grit my teeth, focus on the way her breath hitches each time I drive into her pussy.

The room reeks of sweat and sex. Her moans rise, sharp and desperate. I can feel her tightening again, her body arching.

Her heartbeat thunders through my palm pressed between her shoulder blades. We're fused at the sternum, sweat-slick and shaking, her forehead jammed against my throat. I count the vertebrae under my fingers—C3 to T1—a mercenary's habit of

cataloging vulnerabilities. Her exhale scalds my collarbone.

The mattress groans as she rolls us sideways. Her leg hooks over my hip, possessive. Moonlight bleeds through cracked window slats, glinting in her eyes.

I catch her wrist, bring her knuckles to my mouth.

Her legs lock around my waist, pulling me deeper with each thrust.

"Traz—" Her voice cracks, a fractured plea.

I silence her with a growl, my hand tangling in her hair.

Her body tightens like a coiled spring, every muscle trembling.

I feel the exact moment her control shatters—her back arches, a choked cry tearing from her throat.

The convulsions ripple through her, dragging me over the edge with brutal efficiency.

My vision whites out. Teeth gritted, I bury my face in the crook of her neck as the world dissolves into static. Her pulse hammers against my lips, rapid as a gunshot. We collapse in a tangle of limbs, the mattress groaning in protest.

The silence stretches, broken only by the creak of cooling metal from the radiator. She shifts, her forehead pressing against my sternum. I don't move when her arm snakes across my chest.

Her hand stills on my ribcage. The faint click of her swallow echoes louder than the street noise outside. I count the seconds until her breathing evens out, muscles slackening against me. Her knee digs into my hipbone.

The streetlight casts her face in amber. For a heartbeat, I consider tracing the contours of her jawline.

Instead, I close my eyes. Let the weight of her arm anchor me to the mattress. The distant wail of a patrol siren fades into the hum of the city. Her breath warms my shoulder.

Sleep comes like a sniper's bullet—swift, unannounced.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

TRAZ

The knock comes just after dark.

Sharp.

Measured.

My hand goes to the knife on my belt before I even think about it.

Kelli stiffens where she's settling the kids down in the corner, her body snapping tense like a wire about to snap.

I tilt my head at her—stay there—and move toward the door.

"Silpha," comes the voice from outside.

I don't relax.

Not yet.

I crack the door open with one hand, keeping the knife low and ready.

She stands alone, wrapped in that tattered coat of hers, eyes sharp, mouth pressed into a grim line.

"It's clear," she says low. "Let me in."

I yank the door open wider, dragging her inside fast before someone sees.

She moves quick, setting down a satchel that clinks with the sound of ration packs and spare charges.

The kids stare at her with wide, silent eyes.

Kelli stands, arms folded, jaw tight.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

Silpha scans the room once, quick, then plants her hands on her hips.

"Opportunity," she says. "But it isn't free."

I cross my arms.

"Talk."

Silpha jerks her chin toward the table.

We crowd around, the kids hovering close to Kelli's legs.

"I got word from a freighter captain," she says, laying out a battered datapad. "No loyalty to Petru. No questions asked."

She taps the screen, showing a map of the lower docks.

"They're willing to take you off Glimner. Disappear you so deep even Petru's rats won't sniff you out."

Hope flares hard and sharp in my chest before I can beat it down.

"But," she says grimly, "it's in one week. Docking schedules, bribes, fuel permits. You can't rush this."

Kelli blows out a breath, sagging a little against the table.

"A week," she repeats, voice flat.

Silpha nods.

"A week," she says. "You don't make it, you don't get another shot."

I run a hand through my hair, jaw grinding.

A week.

Might as well be a damn lifetime in a place like this.

Petru's men were already sniffing around.

We could survive seven more days... or we could bleed out in a gutter for trying.

No in-between.

Kelli pushes her hair back, her hand trembling.

"You trust this contact?" she demands.

Silpha's mouth twists.

"About as much as I trust anyone in this hellhole," she says. "But the freighter's real. Saw it with my own eyes."

I study her.

The tension in her shoulders.

The flicker of real fear she can't quite hide.

She's not selling a dream.

She's selling the only shot we've got.

I look at Kelli.

She's pale, lips tight, but there's steel in her spine.

She meets my gaze, silent.

Waiting.

Letting me lead.

I nod once.

Slow.

Hard.

"We'll be ready," I say.

Silpha huffs out a breath.

"I'll keep feeding you supplies," she says. "Small batches. Nothing that'll tip off the patrols."

She pulls a folded slip of paper from her coat and slides it across the table.

"Coordinates," she says. "Service tunnels. Smuggler routes. Places you can hole up if it gets hot."

Kelli snatches it up, scanning it quick.

"How hot we talkin'?" I ask.

Silpha grimaces.

"Petru's getting twitchy," she says. "Word is, he knows something's off. He's been questioning everyone who ever even breathed your names."

My fists clench.

Damn bastard's got eyes everywhere.

"We keep our heads down," I mutter. "Quiet. Careful."

"Exactly," Silpha says. She jabs a finger at me. "No heroics. No showing your face in the wrong sectors. You get caught, you're dead. And worse—your kids are dead too."

I feel Kelli flinch beside me.

I set my hand over hers under the table.

Squeeze once.

Silent promise.

Not while I'm breathing.

Silpha checks the window, restless.

"I can't stay long," she mutters. "I have my own trail to cover."

She slings her satchel back over her shoulder.

"You need anything," she says, meeting my eyes, "you send signal on channel nine. Only once. Only if you're cornered."

I nod.

She pauses at the door.

Looks back.

Her face softens a fraction when she looks at Kelli.

At the kids.

"You have one shot at this," she says rough. "Make it count."

Then she's gone, swallowed by the shadows.

The silence after she leaves is thick.

Heavy.

Joren presses close to Kelli's leg.

Aria tugs on the hem of my jacket.

"Are we leaving, Papa?" she asks, voice tiny.

My heart kicks hard against my ribs.

I crouch, pulling them both close.

"Yeah, little warrior," I say hoarse. "We are."

She nods solemn, like I just handed her a mission.

Joren just buries his face in my chest.

I lift him into my arms, feeling the frail strength of him.

The steady thrum of life.

Gods help anyone who tries to take that away from me.

Kelli moves around the room, quick and efficient, gathering supplies, stashing weapons, checking the battered satchels we'll need to survive the next seven days.

I watch her a minute.

The way her jaw tightens.

The way her hands shake when she thinks nobody's looking.

She's scared.

Hell, we all are.

But she doesn't quit.

Doesn't fold.

She just keeps moving.

Fighting.

Surviving.

I cross the room in two strides and catch her hand.

She jerks, startled, but doesn't pull away.

I tug her against me, wrapping my arms around her, holding her tight enough to make my ribs ache.

For a second, she stands stiff.

Then she sags into me, forehead pressing into my chest.

"We can do this," I murmur against her hair. "We will."

Her fingers clutch my shirt like she's afraid I'll vanish again.

"I know," she whispers.

And somehow, I think maybe we will.

Maybe we can finally stop running.

Maybe we can finally be a family.

If we live long enough to see that ship lift off.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

KELLI

We don't sleep much after Silpha leaves.

The air's too thick, too wired, like we're all waiting for the floor to crack under us.

Traz pulls the busted crate into the center of the room and dumps out everything we've got—ammo clips, battered old blasters, a few knives so rusted they'd be more useful for intimidation than killing.

"We gotta be ready," he says, voice low but cutting through the room like a blade.

I nod, grabbing the satchel and pulling out the ration packs, counting them with quick, nervous fingers.

Four days' worth if we stretch it hard.

Seven if we get real desperate.

Aria and Joren hover nearby, their little faces pale and serious.

Traz tosses me a blaster.

I catch it, the weight sinking into my palm like a promise.

"You're learning today," he says.

I arch an eyebrow at him.

"Figured that out myself, thanks," I mutter, flipping the weapon over, checking the charge.

He smirks—barely—but there's a flash of pride in his eyes that makes my chest ache.

The quiet settles heavy around us.

Traz shifts beside me, slow and careful, and before I can second-guess it, he slips his arm around my shoulders.

I stiffen, instinct more than intent.

It's been too long since anyone touched me like this—soft, sure, like I'm something precious and not just another body in a war.

But Traz doesn't push.

He just holds steady, his big hand warm against my upper arm, grounding me.

After a minute, I let myself lean into him.

Let the hard lines of his chest anchor me.

Let the smell of dust and leather and him settle into my lungs.

He presses a kiss into my hair, so soft it damn near undoes me.

Not hunger.

Not desperation.

Just... love.

The real kind.

The kind that stays.

The kind that fights for you even when you're broken into a thousand pieces.

I close my eyes, breathing him in, feeling the slow, steady thud of his heart against my cheek.

I don't feel like I'm fighting alone.

I don't feel like a slave or a fugitive or a ghost clinging to scraps of hope.

I feel like a woman.

A mother.

A mate.

Part of something real and fierce and alive.

A family.

Our family.

I curl my fingers into his shirt, holding on.

And I let myself believe.

Maybe we're not just surviving anymore.

We're finally living.

Together.

TRAZ

The walls feel tighter every day.

Like the whole damn city's shrinking around us, one crumbling block at a time.

Kelli moves quiet through the safehouse, but even she can't hide the way she flinches every time a shout echoes outside or a hoverbike screeches past the broken windows.

The kids feel it too.

They're quieter.

Eyes always darting to the door.

Waiting.

Worrying.

Same as me.

I pace near the window, checking the street below for the fifth time in ten minutes.

Nothing but shadows and scavengers.

For now.

A soft knock rattles the back door.

Twice, pause, once.

The signal.

I motion to Kelli to stay back, blaster drawn.

She nods, tucking Aria and Joren behind her.

I open the door fast, knife in one hand, blaster in the other.

Silpha stumbles inside, looking worse than I've ever seen her.

Face hollow.

Eyes wild.

Hands shaking.

She slams the door behind her and leans against it like she's holding back the whole damn planet.

"Traz," she rasps, her voice shot to hell. "We got a problem."

I grab her elbow and steer her toward the table before she falls over.

Kelli's already moving, setting a cup of water in front of her.

"Talk," I bark.

Silpha takes a long gulp, coughing rough.

Then she slams the cup down so hard it cracks.

"Petru's lost his godsdamned mind," she croaks.

I narrow my eyes.

"Define lost."

She drags a hand through her matted hair.

"He thinks you sold him out," she says, voice raw. "To Voltan's crew."

Kelli stiffens across from me.

"Voltan's dead," I snap.

Silpha lets out a broken laugh.

"Doesn't matter," she spits. "Petru's convinced you're working with someone. That you're building an army to come back and gut him."

I grind my teeth so hard my jaw pops.

"Stupid bastard," I mutter.

"Stupid and dangerous," Silpha hisses. "He's torturing anyone who so much as looked sideways at you. Shaking down half the city."

Kelli's face goes pale.

"What about..." she starts, voice breaking.

"The twins are still off his radar," Silpha says fast. "But if he keeps tearing through the streets like this, it's only a matter of time."

I slam my hand down on the table, rattling the cracked plates.

"Damn it."

"He's offering a bounty now," she adds. "On you. On Kelli. On the kids."

The room drops into silence.

Thick.

Suffocating.

Kelli leans back against the wall, arms wrapped tight around herself.

The kids peek out from the bedroom door, sensing the tension even if they don't understand the words.

I force myself to breathe slow.

Steady.

Think.

"How much?" I grind out.

Silpha gives a hollow laugh.

"Enough to make desperate men do stupid things," she says. "Enough that nobody's safe anymore."

I nod once.

Processing.

The clock just started ticking faster.

We don't have a week.

Hell, we might not even have a day.

"You holding up?" I ask, studying her.

Silpha's mouth twists.

"I'm fine," she lies.

The dark circles under her eyes say different.

The tremble in her hands says louder.

She's burning herself out trying to keep us alive.

Kelli moves forward, grabbing another cup, filling it, forcing it into Silpha's hands.

"Drink," she says, no patience in her tone.

Silpha glares at her but drinks anyway.

"I can keep feeding you updates," she mutters between sips. "But it's getting harder to move without eyes on me."

"We need to hole up," I say. "Stay buried until the freighter docks."

Silpha nods, hollow.

"Yes," she whispers. "If we make it that long."

Silpha slumps against the wall, drained, breathing rough.

We all do.

Nobody says it, but the weight of what's coming crushes down on us, making the air thick, too heavy to breathe.

The kids shuffle back to their pallet in the corner, curling up small under the worn blankets.

I check the locks again, triple-check the weapons, every move automatic.

Kelli watches me the whole time.

Silent.

Sharp.

When I'm finally done pacing, I lean against the door, scrubbing a hand over my face.

Bone tired.

Nerves fraying.

She crosses the room slow, arms wrapped around herself like she's holding something fragile inside.

I straighten.

Ready for a fight.

Ready for anything.

Except the look in her eyes.

Soft.

Strong.

Unbreakable.

She steps close enough that her breath brushes my chest.

Lifts her chin to meet my eyes.

"You didn't have to stay," she says, voice hoarse and raw. "You could've walked away again. Would've been easier."

I grunt.

"Would've been wrong."

She smiles—small and sad and beautiful as hell.

"You've changed," she says, studying me like she's memorizing every scar, every crack.

I shake my head.

"Just finally woke the hell up."

Her hand lifts.

Brushes my jaw.

Callused fingers tracing the line of my cheekbone, soft and sure.

"I trust you," she says.

Simple.

Devastating.

No hesitation.

No fear.

My chest feels too small for everything trying to rip through it.

I catch her hand, pressing my mouth against her knuckles, holding on like a dying man to a life raft.

"I'm not gonna let you down," I rasp.

"I know," she whispers.

And in that moment—against all odds, against all the blood and dirt and broken promises—we're a family.

A real one.

Stronger than anything hunting us.

Stronger than fear.

Stronger than fate.

I pull her close, wrapping her tight against me.

She buries her face in my chest, breathing me in like she's claiming me all over again.

I rest my chin on her head, breathing her right back.

We don't say anything else.

We don't have to.

Not tonight.

Tonight, it's enough just to stand together.

Alive.

Fighting.

Home.

KELLI

The night presses heavy against the cracked windows, thick and choking.

Silpha's curled up in the corner, snoring soft and rough.

The kids sleep tangled together, little fists clutching at each other like they know even in dreams they can't be alone right now.

Traz stands by the door, watching the street below.

Like he's daring the whole damn world to try and take what's his.

I watch him a long moment.

The way the muscles in his back bunch under his battered jacket.

The way his hand hovers near his knife, even in the quiet.

Always ready.

Always braced.

For a fight, for a fall, for another loss.

And I realize something cold and sharp.

He isn't just guarding the door.

He's guarding us.

Guarding me .

Not out of duty.

Not out of guilt.

But because he wants to.

My throat burns.

I cross the room slow, my boots scuffing soft against the cracked tile.

He hears me coming, of course.

Doesn't turn.

Doesn't flinch.

Just tilts his head slightly, like he's been waiting for me.

I stop beside him, close enough that my shoulder brushes his.

Outside, the city seethes like a wounded beast.

Lights flicker.

Distant shouts tear through the dark.

But inside it's just us.

Him and me.

And all the ghosts we gotta leave behind if we're gonna survive tomorrow.

"You ever think," I say, voice low, "about what life would've been like... if none of this happened?"

He huffs a breath, not quite a laugh.

"Sometimes," he says. "Used to think about it a lot."

I lean against the wall, arms crossed.

"What'd you see?"

He's quiet for a long beat.

Then he shrugs, slow and heavy.

"You," he says simply.

"You," he repeats, voice rough, like it costs him something to say it out loud. "And a little place. Quiet. Safe. Kids running wild. You laughing."

I bite my lip hard.

Fighting the sting behind my eyes.

Fighting the memory of everything we lost.

"That's a nice dream," I whisper.

He finally turns to look at me.

Full-on.

His face all harsh planes and old scars.

But his eyes, Gods, his eyes are soft.

"Still can be," he says, dead serious. "If we make it outta here."

I study him.

Every broken, battered, stubborn inch of him.

And I know in my bones that I'm not just surviving for the kids anymore.

I'm surviving for him , too.

For us.

I push off the wall, stepping right into his space.

Close enough to smell the dust and gun oil and raw, beating life on him.

Close enough to see the flicker of fear he tries to bury when I reach up and cup his jaw.

"You hear me, Traz?" I whisper. "I love you."

The words are small.

Ragged.

But real.

They hit harder than any bullet.

He stiffens like I shot him.

Then he grabs me.

Pulls me in so hard my breath whooshes out in a gasp.

His arms crush me to his chest, rough and shaking.

"I'm never leaving you again," he growls against my hair.

"I swear it, Kelli. I swear on every godsdamn thing I am."

I fist his jacket tight in my hands, blinking hard.

"You better not," I mutter, voice thick. "I'll kill you myself if you do."

He laughs, a low broken sound, and presses his forehead to mine.

"I believe you," he mutters.

We stand there a long time.

Just breathing each other in.

Letting the past burn away around us.

The girl who was sold and broken.

The man who ran to escape his own damn heart.

Gone.

All that's left now is the woman who clawed her way back to life.

And the man stubborn enough to follow her into hell and drag her back out again.

Together.

Always.

I shift, wrapping my arms around his waist.

Feeling his heart pounding against mine like a drumbeat.

Strong.

Steady.

Real.

"We deserve better," I whisper.

"Yeah," he says, his voice a low rumble against my temple. "We do."

"And we're gonna get it," I say fierce.

He pulls back just enough to look me dead in the eye.

"Damn right we are."

He kisses me then.

Not rough.

Not hungry.

But slow.

Sure.

A claiming that needs no fight, no fear.

Only faith.

Faith in us.

When we finally break apart, the night feels a little less heavy.

The shadows a little less sharp.

Tomorrow's still coming fast and brutal.

But tonight, we've made our peace.

Said goodbye to the ghosts.

Made room for something new.

Something worth fighting for.

I lean my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of him.

I let myself hope.

Really hope.

Because we aren't just surviving anymore.

We're living.

Together.

And nothing—not Petru, not fear, not the whole broken galaxy—is gonna tear that away from us again.

Later, when the city's noise dies down to a low, distant hum, we creep outside onto the crumbling balcony.

The night air is cool against my skin, crisp and clean in a way that feels rare down here.

The stars stretch wide above us.

Bright.

Endless.

A reminder that there's still more out there than just fear and blood and running.

I cradle Aria against my chest.

Traz's arm curls around Joren, the boy snuggled deep against his side, breathing slow and even.

We sit together on the battered bench, the kids dozing heavy and warm against us.

I glance at Traz.

He's staring at the stars like he's memorizing them.

Like he's making a map in his heart for all the places we still have to go.

Without a word, he reaches over and threads his fingers through mine.

Big.

Rough.

Solid.

I squeeze back hard.

Silent.

Steady.

Ready.

Whatever comes—fire or fury, bullets or betrayal—we'll face it together.

We've already survived the worst.

Now it's time to live for something better.

For them.

For us.

For the family we fought like hell to make.

I rest my head against his shoulder, breathing deep, letting the stars blur and spin.

Tomorrow'll come hard.

But tonight?

Tonight, we're unbreakable.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

KELLI

The city breathes down my neck.

Hot.

Thick.

Smothering.

Every step we take, it feels like the walls close tighter.

Traz leads us through the ruins of Glimner like a man who knows he's walking straight into hell.

Aria's pressed against his chest, her little body bundled tight in his jacket.

Joren clings to my side, hand clenched in mine so hard his knuckles turn white.

Silpha trails us, quick and twitchy, eyes slicing the shadows.

We don't speak.

Words would just get us killed faster.

We move.

Fast.

Quiet.

Praying to whatever gods still bother listening to broken souls like us.

The neon smears the street in sick colors—blood reds, toxic greens, drowning blues.

Garbage piles steam in the gutters.

Old hovercar husks loom like rusted-out monsters.

Traz lifts two fingers—pause.

We press back into the broken frame of a building.

I cradle Joren tighter.

My heart pounds so loud I'm sure it's echoing off the walls.

A gang patrol slinks by, heavy boots stomping.

Their blasters gleam wet under the flickering signs.

One of them spits in our direction, missing us by a hair.

We hold our breath.

Frozen.

Waiting.

They move on.

Traz glances back at me.

I nod.

I'm good.

I'm ready.

We slip out and run.

Silpha guides us through a rat maze of alleys.

Twisting.

Turning.

Ducking under hanging wires and collapsed scaffoldings.

We climb over a burnt-out market stall, shards of melted plastic crunching under our boots.

Traz boosts me up first, Joren dangling from my arms as I scramble to the other side.

I reach down for Aria next.

She whimpers.

Traz hushes her with a low growl in her ear.

She presses her little face into his shoulder and doesn't make another sound.

Good girl.

We move.

Half a block later, we hit a crowd.

Scavengers.

Dealers.

Eyes gleaming like rats in the half-light.

They part for us, sensing danger.

Sensing death on our heels.

Traz keeps one hand on his blaster, the other on Aria.

I shield Joren with my body.

Silpha mutters a curse and yanks us down a side street slick with oil.

Every footstep feels like it echoes to the rooftops.

Traz glances back again.

His jaw's tight.

Worse than tight.

Like he's bracing for the inevitable.

And gods help me, I feel it too.

The city isn't just breathing.

It's hunting.

A few blocks later, Silpha calls a halt.

We duck into the wreckage of an old hover depot.

Rust stains the floors.

Broken shells of speeders sit in twisted heaps.

Traz draws us into the darkest corner.

"Five minutes," he mutters.

"Five minutes isn't much," Silpha snaps, pacing like a caged cat.

"It's what we got," Traz growls back.

Kelli sinks down, pulling Joren into her lap.

I glance at the kids.

Aria's pale but awake, eyes huge.

Joren's trembling like a leaf.

I wrap my arms around him, pressing kisses into his messy hair.

"You're safe," I whisper, lying with everything I've got.

"You're safe, my baby."

A shadow shifts outside.

Traz stiffens.

Silpha swears under her breath.

"They're here," Traz mutters.

"We run?" I ask.

He hesitates—just a second.

Then nods.

No other choice.

We bolt.

The city explodes around us.

Voices shout.

Lights sweep the ruins.

Blasters crack the air, throwing sparks and smoke.

Traz grabs Aria tighter and barrels through a pile of old crates.

I chase after him, Joren clutched tight against my side.

We dodge between heaps of rusted metal, dive under dangling signs, slip past drunken brawlers too wrecked to care.

Every step feels heavier.

Every breath harder.

Traz cuts left into a maze of narrow alleys.

I follow blindly.

The walls press close, reeking of piss and garbage.

A gang banger leaps out ahead—gun raised.

Traz doesn't hesitate.

One shot.

Clean.

The man drops like a puppet with its strings cut.

We keep moving.

Silpha breaks ahead, waving us on.

"This way!"

The alley spits us into another dead street.

I see it before Traz does.

More thugs.

Blocking the road ahead.

Laughing.

Waiting.

"We cut right!" Traz shouts.

He yanks Aria closer, shifting direction hard.

Joren sobs once against my neck, terrified but quiet.

Good boy.

I pivot after Traz.

Then blaster fire sears the wall next to my head.

The explosion of debris knocks me sideways.

I stumble.

Cough.

Choke on smoke and fear.

"Traz!" I scream.

But he's already ahead, diving with the kids through a broken maintenance hatch.

Silpha's right behind him.

I lunge after them.

But another blast shatters the ground between us.

A piece of metal whips across my arm, tearing fabric and skin.

I cry out, stumbling back.

The hatch clangs shut.

They're gone.

Traz.

Aria.

Joren.

Gone.

The street around me howls.

More shouting.

More shots.

I shove up off the cracked pavement, blood running down my arm.

No time to cry.

No time to scream.

I bolt into the night, heart hammering like a war drum.

Alone.

TRAZ

The second the hatch slams behind us, I know something's wrong.

Kelli's not with us.

I whip around, hand flying for the latch—only to find it twisted, fused shut from the blast.

"Dammit!" I snarl, slamming my fist into the rusted metal.

Joren whimpers, clinging to my jacket.

Aria sobs, pressing her face into my chest.

"She's smart," Silpha rasps behind me, panting hard. "She'll find her way."

I grit my teeth so hard my jaw pops.

"She isn't supposed to be alone," I growl.

"No one's supposed to be anything anymore," Silpha snaps. "Move or die, Traz."

The air outside's alive with shouting.

Blasters charging.

Footsteps pounding closer.

I hoist Aria higher, shifting my stance.

The twins come first.

No matter what.

No matter what it costs.

We run.

The maintenance tunnel stinks of burnt metal and rotting water.

Lights flicker overhead, buzzing like angry wasps.

Joren stumbles.

I catch his hand, dragging him faster.

Silpha leads, weaving through the maze like she was born in it.

A door slams open ahead.

Three thugs pour into the tunnel.

Petru's colors painted sloppy across their chests.

Blasters up.

Smirking like they already won.

"Give us the brats," the biggest one sneers. "And maybe we let you crawl away."

My fingers twitch against the trigger.

"You got one chance," I snarl, voice low and sharp enough to cut. "Turn around. Walk away."

They laugh.

Wrong move.

I set Aria down behind me, shoving Joren close to her.

"Stay," I bark.

Their wide, terrified eyes lock on me.

I turn.

And unleash hell.

The first thug charges, sloppy and overeager.

I sidestep, grab his wrist, and drive my knee into his gut.

Bone cracks.

He folds with a wet grunt.

The second fires wild.

I duck low, roll forward, and come up swinging.

My fist catches him across the jaw—hard enough to send teeth flying.

He drops, whimpering.

The third backs up, fumbling his blaster.

Fear flashing across his face.

Good.

He should be afraid.

I close the distance in two strides.

Rip the weapon from his hands.

Jam it into his gut.

Fire.

One shot.

Clean.

He crumples without a sound.

Silence falls.

Except for the buzz of the broken lights.

Except for the ragged breathing of two little kids watching their father rip men apart to keep them alive.

I turn, slow.

Kneel down.

Aria's crying silent tears, her small fists balled up tight.

Joren looks like he's trying not to breathe, not to move, not to exist .

My heart shatters clean in half.

I wipe my bloody hands on my jacket.

Crouch lower.

"Listen to me," I rasp, voice thick. "You aren't bad because you saw bad things."

Joren blinks up at me, tears brimming.

"You're strong," I whisper, tapping his chest. "Both of you. Stronger than anything chasing us."

Aria sniffs.

Joren nods, trembling.

I scoop them both up.

Their little bodies clinging tight to me like vines.

"I got you," I mutter into their hair. "Always."

We don't linger.

Can't.

Silpha's already moving, checking weapons, scanning exits.

"More'll be coming," she growls. "They heard the shots."

I sling Joren over my shoulder.

Grab Aria with my free arm.

Double the weight.

Triple the need to fight harder.

Move faster.

Kill cleaner.

We sprint through the tunnels.

My boots pound the cracked floors.

My lungs burn.

But none of it matters.

Only them.

Only getting them out.

A second ambush waits near the sector junction.

This one's smarter.

A barricade.

Five thugs.

Two with blasters already trained on us.

Silpha curses under her breath.

"No way through," she mutters.

I set the kids down again.

Tuck them behind a fallen crate.

"You stay," I say again, dead serious. "No matter what you hear."

Their faces are pale.

But they nod.

My brave little warriors.

I stand tall.

Blaster raised.

Walk out slow.

Let them see me.

Let them think I'm stupid enough to play fair.

The leader smirks.

"There's nowhere left to run, ghost."

I smile.

Mean and sharp.

"I wasn't planning to run."

He doesn't even have time to shout before I fire.

Two shots.

Precise.

The first drops the idiot closest to the kids.

The second ricochets off the wall, catching another square in the throat.

Chaos erupts.

They return fire, panicked.

I dive behind a broken pillar, firing back in tight bursts.

Silpha's already moving, slicing through the side, her knife flashing in the broken light.

One thug screams.

Falls.

Another charges her—she drops him with a savage jab to the gut.

The leader tries to flee.

Big mistake.

I sprint after him, tackle him into the wall.

Drive my knee into his chest.

Hard.

Over and over.

Until he stops moving.

Until the city's screams drown out his.

I stagger back to the crate.

The kids are there.

Waiting.

Joren's eyes are wide and unblinking.

Aria's hand shakes when she reaches for me.

I drop to my knees.

Gather them both into my arms.

Hold them so tight my arms ache.

"I'm sorry you saw that," I whisper into their hair.

"But I'm never sorry I fought for you."

Never.

Not for a second.

We cut through a collapsed fence, bursting into a narrow back lot filled with burned-out hover bikes and shattered glass.

And there, staggering across the rubble, blood streaked down one arm, face pale but fierce, is Kelli.

Alive.

Fighting.

Gods, my chest cracks wide open at the sight of her.

She sees me.

Sees the kids.

And she runs.

Doesn't hesitate.

Doesn't look back.

Just runs.

I meet her halfway, dropping to my knees in the wreckage.

She collapses into me, arms thrown around my neck, sobbing, shaking.

I bury my face in her hair, breathing her in like a dying man starves for air.

"I thought—" she chokes out.

"I know," I rasp, my voice breaking. "I know, baby."

Aria squirms between us, reaching for her mama with tiny hands.

Joren presses close, burying his face against her side.

Kelli pulls them both into the circle of her arms, cradling them like they're the last precious things in a dying world.

Which they are.

Which they always were.

We stay there, huddled in the wreckage, the four of us clinging like the universe is trying to tear us apart and we refuse to let go.

Kelli pulls back just enough to look at me.

Tears shine on her dirty cheeks, but her smile.

Gods, her smile.

It's pure steel and sunlight.

"You came for me," she whispers.

I brush the hair from her face, rough and shaking.

"I'll always come for you," I say.

"And next time?"

Her voice wobbles.

"There won't be a next time," I growl, pressing my forehead to hers. "I'm not losing you again."

Not to Petru.

Not to fate.

Never.

Around us, the city howls and shudders.

Hunters still out there.

Blood still in the air.

But in this broken moment.

In this breath, we're whole.

And gods help anyone who tries to take that from us now.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

KELLI

We don't waste time after the reunion.

Can't.

Traz grabs my hand so tight it damn near cuts off circulation, dragging me through the crumbling alleys toward the hangar where Silpha said the freighter would dock.

Aria clings to his chest.

Joren runs, panting, at my side.

The city howls behind us.

Sirens.

Gunfire.

A world burning.

I don't dare look back.

The hangar's a rusted skeleton at the edge of Glimner's industrial sprawl.

Broken lights flicker overhead, throwing everything into jagged shadows.

The transport ship's there.

Big.

Ugly.

Beautiful.

Hope in metal form.

Traz slows as we approach, scanning the lot with sharp eyes.

"Too quiet," he mutters.

My stomach twists.

I feel it too.

Wrong.

Heavy.

Like the world's holding its breath before it punches you in the gut.

I clutch Joren tighter.

Traz shifts Aria higher against him, his free hand never straying far from his blaster.

Silpha moves to the door first, punching in the access code.

The ship's ramp hisses open slow.

And that's when all hell breaks loose.

Shouts.

The crunch of boots.

The gleam of rifles in the flickering light.

Petru steps out from the shadows like a nightmare made flesh.

Scarred.

Grinning.

A dozen of his men fanning out behind him like a pack of hungry wolves.

"Thought you could just slip away, ghost?" Petru calls, voice smooth as broken glass.

"You disappoint me."

Traz pushes me and the kids back, shielding us with his body.

"You're the one who's finished," he growls.

Petru laughs, a low ugly sound.

"We'll see about that."

He lifts his hand.

Snaps his fingers.

Gunfire explodes all around us.

Traz shoves Aria into my arms.

"Run when I tell you," he snarls.

I nod, heart hammering my ribs into dust.

He draws his blaster.

Silpha's already firing from the flank, picking off the first two thugs who rush the ramp.

I grab Joren's hand and duck low behind a crate, cradling both kids against me.

Traz moves like a force of nature.

No hesitation.

No mercy.

He shoots one bastard clean through the throat, then spins and drops another with a shot to the knee and a brutal elbow to the skull.

He's a whirlwind of blood and fury.

And every shot fired feels like it tears another hole in my chest.

Because if I lose him now, if we survive only for me to watch him die.

I'll never recover.

Not again.

Not ever.

Petru's men circle tighter.

More shouts.

More gunfire.

Concrete chips spray around us.

One thug tries to flank Traz.

He sees it a second too late.

The bastard swings a pipe at his head.

Traz ducks, snarling, and rams his blaster butt into the man's gut, then kicks him hard enough that he slams into a rusted loader and crumples.

I suck in a sharp breath.

Joren whimpers against my leg.

Aria sobs silent tears against my neck.

I clutch them both tighter.

"Hold on," I whisper. "Just hold on, babies."

Traz fires again—center mass—dropping another attacker.

But there's too many.

Way too many.

For every one he drops, two more step over the bodies to get closer.

Silpha shouts something I can't hear over the roar.

Petru moves forward, casual, calm, like he's got all the time in the world.

He lifts his blaster.

Aims straight for Traz's back.

My heart freezes.

"Traz!" I scream.

He turns, too late.

A shot rings out.

Sharp and ugly.

But it's Silpha's blaster.

She drops Petru's second-in-command mid-sprint.

Traz throws himself sideways, rolling behind a crate.

Returns fire.

Blood blooms in the chest of another thug.

But it's chaos.

Pure chaos.

The hangar shakes with the thunder of weapons.

Smoke curls thick and greasy through the air.

My babies cry harder.

I cover their heads with my body, shaking, praying, pleading to whatever gods are left.

Just let us make it.

Just let us survive.

I don't care what it costs.

I don't care what I have to give.

Just bring him back to me.

Bring us all home.

Traz fights like he's already dead.

Like nothing matters except carving a path for us out of this slaughter.

He moves brutal and fast, using every piece of cover, every broken crate, every inch of shadow.

He grits his teeth, fires two shots into the nearest thug, then rams his shoulder into another, sending him flying into a wall.

He's bleeding.

I see it.

A line of red slicing down his side where a blaster grazed him.

But he doesn't slow.

Doesn't even flinch.

He's not fighting for himself.

He's fighting for us.

For me.

For our babies.

And gods, it makes me want to sob and scream and laugh all at once.

Because no one's ever fought for me like this.

No one's ever stayed .

Not until him.

Not until now.

Another thug charges, wild and sloppy.

Traz sidesteps him, grabs his arm, snaps it clean at the elbow with a sick crack, and throws him face-first into the ground.

The others hesitate.

Just for a second.

Long enough to buy us a breath.

A heartbeat.

Traz glances back at me across the battlefield.

Our eyes lock.

The world disappears.

Just him.

Just me.

Just survival.

"Stay down!" he roars.

I nod, mouth too dry to speak.

He turns back to the fight.

And the last thing I see before the smoke swallows him again is him standing tall.

Unbreakable.

Unstoppable.

Ours.

But then Traz's blaster clicks dry.

Silpha's pinned behind a loading crate, bleeding bad from a shot to her leg.

Petru's men keep coming.

More shadows.

More shouting.

More gunfire.

We're outgunned.

Outnumbered.

Trapped.

And the exit—the freighter—the only way off this godsdamn rock.

It's still half a battlefield away.

I clutch the kids tighter, tears burning my eyes.

Traz meets my gaze again, and in his eyes, I see it.

The moment he realizes we aren't making it out together.

Not all of us.

Not alive.

Silpha moves.

Fast.

Savage.

She rips a thermal charge from her belt, sets it fast with bloody fingers.

"Silpha—NO!" Traz roars.

She flashes him a crooked grin.

Tired.

Fierce.

Free.

"Get them home," she shouts.

And then she's running—straight into the heart of Petru's men—blasting rounds and curses and rage.

For one frozen breath, time stops.

Traz surges forward, desperate.

I scream his name, grabbing him back.

Because we both know.

We both know .

A flash of light.

A deafening boom.

The hangar shakes.

Fire erupts, a screaming wall of heat and fury that throws bodies and debris into the air.

Petru's men scatter.

Screaming.

Burning.

Silpha's gone.

Traz stumbles back, face twisted with something worse than pain.

Something worse than loss.

I crawl out from behind the crate, dragging the kids, heart hammering so loud it drowns out the world.

Traz scoops us up without a word, cradling us tight against his body.

We run.

Through fire.

Through smoke.

Through the wreckage of Silpha's sacrifice.

We run.

Because she gave us this chance.

She bought us this breath.

She bought us this life.

And we won't waste it.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

TRAZ

The ship's engines roar under my boots, a low, angry hum that rattles my bones.

We made it.

Barely.

At a price I'm not sure I'll ever stop paying.

I slump against the cold metal wall just inside the main hold, cradling Aria against my chest like she's the last soft thing left in a world made of knives.

Joren clings to my leg, silent, his wide eyes locked on the cargo ramp as it seals shut behind us.

Behind him, behind all of us, Glimner burns.

Along with it is Silpha.

Kelli crouches nearby, arms wrapped around her knees.

She rocks slightly, not crying.

Not yet.

Too numb for it.

I know the feeling.

It's sitting thick in my gut too.

A heavy, ugly knot I can't shake loose.

"She saved us," Kelli says after a long beat, her voice barely a whisper.

"Yeah," I rasp.

I rub Aria's back slow, mechanical.

Feel her shudder against me, small and scared but alive.

Because Silpha made it so.

Because she gave everything she had left so we could crawl out of that hellhole.

I should be grateful.

I should be relieved.

But all I feel is hollow.

And guilty as sin.

I slide down the wall until I'm sitting on the floor, Aria still pressed tight against my chest.

The engines thrum louder as we break atmosphere.

The ship jolts.

Joren yelps and scrambles into Kelli's arms.

She holds him close, murmuring soft words into his hair.

Words I can't quite hear.

Don't deserve to hear.

Not yet.

Not with the way my guts are twisting.

I should've seen it.

Should've fought harder.

Should've found another way.

Anything but letting her go up in flames to buy us a few goddamn breaths.

Kelli looks at me.

Really looks at me.

And it cuts deep.

Because she don't see a hero.

She sees a man carrying too many ghosts on his back.

And she's right.

I lean my head back against the wall, squeezing my eyes shut.

"I failed her," I grind out, voice low and rough.

"You didn't," Kelli says, steady.

"Could've found another way."

"You did everything you could."

I shake my head.

Feel the burn of guilt slicing under my ribs.

"I swore I'd protect all of you," I mutter. "Every one."

"And you did," she says fierce, sliding closer.

Joren snuggles between us, pulling Aria along with him.

We're a tangle of bruises and blood and broken promises.

But still breathing.

Still together.

Because of her.

I reach for Kelli's hand.

Grip it tight.

Anchor myself.

"I'm not gonna just protect you," I rasp. "I'm gonna stand with you."

Kelli blinks, caught off guard.

"You already do," she says, soft.

I shake my head again.

"No. Not the way you deserve."

I squeeze her hand tighter.

"So hear me now, Kelli. I'm not just your shield. Not just a pair of fists keeping the monsters back."

Her breath hitches.

I look her dead in the eye.

"I'm your partner. Your man. Your husband—if you'll still have me."

Her eyes widen.

Tears fill them fast, slipping free down her cheeks before she can blink them back.

"You mean that?" she whispers, voice cracking.

"Every godsdamn word," I swear.

"I'm not running. I'm not hiding. Not from you. Not from them."

I pull her hand to my mouth.

Press a kiss against her knuckles, rough and raw.

"You and these kids—you're my life now," I mutter against her skin.

"No more looking back. No more walking away."

She shudders a breath.

Lets go of something tight and scared she's been carrying too long.

And leans into me.

Into us.

Joren curls against my side.

Aria wiggles into my lap.

I pull them all close.

Tighter.

Tighter still.

Like if I just hold them hard enough, maybe the universe won't be able to tear us

apart again.

We sit there in the cargo bay as the ship shudders into open space.

A broken, battered knot of survivors.

A family stitched together with scars and stubbornness.

And gods help the galaxy.

If it ever tries to take them from me again.

Later, when the ship settles into the steady hum of a jump corridor, Kelli pulls a rough blanket around the kids and settles beside me on the cold floor.

For a long moment, we just sit there.

Listening to their soft breathing.

Feeling the quiet stretch thick between us.

Not the bad kind.

Not the kind full of fear.

The kind full of possibility .

I tilt my head, studying her in the dim light.

Her hair's a mess.

Her jacket's torn.

There's grime streaked across her cheek.

And she's the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on.

"You ever think about where we go next?" I ask low, my voice still scraped raw from everything we lost.

She leans her head against my shoulder, sighing deep.

"Someplace quiet," she mutters. "Someplace green."

"With trees," I add.

"Real ones," she says, fierce. "Not some fake synth-farm garbage."

I grunt a laugh.

"Maybe a little patch of land," she murmurs. "A house. A real kitchen. Kids running wild."

I look down at the little ones, sleeping like the dead against her side.

"Already halfway there," I say rough.

She smiles.

Soft.

Hopeful.

The kind of smile that makes a man believe in miracles.

"We could do it," I say, surprising myself with how much I believe it.

Her fingers find mine under the blanket.

Squeeze tight.

"I know," she whispers.

I kiss the top of her head.

A small thing.

But it feels like a vow.

Silent.

Solid.

No more running.

No more surviving.

It's time to start living .

For them.

For her.

For all the future we almost lost, and fought like hell to keep.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

KELLI

Space hums soft around us, endless and deep.

It's been weeks since we left Glimner's charred bones behind.

Weeks since the ship became something more than just a metal box flying through the stars.

It's home now.

Rough.

Cramped.

Loud in weird places.

But home.

The air doesn't taste like fear every time I breathe. It tastes like freedom.

I wipe down the makeshift table in the galley while Aria sings a made-up song, twirling her little fingers through the air like she's painting something nobody else can see.

Joren's on the floor, stacking old supply crates like they're building blocks.

Traz leans against the counter, arms crossed, watching them with that soft, guarded look he only gets when he thinks no one's paying attention.

I catch it.

Every damn time.

He isn't slick.

"You're gonna have to do something 'bout that hair, wild man," I say, smirking as I toss a rag at him.

He snatches it outta the air without blinking.

"Maybe I like it this way," he rumbles.

"Like you're auditioning for some backwater band?"

He grunts, low and almost a laugh.

Almost.

"You offering to fix it?" he asks.

I arch a brow.

"Depends. You trust me with scissors?"

He huffs a breath, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"I trust you with my life," he says, dead serious.

The air goes still for a second.

Heavy.

Sweet.

Real.

Aria drops a crate with a crash and giggles herself silly.

Joren scowls at her, then at the mess, arms crossed just like his daddy.

I swear, the boy's a pint-sized Traz when he gets mad.

Traz pushes off the counter and crouches down next to them, ruffling Joren's hair until he squawks in protest.

"You building a fortress, little man?" Traz asks.

Joren nods fiercely.

"Gotta keep the bad guys out."

"Damn right," Traz says, helping him restack the boxes higher, stronger.

"And the dragons!" Aria shouts, waving her arms.

"Dragons too," Traz agrees solemnly, like she just gave him military orders.

I lean back against the wall, watching them.

Something blooms warm in my chest.

Big.

Bright.

Something I thought I'd buried a long time ago.

Hope.

Later, after the twins crash out in the little sleep nook we rigged up, I sit at the table, fiddling with a busted comm unit.

Traz slumps into the seat across from me, dragging a hand through his messy hair.

"You look dead," I say.

He grins.

Slow and lazy.

"Feel alive."

I toss a piece of wire at him.

He catches it easy.

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" I mutter.

"What?"

I meet his gaze.

"That we made it."

He's quiet a long beat.

Then he nods, slow.

"We're here," he says.

"That's what matters."

I set the comm unit down and rest my chin on my hands.

"Think about what's next?"

He shrugs.

But there's a light in his eyes that wasn't there before.

"Maybe a real place," he says. "With doors that lock and fields to run in."

"And a kitchen that isn't half engine parts?" I tease.

He chuckles low.

"You get picky real fast, woman."

I smile.

Big.

Real.

The kind that aches a little because it's been too long.

"Yeah," I say. "Guess I do."

The ship lurches slightly as we hit another patch of rough drift.

Joren mumbles something in his sleep.

Aria kicks the wall with a thump.

Traz's hand snakes across the table, finding mine.

Warm.

Calloused.

Steady.

"You're not alone anymore, Kelli," he says, voice rough with promise.

"You don't have to fight everything by yourself."

I swallow hard past the lump in my throat.

"Yeah," I whisper. "I know."

And, somehow, I actually believe it.

The next day, routine falls into place like it's been there forever.

Traz teaches Joren how to reassemble a blaster.

"Not to shoot," he says when I glare at him. "Just to know how it works."

I pretend to grumble but I can't hide the pride when Joren beams up at him, clutching the barrel backwards like it's a damn trophy.

Aria paints all over the wall with water and old rags.

"Modern art," Traz mutters when he almost slips on one of her soggy 'masterpieces.'

She giggles so hard she snorts.

And gods help me.

I laugh too.

Full and ugly and loud.

It bursts out of me before I can stop it.

Traz looks at me like I just handed him the whole damn galaxy.

I cover my mouth, blushing hot.

"Don't look at me like that," I mumble.

He just grins wider.

"You laughing's the best thing I've heard in months," he says, voice thick.

I throw a rag at him.

He ducks it easy.

We laugh together.

And just like that, the ship feels less like a coffin and more like a home.

Later that night, after the kids are tucked in and the ship hums low and steady around us, I find Traz leaning against the viewport.

Staring out into the stars like he's trying to memorize every damn one.

I walk up slow.

No rush.

No fear.

He turns when he senses me, that crooked little smile tugging at his mouth.

And gods, he's beautiful.

Rough.

Scarred.

Mine.

I stop in front of him, chest tight.

For a second, we just stand there.

Breathing the same air.

Feeling the same weight lifting off our shoulders.

Then he reaches out.

Fingers brushing my jaw.

Light.

Reverent.

Like he's afraid I'll vanish if he touches too hard.

I press into his hand without thinking.

Needing him.

Needing this.

He bends his head.

Slow.

Patient.

Our lips meet soft.

Tentative.

Like it's the first damn time all over again.

But this time, there's no fear.

No walls.

No ghosts clawing between us.

Just him.

Just me.

Just the future we're finally brave enough to reach for.

His arms wrap around me, pulling me in close.

Safe.

Steady.

Home.

I kiss him back, fierce and sure.

And somewhere in the middle of all that wrecked tenderness.

I realize I'm not lost anymore.

Not alone.

Never with him.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

KELLI

The ship rattles harder than it ought to on approach, metal skin creaking like it's nervous too.

I press a hand flat against the nearest bulkhead, feeling the vibration roll up my arm.

Traz sits across from me, Aria cradled asleep in his lap, Joren curled stubborn at his side like a little watchdog.

We don't say much.

Don't have to.

Every inch closer we get to the ground feels like something old breaking loose in my chest.

Not fear this time.

Something bigger.

Something almost too big to name.

Hope.

Real, solid, terrifying hope.

The view out the scratched port windows is green.

Endless green.

Thick forests stretch as far as the eye can see, broken up by ragged mountains and deep rivers carving across the land like silver veins.

No walls.

No patrols.

No city stink.

Just open sky and wild, roaring life.

I grip the seat tighter as the ship bumps through final descent.

Traz shifts slightly, his big hand resting light on my knee.

The warmth of it settles the nerves jumping wild under my skin.

"We're here," he says, voice low and steady.

I nod.

Swallow hard.

"Yeah," I whisper. "We are."

Landing kicks up a storm of dirt and broken brush.

The whole ship groans when it touches down, but it holds.

When the ramp lowers, the smell hits me first.

Fresh.

Rich.

Alive.

Dirt and rain and something sharp and wild underneath it all.

I step out slow, blinking against the bright sun.

It isn't polished.

It isn't safe.

It's rough and tangled and real.

And for the first time since I was a kid, I feel like I can actually breathe .

Silpha's contact—a wiry woman with sun-bleached hair and arms like iron—meets us at the edge of the clearing.

"Name's Lora," she says, jerking a thumb at the little battered crawler parked behind her. "You're late."

Traz grunts, shifting Aria higher on his shoulder.

"Had some delays," he says dry.

Lora snorts.

"Always are when you're ditching past lives."

She scans me up and down, then the kids.

"These your little shadows?"

"Yeah," I say, squaring my shoulders.

She gives a sharp nod.

"Good. Families blend better."

She tosses a battered dataslate to Traz.

"New IDs. Clean. As far as the system's concerned, you were born here. Always been here."

Traz catches it easy.

"Thanks," he says.

Lora shrugs.

"Thank Silpha. She paid in full before she..."

Her mouth tightens.

She looks away.

The silence stretches sharp and awkward.

Traz clears his throat.

"Property?"

Lora jerks her head toward the crawler.

"One klick that way. Old farmstead. Needs work. Off the grid."

"Perfect," I say, surprising even myself with how fierce it comes out.

Lora smirks.

"Thought you might say that."

The ride out's rough.

The crawler jostles and creaks over the broken trails, rattling our teeth loose.

Aria squeals with delight every time we bounce.

Joren scowls like he's gonna kill the vehicle with his bare hands.

Traz keeps a hand braced on the kids the whole way, his other on his blaster, just in case.

I watch the trees roll past.

Tall.

Twisted.

Beautiful.

They reach up toward a sky so blue it hurts.

This place isn't tame.

Not neat.

Not safe.

But maybe that's why it feels right.

The farmstead's exactly what Lora promised.

A squat, weather-beaten house squatting at the edge of a field gone wild with waist-high grass and creeping vines.

A barn leaning stubbornly to one side.

A broken fence circling it all like a drunk trying to draw a straight line.

It's a mess.

A disaster.

And I fall in love the second I see it.

Traz steps out first, scanning the perimeter like he's expecting ghosts.

Joren clutches his leg, wide-eyed.

Aria toddles off the crawler ramp and trips straight into the dirt, laughing.

I follow her, sinking to my knees in the wild grass, scooping her up and spinning her once.

She shrieks with glee.

Traz watches me, a slow smile pulling at his mouth.

"Think you can fix it up?" he asks.

I glance around at the broken fences, the overgrown fields, the peeling house.

I wipe a smear of dirt across my pants and grin.

"Hell yeah, I can."

He laughs.

For real this time.

A deep, rough sound that shakes something loose in my chest.

Gods, I missed that laugh.

We spend the afternoon hauling supplies off the crawler, making rough plans.

The house needs repairs.

The roof leaks.

The water pump wheezes.

The solar collectors are half-dead.

But it's ours.

Every broken board.

Every rusted hinge.

Ours.

Silpha's sacrifice paid for this second chance.

And I'll be damned if I let it slip through my fingers.

Later, after the kids pass out in a nest of blankets we throw together in the front room,
I sit on the porch with Traz.

The stars here are bigger.

Brighter.

Like they're close enough to touch.

Traz hands me a battered mug of something hot and bitter.

I sip it, grimacing.

"What the hell is this?"

"Starter pack," he says, deadpan. "For frontier living."

I snort, bumping his shoulder with mine.

We sit like that, side by side, watching the stars burn cold and fierce overhead.

"You think we'll make it?" I ask after a while, voice barely above a whisper.

He turns, studying me like I'm the only thing worth looking at in the whole damn universe.

"We already are," he says.

Simple.

Certain.

Solid.

And somehow, I believe him.

The stars are still burning overhead when Traz shifts beside me, pulling something small and rough from his pocket.

I blink, confused.

It's a ring.

Handmade.

Crude and beautiful, twisted from a strip of salvaged wire, polished smooth by calloused fingers.

My breath catches.

He holds it out, voice low and steady.

"No priest. No papers. Just you and me."

I stare at him, heart hammering so loud I'm sure he can hear it.

"I'm not just your protector," he says, voice rough with feeling. "Not just your mate."

He swallows hard.

"I'm your man. Forever. If you'll have me."

The world goes soft and sharp all at once.

Tears burn down my cheeks before I can stop them.

I laugh through them, nodding so hard it makes my head spin.

"Yeah," I whisper, choking on it. "Yeah, you stubborn, beautiful bastard. I'll have you."

Traz slips the ring onto my finger with shaking hands.

He presses his forehead to mine, breathing me in.

And under the endless stretch of stars.

We make a promise no one can ever tear apart.

Not this time.

Not ever.

TRAZ

The fire crackles low in the hearth, casting amber light across Kelli's bare shoulder as she rests her head on my chest. Her breath still comes uneven, her fingers tracing idle patterns over the scar beneath my collarbone—a relic from a job on Xyris Prime.

I catch her hand, press her palm flat against the steady thud of my heartbeat. She smiles, her lips brushing my skin.

“Never thought I’d see you still after sunrise,” she murmurs.

I grunt, my thumb sweeping over the ridge of her knuckles. “Farm’s got a way of...slowing things.”

She shifts, her hair spilling like pale silk across the quilt we’d dragged in front of the hearth. The scent of hay and woodsmoke clings to her. “You hate slow.”

“Not this.” My voice rougher than I intend. Her laugh is soft, a sound I’m still learning to map.

Outside, the night hums with crickets. No gunfire. No engines. Just the creak of old timbers settling. Kelli’s gaze drifts to the window, where the stars hang thick as spilled salt. “You think they’ll come looking?”

I pull her closer, my lips grazing the crown of her head. “Let them.”

She tenses, then exhales, her body melting against mine. “You’d burn it all down for

this, wouldn't you? For a patch of dirt and a roof."

"Not the roof." My hand slides up her spine, fingers threading into her hair. "The woman and children under it."

Her breath hitches. She tilts her face to mine, eyes glinting like fractured glass. "Mercenaries don't make poets, Traz."

"Farmers do, apparently."

She kisses me then—slow, deliberate, a language we've rewritten together. Her leg hooks over my hip, the quilt slipping. The fire pops, embers spiraling upward like dying stars.

When she pulls back, her thumb traces the line of my jaw. "I want you," she whispers. Not a plea. A declaration.

I catch her wrist, press a kiss to her pulse. "Already have me."

The words hang, simpler than vows. She settles her head back on my chest, her breath evening out. The farmhouse sighs around us, the night stretching endless and quiet. I close my eyes. Let the stillness take root.

Her mouth finds mine again, harder this time.

The quilt bunches beneath us as she rolls me onto my back, her knee pressing into the hay-strewn floorboards.

I taste woodsmoke on her tongue, feel the calluses on her palms as they slide down my ribs.

The fire licks at the edges of my vision, heat blooming where her hips meet mine.

She breaks the kiss to bite my lower lip. “Still think you’re the one in charge here?”

My laugh comes out a growl. I flip us, pinning her wrists above her head. Her pulse thrums against my thumbs. “Farm’s full of surprises.”

Her grin sharpens. She arches, bare skin catching the firelight as the quilt falls away completely. A scar along her ribcage gleams silver. I trace it with my tongue. She hisses, her heel digging into the small of my back.

All I hear is hitch in her breath, the creak of floorboards. No contracts. No gunpowder tang. Just her nails scoring my shoulders as I move, her choked laugh when I nip the hollow of her throat. Embers spiral upward, dying in the rafters.

She fists a hand in my hair, yanks my head back. Her eyes reflect the dying fire, twin supernovas. “Mine,” she snarls, voice raw.

I let her see the surrender in my bare teeth before crushing my mouth to hers. The farmhouse fades. The galaxy with it. Her thighs tremble against my hips, the only truth left spinning in the dark.

The fire’s warmth licks my skin as I hover above her, her body a map of stories under my hands.

Her breath hitches when I brush a strand of hair from her face, her eyes locked on mine like she’s daring me to look away.

I don’t. The quilt is rough beneath my knees, the air thick with the scent of woodsmoke and her.

Her hands find my hips, fingers digging in as I lower myself, my mouth grazing against her ear. “Slow,” she murmurs, not a plea but a command. I obey, my body moving with a restraint that feels foreign, deliberate.

My cock enters her achingly slowly. Her breath stutters as I press in that last delicious inch, a sharp inhale that softens into a sigh.

Her legs wrap around me, anchoring me closer. Every shift, every shudder is a language we've carved out in stolen moments.

The fire pops, casting shadows that dance across her face.

Her eyes are half-lidded, her lips parted as she murmurs my name like it's a secret.

I catch it with my mouth, swallowing the sound as her hips tilt to meet mine.

There's no rush, no frantic urgency—just the steady rhythm of skin against skin, the creak of the floorboards beneath us keeping time.

Her hands slide up my arms, fingers threading through mine as she pins them above her head. A smirk tugs at her lips, but there's no challenge in it now. Just heat, and something softer. I let her hold me there, my forehead resting against hers, our breaths tangled.

When she comes, it's with a quiet intensity that ripples through me, her body tightening like a coiled spring. I follow her over the edge, my orgasm muffled against her throat. For a heartbeat, all that matters is the pulse of her skin under my lips, the hitch of her breath in the silence.

She releases my hands, her fingers trailing down my spine as I collapse beside her. The fire's embers glow faintly, the room bathed in a dim, amber haze. Her head finds the hollow of my shoulder, her exhale warm against my chest.

No words. None needed. The crickets outside pick up their chorus, filling the quiet.

Her breath evens out against my neck, the rise and fall of her ribs syncing with mine.

I stare at the smoke-stained ceiling, one arm pinned beneath her, the other draped across the dip of her waist. Her hair smells like the lavender soap she insists on making every spring, though I'd never admit how the scent clings to my shirts long after she's gone.

Somewhere down the hall, a floorboard creaks.

Joren's nightmares, probably. Kid's been jumping at shadows since the harvest raid.

I count seconds until the soft pad of bare feet follows—Aria, always slipping into his room to hum those off-key lullabies.

Their murmurs drift through the thin walls, a language I still don't speak fluently.

Kelli stirs, her knee brushing the old blaster scar on my thigh. I freeze, but she just nestles closer, her exhale warm against my throat.

Strange, how the weight of her doesn't set my nerves alight.

Ten years of sleeping with one eye open, and now I'm here—letting a woman with vengeance in her bones and two half-wild strays she calls siblings press their luck against my ribs.

The hearth's glow paints the rifle propped by the door, the security system blinking green near the windowsill.

All the traps I've laid, and still, the tightness in my chest isn't about perimeter breaches.

Kelli mutters something, a half-formed word that might be my name. My arm tightens around her on instinct.

Mercs don't retire. We bleed out or burn up. But this—her heartbeat under my hand, the kids' muffled laughter at dawn, the godsforsaken rooster that pecks my boots each morning—it's not an ending. It's a ceasefire. A stolen rhythm I've started grafting to my bones.

The fire dims. I should move, bank the coals. Instead, I count the freckles on Kelli's shoulder and memorize the way the moonlight cuts across the crib in the corner—empty still, but not for lack of trying, that's for sure.