

Wasting Time

Book 4 of the Wastes series

by
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Dedications:
To my readers...this one is all for you.

...It is a dark time for pretty much everyone. Empire McDicks has possession of half the crew in one of their heavily armed warships. Their destination is a space station where Oro and Danny are to be put to death on live television. Coming to their rescue and failing so far are the Hunters Lincoln and Kennedy, and Czar, the Cosmonaut with a hard-on for covert ops.

The other half of the crew is free, but not much better off. Their pilot is in a coma. Their Navigator was last seen black hole spelunking. Their Rexos is about to hit puberty and rage out. Their bodacious ship (me) is dead in the water with internal injuries and some nasty outer hull damage. Besides that, everything is peachy...

“Fuck! Fucking shit! Or, motherfucking hell!” Oro stretched in his prison bed, ignoring the pain of the bruises along his ribs and stomach. He spoke in Ampyr, “What about fuckers?”

“Oro! Will you *shut up already!* You’re giving *me* one of your goddamn migraines!” Danny rubbed his temples. He sat in the other bed just a few feet away. He spoke in English, “Just be quiet for a minute so that I can think.”

Oro tugged on the chain around his ankle that kept him attached to his cell bed. He sported a black eye and bruises up the side of his face. Despite that, he was still able to smile. “He’s got to learn how to swear properly.”

“No, actually he doesn’t.” Danny glanced over at Lloyd; the teenage Ampyr sat on the edge of Oro’s mattress. He had his hands over his ears and stared at the locked door to their cell with a look of unwavering fright. He was paler than normal; even his lips were slightly bluish. Danny shook his head. “He looks like he’s going to piss himself, and I’m pretty sure you swearing at his face is part of the reason for that.”

Oro followed his gaze and smirked at Lloyd. “All the more reason to learn. Saying *fuck* makes you feel better. It’s universal.” Oro pulled tangles out of his black hair. “Hey. Hey, kid. Say *fuck*.”

Lloyd closed his eyes and brought his knees to his chest.

Danny glared at Oro. “Leave him alone. We’re all in this shit situation *together*, and it’s not all because of him. We’re mostly here because of *you, Lord Vader*.”

Oro grinned. “One way to look at it, *Wedge*.”

“One way?” Danny ran his callused hands through his short silver hair. “With the space program shut down, I should have been retired by now and on a ranch drinking beer or at least biding my time on that medical ship. Instead,” he flung a water sack at Oro’s head, “I’m sucking down recycled water on a warship, guest of the Ampyr prison guard, on my way to watch *your* fucking execution at the hands of this Empire because they think you’re *motherfucking Darth Vader!*” Danny caught his breath.

Oro watched him. “I bet saying *fuck* made you feel better.”

Danny’s right eye ticked. “Just keep it up, *Vader*.”

The light in the room shifted to blue, and the three of them groaned together. Oro mimicked the ship’s announcement system, “Jump number two. Crew, please get ready for vomit inducing—”

“Jump preparation sequence complete,” A toneless voice interrupted Oro. “*All crew prepare for jump*.” The lights flashed between blue and yellow in a three-change sequence.

Danny rolled to his back and grabbed on to the metal bars at the side of his bed with one hand. “I *hate* this shit.”

The ship lurched as the warship’s Navigator took them into the in-between, a place that allowed a Navigator to move objects across space near instantaneously. Oro watched lines of

blue lights rush by as they jostled in the strange zero gravity of the space between. The ship jerked, and he slammed into the bars at the foot of his bed. He yelled over the rush, "I miss Ravil!"

Danny held his pillow against the back of his head to protect him as he bounced around. "Remind me to thank her for smooth sailing!"

The ship turned, throwing them into the air. Oro and Danny floated in place, anchored by their ankle chains, while Lloyd held on to the bed with his hands. The ship stopped—plummeted.

Oro whooped. "It's like a roller coaster!"

Lloyd lost his grip on the bed and flew past them. With no ankle chain, he had nothing to keep him from crashing in to things as the ship jerked. He flailed his arms. "Fuck!"

Oro caught him by the forearm. He grinned at the pale, black-haired youth. "See, it *is* satisfying!"

Lloyd clutched at him. "Don't!"

"Let go?" Oro pulled him a bit closer. "Or are you offended that I'm touching you this time?" The ship bucked, knocking the pair in to the wall above their shared bed.

Lloyd clenched his teeth and met Oro's warm gaze. "Don't let me go."

Oro grinned. "What are the magic words?"

"Oro! Stop being a dick!" Danny reached for the pair. "You were raised better than that!"

Lloyd gulped. "*Please.*"

Oro wrapped his arms around Lloyd, hugging him tight. "Well, since you're so nice." Lloyd glared at him, but didn't fight. Oro smirked as they dropped into their bunk. Lloyd landed on his back with Oro on top of him. Oro cocked his head. "How convenient. Got you in bed already."

Lloyd blushed scarlet.

Danny threw one of his shoes at Oro's head. "Stop teasing him!"

"Fine." Oro let off Lloyd, but held him by the wrists. He hung upside down above Lloyd, smiling at the mixture of distaste and desire on Lloyd's face. Blue lights reflected against Lloyd's black irises.

Lloyd fidgeted, wishing Danny hadn't intervened quite so quickly. He shivered and chased the notion away. Lloyd glared at Oro, knowing *he* was responsible for perverting his head in the first place with his unclean presence.

Oro blew him a kiss.

The ship burst out of the in-between and dropped back into regular space, returning things to normal. The bumpiness faded, leaving them becalmed. The low gravity of the ship reasserted itself. Everything that was floating slowly fell towards the floor, including Oro.

Lloyd squirmed and pulled on his hands, drawing Oro down faster. "Let me go."

Oro let Lloyd go and hauled himself back to his spot on the bunk by his ankle chain. He ignored Lloyd wiping his hands off on his clothes. He tossed Danny his misplaced shoe. "So, how many more times until it is *go time* do you think?"

Danny caught the shoe. He grimaced at the sight of his blood-encrusted sock and slid the shoe on his foot. "Who knows? If the jumps are any indication, their Navigator is nothing like Ravil."

Lloyd wedged himself back into his corner of the bed. He leaned on the metal bars that enclosed the ends. He mumbled into his arms, "This is a common warship. Their Navigator will be increasingly tired and distracted after each jump. Sufficient downtime must be taken between

each jump in order for him or her to rest. In comparison to your Langone, this Navigator is an amateur. The distance able to be traversed in one leap is vastly different.”

“Wow. You do have something useful to say for once.” Oro picked at his fingernails.

Danny sat up. “Anything else you can tell us?”

Lloyd closed his eyes, recalling what he did know. “This is a warship used for ground assaults on taken seed planets, therefore its crew will be primarily Ampyr foot soldiers and Hunters, though it will have a retinue of Fix-Its and Rexos doctors, as well as a few specialists on board.”

“How do you know this stuff?” Danny looked him over. “You’ve never been off of that space station until now.”

“I studied military history and theory among other things,” Lloyd mumbled. “Grandpapa made me as part of my lessons.”

Danny smiled. “This is good news. We have time then.”

Oro stretched. “More time for me to be tortured for information before they kill us. Yes! Just what I wanted to hear.”

Danny shook his head. “Kat and Rake are not going to sit around and let that happen.”

Oro did not look convinced. “I want them to be alive too, but what are the odds?”

Danny sat back in his bed and rested his head on the wall. “We would know if they were dead.”

Oro leaned across the space between their beds and gave him a once over. “How? Are you developing psychic powers?”

Danny sighed. “No, but these Ampyr seem to like to gloat and I doubt they could contain themselves if they had murdered everyone else. They’d be playing us tapes of that as well.” He gestured to their wall monitor. For the last several hours, the muted videos had been playing scenes of torture, their motivation to spill what information they had now and not after a few rounds of getting the same attention the men and women on the screen got.

Oro nodded. “Okay, I can see that. Ampyr are all a bunch of anemic, self-righteous, self-centered dicks that think the world of themselves.”

Lloyd flinched. “We are not all that way.”

“Really?” Oro looked at him sideways. “I have yet to meet one that isn’t a complete douche bag. Present company *included*.”

Lloyd shied away from his gaze. “They want to kill me *too*.”

“Right and *that’s* the only reason you care. If they came in here, gave you a gourmet meal and a change of clothes, and treated you like a prince, you wouldn’t give two fucks about what happens to *us* next. Because you’re a selfish, spoilt *brat*.”

Lloyd sprung to his feet in a blur of speed. He stood at his end of the bed and pointed a finger at Oro’s face. “I am not a brat! Take it back!”

“No, screw you.” Oro closed his eyes and folded his arms behind his head. “I’m going to sleep.”

Lloyd stomped across the threadbare mattress. “I said take it back!”

Oro smiled. “Sorry, I don’t take orders from spoiled children that throw tantrums.”

Lloyd leapt on Oro and slapped at his face. “I don’t throw tantrums!”

“Boys!” Danny caught Lloyd’s foot. “Stop this now!” He pulled Lloyd off Oro and pushed him away. “We cannot afford to do this. If you both can’t be mature enough to behave, then stop speaking to one another. Don’t even *look* at each other.”

Lloyd regained his composure and turned his nose to the air. “I can do that. It is easy to

ignore someone so vile.”

Oro rolled his eyes. “Oh burn, you got me.”

Lloyd misunderstood his tone. “It is easy to ‘get you’ or anyone else beneath me.”

“So, you do like being on top.” Oro threw his blanket off his lap. “Then hop on, princess, let’s see what ya got.”

Lloyd blushed and hissed, “Foul—”

“Boys!” Danny snapped his fingers in the air. “I said *stop it!*”

“Why?” Oro switched to English and glanced over at Danny. “I want to get a good punch in to his face. Just one, please? He just needs to get a little closer.”

Danny responded in English, “Stop acting like a child, Oro. Just because you *can* tease him, doesn’t mean you need to.”

Lloyd looked between them, unable to understand what they were saying.

Oro gestured to Lloyd. “He’s a prick.”

“He is, but so are you at the moment.” Danny rubbed his temples.

“Yeah, but out of the two of us, I’m not the homosexual homophobe that likes to slap the occasional gay around.” Oro glared at Lloyd.

Lloyd glared back, assuming Oro was saying something inappropriate.

Danny frowned. “I already punched him for you and gave him a bloody nose.”

“Seriously?” Oro’s face lit up. He looked from Danny to Lloyd. “And I missed it?”

“You were high on Darq’s drug cocktail. If he steps out of line again, *I’ll* be the one taking care of it. So shut up and get some rest. I’ll wake you up for a watch rotation—”

Food slid through a slot in their doorway.

Lloyd pounced on it. Danny sat up and shouted in Ampyr, “Wait, Lloyd!”

Lloyd unscrewed the first bag and sucked down cold soup. He wiped his mouth. “It does not taste good, but it is edible.”

Danny sighed. “I guess we’ll see if it is poisoned now.”

Lloyd made a face. “Poison is not a common tactic for Ampyr prisoners of war. Why use poison when they have voice control?”

Danny gestured between them. “But we’re immune.”

Lloyd inclined his head to Danny. “Most prisoners are not Resisters like you.”

“And *you*, you dumb bitch,” Oro spoke out of the side of his mouth.

Danny eyed the food. “I think I’d like to see what it does to you before I take the risk.”

“As you wish.” Lloyd shrugged. He tossed Danny a bag and chucked the other into Oro’s face, hitting him in the eye.

Oro struggled to keep from saying something nasty in response. He screwed his eyes shut and pulled a blanket up to his chin. “Sleeping now.”

Katarina shouldered aside limp, floating plants and held her rifle steady as she patrolled the upper level of the medical ship. Her boots clicked on the surface of the floor, keeping her locked in place despite a lack of gravity. She spoke into her headset, “Mica, how long before these plants are out of the way up here? I need easy access to the entire hall and these things limit visibility.”

Mica ducked out of the medical ship’s cockpit and darted up the stairs. He pushed green-tinted hair and corkscrew vines out of his face. “I should have us backed out of the debris field entirely within a minute. That’s task number two I swear.”

She barely gave him a glance. “And the reason you left the cockpit is…”

Mica flushed dark green. “My headset is out.”

“Fair enough.” Katarina pushed through the plants and tapped her headset to change the channel. “Rat, what’s your status?”

Tasanee’s voice sounded scratchy as it came in over Katarina’s headset, “I’m still outside. Hull damage is pretty widespread, but not beyond repair. The biggest problem is going to be prying these fucking Wasps off the hull to see what’s really fucked underneath them, but that’s past my scope at this point. Anyways, all hull punctures we have are sealed, but the protective shield will need to be touched up before we can do any kind of jumping. Our oxygen inside is low, but Mica’s plants are cycling that so we’ll be good on that front in no time. Besides that, we’re ugly, burnt, and dented, but she flies.”

Katarina ducked into the soldiers’ bunkroom. The room was empty, but in disarray. Floating blankets and pillows blocked her line of sight. She batted them aside and swept the room with her flashlight. “Any occupied Wasps?”

“No, all empties. I made sure. Czar beat some people to shit. I saw a few floating corpsicles.”

Katarina smiled and opened the door to the freezer to check that the room was free of damage. “Good.”

“I can’t believe he fucking snuck on to their warship and left us behind.”

“I can.” Katarina ducked down to look under racks of floating meat. “It’s what he does. He probably has a raging hard-on from the anticipation of doing covert ops. Let me know when you’re done with your review. I want a summary report and a comparison against our current supplies.”

“Roger that, Kit-Kat.”

Katarina pulled the fridge door shut. She ripped plants out of her way and passed the mess hall, which was still locked against the now-repaired hull breach. Banging sounds from the inside were evidence of Sammy’s robots repairing and cleaning what they could. The mess hall had been exposed to space during the battle with the Ampyr warship *and* it was full of Mica’s plants.

The sound of scuffing feet drew Katarina’s attention down the hall. She turned, rifle at the ready. “Who’s—oh, hi Darq.”

“Hi…” Darq waited by the med lab doorway at the end of the hall. He kept his eyes down. His cheeks were a darker shade of orange than normal, the Rexos way of blushing. His white lab coat was speckled with blood, but it wasn’t his.

Katarina kicked at plants and hurried to his side. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders and drew him to her. “How’re you doing, honey?”

Darq threw his arms around her waist and hugged her, his head not even reaching her shoulder. He used a fraction of his strength to squeeze her tight. His words came out clipped, “I’m so sorry, Mom! I didn’t mean to snap at you! I don’t want to fight with you!”

Katarina kissed his lemon yellow hair. “Don’t be, we were all stressed out. Everyone loses their temper every now and then, Darq. I’m not mad at you.”

Darq looked up at her, his purple eyes big in his childlike face. “But I *can’t*, not now. I can feel my body starting to change. I’m going to hit puberty any time now and then you’ll all be killed when I go crazy!”

Katarina took his trembling hands in hers. “We’ll get this solved, Darq. I don’t want you to worry about it. Okay? It’s top priority for me, I promise.”

Darq nodded and latched on to her. He was desperate for affection to calm his nerves. Any

strong emotion could set him off into an uncontrolled rage that could tear the ship apart.

Katarina let go of her gun and gave him a full two-arm hug. "You'll be okay."

Darq listened to her heartbeat. "I wish I was like you sometimes."

"Like me? An Adapter?"

He nodded. "You don't have to be afraid of your feelings."

"Yeah well, I get to be afraid of other things, like getting shot, or burnt, or having my arm ripped off. You just grow another one back like nothing's the matter." Katarina smiled and ruffled his hair. She plucked her floating gun out of the air. "Everyone has their own challenges to face."

He gulped. "Yours don't put the entire crew and ship in danger."

"That you know of." Katarina winked and gave him a gentle push towards the lab. "Do you have Rake in there?"

Darq's expression changed to a scowl. "Yes, *he's* in there. I put him in my bunk, tied down and knocked out. There's debris and blood still in the air so be aware." He gave the door a shove. "Systems are still on manual in here and the lights are out except for the emergency ones."

Sammy piped up on the overhead speakers, "I'm sorry about that. It's on my to-do list. Just got the floors working again downstairs."

Katarina looked to the ceiling and replied to her electronic girlfriend, "Don't worry about it, Sammy. We can and have coped with worse."

"Yes, sir ma'am!"

Darq frowned. "Do I need to call you that now that you're in charge?"

"No." Katarina gestured towards the ceiling. "Sammy, don't call me that."

"But I like this title stuff, all that *dominance* and *control*." Sammy laughed. "I saw this one porno once where—"

"Stop right there." Katarina glared at the cameras. "I hope your porn stash gets *deleted*. Frankly, it might do you good."

"No way! I have gems in there! Classics, Kat! I know I have some of your favorites."

"*Sammy!*" Katarina looked quickly between the ceiling and Darq.

Darq looked up at her. "I thought you said the adult movies are not appropriate and give false ideas about sex."

Katarina grimaced. "That's why they're for people who know what sex should be, like me. Besides, I used to be young and did stupid things with my girlfriend."

"I'll say." Sammy snickered. "Remember that one time we taped ourselves getting it on? I still have that too. That one gets the most watches...uhm...just by me of course."

"*Sammy!*" Katarina tucked her floating ponytail inside her collar. "Can you *please* not share all of this with him?"

"He's hitting puberty, now is the *best* time to share embarrassing shit with him. Puberty is all about humiliation. So give him some solidarity, Kat."

"Solidarity?" Katarina moved floating medical instruments out of the way as she made her way towards the lab bunkroom. "That would be you sharing your embarrassing stories too, Sammy. How about we talk about when you had your first period, or when Rake stole your clothes from the showers and you chased him into the officers' dinner while Danny was getting a medal?"

"I find nothing embarrassing about the latter. I have that memory stored in my 'awesome' folder. Plus my body was *tits*."

Darq raised an eyebrow. "Your body was an entire other part of the female anatomy?"
"Tits, tight, bodacious, rockin', hot stuff. I was a surfer babe, Darq! You wouldn't wonder why Kat was tapping my shit if you'd seen me then, little lemon-head."

"But I don't wonder about that." Darq strong-armed the door to their bunks open. Scuffmarks blackened the floor and walls. Droplets of blood floated in the air.

Katarina lifted her flashlight and gave their shared bedroom a once over. "It's not too bad off. I thought it would be worse."

Darq caught one of the blood droplets in his mouth and rolled it around on his tongue. "That one is Danny's as well. He lost quite a bit of blood in here."

She paled. "How much? Enough to be dead?"

He shook his head. "No, but certainly a quantity that indicates he would need medical attention shortly after the injury was taken."

"Do you think the Ampyr would have given it to him?"

Darq did not look certain. "I do not know what their protocol is for that, Mom. If he was not useful as a prisoner I cannot say for sure."

Katarina clamped down on her emotions and looked at Rake. She gave her friend and ship's pilot a good once over. "Give me an update please."

Darq sat on the bunk next to Rake. He touched Rake's blood encrusted jumpsuit. "He has not hemorrhaged since the initial burst in the cockpit, and both his blood pressure and heart rate have leveled off to normal for your kind and this environment. The Navigator signs he showed before are gone and his brain activity is what I would expect for someone in his situation."

"What situation?"

"Medically induced coma." Darq turned Rake's face to her; a streak of silver ran through his thick black hair at the roots.

Katarina squinted and shined her flashlight on his hair. "What's *that* from?"

"Silver? This was from before, when he fiddled with Ravil's Navigator panels." Darq made a face. "Now that I have had time to calm down and think on it, the panels may have attributed to his reaction when she left abruptly."

She frowned and touched Rake's forehead. "How so?"

"Those panels are made for a Navigator to link with the ship so that she can travel with it; anything else in there would be linked to her as well. He reached in when her hands were already submerged."

Katarina nodded. "So maybe he only reacted violently to her leaving because he'd done that?"

"Possibly." Darq rubbed his eyes. "I am not yet fully capable of handling your subspecies' changes, Mom. Evgeniy did not show a biological change, yet now has the abilities of a Blackout, but Tasanee and Mica very much *did* have a biological change, yet at the same time, they both have extenuating circumstances to explain that. Rake could very well be adapting to a Navigator, yet not show any signs in the blood. Do you follow?"

Katarina nodded. "Do you think we can wake him up? Maybe he has insight into his condition."

"I do not think that wise, not yet. I would like more time to observe him in this state before reviving him."

Katarina patted Darq on the shoulder. "That you can have. I need to finish my rounds, but I'll be back. Do you need anything?"

Darq shook his head. "I am in a satisfactory mental and emotional state now that we have

spoken.”

“All right.” Katarina left for the hall. She tapped her headset. “Marx, report in please.”

Marx pushed up the hatch at her feet and floated into the upper hallway. The only sound he made came from the rustle of his gray uniform. He flexed his feet and caught his toe and ankle hooks on the floor to hold him in place. The nearly seven-foot tall Hunter licked congealed blood from his lips. “All bodies have been disposed of.”

She eyed the blood on his face and hands. “Was there anything we could salvage?”

He nodded and unraveled his copper-colored braid. “I moved the working weapons and intact armor into the storage room off of the showers downstairs. Everything else has been jettisoned.”

“Any sign of Evgeniy’s Stalker girlfriend?”

“Emmalethe did not make herself apparent while I searched.” Marx groomed his hair with his Velcro-like tongue. “I did not scent her on the air either.”

Katarina sighed. “Without Czar she might not come out.”

Mica threw an apple at them from down the hall. “She’ll come for food. She can’t go long without eating.”

Marx flicked out his five-inch-long, hollow claws and slashed through the fruit. “Perhaps she followed Kennedy and Lincoln to the warship.”

Tasaneé crawled up the hatch behind Marx. The short Thai mechanic slapped his leg. “Bitch, get your tall self out of my way.”

Marx stepped to the side and reached down for his mate, drawing her into his arms. Tasaneé shook out her short black hair; the motion dislodged a glass vial that floated on a chain around her neck. She sniffed her arms. “Those space suits smell like ass. Here.” She handed Katarina a codex. “Damage report. Supplies are fine. With all the stuff we stole from the space base we’re good to go on repairs internal and external.”

“Some good news at least.” Katarina put the report under her arm. “Marx, if you’re done downstairs, please see to Rake and Ravil’s room.”

Marx smiled, remembering fighting alongside Katarina above the cockpit. “I enjoyed fighting beside you.”

She nodded as she scrolled through the report. “Yeah. Uh, same. I know we left some bodies in there that need disposing of.”

“And bullet holes.” He smiled and eyed her rifle.

Katarina smirked and looked up. “I think the overall slow roast the room got from the Pyros makes *my* damage moot. Rat, check in on Darq. The lab needs a power supply.”

Tasaneé snapped her fingers and threw sparks. “One Fix-It spot repair on the way.”

Ravil shrieked from the depths of her singularity. Her voice bounced off invisible barriers and returned to her, amplified. She held her head and kicked, slamming her feet into the splintered mirror her mind had created for this place.

Ravil’s reflection dissolved into white fire. The flame fuzzed in and out of view, changing slightly with each movement it made. The fire spoke with a feminine voice, “You *are* Ravilaea, aren’t you? I am not wrong, am I? That would speak poorly of my observational skills if I were to make a mistake *that* simple.”

Ravil winced at the voice. “Of course I am, and I created this place so let me go or get the fuck out!”

“I really do not understand what you are so angry for.”

Ravil glared at the fire. “My friends are in danger! I can’t stay here!”

“Friends?” The fire edged closer. “Don’t you recognize me?”

“No!” Ravil spun, looking for a way out. “Why can’t I remember a way out?”

The other Langone shrugged from within the flames. “I might have changed things since I moved in...remodeled you might say. What do you think of my changes? Do you like the scenery?”

Ravil eyed the flame. “You’re *mad*.”

“I am not. I’m really happy now that you’re here! I have wanted to speak to you for some time about your engine. I have not seen it in action like this before. You don’t know how long it has been for me—”

“Why does my head hurt so fucking much?” Ravil raked her nails along her scalp and glared at the fire. “What the fuck are you?”

“Yes, I mean, what?” The shifting creature trembled. “No. Stop confusing me with someone else. I am me!”

Ravil snarled. “Be helpful or go away!”

The fire moved around the boundaries of this place. “How long has it been?”

Ravil pivoted to follow the flames. “Since *what*?”

“Since you created this place within your engine?”

“I made this like...I made this...I can’t remember.” Ravil looked ill and touched her temples. “How could I have forgotten I made *this*?”

The flame swirled. “Oh, it might have been a bit then. Why are you out here?”

“What do you mean *out here*?”

“Aren’t you away from the others? I know you are not allowed out alone, it’s too dangerous with the way things are.” The fire got closer. “You speak with a strange accent as well, not our native one. Something is strange with you. I am going to examine your memories now, so stay still.”

“Oh no you are fucking not!” Ravil backpedaled. “Get away from me!”

“You do not have a choice.” The fire formed into a girl made of white light; it was too bright to see her features clearly. “You know as well as I that this will be painless and done in an instant.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Shush. Let me link with you, then things will be clear to me. It is only fair!”

Ravil threw up her hand, creating a net of light. “Don’t get near me! I don’t know who you are, and I don’t want anything to do with you. I don’t want to share memories with you!”

The girl disappeared and reappeared behind Ravil. “Quick to anger, that is a habit you might want to control, young lady.” She grabbed Ravil’s short cherry-red hair. “While I’m doing this, let’s get your look back to normal too. I don’t approve of this; it does not suit our kind or your station.”

Ravil kicked. “Let go of me, you crazy bitch!” She turned and elbowed her counterpart, but in the contact, their lines linked together. Incomplete memories, images, and thoughts travelled from Ravil’s mind to the other.

The girls shuddered and spiraled apart. The flame hissed in pain. “No wonder you are strange! How odd, I can’t see *anything* clearly. What is the damage from?”

Ravil rubbed her temples, her eyes wide. Her hair returned to its mid-back length and pure white color. She gagged. “That felt *terrible*.”

“I can’t tamper with it. Can’t fix it, not at all, not a *Jungay*. Those behind it no doubt at

all.” The girl cocked her head. “I can only see what is left, but I do have this place and this place has its own memories. Yes, it has told me some things, but nothing that makes sense to me. Probably because I have no key, had no key, but now here you are. *My key.*”

“*What* are you talking about?”

“Let’s play a game!” The girl dissolved back into flames. “I miss games! It has been so long. May we play one together, Ravi?”

“Don’t call me that.” Ravi struggled to make her mouth move as cold seeped into her limbs. “I haven’t played games before.”

The fire danced around her in a ring. “Of course you have! How much must be gone from your head. Where is Saroi? Why hasn’t he taken care of this issue for you?”

“Who?” Ravi turned to follow the fire. “Look, I don’t have time for games. I have to help my friends!”

“No, no, no! Why are they so important? You just met them! Known them for so short a time.”

“They’ve *grown* on me.” She growled.

“This isn’t normal at all, not protocol. I guess you’ve learned a few things, but the ones you travel with...mostly men and no handmaidens, no Saroi. Oh, what would Viro think? He’ll not be happy at all!” The fire laughed. “I hope he finds out. That will be funny! He’ll be so pissed off! And Leth—”

“Viro? Leth? Who are you talking about?”

“Oh.” The fire froze. “Never mind. So who cares about *him*. He’s been a jerk recently, what about *me*? Can you tell me how I got here?”

Ravi’s eyes glowed. “What *about* you? You’re a crazy nut ball that’s moved into *my* freaking anomaly. I don’t want to hang out with you just because you’re lonely or something! And stop with the shifting already! Pick a look and stick with it! You’re creeping me the fuck out!”

The fire scoffed. “You’re the one shifting around, so *you* stop it! I’m completely solid and don’t tell me what to do, that’s not very nice.”

“*Listen to me!* Right now, my only family left are the people on that ship and the longer I stay around with you the more danger they’re in. They are all that I care about!”

“Why am I here, Ravi?”

Ravi gaped. “I don’t know, you tell me.”

“In your place, your engine, the one that screams *made in Ravi*. A Langone creation, you and I.” The girl burst into tears of sparks. “The only thing that’s safe for me and now you want to throw me out! You don’t want to use this place. Why can’t I have it?”

“No, you’re right, I don’t want it!” Ravi scowled. “I wouldn’t have even come here, but you chased me and tried to eat me!”

“Eat you? I wanted to see you! I’ve been looking for you since I woke up! You’d have to know...be willing to talk!”

“By eating my ship!”

“That strange thing was a ship? It looks like an egg and you are Langone, our princess. Why were you in that tiny thing? That is what I ask—*asked* myself. Was why I didn’t think, I saw it, confusing yes, a little strange, but a ship? That hadn’t crossed my mind, but I know better now. May I come back with you? I am intrigued by the things going on in this life. Things seem so strange, different. What year is it?”

“No, you can’t come back with me!” Ravi ignored her other questions. “I don’t know

you!”

“But I called for you. That is why you’re here, right?” The girl clasped her hands together. “To help me?”

“That terrible screaming wail?” Ravil glared at her. “That was you saying *hello*?”

“Before you got here I was less...” The other one giggled. “*Together*. I still have a hard time concentrating. I can’t remember things and sometimes I remember other people’s memories, those taken by this thing...it is highly confusing! It’s *intolerable* and stupid when I can think clearly, but I can’t do that so much anymore. I don’t feel like me anymore, Ravil. I’m lost...my mind is lost here...”

Ravil edged away. “No shit.”

“But now I’m corporeal again!” The girl twirled. “At last! It should be easier to be me now that you’re here. The engine is already less chaotic since your presence has stabilized it.”

“Good for you.” Ravil rubbed her temples. “Can’t you just tell me who you are?”

The other one shook her head. “Not fair not fun! Let’s play a game instead! It will jog your memory!”

“No! Why?”

“Your head is hurt. I will do you a favor and see if I can find the cause. I am not able to fix the problem, but able to explain it perhaps? We used to do this, remember? We learned the memory tricks to keep things from Saroi! Maybe not, but you will soon!”

Ravil pointed. “You stay the *hell* out of my brain!”

“This will be so much fun!”

Ravil lunged for her. “Why don’t you just tell me your name?”

The girl flickered out of her reach. “In your current condition you’d only get confused by excess knowledge I think.” The other returned to amorphous fire. “Let’s play and ease you into this process slowly!”

Ravil struggled for control over the situation. “Okay. What kind of game? May I pick?”

“A Langone’s *favorite* game of course!”

“I’ve *never* played games!”

Light fractured the darkness and the other Langone grinned. “You’ve had your head stuffed with so much garbage and bindings, you’ve forgotten. I bet you can’t remember your mother’s name.”

“Why would I know that?” Ravil swatted at the fire. “She was gone as soon as I was born. None of us gets to know their parents.”

“See!” The girl laughed. “While you play, I will figure out what happened to you! We shall solve this mystery together!”

“Just please let me go.” Ravil put her hands together. “*Please*.”

The fire wobbled back and forth. “No, that would be irresponsible of me.”

“Listen, my friends are in *danger*!” Ravil pointed outwards. “I have to help them.”

“Oh, yeah them. Well, they can come play too then and keep you company.” The girl cocked her head. “Maybe they’ll have some insight on your current condition.”

“Don’t bring them in to this!” Ravil shook her head. “They’re safer where they are! Leave them alone.”

“They are coming, what a great idea you had. We’ll save them together! Which is great, my list is so short now. They’ll be my friends too if they’re smart enough. Right?”

“No!” Ravil grabbed at her.

“Yes! Are you ready?” She snapped her fingers and the scene went white.

Lincoln and Kennedy smelled Cagetown before they saw it. Blood, sex, pheromones, drugs, and booze permeated the air. The pair of Hunters had been climbing down safety shafts for hours, searching for one that didn't lead to a dead end. The further down they went, the more the pressure and gravity faded until they were back to being weightless. The climb wasn't a chore, but it was slow, as they'd had to stop and hide to evade notice several times.

Lincoln's hair vibrated, noting small sensations and changes in the air. His yellow cat eyes flicked up to Kennedy's face. "Stop."

Kennedy stilled; her eyes darted up and down, seeking out threats. Sensing nothing, she looked down to him, confused. "Why stop? No patrols to hide from."

"We need to get a few things clear before we go in." He caught her gaze. "We are no longer family, but I expect you to act as if we were."

"Oh...okay." Kennedy blushed.

"I—" Lincoln backtracked. "Not in *that* way. In obedience only, not...anything else." He cleared his throat. "There are rules. You will obey them and I will obey them as well."

"I thought we were equals?" Kennedy gulped.

"We are, but I have experience here, while you do not." He looked to see that she agreed before continuing, "If I am killed, you are returning here and fleeing. If we are in mortal danger you will listen and do exactly as I say, not deviating, not guessing I mean something else. My words will be literal."

Her voice was soft as she spoke, "Okay, Lincoln."

"Only I will fight. You will under no circumstances fight unless you are attacked. If I am in danger in the ring, you will *not* join me. You will *not* attempt to save me. You will stay on the sidelines until I have reached the point of death, then you run here and leave."

"Lincoln—"

"Wait." He flicked his claws out. "You care for yourself and for me only, you pity no one, and you feed no one. You will assume everyone is trying to fuck you in one way or another. Understood?"

"Yes, I—"

"You will keep information regarding your spots and your blood to yourself." Lincoln climbed up to her height and stood so that they touched from toes to shoulder. He checked that her jumpsuit was closed up to her chin to cover her black spots. "If given an order from the Ampyr you will act as if it has an effect unless you can kill the Ampyr and flee. Your Resister abilities are a death sentence on this ship. Do *not* show them."

She nodded.

He continued, "Your history is unimportant; no one needs to know your story. The more you tell the more power they have over you. I will muzzle you if you cannot keep quiet."

Kennedy barely suppressed her tears of fear. He pressed his forehead against hers. "You will survive this, I promise you."

She sniffled. "You are not planning to."

"Dying in the duty of protecting another is honorable." He met her gaze. "You will respect my choice and flee if I die."

Her eyes went wide. "But they will eat your corpse."

"Or worse." Lincoln nuzzled her neck. "Do not worry about that. You are brave."

"I *am* brave." She nodded.

"You are strong and smarter than you think." He ached for her, wishing he could kiss her.

“You are a survivor. I know of no one else that has shown that more than you.”

Kennedy nodded. She desired to throw her arms around him, to seek comfort and protection in his nearness, but fear followed desire. Dread that he would hurt her like he used to, that he would taunt her for such a display of weakness. Kennedy trembled in his embrace, confused and wanting.

Lincoln purred and put his lips to her undulating hair. “I have mistreated you terribly since the day we met.”

Kennedy shook her head frantically. “No! No! I have been—”

Lincoln covered her mouth with his hand. He inhaled her scent. “Yes, I have, but I have always protected you from others if I have been there to do so. That at least I have never failed in, and I will not let you down. I *will* keep you alive so that you can return to Marx and Tasanee.”

Lincoln closed his eyes and whispered into her ear, “And if I ever hurt you again, I *order* you to rip out my throat. You *will* do this.”

Kennedy jerked underneath his hands.

Lincoln hissed, showing his fangs. “You need to know that if I hit you again, I will be aiming for your death. The attack will not be a beating I will stop in the middle of, not something that will tire or sate me. I will give no mercy. I expect none.” He closed his eyes. “And of us both, you are the one that deserves to survive that confrontation. You *will* kill me first. You *must* kill me first, Kennedy.”

Lincoln kicked off from the wall and moved down the shaft, knowing she’d follow. His limbs twitched as his two personalities warred over his actions. He could hardly believe he had been allowed to speak and warn her. That had to be a sign of something, of returning sanity or strength.

His split self, a feminized version of his Instinct, hissed in his ear. “You warn her? Fine! When she fights back it will be all the more pleasurable to break her again!”

Lincoln kept his jaw locked, unwilling to speak to the thing he had begun to regard as an infection, an evil presence that he could and *would* control. He would no longer let it be in charge of him as it had for the last twelve years of his life.

The female Lincoln laughed. “This place will break you down again, feral. You’ll need me in the cages. You’ll need *me*, Lincoln, not her, and once I settle in your bones you can count the hours that cub above us has to live.” She purred. “It will be so sweet. Perhaps I will let her trust you again. The look of hopelessness on her face will be so tender, innocent. Just like the first time you beat her into submission.”

Lincoln bit his tongue until it bled. His fangs chipped under the pressure. He stabbed his claws into the wall. His yellow eyes caught on the patterns there and he halted. He looked down. Below him, the shaft went from organized and clean, to vandalized and chaotic. Floating garbage and spare parts littered the open passage, but it was free of life. They were close. He resumed his descent, his inner Instinct quiet once more.

The deeper they climbed, the fewer lights were on, the more scratches they saw in the metal. The smells grew thick, visible to their noses like smoke in the air, each carrying a story of violence, lust, or despair. Lincoln immersed himself in it, preparing his mind.

He stopped in front of a heavy mesh hatch, the passageway beyond stained with paint and blood. Past the metal door, the hum and pulse of life began, the low bass of engines churning, the groaning of pleasure and pain. Cagetown...the dregs of the ship. Home to the desperate, the scum, the dying, and the daring.

Lincoln closed his eyes, willing calm. Kennedy stopped just above him. He reached up and held out his hand. She put hers in his. He drew her down to his level. “We enter now.”

Kennedy swallowed audibly. “I am brave, not coward, not scared.”

Lincoln flashed a smile. “You have never been a coward, not a day in your life.” He cranked on the lock and pulled the door open. He ushered her through and followed, sealing the door behind him.

They found themselves in a small, dimly lit shaft. Flecks of neon paint caught flickering lights from the end of the tunnel. Lincoln took the lead, walking on his talons and toe hooks, expecting a trap.

Netting covered the end of the tunnel. Lincoln flicked it aside and took Kennedy by the hand. They floated out into a giant holding bay. Lincoln hooked his feet to the metal floor and surveyed the scene. Like any other Cagetown, this one was filled with makeshift buildings, fighting rings, and drug dens. Lincoln stretched, unfolding to his full height. He was average for a Hunter, near six and a half feet of muscle designed to hunt and kill.

He flashed his fangs and used the far distant glow of the Cage arena to orient them. He took off stomping with Kennedy in tow, clearly *his*. He jerked his neck and his hair roped back into a high ponytail, his stance with hooks out a clear threat to others. He was ready to kill things and his look screamed that he enjoyed doing it.

Hunters leaned on the metal walls of improvised buildings. They hooted and clacked their fangs, smelling the new goods. Underfed, barely clothed, these slept near the back entrances, picking off newcomers foolish enough to wander here, or worse, the exiled dumped there, given a death sentence simply by entering the area.

Lincoln kept his eyes on the horizon. The arena’s lights were visible over the shacks and buildings made from abandoned and repurposed shipping containers. Smells assailed his senses, distinct, competing for attention like the clamor of fights and those pimping out their goods.

Though the layout of this place was different from what he was used to, Lincoln knew where he was going. Every warship of this size had a Cagetown; every seed planet populated with enough people did as well. They all worked the same because they existed for the same purpose—a pressure release, a place to vent during the constant warfare that plagued every corner of the Empire. Lincoln had been to and survived a few and this one certainly wasn’t anything special. He turned his nose to the air, begging someone to fuck with him.

Hunters whistled to each other. Their eyes brushed over Lincoln, sizing him up, but lingering on Kennedy, a young one, a body to sell for meat, for sex, or for both. That she was pretty and visibly undamaged only increased her value. Kennedy pressed in close to Lincoln, acutely aware of the intent of the attention she received.

Two young Hunters blurred out of the darkness and twisting smoke, leaping for Lincoln.

Lincoln ducked. He threw out a leg like iron and caught the male in the stomach, his hooks piercing lungs and heart. The other Hunter he caught in the chin, his talons slicing up through her throat and mouth. Lincoln gave the Hunter a shake, breaking her neck. He gazed into her eyes as the light in them went out. Ropes of blood marbled the air around them.

Lincoln kicked the first corpse aside, sending it floating, and handed Kennedy the second. He spoke up without looking at her, “You wanted a meal, here’s your first. Start eating *now*.”

Kennedy tore off a piece of shoulder, aware that they stood under scrutiny on nearly all sides. She stuffed the meat in her mouth and chewed quickly, licking the blood from her fingers.

Lincoln waited until she had taken a few bites before tossing the corpse, an indication to others that they neither needed nor wanted the poor quality food. They would find more, secure

in their strength. They were not like these scroungers.

He gave Kennedy a tug and walked on. Behind them, Hunters poured out of alleys and descended upon the corpses, taking them to pieces in seconds. Lincoln dropped his voice, "I hope that was not too foul. I will get you better next time."

She burped. "I have had to eat worse."

He nodded once and herded her towards some buildings. "Come, we need to find a house."

Kennedy frowned. "I thought we register at Cage arena?"

"We are not *visiting* here, Kennedy." He scanned the area. "We are staying for a time. I need a house to sponsor us or we'll be sleeping out in the streets like those living meals we passed."

"But the arena is still far away." She pointed at the distant lights.

"It is a ring only. Those that fight there return above after their battles. That place has no sleeping quarters for newcomers."

Kennedy did not know much about how this worked. "We pay someone for room?"

Lincoln smiled. "We will generate money, but not much notice, not this far back from the main thoroughfare." He pushed open the back door of a two-story building built from huge pieces of scrap metal and broken machines. He stalked past aimlessly drifting drunks and drug addicts that had fallen asleep in the hallway. Men reached for Kennedy; Lincoln kicked their heads in. No one batted an eye. Anyone foolish enough to pass out in the open would be dead within hours anyways.

Lincoln passed the small rooms used for dealing sex or drugs. He walked into the front of the house, a mostly vacant bar. A mix of Hunters, Ampyr, and Pyros occupied barely half of the bolted down tables. Lincoln cocked his head and listened. He heard no sounds of battle, no cheering or betting. He changed his stance and growled. "No business, we're leaving."

The Ampyr bartender looked up from hanging out new bags of alcohol for customers. "You're looking for a sponsor, Hunter?"

Lincoln regarded the pale man. "An actual one. This place has no fights."

"We do, but not generally the ones that make a lot of noise." The man smiled and ran his fingers through his graying jet-black hair. "Specials."

Lincoln's eyes flashed. "May I see?"

The man gestured for a tall blonde Pyro to take over the bar. He hooked his thumb at the other end of the room. "Come on." He pulled back a magnetized metal curtain from the doorway and gestured the pair into the next room.

The room circled a barren fighting ring. Blood stained the iron floors, and a rusted wire fence locked participants in and viewers out. The seats around the ring were three deep and all occupied; the bet placers spoke softly. Lincoln saw why.

Two women stood in the ring, their feet locked to the floor by their boots. One woman was so blue she nearly appeared black; her head was topped with a plume of flame red hair. Her opalescent eyes were locked on her opponent. The other woman, a blonde Pyro with dark brown skin, stood with her hands out, fingers splayed. They were both dressed in black, loose-fitting garb. Lincoln grinned, appreciative and surprised. "Pyro and *Jungay*. I have never seen the latter in a Cagatown, let alone one on her own. How did she come here?"

"Exiled from above." The Ampyr flicked his black eyes towards the ceiling. "Pissed off the wrong officer and got tossed down a chute, probably avoiding a messy execution and paperwork that way. She made her way here a few weeks back."

Lincoln eyed the Ampyr. "Is she one of yours?"

“Oh yeah, now she is.” The man grinned. “She came right here and wanted to fight. She passed the voice test, sane enough for that.”

Lincoln eyed her hungrily. “I am surprised she is not in the Cage arena.”

“They wouldn’t let her in. What would be the point?” He dropped his voice, “Not that these idiots know, always betting *against* the Jungay.”

Lincoln smiled faintly. “You do not seem to hold them in contempt.”

“I appreciate money and those that make it for me regardless of the source.” The Ampyr rubbed his fingers together. “Do you want to place a bet?”

Lincoln’s smile increased. “Not against the Jungay. Is she your only fighter?”

“The only one worth anything and all I can get now. Hunters come to watch, hoping she’ll die, but none fight her.”

Lincoln licked his fangs. “Looking to acquire one?”

The Ampyr shook his head. “Not a onetime fighter.”

Lincoln nodded. “I have killed Ampyr, Hunters, Fix-Its, Sodas—”

“You’ve killed Sodas?” The man grinned. “Fuck, I’d pay for someone to take out a few around here.”

Lincoln wrinkled his nose. “You have an infestation on the *ship*?”

“Not completely. There’s a guy a few shops down that keeps them caged. They get loose sometimes. Everyone flees and leaves the shop owners to deal. Because of them, the upstairs has shut off the whole town to the rest of the ship except for the main gate. I’m surprised you got through the quarantine at all.”

Lincoln shrugged. “They must have missed a murder vent.”

The man snorted. “Must have.”

A bell rang and the Pyro snapped her fingers, creating a flame. She bent over, screaming, clawing her eyes and raving about insects. The Pyro wailed, bucking and twitching in the air. Those with bets on her grumbled, disappointed, hoping to see someone roasted.

“Come on, Waitrey.” The bartender gave the Jungay a loaded look.

The Jungay gave no indication she heard, but the Pyro lit herself on fire. The crowd hooted and cheered. The Jungay had not moved a muscle.

The owner grinned. “She gives ‘em what they want, one way or another. She’s a good showman.” He pointed. “Sure you don’t want to fight her?”

“I am no fool.” Lincoln cracked his knuckles. “You do not have any other fighters?”

“No one wants to fight on the same team as the head job.” He jerked his head at Waitrey. “*I will.*”

The bartender looked to Kennedy. “And her?”

Lincoln placed himself between the man and Kennedy. “She does nothing but feed me.”

“All right, but if you’re selling her from the room I expect a cut of the profits.”

“Of course. We have a deal?”

The man nodded. “For tonight at least. Show me what you got. Waitrey! Out of the ring, clear it!” A bedraggled Rexos darted into the ring to grab the charred Pyro. Waitrey skipped out with a crooked smile on her face. Her boots lit up blue with each step, forcing her feet back down when she skipped too high.

The bartender looked to Lincoln. “Fight me something flashy that gets repeat customers and I’ll give you *two* night’s room and board.”

Lincoln nodded and turned to Kennedy. “Remember our rules. You stay here.” He walked up to the largest Hunter in the room and raked her across the back with his claws. The Hunter

hissed and whirled, but Lincoln danced back and stepped into the ring. He put on a doofus grin and shook out his hair into pigtails. He cocked his head and hooted as the enraged Hunter followed him in.

Kennedy hooked her claws on the metal fence and pressed her face to the mesh. If Lincoln got himself killed, she was better off dead.

The fence around her shook and deep growling settled in next to her. “Bitch.”

Kennedy turned her head and hissed at the female Hunter, warning her back. “Away from me!”

The female snapped her teeth in Kennedy’s face. “My mate will kill yours, and we will eat both of you.”

“My mate will kill yours and we will not eat you, because you smell.” Kennedy turned away, terrified.

The Hunter laughed and licked Kennedy’s arm. “Little young one I...I—” she grabbed her own throat and backed off. Her eyes locked on the Jungay that settled in on Kennedy’s other side.

Waitrey rested on the fence, her milky blue eyes warning the other Hunter off. She smiled and looked to Kennedy.

Kennedy refused to look at her. She kept her mind solely on Lincoln’s movements in the ring. Blood splashed them both as Lincoln broke and then tore the Hunter’s leg off at the knee. He roared and let the wounded Hunter float away while he planned his attack. Lincoln took a bite of the leg, eliciting a murmur from the crowd.

The Jungay touched Kennedy’s face. *Hello.*

Kennedy’s whine came out high-pitched.

I do not like that frequency, stop.

Kennedy went silent. She was smart enough to realize she was being invaded, her thoughts now no longer entirely hers. Kennedy knew she was no match for the Jungay and so did not even attempt to contest her control. She kept still, letting the woman do as she wished.

Good. Waitrey took her hand away from Kennedy’s face and turned back to the battle.

Lincoln tore an arm off at the shoulder, getting laughter from the crowd.

Kennedy glanced over at the Hunter’s mate; the female’s face went from showing despair to blank between two blinks. She turned and walked from the room, shutting out the pain, and giving up on her mate. Her thoughts fixed upon surviving the next few hours alone.

Kennedy shook the foreign thoughts from her head and looked to the Jungay.

The woman smiled, showing off sky blue gums and white teeth. Her pale blue eyes shifted in the light, sparkling with rainbow colors as they moved. She trilled her lips and turned to go. She trailed her finger across the bald stripe on Kennedy’s scalp.

Kennedy gulped and focused on not peeing herself.

The Ampyr bartender stepped up beside Kennedy and handed her a key on a chain. He pointed at Lincoln as the crowd laughed. “He’s *funny*. You both have the nights I promised; your room number is on the key. Don’t worry, no windows, only one door, yours the only key. Second floor is the top floor. You still feed yourselves. If you bring back corpses, dispose of them.”

Kennedy nodded numbly and slipped the chain and key over her neck, hooking it to her jumpsuit. She took in the sights of the crowd, people betting on the outcome of the fight, now assured to go in Lincoln’s favor. Already men and women sized him up, thinking of future opponents, of entertainment, and moneymaking opportunities. Kennedy measured them as well,

taking in their scents, their sounds, memorizing them.

Lincoln tore the Hunter's head off and tossed it. He grabbed the body and dragged it to the exit of the ring. He caught Kennedy's eye, then the key around her neck. He carried the body over his shoulder. "Upstairs?"

She nodded. "They have taken note of you."

"Good." He licked blood from his hands. "They will bring money and opponents to me. We need not spend our energy tomorrow seeking it out."

"Okay." Kennedy left the room and found the stairs by smell, leading Lincoln up.

Lincoln stopped Kennedy and moved in front of her. He sniffed and his eyes narrowed. He put his hand to the door at the top of the stairs and threw it open. The dead Hunter's mate dove out of the darkness. Lincoln lashed out, but only caught her across the cheek.

Kennedy kicked on reflex and caught her in the sternum. She plunged her claws into the wall to keep upright as the blow knocked her back. The woman cried out and reached for her with talons out.

Lincoln punched the woman in the neck. A snap followed, and she went limp, dead. He shrugged. "It's not ten, but two somethings will suffice for dinner?"

Kennedy licked her fangs, her stomach growling. "She wanted to eat me."

"Turnabout is fair play. She is yours first then." He took the key from around Kennedy's neck and found their room. He unlocked the door, his eyes darting around the small, windowless metal box. There were no furnishings, no other rooms, just four walls, a ceiling, and a floor. The metal ground and walls were perforated, giving them toeholds. The room was cold, just like they needed.

Lincoln chucked the headless body of the large female into the corner and took the smaller female from Kennedy. He hucked the key to Kennedy. "Lock the door." Lincoln stripped the corpse, looting her for valuables. He rolled the body towards Kennedy. "All yours."

Kennedy sat in front of the body and glanced at Lincoln. "I still don't understand why this is best? Couldn't we have hidden upstairs?"

Lincoln started in on his former opponent's chest, sending cooling blood into the air. "The whole ship is looking for you, and they will have your mark, but they won't look here."

"Why?" Kennedy gnawed on the female's arm.

Lincoln gorged on meat. "This place is a death trap, and if they track you to the shaft they will consider you dead soon enough. They will see no reason to come here."

"Many come here, they filled the audience downstairs. They placed bets in their uniforms, I saw." Kennedy looked to the doorway.

"Kennedy, they are not here on duty, they drink and will not remember us. On duty Empire soldiers caught in Cagetown will suffer demotion and solitary confinement...at least that, if not worse. Besides, even if we were reported they can't hope to close this whole place down to search for one Hunter that they think will end up dead anyways."

"But—"

Lincoln took her hand. "Do not worry, Kennedy. They will not look for us. We are free to roam."

"But what about Danny! Oro!"

"They are not going anywhere. We are all on one ship. You heard the same announcement as I. They are taking Oro to a space station for execution. We will go then, intervene at that time." He took in her expression. "Our odds are poor both ways, but lying low now and attacking later has better odds of success."

Kennedy sulked. “But—”

“Do you not like this plan because you are at risk? Is it that it is not your plan? We can discuss the details together—”

“No.” Kennedy cut into her dinner. “*You* are in danger from doing this.”

“I can handle myself.” He stripped a bone clean of flesh.

“Not against all, not against Jungay!” She cracked a bone with her teeth.

“I am not planning on fighting that Jungay.” Lincoln jerked, repulsed at the thought.

“Anyone who fights one and thinks they can win is foolish or without options. It is impossible to kill them in a straight duel and *everyone* knows that.”

Kennedy shivered. “She touched me and got in my head.”

Lincoln went still. “Did she find anything?”

Kennedy shook her head. “She did not, just showed she could. She touched my scar.”

“A simple power play then. That is all.” Lincoln spat out bone in distaste. “Keep that scar covered. We cannot account for your survival. If any ask, it is a birth defect, not a wound.”

Kennedy wound her hair into a braid. “What do we do now?”

“Now? We gorge and sleep while we can. Tomorrow I hope to have a fight or two, enough to keep us here and fed.” He took in her expression. “Believe me, I do not want to go to the arena, Kennedy. I am not doing this for glory among trash. I will do no more than I must to keep us fed and housed.”

“You promise?”

“Yes, now eat. Your corpse is getting cold.”

Evgeniy relaxed inside the cockpit of his stolen Ampyr Wasp. He’d parked the small ship inside one of the six docking bays that ringed the Ampyr warship like a belt.

He used the monitors of the Wasp to cycle through a level-by-level map of the warship while sipping on a water bag. Soldiers’ bunks, training rooms, mess halls, supply depots, and a sprawling doctor’s office made up the rest of his current level.

The Wasp’s radio was on, filling up the space with white noise. Evgeniy mouthed the Ampyr voice commands that came across the speakers, practicing his inflection. He’d mastered a few phrases and responded absentmindedly to the radio commands while a new map level loaded on his monitor.

The prison that Oro, Danny, and Lloyd were stuck in was on the lowest officer’s deck, ten levels above him. He couldn’t get in without officer-level clearance. On Earth that would perhaps have been difficult to come by in an era of fingerprinting, voice recognition, and computers. But here? Possess the right badge and you’re in no questions asked.

There was no expectation of infiltration or of treason. No one could disobey orders from their superiors, no one mutinied, and everyone on board was under someone else’s voice command, unable to break their programming.

From his seat in his ship, Evgeniy surveyed automated rotation of watches. The Ampyr were alert, because they had orders to be, but underneath everything was a striking lack of imagination.

The emergency routines he’d found on his codex were few and revolved around events like a fire or hull breach or something called a sweep. Evgeniy had no doubt that were he to set a fire, the Ampyr would progress in neat lines to their waiting stations, exactly as the codex indicated, regardless of what passed by them in the opposite direction. They simply weren’t prepared for infiltration by solo operatives.

No bit of information was beyond his reach either. He'd read the captain's log until he realized it was mind-numbingly boring and full of self-congratulatory bullshit. Evgeniy chewed on his water bag. His stomach grumbled. He rifled through the equivalent of the glove compartment until a protein bar floated loose. Evgeniy suspected it was his last one. Fortunately, there was a fridge a few doors down and, once he ventured forth, that was his first stop on his list of things to check out.

Oro woke up to the sound of the door to their room opening. His brown eyes snapped open, and he rolled up to a sitting position. A gloved fist greeted him, slamming his head back into the pillow. Half-awake and his head pounding, Oro lashed out with a kick and made contact with soft flesh. "Fuck you too!"

The Ampyr officer snarled and wrenched Oro's ankle. "Do not touch me that way again!" "Same to you!" Oro pulled his injured foot in and massaged it.

The officer turned from Oro and gestured to Danny; two lower ranking soldiers grabbed his chain and pulled him to standing. Danny kept calm and watched all three Ampyr.

Oro looked to the officer. "What is this?"

The officer smiled at Oro. "You've had time to think. Now we begin with the questions. If you do not answer me, this old one will start to receive torture."

Oro jerked. "What?"

The first soldier held Danny, while the woman punched him in the gut. Danny took the blow, shook it off, and spoke in English, "I'm fine, Oro. Don't tell them anything." His response earned him another fist in the stomach and a hit to the face, which split his lip open.

Oro spoke quickly in Ampyr, "If I give you information, you'll stop hitting him?"

The officer smiled and nodded. "Of course."

He was lying; Oro could read it in his expression plain as day. The man looked haggard from a prolonged lack of sleep; his superiors hounded him for information before they handed the prisoners over at the space station. The officer wanted information and if Oro cracked now, he'd only ramp up the violence to get more.

Oro grinned. "You look like you could use a good massage."

The officer frowned. "What?"

"A rub down, a relaxant, or maybe booze?"

The man sneered. "Officers do not drink on duty."

"Why the fuck not? You guys seem like you have sticks up your asses at literally all times."

The officer flinched and his soldiers punched Danny twice. Oro ground his teeth, but kept his smile. "I bet you guys don't get to fuck very much either."

Danny hissed as another fist met his stomach. He doubled over and spoke in English, "What are you aiming for? Should I piss them off or—"

"Stay quiet." Oro smiled back at the officer. "Underlings are so funny sometimes."

"What is he saying?" The officer's eyes darted between Oro and Danny.

Oro twisted and cracked his back. "He's telling me that I should tell you everything and save us the pain."

"He's smart." The man smiled. "You should pay attention to him."

"Yeah, but don't you just hate it when the lower downs tell you what to do? So uppity." Oro stretched. "Why're you so interested in getting me to say what our language is anyways, can't you translate it? We had a ton of translators on board our ship. Supplies that scarce that you can't wrangle one up?"

Danny gaped. “Don’t *give him* ideas!”

The officer gritted his teeth. “Our supply *situation* is *none* of your concern.”

Oro snorted and spoke in English, “Seriously...these guys do *not* have their shit together. We must have gotten taken by the bottom of the barrel warship. This is *awesome*.”

The officer stared at Oro, trying to figure him out. “Tell me where you hail from. Your accent is First Planet, but your skin is too dark. Who taught you? Who is your master?”

Oro grinned. “Well, considering the source of your data, I suppose that would be Obi-Wan.”

Danny hid a smile.

The officer frowned and marked the word on a paper notepad. “Obi-Wan?”

“No codex even. Look at the paper.” Oro spoke in English and met Danny’s gaze before smiling at the officer and switching to Ampyr. “I bet if I were to tell you everything you’d be pretty well off wouldn’t you. Information is currency with you guys.” Oro smirked. “You have no control over what you really get to do, but what you know, now that’s a different matter. The more you know, the more you can subvert your orders. It’s interesting don’t you think? That officers are so loyal yet constantly striving to regain some of that control back from the Emperor and—”

“Blasphemy!” The officer backhanded Oro. “I am collecting this information for the *good* of the Empire!”

Oro held his cheek. “But you get a bit out of it, don’t you? Favors, accolades, a tick mark up in rank from those around you, a tiny bit more power over your body. Something to distinguish your career, hell your *life*, from any other puzzle piece that can fill your insignificant role.”

A barrage of slaps drove him into the wall. The Warden hissed his words, “You know *nothing* of our ways, or what we deal with day to day, our nightmares or our goals! *You know nothing, you Jungay-corrupted puppet!*”

Oro licked blood from his upper lip. “You’d better watch it. Whatever information you get from me has a price. I wonder if one will outweigh the other?”

“What price?” The Ampyr flicked his wrist, wiping blood off with a handkerchief.

“I’m unclean and you’re touching me.” Oro sat down on his bunk and gave him a once over. “My blood is on your hands...Jungay-tainted blood.” He recalled the phrases Lloyd had used to insult him. “I’m *contaminated*.”

The man jumped back, wiping his hands on his clothes. “I deal with prisoners all of the time. You’re *all* contaminated in one way or another.”

Oro sat up. “Yeah, but I’m *really* bad. So bad that kiddo over there sits in the corner.” He jerked his head to Lloyd who still pressed himself into the corner bars of the bed. “He’s sick you know. I made him tainted—just by breathing the same air together. I got all sorts of Resistance mental illnesses that I can pass your way.”

“I’ll get the Rexos then and you’ll be fine.” The Ampyr sniffed. “Illness does not concern me.”

“Sorry, not that kind of sickness, not flesh but brain. No way to get cured I’m afraid.” Oro smiled. “In a day or so, you’re going to start having unnatural thoughts about me, terrible things like you can’t even imagine.”

Danny nodded sadly and spoke in Ampyr, “He’s right. I used to have a wife, but not anymore.”

The officer took a step back. “This is a lie. It’s not going to affect one such as me. I’m

warded, fully protected! No *Ampyr* can be affected by—”

“No! It’s true!” Lloyd crawled to the edge of the bed on his hands and knees. He was paler than normal, his hands trembling. “He gets in your head like a Jungay or a Feeler.” Lloyd pressed his long fingers against his skull. “Now I have these horrible urges and desires all the time! I can’t stop them and they’re getting worse! I am *Ampyr*, like you, I thought I was immune too, but he is too strong.” Lloyd choked on his own words.

Oro would have been proud of Lloyd’s acting job, except he was nearly positive it wasn’t acting. Oro put on a cheerful face and blew a kiss to the soldier that held Danny. “Just wait, you’ll dream about me and my body; I’m just too good to look at. You’ll want more. You’ll sleep walk and end up outside this door trying to get in to see me. That’s right...I’ll get in your dreams!”

“Dreams?” The officer took another step back, terrified. He fixed his gaze on Lloyd. “You’re both lying. You...you are not Jungay! You have no such dream control!”

Lloyd blinked back tears. “Why would I lie to you? It is my shame as an *Ampyr* to admit that I have such a vile sickness! I do not want such a fate to befall another of my kind. You should leave! You don’t have much time!”

The officer flushed. “This is a falsehood!”

“Can you really afford to take that risk?” Oro made puppy dog eyes. “I’m already making you doubt your decisions, you secretly want to stay. You’re looking for an excuse to be around me.”

“No, I am not!” The *Ampyr* officer went red in the face. “I don’t, but this—”

“Go!” Lloyd fell at Oro’s feet and hugged his ankles. “Run before it’s too late for you!”

“This is ridiculous! You just spin lies!” The officer pointed at Danny. “Hit that one again until they stop this foolishness.”

Lloyd pounced on Oro, grabbed him by the shirtfront, and pushed him against the wall. He wrapped Oro’s braid around his hand and straddled him. Lloyd took a desperate deep breath and kissed Oro on the lips. Oro responded with a muffled cry of surprise, then a smile. He closed his eyes and kissed Lloyd back.

The officer ran out of the room; the two soldiers were quick to follow behind him. They shut the door and threw the lock. Two more bolts fell into place after the first.

Danny laughed, then held his side and grimaced. He glanced over at Oro.

The two on the bed made no move to break apart. Oro slipped his hands up the outside of Lloyd’s legs, digging his fingers into his outer thighs. Lloyd whimpered. Oro pulled him closer.

Danny cleared his throat. “Okay boys, they’re gone.”

Lloyd came to his senses and kicked off the bed, sending him across the room. He hit the wall and looked at Oro in abject horror. He doubled over and retched into their tiny garbage chute.

Danny sighed. “Lloyd, *really?*”

Oro made a face. “At least he didn’t puke *on* me.”

Danny pulled his shirt up to look at the bruising along his ribs. He poked a dark purple spot and winced. “That officer is going to come back and hurt you for that.”

Oro shrugged. “I kind of figured as much.”

Danny sat up. “You cannot fuck around with your health, Oro.”

Lloyd heaved. His ragged breaths gave the indication he was crying. He sank to the floor. “No, no...no.”

Oro rolled his eyes to hide his hurt feelings. “God, we *got it*, Lloyd. You didn’t like it; you

really, really didn't like kissing me and never had or will have the urge to do it again. We both know that we were *acting* for the good of the group. No one thinks you're gay." He set his jaw and spoke through his teeth, "*Sir*, my health isn't a concern."

Danny huffed. "It damn well *is* my concern when you're having strokes!"

Lloyd leaned his head against the wall. He wiped away tears and puzzled over their conversation. "What is a *stroke*?"

Danny grimaced. "Oro's brain is bleeding and the pressure is slowly killing him."

Lloyd gasped and bolted upright. "No! Why?"

Oro sighed. "Stop being so melodramatic, Lloyd. It's not like you actually care."

Lloyd held on to the wall and turned to Danny. "Why is it happening to him?"

Oro glared at Lloyd. "It's not because you slapped me around, so you don't need to feel guilty, not that you'd really feel guilty anyways. Clean off." He threw a blanket at Lloyd and turned to Danny. "I'm twenty-four, *you* are forty-seven. I can take a beating *way* better than you can."

"Darq has given me a few tune-ups." Danny cracked his knuckles. "I'm not a senior citizen."

"Sure, but you're closer than me and a crippling beating will get you there a lot sooner."

Danny put a cool bag of water against his stomach. "I will order you to stay in line, *Second Lieutenant*."

"Exactly, *sir*." Oro got to his feet and pulled on his ankle chain. "You're the commanding officer here. You need to be able to make orders, not take punches. That's why you have grunts like me around you."

"You are not just some grunt! And I'm sorry, Oro, but you're *not* physically imposing to *anyone*." Danny pulled himself to his feet. "Your brain has been, *is*, your best asset and I refuse to see it fucked to shit because some dumbfuck soldiers cave your skull in because you're gay! So keep your *fucking* mouth shut from now on!" Danny trembled. "I'm the adult—"

"I am too!" Oro shouted. "I am not a cadet anymore!"

Danny pushed Oro back into his bunk. "You're barely out of college! You have a life in front of you, and no matter how old you get, to me you're always going to be the little boy that followed Mica and Rake's every word and stupid idea."

Oro gaped. "Da—"

"You don't *get it!* You're my *kid!*" Danny blinked back tears. "All of you and you constantly do stupid fucking things that put your lives at risk! What kind of terrible parent was I that I raised you to be that way?"

Oro hugged as much of Danny as he could reach. "You were the best parent any of us could have ever asked for."

Danny hugged him in return. He spoke into his hair, "Yeah, Rake gets addicted to drugs, Sammy blows her brains out, Lara's murdered, Kat takes up prostitution, Mica worked for a drug lord, and we're involved in an intergalactic war."

"Pretty sure you can't take credit for the last one." Oro grinned when Danny managed a laugh. He let him go. "Nina doesn't act this stupid, so you didn't screw up with all of us."

Danny gave Oro a pat on the back. "She would if she could."

Lloyd watched the pair and scuffed his feet on the ground, feeling left out.

Oro noticed him. "We can have a non-sexual brotherly friendship hug too if you want to."

Lloyd turned beet red. "Why would I want to do that?"

"If only you knew," Oro replied in English, smiling when Lloyd looked even more

confused.

“Ampyr only from now on. I don’t want them even attempting to translate.” Danny curled up on his mattress. “Kid, it’s your watch. Lord Vader and I need our beauty rest.”

Oro grinned. “Speak for yourself, old man.”

A silver duffel bag floated down an empty maintenance corridor of the Ampyr warship. Lights flickered overhead. A wall panel opened and the bag disappeared. The panel shut silently. The lights in the hall stayed on.

Emmalethe shoved the bag ahead of her as she made her way deeper into a crawlspace. She climbed into a junction point and tied the bag to a metal handle.

The air around her was littered with broken plastic and metal. She had to swat at the parts to give her enough space to float unimpeded.

Emmalethe opened the top of the bag. Headsets spilled into the air, and smaller translators floated away. A codex ricocheted with a bang as it hit into another one. Emmalethe snatched at them and crunched them between her hands. “Crunch, crunch, stupid baby smart toy. I crunch, crunch you all. No good things for you.”

Her idea had formed when she’d come across the treasure toy room hours ago. It was full of these things, more than she could count. She knew what these electronics were used for and how important they were to all of the stupid people on board. So she’d ruined all of those there and set about to destroy the rest of them on the ship.

It wasn’t to help anyone. Emmalethe was bored, and her behavior sent all the funny pale people into flights of hysterics. Those stupid antics made her laugh and fueled her search for more of their treasures.

Her fingertips were bloody, evidence of the few times she’d had to deal with people noticing her intelligent thievery. Emmalethe grinned, showing off her clear needle teeth. She was better than everyone.

She finished destroying her most recent haul and crumpled the bag up. The material was small enough that she could tuck it up into her hair and hide it while it was empty. Emmalethe yawned. Her stomach grumbled.

She wrinkled her nose and sniffed the air. She might as well steal baby knowledge toys from a level that had food too. She smiled; she was the smartest. Her alpha would approve, she was sure of it.

“Pirate steals all good things, make all her good things. No one gets good things, no one but pirate,” she sang to herself as she crawled through the bowels of the ship. “Good pirate action! Help self to their selfs things! Crunch, crunch, crunch! Pirate time the best time!”

Marx raked ashes and pieces of bed and desk towards the hatch in the floor that led from Rake and Ravil’s room down to the cockpit. He coughed and spat out black saliva.

Tasaneer poked her head through the hatch. “You all right?”

Marx nodded. “Yes, just a most unpleasant taste.”

Tasaneer’s nose wrinkled. “And smells. Do you want to hold the garbage vacuum instead?”

He shook his head. “I can do this.”

Mica spoke up from the cockpit below, “Why don’t we just vent the room into space? I doubt you’ll find anything in there to salvage.”

Marx coughed and held on to the wall. He sneezed and his hair curled into corkscrews. “Disagreeable air.”

Tasanee snapped her fingers. “Get out of there! They probably use like asbestos or something in their insulation. Come on, that’s not healthy. Sammy, we’re venting as soon as we’re out.”

Marx did not protest. He floated down the hatch after her and sneezed again. Tasanee flicked off the vacuum and tied off the garbage bag. She interlaced their fingers. “We’re going to Darq. You’ve probably inhaled something nasty.”

Marx’s eyes were red and watering. He nodded and followed her down the hall, his chest convulsing.

Sammy’s voice came over the speakers. “Warning! I’m dumping Rake’s room. Don’t be in there or your ass is getting spaced!”

Katarina responded on the headsets, “Something wrong, Rat?”

“Marx inhaled too much smoke and ash; we’re going to see Darq.” Tasanee squeezed Marx’s hand. “Kat, where are you at?”

“Cleaning the operating room. It’s a mess in here.”

“We’ll join you in a bit then.” Tasanee knocked on the med lab door. “Darq?”

Darq looked up from his reading. He was back to a clean white jumpsuit and lab coat. He let his codex float free. “Tasanee, I want to apologize for my behavior earlier. I did not mean to yell at you. That was highly inappropriate of me.”

She smiled. “Yeah, you’re forgiven. Can you check out Marx?”

Darq stepped over. “Of course.”

Tasanee made sure Marx would stay still before letting him go. “Can I take a peek at Rake?”

“Yes, go ahead.” Darq put his fingers into Marx’s skin, sensing the damage. “This is not too bad, but you have inhaled some toxic materials. A full body detox should work.”

Tasanee smiled at Marx. “I’ll be back in a few.” She slipped into the bunkroom.

Marx rolled to his back out of habit. He cleared his throat. His voice was raspy as he spoke, “I need to ask you something while she is out of the room.”

“Go ahead.” Darq shoved his hand into Marx’s abdomen, pushing the Hunter down.

The Hunter grimaced. “When does their kind go in to heat?”

Darq frowned. “They don’t.”

Marx knotted his brows. “Then when are they fertile?”

“All the time.” Darq rolled Marx to his stomach with the flick of his wrist and pressed his hands into his lungs. “Didn’t she tell you?”

Marx hacked up globs of gray fluid into the air. “Tell me what?”

“They go through monthly cycles, times when they are fertile and not fertile. They have a more productive time of the month, but it’s nothing like what Hunters have. It’s actually quite subtle. I didn’t notice it with Mom for a while.”

“Oh.” Marx’s eyes narrowed. “I was wondering why she was changing smell and temperature throughout the month.”

“Why didn’t you just ask her?”

“I did. She said it was a girl thing.” Marx hissed. “Though technically not a lie, I find that answer bothersome in light of this information.”

Darq nodded without really understanding. “Mom told me that they can plan their sex lives around their own cycles so that they don’t get pregnant, but Mom was looking at it from the perspective of maybe trying to get pregnant someday. It goes both ways. Don’t you think that’s interesting?”

Marx coughed. “Yes, did Kat tell you all of this?”

“Tasanee said it too with more colorful words.” Darq rubbed the gore off his hands. “Something about getting stuck and stuffed with spawn. I don’t get the impression she wants to have children, Marx.”

Marx made a face. “How do you know that?”

“Well after she said *that* she asked me how it works with Hunters.” Darq ran his fingers across Marx’s neck. “I told her that when Hunter females go in to heat the males do as well. Therefore, *you* wouldn’t be fertile since from your body’s perspective you haven’t had the Hunter signs from her. Doesn’t that—hey, I’m not done checking you.”

Marx hooked his feet on the floor and curled up to standing. “I feel *fine* now, thank you, Darq.” He crossed the room and threw open the door to the bunkroom.

Tasanee looked up from Rake’s side. “Ready?”

“Yes.” He grabbed her and raised her over his shoulder. “As are you apparently.”

“Hey, what are you doing?” Tasanee kicked and twisted. She looked at Darq as Marx stomped past him. “What did you say?”

Darq gulped. “He asked about your fertility.”

“No, Marx!” Tasanee punched Marx’s shoulders. “We have Kennedy!”

“I want more.” The Hunter growled as they left the lab.

Tasanee sent a bolt of electricity into Marx’s shoulders. He staggered and let her go. Tasanee hit a wall. She grabbed the surface, getting her feet back on the floor and sprinted across the hall to dive into the operating room. She spotted Katarina. “Kat, help me! Help me!”

Marx lunged and caught Tasanee by her boots. “Stop this!”

Katarina ran to Tasanee’s side. “What is going on?”

Tasanee kicked at Marx’s face. “He’s trying to impregnate me with alien babies!”

“You would be a good mother!” Marx locked his claws around her legs, jerking as she did. “You fight the inevitable!”

Tasanee sparked and snapped her fingers in Marx’s face, sending him flying into the wall. “Hide me, Kat!”

Marx shook off the blow and rubbed his burnt stomach. “You cannot hide from a Hunter, but you may try.” He smirked and hooked his feet to the floor. “Please do actually. It will make this more entertaining for me.”

Tasanee threw a floating microscope at his head. “I don’t think this is funny! This is a decision we both have a say in.”

“No, actually it is not.” Marx batted the microscope away. “I am the dominant one in sex; it is my choice only. Now perhaps you might see why those acting as female opt to be dominant there?”

Tasanee paled. “Bullshit! I call *epic* bullshit!”

Marx bit at the air in her direction. “You can call it whatever you wish, but nothing changes the fact of our current situation.”

“Oh God.” Tasanee shivered. “You’re serious!”

“I am.” He nodded.

Tasanee wrapped her arms around Katarina’s waist. “Make him go away!”

Katarina tapped her headset. “Darq, do you have any birth control on board?”

“Does Tasanee need some?” Darq replied. “I should have given it to her already. Oh, I should have known. I’ll be right over.”

Marx snarled and stepped in front of the doorway out of the room. “No.”

“Yes!” Tasanee shouted, “Darq, save me!”

Marx flicked his claws out. “No, this is *my* decision, Tasanee.”

Katarina frowned. “Whoa, wait a second. Regardless of whose decision it is, do you really think it wise to get pregnant right now? Our ship is half-dead, we have crew missing, and people injured.”

Tasanee turned to Marx. “Yeah! How about that!”

Marx sighed and took a step towards her. “There is no time free of danger in a Hunter’s lifespan. We reproduce when we can.”

“Fuck *that*.” Tasanee moved an operating table between her and Marx. “You are banned from my crotch.”

Katarina backed up with Tasanee. “Why is this just a problem *now*?”

Marx stretched out his legs, ready to give chase. “Males are not fertile unless they sense their females are. I waited for a sign, but she is apparently ready to get pregnant at almost any time. Knowing this, I’m ready as well or I will be shortly.” He licked his lips. “You know you’ll enjoy yourself, Tasanee.”

She shook her head frantically. “Not when I know what you’re planning on!”

“I doubt you’ll think of that while I’m pleasuring you.” He grinned.

“This is fucking lame and not fair!” Tasanee shouted towards the hall, “Thanks a lot, *Darq!* You just screwed me over big-time!”

Marx tapped his claws along a table and looked towards the ceiling. “Perhaps we will name the eldest after him?”

Tasanee gulped. “How many do you have at a time?”

“At least two, up to five.” He eyed her figure.

Tasanee snapped with arcs of electricity. “Why isn’t Kennedy enough for you?”

Marx frowned and stopped in his tracks. “Why would you say this to me?”

“Well why *isn’t* she enough for us? You’ve had kids before, but I haven’t.” Tasanee trembled. “Dealing with an adopted daughter is stressful enough for me as it is.”

“But you have done a wonderful job.”

Tasanee made a face. “Yeah, well, you know on top of that...there’s being almost killed nearly every day by space shit.”

Darq stepped into the room with a needle in hand. “She does have a point. The stress on her body could be bad for her and any children.”

Marx thought it over and shook his head. “She is strong enough. She survived mating, she’ll survive this.”

“Marx!” Katarina stepped in front of Tasanee. “Earth women have a long history of dying not only in childbirth, but also from miscarriages!”

Darq looked thoughtful. “I wonder if it is due to your mixed heritage.”

“Doesn’t matter why.” Katarina shook her head. “This is a serious undertaking for our females!”

Marx hissed. “We have a *Rexos*.”

“And what if we get split up?” Tasanee poked her head around Katarina. “What then?”

Marx snapped his teeth. “I wouldn’t let us split.”

Darq gulped. “I’ve never actually had to work with a pregnancy before; it is a new area for me too.”

“Then *study* it.” Marx curled a lip. He reached for Tasanee. “Little rat, this backing away is doing nothing. There is only one exit in this room, and I am between you and it. I *will* collect

you. We will go to our room and—”

“So you can do me until I get knocked up!” Tasanee shouted at him.

“That is what I had in mind.” He nodded.

“And I don’t get a choice or a say *at all*?”

Marx stilled. “Well, not in it happening or not, that is completely *my* choice.”

“Then no sex! I don’t want to have any anymore.”

“Now that I know is a lie.” Marx grinned. “You enjoyed it just this morning, and, that’s not your choice either, especially when I know you don’t mean it.”

“Stop telling me what I want or don’t want!” Tasanee snapped with electricity, making the lights in the room flicker.

He raised an eyebrow at her display. “Are you saying I’m wrong?”

“No, but—”

“The ‘buts’ are really not important to the decision *I* make.”

“This relationship blows!” Tasanee stepped out from behind Katarina. “I want a divorce.”

He sighed. “You are not serious.”

“I am too! I’m not your baby bitch, Marx! So forget about it or take a hike!”

Marx went rigid and snarled. “Anytime something is not to your liking in our relationship you do this! It is not mature! I support *you*! I do not thwart *your* desires!”

“You subvert them!” She pointed at him.

He hissed. “Then learn how to do the same, but stop doing *this* to me!”

“Doing *what*?” She gestured at him.

“Trying to part us!”

“Why not? It actually works!” Tasanee wiped angry tears away from her face. “Maybe you’ll learn not to hurt me!”

Marx blurred and caught Tasanee, driving them to the floor. “Hurt you? No, I have not *hurt* you, and I won’t.” He spoke with a hiss, “It is you who injure me with your careless threats. What this shows me, what I am seeing increasingly, is that you do not understand at all the way we are bonded. Perhaps I should be lenient and understanding because of your *lack* of worldly experience, but when you use it as a weapon to wound me you *forfeit that right*!”

Tसानee stared in too much shock to move or speak.

Marx let her up. “The fact that you can speak of parting at all makes me wonder *what* you feel, because no matter what you do, I would stay with you. I would support and defend you. Yet you are willing to part over a petty disagreement.”

“Petty? *Petty!* You’re trying to—”

“Start a family with the one I love! Why is that so terrible to you?” Marx’s body heaved with barely controlled anger and grief. Tasanee’s mouth snapped shut. Marx hissed. “*Obviously* our relationship means far more to me than to you and I am *sick* with the reminders of this. I wonder why I even bother loving someone that does not feel the same.” Marx turned and stalked out of the room, brushing Darq aside.

Tसानee got to her feet and reached for him. Pain raced through her veins like acid. She sparked with electricity and staggered towards the door. “Marx!” She ran past Darq. “That’s not true, Marx! Marx, wait!” She saw him take the stairs to the lower level. Tasanee threw open the hatch in the hall and kicked down, landing in front of their room with an unsteady bounce. She blocked the doorway. “Marx.”

Marx kept his eyes on the ground and stopped in front of the door. “Let me through.”

“Marx, please...” Tasanee hesitated.

Marx lifted her off her feet and set her to the side. He stepped into the Hunters' room and sank to the floor on his hands and knees. His hair floated limply around his face like a curtain.

Tasaneë darted in before the door had a chance to close. She sat behind Marx and spoke softly, "I'm sorry, I lost my temper. I didn't mean it."

"Yes, you did."

"No." Tasaneë touched his back.

"You're too young." Marx could not bring himself to look at her. "Or I'm too old." He pressed the palms of his hands to his eyes.

Tasaneë scooted closer. "Why? What does that mean?"

"Hunters mate for life. We do not have a concept of divorce or breaking up." He sat back and rocked on his heels. "I should have never given in and mated us. That was an irresponsible idea on my part, and the only one to blame for my pain now is me."

Tasaneë gaped. "What are you saying?"

"That you should go." He gestured to the door.

"What?"

"I thought that you would become more like my kind, that you would feel that we are cleaved together, but you *don't*." He lay down on his side and stared at the walls. "I have dealt with losing a mate before, I can handle this."

"Marx, *no!*" Tasaneë stepped over him and came down in his field of vision. She got on her hands and knees. "Look at me!"

Marx kept his eyes from hers. "This is for the best."

Tasaneë pursed her lips together. "I decide what's best!" She pushed on him. "Roll over and listen to me *now*."

Marx turned with her push and went to his back. Tears that had caught on his lashes floated away at the motion. His yellow eyes fixed to the ceiling.

Tasaneë felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach. She sat on Marx's chest and buried her hands and face in his hair. "I'm sorry! Stop crying! I love you. I love you!"

Marx shifted underneath her. He threw an arm over her back and pressed her to him. "I know you do, and I love you, but that is not our problem."

"Every relationship has problems and challenges! You don't get to break up with me!"

Marx kissed her head softly. "I do not wish to, it is you who brought it up first."

"Well, I take it back." She clung on to him. "I mean it."

Marx broke into a purr and trailed kisses down her neck. "Good."

Tasaneë smiled at his purr. Her features changed, suspicious. She cupped his face. "You will answer me honestly, or I'm going to cut your cat balls off."

Marx's pupils narrowed to slits. "I always answer you honestly when you ask me a question."

"Are you doing this crying stuff so that I'll give in and let you get me pregnant out of guilt?"

Marx's brown cheeks flushed with color. "No, but that is a *good* idea. I wish I had thought of that earlier."

Tasaneë straddled him. "Too late."

Marx gripped her hips. "I still think what I said is true. You are too young for this. Commitment perhaps is beyond you."

Tasaneë grimaced. "It is not *beyond* me just because it scares me." She put her hands on his bare chest. "Look, I'm sorry my reflex is to break up with you, but I don't know how else to

handle you when you're going to do what you want and not even listen to anything else. It seems to be the only way to get you to stop and listen to *my* concerns. My feelings don't seem to matter to you at all."

"But they do, very much." His hair snaked out and brushed her cheeks. "The most important."

"Then why don't you ever *listen* to them?" She wiped her eyes. "I hate it when you act as if you know what's best for me."

"But I do."

Tasanee punched him. "Marx! I am not a kid and I want a say in this relationship! I let you take part in our work and battle decisions even though I am dominant in that area. Why can't you do the same for me?" She touched her chest.

Marx frowned. "This is true, and you're right."

"Then why do you keep disregarding what I feel?"

"You run, and when you run from me I must chase you. I do not think on discussion or feelings or thoughtfulness, I think only of running you to the ground and doing whatever I wished to begin with."

"I only run because you freak me out."

He made a face. "That is not my intent, it is my instinct."

"Marx, I don't care which thing it is." She sat up. "I just want it to stop."

"But I—"

"*No.*" Her eyes narrowed. "Concede that you're scary and hard to be around sometimes."

Marx nodded. "I have heard that before, and it is a more than fair assessment." He took in her expression. "Going forward I will restrain my initial reaction of taking what I want, will you not run then?"

"Only if you mean it." Tasanee ran her fingers through his hair. "How did your other mates handle you and your requests to get them knocked up?"

Marx grew thoughtful. "*I* was the one getting pregnant usually. I have been both mother and father, and I like babies." He smiled. "Hunter babies are the cutest by far."

Tasanee snorted and looked down at him. "You're biased, and for the record Thai babies are the cutest."

"I am biased and if you are any indication then I cannot wait for our Thai-Hunter children."

Tasanee held her stomach. "Couldn't they claw their way out of me like in *Aliens*?"

Marx cocked his head. "No...claws and teeth do not strengthen to that point until they are one-month-olds, but their hair and tail are fully functional at birth."

"Tails?" Tasanee gaped. "*You* don't have a tail."

He half smiled. "Removed per Ampyr regulation."

Tasanee slid her hand around him and grabbed his butt. "Hunters seriously have tails? Are you joking with me?"

"No." Marx nuzzled her neck. "Are you relenting to *me*?"

"Uhm." Tasanee went red in the face. "Marx, I expect that we talk about these things before running and doing them."

"I am not running and we are talking right now." Marx rubbed her lower back. "I want children, while you hesitate. Tell me why so that I may understand."

"I want more time with you." Tasanee sank down to him. "Just us, together, doing things, getting to enjoy each other when the threat of death isn't everywhere. Kids take time away."

"They grow up fast. Hunters are independent." Marx kissed her neck. "We will have

plenty of time together.”

She eyed him critically. “You’re *old*. How much time could we have?”

“Hunters have no definite lifespan and with a Rexos it does not matter. We have a very long life before us.”

“Still, you’ll just want more and I don’t want to be a never-ending baby-making machine. Plus, I’ll have to go without sex for a while, you too.”

“Why?” Marx smiled. “Is it taboo in your culture?”

Tasanee made gagging sounds. “Don’t tell me you have a pregnant woman fetish?”

“A fetish?” He raised an eyebrow. “No, I do not think so.”

“Then you’ll probably think I’m yuck for a while.” At his blank expression, she smiled.

“You do realize humans are pregnant for nine months, right?”

“Nine mo...” Marx froze. “*What?*”

“Yeah.” Tasanee laughed. “Like almost a full year.”

Marx eyed her. “You are lying.” He inhaled. “No, you’re not. This is...that is *ridiculous*.”

Tasanee kept the sarcasm out of her voice. “Good reason we’re having this talk. Seems you don’t know everything.”

Marx flipped her to her back and touched her stomach. “Why does it take so long?”

“I don’t know. I’m a mechanic, not a doctor.”

Marx hooked his arm around her waist and stood with her in his grip. “We’re seeing Darq about this right now.”

“What is *he* going to do?”

“Verify that after your adaptations you still have that absurdly long incubation time.” Marx walked out of the room. He shook his head and pushed up the hatch to let them into the upper level. “If Hunters were pregnant for that long, we would all have died.”

Tasanee frowned. “How long do you take?”

“A month at most, it depends on our environmental conditions.” He climbed up into the upper level. “If in danger it happens sooner.” He locked his feet to the floor.

“God, no wonder you’re prolific.”

Marx grinned. “We also do not get big like you Adapters. I saw women on your planet, very large and slow. Among my kind they would have been taken down and eaten quickly.”

She gagged. “*Gross*, Marx.”

He flashed his fangs in a smile and looked up and down the hall. “Where is everyone?”

Mica’s voice floated up from the cockpit, “Down in here! Got a message you should hear.”

Marx all but ran to the cockpit. “I do not think you will get large and fat like your Adapters.”

“Woo-hoo...” Tasanee bounced in his arms as he dashed down the stairs.

Katarina glanced at the pair as they entered the cockpit. “Are you guys okay?”

Tasanee shrugged as Marx set her down. “I think so...”

Darq blushed when he saw Tasanee. “I am sorry.”

She waved him aside. “Don’t worry about it.”

Marx gave Tasanee a gentle shove in Darq’s direction. “I want to know why it takes her kind so long to produce offspring.”

“Okay.” Darq pressed his fingers against Tasanee’s neck and stomach; he closed his eyes and concentrated.

Katarina gestured to Mica. “Play it while Darq works.” She looked back at Marx and Tasanee. “We got this over the comm.”

An Ampyr bulletin poured through the speakers. "At dawn today, First Planet time, the Resistance general known as Lord Vader was apprehended by the warship *Pyrtos*. If the remaining crew of the *Millennium Falcon* meets the warship and surrenders within two Imperial days, then their own death sentences, as well as those of their crew members, Wedge and General Vader, will be commuted to sentences of hard labor."

The message switched to video, showing one of Oro's home movies. "Lord Vader and his crew, the *Rogue Squadron*, became notorious when—"

Mica turned the volume down. He made a face and his plants rustled. "That's my fault. Sorry, Oro."

Katarina watched the tape play. "He probably fucking broadcast it himself on accident."

Mica shook his head. "It was still *my* idea."

Marx burst out laughing, startling the others. He cocked his head and watched the screen. "Kennedy, Lincoln, and Czar have not been captured, and Danny and Oro are alive. This is *very* good news for us."

"Except *we* are dead in the water." Katarina stared at the monitor. "Even if we wanted to meet them and hand ourselves over; we're down a pilot and a Navigator."

"Ravil is not dead." Marx memorized the rendezvous space station code as it flashed on the screen. "Otherwise, Rake would have disappeared."

Katarina shook her head. "That's assuming he's her Navigator."

"Of course he is." Marx smiled.

Katarina looked at him. "But you sided against that idea just a while ago."

"Tasanee sided against it and so I did too. I do not think he can actually move our ship, but he has the traits, or at least sensitivity to her presence." Marx smiled at Katarina's glare. "*Never* doubt a Rexos on matters of the body and flesh; they know it better than everyone."

"Speaking of which." Darq frowned and wiped his bloody hands on his jumpsuit. "She's changed."

Marx grinned and lifted Tasanee off her feet. "Excellent."

Darq held up his hand. "But so have you it seems, Marx."

Marx's smile faded. "What do you mean?"

"You've both kind of shifted towards the middle...towards each other."

Tasanee dug her fingers into Marx's shoulder. "What does *that* mean?"

Darq smiled faintly. "You will be pregnant for less time than an Adapter. Your body will handle a pregnancy like a Hunter."

Tasanee grinned. "No fatness or barfing?"

"No, it won't really be noticeable...in fact, it would be easy of you to not notice it at all..."

She sighed. "Neat."

Marx nodded. "And for me?"

Darq flushed. "You don't go in to cycles of fertility anymore, because your mate does not. You're uhm, you've both been able to have children together since pretty much the get go. Since you mated I mean."

Tasanee's face drained of color. "How do you know that? You didn't touch *him*." Darq took a step back under gaze. Tasanee flinched. "That means. Oh my God *no!*"

Darq hopped to Katarina's side. "Congratulations?"

Tasanee charged a bolt of lightning to throw at his face. "You're lying! I haven't felt sick or anything."

"I'm not lying I swear!" He held his hands up. "And you wouldn't feel sick...Hunters

don't get those kinds of symptoms."

"I'm *not* pregnant!"

Marx shivered, ecstatic. "Females only get stronger, heartier, and far more violent as they go."

"This is so not true!" Tasanee looked at everyone. "I demand a retest!"

Katarina stepped in front of Darq. "Rat, when was the last time you had your period?"

Tasanee searched her memory. "Before Marx and I..." she looked nauseous. "Fucking hell."

Darq did not emerge from behind Katarina. "That works out right for my timeframe."

Tasanee looked to Marx. "Fuck..."

He dipped her and kissed her on the lips. "How many Darq?"

"Two at least."

"At least?" Tasanee looked ready to puke.

Marx purred. "How soon?"

"Weeks."

Tasanee burst into tears, punched Marx in the stomach, and ran from the cockpit.

Marx dropped to all fours and bounded after her. "Happy tears or sad tears?"

Tasanee sprinted towards their room. "I don't know!"

The lights on the ship switched to red. Sammy blasted the alarm. "Sorry to break this happy moment apart, but we have company!"

Mica swiveled in the pilot's chair and strapped in. "Ships on the inbound?"

"Worse." Sammy changed their view on the monitors. "The blob is back."

Katarina strapped Darq to a chair. "Darq, I'm going to grab Rake! You wait here."

Sammy blasted the engines, putting them on full reverse. "I don't think we can evade it, Kat!"

"Then everyone brace for impact." Katarina climbed down the hall, desperate to secure Rake. Their ship rocked to the side as if hit with a wave. The ship tipped over and Katarina ran along the ceiling.

In their room, Marx hovered over Tasanee protectively. Tasanee touched her stomach with one hand, her other arm was around Marx's shoulders. She cried into his neck. "Not angry tears, Marx, *terrified* ones."

Marx smiled and scooped her up. "You have nothing to be afraid of."

"Nothing but the giant black hole off our port side?"

Marx kissed her, releasing pheromones to calm her. "I love you, and that is all you need to think of."

In the cockpit, Mica maneuvered the ship feverously as chunks of debris flew in their direction. He crossed himself and took control of their cannons, blasting anything he couldn't evade.

Darq detached from his chair to go after Katarina. He made it up the stairs and into the upper hall when Sammy's portable medical robot hit him in the chest, pushing him back. Her voice was tinny, "Kat said no, Darq. Get back in your seat and be a good boy."

Darq tucked Sammy under his arm. "I am *not* a boy!"

Sammy pinched at him with her eight arms. "Hey! You can't carry me like this! I'm like technically your other mom! So listen to me too!"

Katarina lifted Rake off the bed in the med lab and cradled him in her arms. “All right, flyboy, are you seriously going to let Mica pilot your ship? Han never let Luke do that. Please wake up!”

Darq pulled himself through the door. “Mom! I should be doing this!” He took Rake from her arms and slid to the side as the ship jerked. Sammy hit him in the back, pushing him upright.

Katarina grabbed Darq’s arm to steady him. She braced herself against the bunks. “We need to wake him up. If he can call Ravil back, we can get the fuck out of this!”

Darq nodded. “It’ll take me a minute. I have to get the drugs out of his system.”

Katarina squeezed his arm. “Darq, we don’t have a minute! We need it now!”

“I can’t go any faster!”

Katarina winced as the ship rocked. The hull buckled and groaned. She swore. “We’re out of time! You *can* do this!” Her hands flashed with light, illuminating where she touched Darq.

Darq shivered as his body glowed from within. He gazed up at Katarina in shock as the light faded from his features. “What did you do?”

Rake’s eyes opened. “Ravil?”

“Rake!” Katarina smiled.

“Hey!” Rake slapped Darq across the face. “I told you not to touch me!”

Darq twitched and fangs shot out of his gums. “And I said never to hit me!”

Darkness engulfed their ship.

Warm darkness shifted to gray. Voices carried on the air, scratchy as if a conversation played over a bad set of speakers. Men and women chatted at a dinner party. The clink of glasses and silverware accompanied their laughter. There was heat and the smell of perfume and grass.

Ravil woke from her dream to a tiny, dark, windowless room. She bolted upright and fell from the small wall bunk she’d slept on. Ravil winced and pushed to get up from the floor. She had weight again. She frowned. “Gravity?”

Ravil rubbed her eyes and turned in a circle. “Hello?” She looked to the unmarked ceiling. “Is anyone around? Hello! Hey!”

There was an exit imbedded in the wall. She ran over and pounded on the door. She put her ear to it, but could hear nothing beyond the space. Ravil turned back to the room, looking for cameras, a hatch, anything. She frowned. She found something about this place vaguely familiar, like she’d been here before.

Ravil walked the perimeter of the tiny room; she ran her hands across the walls. She closed her eyes and sensed for Rake. He was close, but his location was unobtainable, in flux. She concentrated and focused on jumping, but nothing happened. Her abilities were gone; she thought of codes, locations, but the information was missing, it was as if she never had the talent at all. Even her sense of Rake’s presence faded as she focused on it.

Ravil pounded her hands against the door. “What the fuck is going on? Someone answer me!”

“I’ve reserved us a separate space and now we’re playing and *experimenting!*”

Ravil whirled around to see a little girl sitting on her bunk. The child was dressed in an iridescent green uniform with her long white hair bound in a tight braid. She looked younger than Ravil, stuck in an earlier stage, but she could have been any actual age.

The girl smiled and her cherry red eyes glittered in the light. “Hi. I have a body here! Do

you see me?"

Ravil slumped against the wall, her mouth agape. She pointed. "Your *face*."

The girl frowned and clicked her heels together. "Am I still unrecognizable? I need to adjust the settings. I thought I'd created a separate loop, but maybe it's not closed all the way." She closed her eyes and chewed on her lip. "No everything seems to be fine. Please try again."

Ravil sank to the ground and hugged her sides. An ache grew in her chest. "I *recognize* you."

"See!" The girl hopped down to the floor. "Good! Tangible progress!"

"But I don't *know* you."

The girl pointed her finger in the air. "And I am here to figure out why...with *science!*"

Ravil rubbed her temples. "What do you mean?"

The girl frowned. "Something's wrong with your head and your memories."

"Oh..." Ravil searched her memories, unsure. "And your name?"

"Ipsa. Don't worry about it for now though." Ipsa knelt in front of Ravil. "You don't need to be afraid, Ravil."

Ravil burst into tears of frustration. "But I...I..."

Ipsa petted Ravil's hair. "It's okay. Everything will be corrected soon enough."

Ravil shook her head. "It's...I *recognize* you...I feel..." she touched her chest. "But I don't know. What's going on?" Ravil looked around. "Where are we?"

"We're playing!" Ipsa smiled. "Well, *you* are so that I can figure out what's wrong with you. *I'm* working."

Ravil held out her hands to Ipsa. "Why are my talents gone?"

"Necessity on my part. I don't *want* you to be a prisoner, but you have to stay put. So, I looked through all that you know now and I selected a good, lengthy memory." Ipsa touched Ravil's hair. "You like this memory, so I chose it for you, you'll like this."

Ravil looked around. "How long have you been here?"

"In your engine? A long time since I woke up." Ipsa tapped her fingers in the air, touching bits of light. "But I don't really know."

Ravil eyed her strange hand gestures. "How did you get here? What are you doing?"

"I got lost, confused, something went wrong and I couldn't find home. I have lost much time I think, like you, but for a different reason." Ipsa closed her eyes. "But I feel safe here, Ravil, in your creation and this funny memory. I'm missing some things though. That is concerning to me."

Ravil laughed at Ipsa's strange way of speaking. "This is not a memory of mine. I've *never* been here."

Ipsa smiled with her. "Is too a memory!" She grabbed Ravil's hand and placed it on Ravil's hair. "See! Remember that?"

Ravil's hair was wound up tight against her ears. She reached up and touched the other side, finding a matching bun. She looked down at her amorphous white dress, and then back up to Ipsa. "This *really* isn't a memory, Ipsa."

Ipsa shook her head. "But it's in your head."

"Yes, but it's a *movie*."

"What's that?" Ipsa wrinkled her nose.

"A moving picture, a play, theater, its *fiction*, make-believe."

"Yes, make-believe!" Ipsa grinned. "Remember when you used to do that at home? Always running around the halls with the others, knocking into people! Remember! Nursery!"

Ravil gripped Ipso's shoulders. "No, Ipso, I don't. I—I grew up on a seed planet, in the dormitories. You're getting me confused with someone else I think."

Ipso touched her pink lips. "Oh, no, I don't think so." She shook her head. "All the more reason to find the source of your memory problem! Maybe ours are related?"

"But I have to go!"

Ipso frowned and jumped to the door. "No!" She stomped a small foot. "You're not well and I'm not letting you go without some proper treatment. It's my duty. So please, have some fun while this lasts. The Science ring is on the case!"

"What does that even mean?" Ravil got up. "Wait!"

Ipso grinned. "You'll have a great time, you'll see! You deserve fun, I saw! You won't want to leave, I swear!" She vanished, leaving Ravil alone in the little gray room.

Ravil sat on her bunk and stared at the door. She tried pulling her white hair out of the buns, but they were stuck fast, same with the dress. Ravil groaned and flopped back on the bed to wait for her rescuers she assumed. She threw an arm over her face.

Was Ipso insane or was she? Ravil sighed. Rake had been right. She should have never jumped into the black hole.

Ravil closed her eyes. "Fuck."

Kennedy woke up in a warm embrace of floating flesh and undulating hair. She opened one yellow eye to caramel skin, blue spots, and copper-colored hair. She inhaled and smelled everything Lincoln. He had his arms and legs around her, holding on to her gently, his body between hers and the door, protecting her even as he slept.

Someone walked by outside the room and Lincoln's ears twitched, tracking the sound. Kennedy tried not to breathe, to move. She did not wish to wake him; she wanted this to continue. He'd only held her like this once that she could remember...after they'd had sex for the first time.

Kennedy smiled and closed her eyes. She tried to fall back into sleep. Her hair rippled, happy and content; it twisted into braids and lightly brushed across Lincoln's face.

Lincoln broke out in a deep purr. He opened his mouth and caught at her hair with his tongue. He kissed a twisting lock and groomed the strand out to its end.

Kennedy squeaked in surprise.

Lincoln's lips quirked into a smile, and he let her hair go. He shifted, curling a hand up through her hair. He yawned, his white fangs bright in the dim light of the room. He opened his eyes and gazed at Kennedy. "I know you're awake."

Kennedy twitched in his grip. One eye slid open and she looked up. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I...I don't know, but I am! What...what happened?"

Lincoln smiled and disentangled their limbs. "You slept well, passed out after eating. I had to groom you to get all the gore off, but I don't mind that."

Kennedy blushed. He'd never done that before, and she did not know what to say. Kennedy pointed to his bare chest. "Your blue is back."

Lincoln sat up and examined his upper thighs and abdomen. He smiled. "Good, I never liked orange."

"But it is your disguise! You smell as Lincoln again."

Lincoln shrugged and pulled up his jumpsuit to cover the spots. "Down here it doesn't matter." He ran his talons against his scalp, shaking out his hair. "No one here cares." Lincoln

flicked his wrist to her neck, tightening her collar to hide her black spots. “If anyone asks, you’re blue as well, indigo, something *dark*.”

“What are we supposed to be?”

“Cousins.” Lincoln cracked his back and dislocated his hips and shoulders, stretching them out before adjusting them to walk upright. “We smell similar, but we will fool no Hunters.”

Kennedy nodded. She turned to find the floating and mostly consumed corpses of the two Hunters from the night before. “Breakfast?”

Lincoln wrinkled his nose and turned to the door. “I’d rather have something fresh.”

Kennedy darted to his side, worried. “Are you fighting now already?”

He took her hand. “No, too early. We need to do recon.”

“What for?”

“Quick escape. If the Ampyr bartender is right, we only have a few ways of leaving Cagetown. The vent we found being one, but I would like more than one option.”

Kennedy nodded. “We go out then?”

Lincoln unlocked the door and gave her the key. “If we are parted for any reason, come back here and lock yourself in.”

The pair stepped into the hall and stopped short. The Jungay, Waitrey, had her nose up against the opposite wall, her eyes staring sightlessly. She made no move to indicate she saw or heard them.

Kennedy leaned towards her.

Lincoln took Kennedy by the hand and pulled her down the stairs.

Kennedy followed obediently. She whispered, “What was she doing?”

“It does not matter, Jungay are insane.” Lincoln headed for the back door. “That one has power and the more power Jungay have, the worse off they get in the head. It was probably why she was thrown down here in the first place.” Lincoln shoved open the back door. “I’m surprised she wasn’t executed. She’s a huge security risk for the Ampyr.”

“Oh.” Kennedy expected dim light when they stepped out into the street, but the overhead lamps were on, casting everything in white light. She shielded her eyes and hissed. “Why this bright!”

Lincoln bent his head against the lamps. “To keep the Hunters from roaming night and day in Cagetown.” Lincoln snarled. “No doubt a design for the Ampyr that live here.”

Waitrey shoved off the roof and landed at their side, cackling as her boots locked in place. She handed them sunglasses and boots like hers. The Jungay took off and ran towards the most barren part of town, unheeding danger.

Lincoln tied his sunglasses on to keep them from floating away and watched her go. “*Very* insane.”

Kennedy stepped into the boots and grinned as they lit up. “That was nice of her! Look at my boots! I walk good now!”

“Jungay are *not* nice, Kennedy. No doubt she finds some amusement in us wandering around, and perhaps she is bored.” Lincoln left the boots alone. “She’ll probably be watching from afar.”

“Oh.” Kennedy hopped around, enjoying the boots as they activated to force her back down to the deck. “Which way first?”

Lincoln sniffed the air and turned right, going the opposite direction from the way they had entered Cagetown the night before. “The newest arrival since ours is this way.”

Kennedy followed and sniffed the air. She caught the scent, a mixture of the sterile smell of

the above-level ship and soap. She turned to Lincoln for the classification. “Ampyr?”

“An Ampyr, male.” Lincoln turned at an unmarked spot between buildings and cast his gaze down an alley covered with sheet metal. A dozen pairs of yellow eyes looked up from the darkness. Lincoln stepped between Kennedy and the gap. He inhaled and frowned. “Dead already, not an officer then. Couldn’t even command cubs.”

Kennedy squinted, barely making out the features of a gang of Hunter children, their faces painted in gore. Pieces of Ampyr floated around them. She glanced up at Lincoln. “I thought children didn’t last long here.”

“They’ve made their own pack.” He turned from them and kept walking. “But that one had to come in here from somewhere, and it wasn’t the main gate.”

Kennedy hurried to catch up with him. “Why?”

Lincoln bumped Kennedy onto a roof and climbed up after her, his talons puncturing holes to stay stable. “It’s against Ampyr law to let an Ampyr be killed by another race.”

“But it happens all the time! I saw it!” Kennedy skipped across the metal with heavy clunks. Her ponytail waved in the gravity-less place.

“Of course it *happens*, but no one gets to break that law by dragging a kicking and screaming soldier down the main gate and dumping them into Cagetown.” He jerked his head towards the ventilation shafts that rose into the ceilings. “That’s why they have murder vents to do it discreetly.”

“Hey, look up there!”

Lincoln and Kennedy’s heads swiveled in unison, tracking the sound. An Ampyr officer pointed at them from the street. He staggered around drunk and called to his friends, “Hey look you guys! Hunters with glasses on!”

Lincoln cracked his knuckles. “Still hungry?”

Kennedy nodded.

Two Ampyr soldiers of the same rank stumbled out after the first. The smell of smoke and booze filled the air around them. One dropped his bottle and it hung in the air behind him. They smiled at Lincoln and then saw Kennedy. The first whistled. “She for sale?”

Lincoln slid to the edge of the building. He smiled. “What do you want to buy her for?”

The second man snorted. “Not to eat her!”

The third soldier had his eyes glued to Kennedy. “Why’s she wearing that body suit?” He kissed his lips at her. “There’re no soldiers down *here*, baby! You can walk around naked and free!”

The first laughed. “Is she new?” He grinned at Lincoln. “I love the new ones. How much?”

“Not selling.” Lincoln unhinged his heel hooks. He watched them steady themselves; all three were barely competent at moving in freefall.

The man frowned. “We don’t need to use money. We’re being polite businessmen, *Hunter*.”

The second touched the ranking bars along his collar. “We’re officers, and we can order you to do whatever we want.”

Lincoln pounced on the head of the first soldier and twisted it off. He lashed out with his foot, crushing the windpipe of the second officer. Lincoln stomped on the face of the remaining man. He stood up. “Order me *now*.”

Kennedy looked over the edge of the roof. “Are we eating them?”

Lincoln smiled. He pushed a body up to Kennedy. “Yes.”

She caught the floating corpse. “But he’s an officer, won’t they know?”

Lincoln climbed up the side of the building. He took the man from her, ripped off the officer bars from his collar, and flicked them into the air. He stripped the corpse of clothes and handed the naked body back to Kennedy. “How is anyone going to know now?”

Below them, Hunters slinked out of the alleyways, seeking out the meat by scent alone, their eyes shut tight against the light. Hissing and yowling hailed the fights; blood and hair floated to Kennedy and Lincoln’s level.

Lincoln gnawed on an arm. “Now they’re casualties of their unclean ways, and we are simply maintaining the purity of the Ampyr bloodline.”

Kennedy started in on the left foot. “They do not taste dirty.”

Lincoln looked over at her and caught her smile. He threw a dismembered hand at her face and grinned. Kennedy lobbed blood in his direction and laughed when it streaked his hair red. Lincoln sucked on the saturated ends of his hair. “Eat quickly; I want to find the other entrance.”

Kennedy nodded. “Are you fighting again tonight?”

Lincoln surveyed the town from their spot. “I must, but it will be more of the same I am sure. Drunks and fools.” Lincoln gestured to their surroundings. “Look how far back we are from the entrance. Only the foolish, the unlucky, or the suicidal like those snacks below get this far, or they’re locals like the Hunter pair from last night. Everyone else goes to the arena for their entertainment.”

Kennedy looked at the far distant fighting ring. Fire burst through the air above the Cage arena. The crack of electricity followed.

Lincoln turned from it. “The Jungay is a fluke. We will see nothing in the ring besides Hunters and Ampyr.”

“You’re sure? How can you know?”

Lincoln watched her. “Are you worried about me?”

Kennedy nodded. “I always do when you are in danger.”

“I will warn you before I fall. You will have time to run I promise.”

“Not that.” Kennedy scooted towards him nervously. “I care about—”

“Come on.” Lincoln took her hand and dove from the roof. “Time to get moving.”

“But—”

“Don’t waste your energy talking.” He tapped her nose. “Put that to use. Find us our escape route.”

Evgeniy stood inside a supply closet just behind the door. He was in full Ampyr uniform including the opaque helmet that covered his non-Ampyr features. He remained perfectly still, patient and waiting. He’d been ready for what he guessed to be an hour.

The click of boots heralded an Ampyr squad drawing near in the hallway outside. Based on the timing, this arriving group was the squad Evgeniy had been monitoring since he’d left the Wasp. The commanding officer issued verbal commands in what Evgeniy had found to be rote practice, reaffirming the direct control the Ampyr exercised over each other. Though strong enough to affect the foot soldiers, the Ampyr control talent had no effect on him.

He listened to them go by, counting the number of soldiers. Each Ampyr patrol squad was comprised of twenty individuals. The twentieth went by. Evgeniy slipped silently out of the room, caught the last soldier by his neck, and dragged him back into the closet.

Evgeniy broke his neck with a twist. He stole the identification tag from the man’s uniform and affixed it to his. He shoved the soldier into a vent in the wall.

Evgeniy walked out of the room and joined the back of the line, looking the same as them in his head to toe gear. The soldier he replaced was similar enough in build that he could pass for him at a glance. The soldiers turned a corner and arrived at the mess hall. Evgeniy followed them as they filled a table of twenty by order of rank. He took the last spot at the table and sat exactly as they did.

Evgeniy focused and blanketed the room with his adapted Blackout talent. The Ampyr moved with natural speed and grace that made all other species look clumsy in comparison, him included. He drained the abilities and energy from everyone around him. Evgeniy had practiced control while he'd hidden in the Wasp. He had taken it from a blunt instrument to a razor. The room of Ampyr gradually slowed until their blurring speed notched down closer to what he would consider quick.

He smiled as he noticed them look between each other covertly, but no one mentioned it. No one wanted to be the first to admit they were feeling a bit slower than normal. Evgeniy grinned behind his mask.

The commanding officer touched his helmet and signaled for attention. He slipped out a radio from his pocket and turned it on. Evgeniy frowned and looked at the others, wondering why they didn't just use their headsets, but since they paid attention to the radio, he did too. They listened to a broadcast message: "Power outage on levels twenty A and B, portside. Need squad to report, evaluate, and summarize extent of possible damage."

Evgeniy frowned as the rest of the message played; he knew what that area was. He looked to the commanding officer, but their squad was not the one called upon to search. For anything else he would have stayed. Evgeniy adjusted his things. Time to test theory number two.

Evgeniy got out of his seat and left the room. He walked down the empty hallway towards the elevator.

The commanding officer of his squad darted to his side. The man pointed back down the hall. "*Return to the room.*"

Evgeniy punched the man in the chin, knocking him unconscious. He took the officer's bars from the man's collar and switched them with his own. Evgeniy took the officer's gun and added it to his belt. He pushed the unconscious Ampyr out of the main thoroughfare and shoved him into another ventilation shaft. If he were lucky, the officer would be out for hours.

He oriented himself and headed to the elevator. He flashed his ID in the elevator scanner to get the door to open. He stepped inside and pressed the button to take him to level twenty.

Evgeniy checked his guns, then his breath. The elevator opened and he stepped out onto level twenty: botanical labs and greenhouses. The power was off, no soldiers in sight yet. Plants were strewn around the air, free floating, some broken, others uprooted. Evgeniy cleared his throat and tapped the speaker at his neck. "Emmalethe, your Russian misses you."

Lloyd sat up against the metal siding of Danny's bed and watched Oro sleep. He was supposed to be on watch, but instead he focused on Oro with tunnel vision, a skill developed from living nearly alone his entire life...not that he needed that much skill for this. His cellmates were incredibly slow moving.

He tracked everything Oro did, noticing that on every third breath Oro snored lightly, and on the fourth, he took a deeper breath.

Oro shifted in his bunk, rolling from his back to his side. Lloyd watched Oro's braid briefly float before sinking down. He resisted the urge to grab it and tuck it back into place. His eyes wandered up and down Oro's body searching for another distraction.

Oro had wrinkled his shirt in all his tossing and turning. Had that been his shirt, Lloyd would have picked and fussed with it until it was perfect, but Oro was definitely nothing like him. Lloyd wondered if that was why he had this compulsion to watch him.

Oro's eyes moved behind his eyelids and Lloyd's darted along with them, following his every twitch. He wanted to force Oro to lie still. Why did he move this much? Surely, he himself did not move that much in sleep.

Oro's loose braid slid around his head as Oro tossed and turned, taunting Lloyd with its non-conformity until he could no longer stand it.

Lloyd blurred, appearing at Oro's side. He took hold of the braid and held it still. He glared at the glossy black hair, annoyed at how nice it felt and how well it suited Oro. Lloyd gripped it closer to Oro's head and ran his fingers along the braid, keeping Oro from feeling a tug or pull. Lloyd leaned over Oro and sniffed his hair. The smell drew him in and he inhaled.

Lloyd closed his eyes and rocked on his heels. The need inside was growing, thickening in his blood. When he had spoken earlier to the officers, he had not been lying. He had no control over himself anymore. His whims and wishes were corrupted. He opened his eyes and gazed at Oro; this was what he had become...some strange freak.

Lloyd tucked Oro's hair under a blanket to keep it in place. His eyes traced over Oro's features; his dark skin a striking contrast to Lloyd's milky white. He stopped at Oro's lips; he remembered what they felt like against his. Lloyd couldn't help but remember how much he'd enjoyed the kiss, and how ill that knowledge had made him afterwards.

He was sure this malady was Oro's doing. Logically, it made sense. Lloyd had never felt like this until meeting Oro, and he felt like this for no one besides Oro. Therefore, this *had* to be Oro's fault. If Oro were gone, Lloyd would surely be fine.

Lloyd held on to Oro's bed frame, his fingers deforming the metal. He ran a finger along the pillow beneath Oro's head; he could smother him quickly and be back to his spot against the wall before anyone noticed. Danny wouldn't be able to stop him. Oro wouldn't even wake up first. Oro would be dead and then he would be free.

Lloyd pictured Oro motionless and cold. His heart seized. Lloyd's cheeks burned and he tore his hand back. How could he even contemplate this? He was not a violent person. He deplored violence, but the thought would not leave him. This action would make his problem go away.

Lloyd's gaze drifted down to Oro's face, calm in sleep. Lloyd recalled his grandparents' words, reminding him of his duty to help others, to lead by example. Killing Oro was not a solution. This was *his* problem.

Lloyd could overcome this, and if he could conquer it, he could cure Oro too. Then they could be friends. Oro, of course, would be grateful to him and their issues in the past would be forgotten. He imagined they might get along quite well if the poison they both possessed were not present. In fact, he was *positive* they would get along very well once they were cured. He smiled slightly at the thought.

Lloyd retook his spot on the bed near Danny, thinking on the issue, knowing it was the best thing for the both of them, but also for everyone else. Surely, the rest of the crew on that medical ship would be happy for such a change. He couldn't imagine they liked Oro as he was. Danny said they accepted him, but years of tolerating a problem didn't mean they liked it.

Danny shifted in his bunk, interrupting Lloyd's thoughts. The older man stretched and sat up. "My turn for watch, go to sleep." Danny patted his bunk and scooted over, giving Lloyd room to lie down.

Lloyd ducked his head. “Thank you.” He lay down and turned towards the wall. He covered his head with Danny’s blankets and ignored Oro’s third breath snore.

Danny watched Lloyd. He’d been awake long enough to notice Lloyd examining Oro. The kid’s demeanor troubled him. Lloyd was either going to love Oro or kill him, and by the way Lloyd had looked at Oro, it would be both.

Danny folded his arms, kicked his feet up on Oro’s bunk, and shook his head. As if they didn’t have enough problems already.

Rake stared at his hands.

He’d been about to punch Darq in the face, but Darq and Katarina were gone. He sat on something hard and his clothes were different. There was no crusted blood on his face. The klaxons were gone, replaced by music, talking, glasses clinking, and shouts. The music he recognized instantly. “Sammy? Sammy, why are you playing the Cantina...”

Rake blinked sleep away from his eyes and frowned as the scene came in to focus. He stared at the familiar bar and alien patrons. His brows furrowed. He looked to his right, to his left, then down at his chest. He pulled at the brown vest he had on and let it drop. Rake found a blaster in the holster he wore. “What the fuck?”

The table rocked. “*Shit!* Watch where you’re going!”

Rake looked up and did a double take. “Kat?”

Katarina looked down and gaped. “Rake! Thank God someone else is in this.” She pulled him out of his seat, hugged him, and let him drop back down. “I thought I was dreaming!”

“Kat, you look, uhm, *different.*” Rake leaned back to take her in. Her blonde dreadlocks were brown, her skin was nearly as dark as his was, and her nose and lips were tinted black. She wore a silver bandolier across her chest and was otherwise only wearing a skintight latex bodysuit in burnt sienna.

Rake whistled. “Hello, Chewie-hotness! Nice makeover.”

“Speak for yourself.” She gave him a once over. “You got a bit...lighter.”

Rake made a face and touched his hair that had turned from black to brown. “Someone’s a stickler for details...well some details anyways.” He searched for something reflective to look at himself. “Ha, still a green-eyed sexy beast. I can deal with brown hair in a *Han* cut.”

“Rake, you’re really real right?” She took a seat in the chair next to him and looked around the bar. “This isn’t just my dream? I didn’t get knocked on the head by Darq?”

Rake poked her shoulder. “*Our* dream, more like it. We’re in the *cantina*, Kat.”

“I know.” She broke into a grin. “I—”

“Kat!” Rake shook her. “We’re in *the* cantina.”

“I know, Rake!”

The pair grinned at each other. They screamed at the same time, “We’re in *Star Wars!*” The aliens around them gave them funny looks and the pair closed their mouths.

Rake whispered, “What the *hell* is going on?”

Katarina leaned in. “Our ship had come under attack right at the time you woke up.”

He nodded along with her. “By what?”

“That black hole.”

“And then?”

“Then *this.*” Katarina fiddled with her bandolier. “Mica was piloting. Maybe he got us all killed and we’re in our afterlife.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m going somewhere hotter than this.” Rake pulled out his gun and held it

up. “Besides, why would I have a blaster in Heaven? I wonder if it works. It looks *exactly* the same. This is *Han’s* blaster!”

She elbowed him and smiled. “I think you’ll get to test it real soon.”

Rake looked around. “So we’re definitely in *that* scene?”

“Yeah.” She gestured towards the bar. “I already saw Alec Guinness.”

Rake grinned. “I’m going to steal his lightsaber.”

“Obi-Wan’s?” She grabbed his arm. “He’ll kick your *ass*.”

“No way, *Luke’s*. They should be here any second, right? Did you lead them over?”

“I—” Kat touched her forehead. “I think I was leading them...I just popped into reality. What about you?”

“I woke up right here.” Rake rapped his knuckles on the table. “This feels real to me, Kat, and I’ve been high plenty of times to know the difference.”

“I don’t think it is a hallucination either.” Katarina tied back her dreadlocks. “But what else could it be? I wouldn’t put it past Sammy to take advantage of us if we were all high from some gas leak. She probably could be playing the movies over the speakers right now.”

Two shadows blocked the light. Rake tackled the one on the right, driving him to the floor. He grabbed for the man’s belt. “Gimme your lightsaber, farm bitch!”

Mica kned Rake in the stomach. “Stop it, *Rake!*”

Rake recognized his British accent. “Mica?”

Mica shoved Rake off him. “Yeah.” He caught sight of Katarina. “You too? Where are the others?”

An older man helped Mica up. “Do you know these men, Luke?”

Rake laughed and stood up. He pointed at an older gentleman. “Kat! It’s *Alec Guinness!*”

Mica coughed and answered the man, “Yeah, uh, you know I went to town ever so often and met these guys once or twice, right, Han? We go way back.”

“Oh yeah, Luke, totally.” Rake grinned and jumped straight into his lines. “*I’m Han Solo.*” He gestured for Alec Guinness to take a seat at their table. “*I’m captain of the Millennium Falcon. Chewie here tells me you’re looking for passage to the Alderaan system.*”

Alec Guinness replied on cue, “*Yes indeed, if it’s a fast ship.*”

“*Fast ship?*” Rake grinned. “*You’ve never heard of the Millennium Falcon?*”

“*Should I have?*”

“*It’s the—*”

Katarina slapped her hand over Rake’s mouth and held him in place. “It’s fast, we don’t ask questions, and we’ll avoid Imperial entanglements. Deal?” Rake struggled, but she kept him down easily. “Sound good?”

Rake bit her hand. She let him go and he glared at her. “That was one of Han’s *classics*, you line stealing *bitch!*”

Katarina re-muffled Rake and looked to Mica. “*Ten thousand all in advance.*”

Mica sat there and silence descended. Katarina kicked him in the leg. Mica jumped in his seat. “What? Oh.” He cleared his throat. “*Ten thousand? We could almost buy our own ship for that!*”

Rake got free and blurted, “*But who’s going to fly it, kid? You?*”

Mica grinned and got in Rake’s face to say his lines, “*You bet I could. I’m not such a bad pilot myself. We don’t have to sit here and listen to this.*”

Katarina shoved Rake’s face into the table. “Stop it!”

Mica tried not to laugh and turned to Alec. “*We don’t have to sit here and listen to this.*”

Katarina gave Rake another thump on the head. “How about two—”

Rake kicked her and pushed off the table to get free. “Why’re you taking *everyone’s* lines? You’re not even supposed to be able to speak, you dumb Wookiee! Pretty sure your part of the script just says *Nghaawrrrrghhaa!*”

Katarina hissed near his ear. “I’m trying to get through this so we can see what’s up, you fucking idiot!”

“Fine!” Rake shoved her. “I’ll say my lines *fast* then!”

Alec eyed them both warily. “*We can pay you two-thousand now, plus fifteen when we reach Alderaan.*”

Rake sat up, his hair skewed in angles. “*Seventeen, huh? Okay, you guys got yourselves a ship. We’ll leave as soon as you’re ready. Docking bay ninety-four.*”

“*Ninety-four,*” Alec repeated.

Rake shrugged off Katarina. “*Looks like—*”

Katarina pointed. “Oh no, Storm Troopers, better get going.”

Alec got up. Mica followed him and called back, “See you soon, guys.”

Rake shouted after him, “Your lightsaber is *mine*, farm boy!”

“We’ll see.” Mica smirked.

Katarina pulled Rake back into his seat. “Are you done?”

“No actually, I want all my lines back.” Rake fixed his hair. “Where’s the rewind on this VHS?”

Katarina glared at the Storm Troopers that came to look at their table. “We’re all our call signs, Rake. You, Mica, and me. Don’t you think that’s odd?”

“Yeah, that and everything else we’ve just seen.” Rake frowned. “What have you gotten us into, Kat? You take control of the ship for *five* minutes and we get screwed.”

“*I* screwed us?” Katarina adjusted her bandolier so that she could sit down. “After *you* tried to *kill* us! Under *my* watch we got the ship repaired, for the most part. We’re still dead in the water of course, but that’s not *my* fault. Ravil’s still not back.”

Rake convulsed in pain at the mention of her name. His gaze deadened. He slumped in his spot and went still.

Katarina gaped. “Rake?” She waved her hand in front of his face. “Rake?” She put her ear to his chest. His heart had stopped beating. “Oh my God, Rake! Someone help me!”

A white fire bloomed on their tabletop. A girl’s voice poured out of it, “Why is a system error occurring *here* of all places?”

Katarina groped at the fire. “My friend’s not breathing! Help me!”

“Oh, *him*. I figured he’d be the first one to cause problems and I was *right*. Like usual.” The white fire swirled closer. “I can fix this. He’s trying to escape the game.”

“Escape the game?” Katarina stared.

“Sorry, I can’t talk about that with an end user. Let’s see. Where’s he gone? Oh, Ravil, of course he would try for *her*. I should have thought of that and prepared countermeasures. I’m getting senile in my years.”

Katarina gave the small fire a once over. “You know Ravil? What are you?”

“Yep and not telling you that.” The white fire speared Rake through the chest. “Escaping is not allowed. Come back, little pyrofly.”

Rake’s head snapped up. “Ravil! Ravil!” He caught his breath and stared at the fire as it pulled out of his chest. He reached for the flame. “What the hell are you? Where’s Ravil?”

The fire danced back. “You want Ravil?”

“Yes!”

“Then you need to play by the rules and have fun. No more cutting in line.”

Rake rubbed his chest. “She could be hurt or dead or—”

“She’s fine.” The fire chirped.

Rake snarled. “Why should I trust you?”

“A lack of another option, if you *must* have a reason.” The fire examined him. “You’re a weird little thing aren’t you? She’s acquired quite the motley crew, what a story that will be to hear. I wish I had time to invade your consciousness too, but I don’t. Hers is hard enough.”

Rake frowned. “Say that again?”

“No.” The fire grew dim. “I have to get back to work, but seriously enjoy yourselves.”

“In our prison?” Katarina looked around the cantina.

“That’s such a negative word.” The fire sighed.

“But we can’t leave.”

“Pretty much, so you might as well have fun!” The fire laughed. “You have to, or you’re never getting out of here. Bye!”

“You!” Rake leapt for the flame.

Katarina wrapped him in her arms. “Rake, stop! It’s gone.”

“Let me go!” He squirmed. “Why’re you so fucking strong all the sudden?”

“I’m a Wookiee!” She smiled.

“Kat, Ravil’s in danger! That thing has her captive!” He kicked at the air. “She’s trapped! I have to save her!”

“Rake, calm down! Use your brain! Where are you going?” She pressed him to the table. “What are you actually trying to accomplish *right now*?”

“I was just going to...I don’t really know.” He sagged in her arms. “But I have to do *something*, Kat. She’s in trouble. I know it.”

“Okay Rake, but we have only so much information.” Katarina let him go. “All we can assume right now is that the flame is in charge. It told us what we need to do to get out and find Ravil.”

Rake frowned. “Play by the rules? But we are in a *movie*.”

“Exactly.”

Rake sat back in his seat. “Meaning we have to play along with the plot?”

Katarina sat beside him. “What else could it mean? Why place us here in these roles otherwise?”

Rake looked at his blaster. “To have fun.” He looked up at her. “That’s what the fire said. We find her *if* we have fun.”

“Then we’ll see this through.”

“How am I supposed to have fun if she’s in danger?” He pulled at his hair. “This is impossible!”

“I don’t think we have a choice and we have bigger problems than this. We have a crew to think of.”

Rake nodded. “Rescuing Oro and Danny. We can plan our attack while we’re getting through this at least.”

“I wish we had the time.” She groaned. “We got word right before we got pulled into this that Oro and Danny are scheduled for execution.” She stood up. “The Empire thinks he’s Lord Vader and leading a rebellion against them. They’re going to kill them both unless we show up and hand ourselves over. Obviously, we can’t do that if we’re stuck in a fucking *movie*.”

“Shit.” Rake smacked his gun against the table.

“Pretty much.”

He grasped at hope. “Do you think Ravil’s in *here* somewhere?”

“I bet she is. If this is a game, maybe she’s a player too.”

Rake couldn’t shake the bad feeling he had. “But why isn’t she *jumping*? Why isn’t she in contact? Something has to be wrong. I don’t feel her at all anymore.”

“*Feel* her?” Katarina eyed him. “Speaking of, what did you do when you passed out just a minute ago?”

“I don’t know, I fainted or something.” He jumped to his feet. “Let’s get going.”

She grabbed him by his shoulders. “*Rake*, do you have something you want to share with me?”

“No, Kat, I don’t.” He gulped.

She looked him right in the eyes. “Darq and Marx think you’re adapting to be a Navigator.”

Rake forced a laugh. “That’s stupid! What a *dumb* idea. Ha! Ravil would laugh. Ooh look at that cool alien over there!”

“*Rake!*” Katarina lifted him off his feet. “Don’t you *dare* lie to me.”

“I’m not. I can’t do what she does. I *can’t* fly the ship; I *can’t* blow shit up like her, or do anything that Navigators can. I’m sensitive to her because I’m her pilot, that’s it. There’s nothing I do that screams Navigator.” Now if he could explain away why Ravil glowed only to him, then he might actually have a point. Right now, he was totally spewing bullshit. He grinned.

“*Rake.*” Katarina glared at him.

Rake squirmed. “If I could do what she did, I’d know where the hell she was, and I’d be able to jump us there. I can’t, so there you are.”

“Fine, be difficult.” She dropped him.

He got his footing. “I’m not being difficult!”

“Whatever.” She headed for the cantina exit. “Let’s get going with this game. We’re wasting time.”

Rake relaxed, glad the topic was dropped. He jumped up after her. “Time to have fun!”

Katarina sighed. “Right, bring on the fun.”

An alien cut Rake off, pointed a blaster at his chest, and spoke gibberish. Rake gave him a once over. “Oh, hi Greedo.” The alien gestured threateningly. Rake shot him in the stomach and leaned over him. “Bet you weren’t expecting *that*.” He shot the alien again. “Ha! I shot first *twice*.”

Katarina grabbed Rake by the arm. “Come *on*.”

“Wait!” Rake flipped a coin at the bartender and affected a swagger. “*Sorry about the mess.*” He followed Katarina. “This place has *potential*; we really *could* have fun if all the other shitty stuff wasn’t happening.”

She nodded. “Yeah, it would be rad if our friends weren’t going to *die*.”

He gave her arm a squeeze. “We can do this, Kat. We *know* this.”

“Good, I like you positive.” Katarina smiled.

“Not even worried. This will be cake.” Rake looked around as shadows grew in the corners of the bar. “Hey, why’s everything getting dark?”

Katarina frowned. “The scene’s ending.”

“So we’re just going to appear in—”

Darq creaked, rocked on his heels, and fell to his ass with a clink of metal. He was in some kind of house...or room. He rubbed his head and looked at the off-white stucco ceiling. "Um... Hello?"

Cursing bounced off the walls.

He got up slowly and headed towards an opening in front of him. Bright light poured through the doorway from outside, making it hard to see out...that must mean he was inside. Darq sniffed the air and got nothing but dust up his nose. He coughed. More swearing carried on the air. He cocked his head and stepped outside. "Sammy?"

A robot half his size raced through the doorway and knocked him back. The robot swiveled back and forth. "Get inside, Darq, quick!"

"Sammy?" Darq stepped back and the door closed. "What are we doing? Where are we?"

"Stay quiet, gold face." Sammy's R2 unit locked the door with a silver extendable arm. "We have Storm Troopers after us."

Darq examined her domed top, attempting to find a focal point that he could speak to. "What are those?"

"*Empire* soldiers."

"Oh no!" His eyes widened. "Why aren't we running from them?"

She snickered. "Because, they're stupid enough *not* to check locked houses." A knock on the door followed her words.

Darq reached for the door. "But—"

Sammy hit him at the knees, sending him back. "Are you *lethally* dumb?"

Darq hit a white wall and frowned. "That hurt." He rubbed his arm and caught his reflection in his lab coat. "What am I wearing?" He touched his head; his yellow, short-cropped hair was spiky and gold. His skin shimmered with gold dust; his clothes were stiff like metal. He spun in a circle, horrified. "What is this? What is wrong with me?"

Sammy zoomed out through the now open doorway. "Follow me, goldilocks!"

"Goldilocks?" Darq followed her. His joints were stiff. His knees didn't really bend, forcing him into an awkward hobbling run. He looked around the desert city. "I don't appreciate you making fun of my current condition. Wait up. I can't go as fast as you in this stupid outfit!" He pulled at his restrictive coat and pants. "Why won't it come off? Sammy, where are you going? We should find Mom at once!"

She raced off, kicking up dust in her wake. "We have to find the hose-faced bitch that's going to rat us out."

"What? Where are we? Where's *Mom*?" He stared at the foreign city. He eyed her as he caught up to her. "I also don't remember that robot on board our ship. Where did you get it?"

"I'm *playing* R2D2, you uneducated Rexos. We're in *Star Wars*, keep up."

"*Star Wars*?" Darq frowned. "What is that?"

"A movie."

"Movie?" Darq searched his memory for the word. "Movie? A film? Like an adult movie?"

"Oh my *God*, Darq." She stopped dead in her tracks and rotated to look up at him. "Why'd I have to get stuck with *you*. You're like the least cool character to be stuck with, but whatever. We have business." Sammy spun in a circle and pointed at one alien in particular among the crowd of aliens. "There he is! Kill him, Darq!"

Darq looked where she pointed. "But I don't want to kill anyone. Why should I kill someone?"

“Useless.” Sammy sighed and motored in a circle. “I wonder if I have ramming speed in this thing. What do you think? You think I could kill him like this?”

Darq put his hand on her domed top. “Sammy! Why are you trying to kill someone?”

Sammy turned. “You see that guy with the hose face?”

Darq nodded and eyed the other aliens around them. “Yes. He looks...everyone looks...*weird*. Why do they appear so *strange*? I’ve never seen subspecies like that before!” His eyes lit up. “What an amazing chance to study—”

“No.” Sammy bumped him. “That alien there wants to kill Mom and eat her corpse. He’s going to capture her and rape her to death, and then he’ll—”

Darq snarled and leapt for the man. “Leave Mom alone!”

Sammy laughed and followed him. “Fuck yeah, Darq Droid Nine Thousand! Get *brutal!*”

Rake found himself under the Millennium Falcon in docking bay ninety-four. He recognized the scene. “Kat?” He spun in a circle and took out his blaster. “Okay, not quite yet then.” He touched the ship and smiled as he looked it over. “All mine!”

Katarina walked through a doorway into the dim docking bay. “See, I told you. We’re scene jumping.” She gestured to Darq as he followed her in. “I found Darq and Sammy.”

Rake grinned. “Sammy’s here too?”

“Hells yes I am!” Sammy blasted past Katarina and went for her twin brother. “Look at my gear! Look at my sweet feet treads!”

Rake thumped her on the head as she went by. “Rad.”

“Darq and I killed hose face.” She motored around him in a circle. “Say thanks.”

“Thanks.” Rake put his blaster away. “No Storm Troopers to worry about then.”

Mica and Alex Guinness stepped through the doorway. Mica smirked at Rake. “*What a piece of junk!*”

“Suck my *dick*, farm boy.” Rake flipped him off with both hands. “You’re just upset because *you* don’t get to fly her.”

Mica took out a silver cylinder and waved it in the air. “Oh yeah, well you want one of these. Don’t you? Yeah?”

Rake eyed the weapon. “I’ll let you fly if I can play with it.”

“No way!” Mica put it back under his poncho. “I’ve *earned* this thing!”

“How?” Rake put his hands to his hips.

Mica touched his messy, blonde hair. “I have to have the bad hair and shitty lines for a reason!”

“You’re lame.” Rake snorted.

“No, I’m the protagonist.” Mica made a face at Rake.

Rake scoffed. “*No*, I am.”

Mica got in his face. “*I’m* the hero.”

Rake shoved him. “I’m the character everyone likes, *kid*.”

Mica shoved him back. “That doesn’t mean you’re the hero!”

Katarina pushed them apart. “Stop this. *We’re a little rushed, so if everyone will just get on board.*”

Rake gaped. “Stop the line stealing, Kat! It’s just wrong! It’s like sacrilege.”

“I’m having fun, Rake.” Katarina smiled and led the way on board the ship. “Follow me.”

Darq followed Mica and Alec. He walked stiffly past Rake. He eyed him. “I haven’t forgotten you punched me.”

Rake smirked. "Good or I'd have to do it again."

Darq frowned. "What about an apology?"

"What about one?" Rake patted Sammy on the head as Darq stomped on board the ship. "You're sure you got hose face?"

"Totally." She beeped. "Darq ripped his head off. It was sweet and there was *gore*, not masks and shit. They're real here. Even as a droid, he's actually stronger than you think."

Rake snorted. "I'm sure."

The doors to the docking bay opened and Storm Troopers piled in. "*Stop that ship. Blast them!*"

Rake glared at Sammy. "What the hell is this?"

Sammy beeped and rolled up the ramp into the ship. "Guess we can't change the plot! Better run!"

Rake fired his blaster in the general direction of the Storm Troopers. "That means they can't hit me, right?" He took a laser shot to the shoulder. "Ow! Fucking hell!" He fired randomly. "Fuck you guys!" Rake ran on board the ship and skidded to stop. He hit a mash of buttons by the door until it slid shut. "Kat, *get us out of here!*"

Mica helped Darq get strapped in. "Have you tried taking the metal stuff off?"

"I can't!" Darq touched a dent in his hair. "And I can't heal my damage."

Sammy beeped and settled in by his side. "You're a robot now, suck it up!"

Rake charged past them and jumped into his bouncing seat in the cockpit as they soared away from the planet. Space scenery replaced the desert outside of the ship. He took a deep breath. "Thanks, Kat."

Katarina grinned. "No problem."

An alarm went off.

Rake looked around the cockpit. "That's our Imperial Cruiser right on cue. Kat, press the buttons you're supposed to."

"What happened to your lines?" She eyed him.

"I'm trying to *make the calculations for the jump to light speed.*" Rake got out of his chair. "Whatever the fuck *that* means."

Music blasted around them.

Rake punched at buttons. "We have a soundtrack too? Turn it *off!*"

Katarina laughed. "What's wrong, Rake? I thought you'd be loving this up at least! This is your dream ship! Aren't you having any fun?"

Rake gestured to his laser burn. "We can take injuries, Kat. I'm going to assume we can die too!"

Katarina lost her smile. "Oh *shit.*"

"Yeah exactly." Rake strapped back into his seat. "All we need to do is remember the exact things we're supposed to push, right? That shouldn't be so hard. We just have to concentrate. We've seen this movie hundreds of times."

Mica jumped on the back of Rake's chair and shouted in his ear, "*Why don't you outrun them, Han? I thought you said this thing was fast?*"

Rake snarled. "Fuck off!"

"I don't remember that line in the movie." Mica grinned. "Feeling a little *stressed*, Rake? You're right, Kat, this *is* fun."

"I swear to God, Mica." Rake fiddled with the controls as shots appeared over their bow. The ride got bumpy. Rake grinned despite the situation, his hands moving in memory. "*Here's*

where the fun begins.”

Alec leaned in from the backseat. *“How long before you can make the jump to light speed?”*

Rake reached behind him. *“Well, Alec, It’ll take a few moments to get the coordinates from the navi-computer.”* He turned and pointed his finger in Mica’s face. *“Don’t bitch in my ear again.”*

Mica grinned. He waited until Rake turned back around. *“Are you kidding?”*

Katarina glared at him. *“Mica, shut up! Rake, just ignore him!”*

Mica sat back. *“Sorry, don’t recognize that name.”* He pointed at a red light and got in Rake’s face. *“What’s that flashing?”*

Rake growled through his teeth. *“Keep it up and you’re going to lose that hand early, Luke!”*

“Rake, don’t!” Katarina undid her safety strap and turned around. *“I will hit you, Luke, I swear to God.”*

“What’s the problem?” Mica grinned and folded his arms behind his head. *“You told us it was a game.”*

Katarina pointed to Rake’s injury. *“A game we can take real injuries in!”*

Rake laughed mirthlessly. *“Isn’t it fun, Mica!”*

Mica paled and leaned forward to take a closer look at the wound. *“Not anymore.”*

“Glad to see you finally caught up with the rest of us, farm boy. Now go be a good kid and strap yourself in, I’m going to make the jump to light speed.” Rake didn’t wait for them to get settled. He punched in the next series of controls and the ship bucked as the view in front of them changed to a flash of lights. Rake whooped as Mica fell over. *“How’re you feeling now, farm boy! Yeah!”*

Ravil punched a soldier in the gut, knocking her guard aside. *“Fuck off!”* She twisted and high kicked the one that walked on her right side. *“Don’t touch me!”* Ravil knocked her head back, hitting Darth Vader’s helmet. *“Especially you!”*

Vader pushed her into a large room full of monitors and buttons. The two men at her sides backed up against the wall.

Ravil raised her fists. *“Next person to touch me is getting a knee to their balls!”*

A pinched faced, older man in a green uniform inclined his head to her. He smiled.

“Charming to the last.”

Ravil pointed her finger in his face. *“You want a kick to the groin, general Tar-something?”*

The general reached out and touched her chin. *“You don’t know how hard I found it signing—”*

Ravil kneed him in the crotch. *“What were you saying? Sorry, I can’t understand you!”*

The man gasped as he tried to maintain his stern expression. *“Princess—”*

Ravil kicked him in the face and broke his nose. *“Yeah, what?”*

Darth Vader lifted her off her feet and shook her.

“Oh?” Ravil bit at his gloved hands. *“Don’t like me not playing along? Ipsso, I wasn’t kidding! This isn’t fun! Turn the movie off and let us go!”*

Those around her tried to carry on their parts. The general rubbed his jaw, ignoring the blood that streamed down his face. *“I have chosen to test this station’s destructive power on your home planet—”*

“Good.” Ravil shrugged. *“Blow that shit.”*

The general frowned, confused by her response. He turned to her. *“You would prefer*

another target?"

"No, not really, that one looks spiffy." She raised her eyebrows. "Blow her up!"

The general looked to those around him, then to Darth Vader. The scene fuzzed and the actors froze. Ravil grinned. "Ha! Broke your toy, Ipsos!"

Cracks appeared in the walls. Ravil shook herself out of Darth Vader's frozen grip and ran towards the light. She put her fingers to the fissure and clawed. Voices slipped through the cracks from beyond. There were people outside. She pounded on the walls. "Hey! Someone help me!"

Ravil put her eye to the break and peeked through. There was a courtyard of marble, a fountain, and a sunlit sky. Flower petals floated in a gust of air and she caught the smell of grass. The scent made her head swim. A melody followed the course of the summer breeze. Voices interwove with the notes. Ravil strained to hear, but the words were soft, sleepy. A child ran past the opening.

"Hey!" Ravil shouted, "Hey wait! Come back! Someone help me, please!"

The objects around her buzzed and a force threw Ravil back into Darth Vader's arms. The scene skipped ahead. A planet blew up in the monitors. The crack in the wall was gone, and the actors were back in place. Ravil dropped her head. "Fuck."

The scene went dark.

Lincoln sliced through the ribcage of his second opponent of the evening. The Hunter clutched her wounds as blood spewed from them. She went limp and hung in the air. Lincoln pushed the body towards the exit of the cage. Around the metal, men and women clapped or scowled as they won or lost their bets.

Lincoln passed the body to Kennedy. "Anything up next?"

She gulped and passed the Hunter to a Rexos. "They're thinking about a Pyro."

"What?" Lincoln looked past her shoulder. "When did *that* come in?"

"Didn't, Pyro works here." She looked towards the doorway to the bar. "He was business partners with the Hunters you killed last night."

Lincoln snarled. "Well, let him come then. I can kill a Pyro just as easily as a Hunter."

Her eyes went wide. "But Lincoln..."

Lincoln bumped her nose with his. "Shush and bring me some water." He climbed up the side of the ring, peering into the crowd. He spotted the Ampyr owner bickering with his Pyro employee. The Ampyr man did not have a strong talent of voice control and could not keep the Pyro out of the ring. Lincoln sized the Pyro up. He did not look intimidating, but as Lincoln well knew, looks could be deceiving.

"He likes the wall flame." Waitrey climbed up beside Lincoln on the outside of the fence. She looked through the metal at him.

Lincoln leaned away from her. "Oh."

The Jungay nodded, her milky blue eyes examining his face. "He does not fight often, due to only the one trick which kills most. Not exciting fight, see?"

"Noted."

Waitrey raised her vermillion eyebrows and pointed down. "Your cub-spouse has your water ready." She grabbed Lincoln's wrist. "Have fun tonight."

Lincoln shivered and climbed down. He opened the door and leaned outside the ring. Lincoln took the water bag from Kennedy and drained the entire thing. "Thank you."

She looked from side to side nervously. "Will this be your last fight of the night?"

“Should be, the Jungay has opponents to duel.” Lincoln looked for Waitrey, but could not see her in the crowd. “I am just the opening act.”

Kennedy wrapped her fingers around Lincoln’s wrist in the same way Waitrey had. “I don’t want you to fight the Pyro.”

Lincoln pulled his hand back. “That is not your decision to make. Stop worrying. I’ll be fine.” He closed the door and stepped back into the ring, hooking his feet to the floor. Lincoln closed his eyes and focused.

Hissing close to his ear made him open his eyes. His female Instinct stood at his shoulder. “You’ll need me for this.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t.”

“You can’t beat fire. Let me in. I’ll numb the pain. You’ll be able to dive through the fire wall and rip the Pyro’s head off.”

Lincoln licked his fangs. “No.”

The female snarled. “You know you need me for this!”

“Does not matter.” His gaze drifted to Kennedy. He watched her as she looked around nervously, her body pressed to the cage. Lincoln turned to his Instinct. “Not worth it, you will make her suffer afterwards. It is the only reason you opine.”

“You place her life over yours now?”

“I always have. That was never our problem.”

The female sneered. “You are only strong now because you are not reminded, not in pain. I will remind you, and then you will need to let me in, to soothe you. Only I can make you feel better, only I bring you comfort.”

“Not when that means we abuse her.” Lincoln flicked his claws in and out. “I told you, I am past that.”

“We’ll see.” The female faded from view.

The Pyro stepped into the ring. He wore no body armor, nothing a fighter would typically wear when fighting a Hunter. Lincoln smiled. The Pyro was assured of his tactic and had nothing to fall back on. Lincoln took his spot in the ring.

He put his talons to his mouth and pressed them into the glands in his cheeks. He filled each hollow-tipped talon with the numbing agent all Hunters naturally generated. Lincoln drew it all out. He put his talons to his neck and pressed them into his skin, injecting the fluid into his veins. The effect was instantaneous. His skin tingled and went numb. He bit his cheek and barely felt it. Lincoln smiled at the Pyro.

The bell rang.

Lincoln dropped to the floor and rolled to his back as a wave of fire blasted inches above his head. He sensed the heat through his hair. His skin blistered, but the pain did not register.

The Pyro stopped, looking to see what was left of the Hunter.

Lincoln swiped and sliced the Pyro’s ankles down to the bone. The Pyro threw his hand out and flames shot towards Lincoln’s face.

Lincoln rolled to his feet and caught the Pyro’s neck in his hands. He slammed the Pyro face first into the floor, fracturing his skull. Lincoln kicked him in the back, his hooks puncturing the Pyro’s lungs.

He bent down and bit the Pyro’s throat open, finishing him quickly. Cheers and shouts came from the crowd, but Lincoln only felt the wave of tingling that signaled damage. He looked at his body; he had sustained burns, some light, others bad. He carried the body of the Pyro over his shoulder and stepped out of the ring.

Kennedy stood waiting for him, her face painted with relief and terror. She focused on his injuries. Kennedy had been around Lincoln wounded many times; he inevitably took it out on her. She knew that this meant agony for her, but she couldn't stand to see him in pain. Kennedy swallowed her fear and took his hand. She pulled him behind her. Lincoln did not stop her; he was in too much shock to do anything but follow.

Kennedy unlocked their room and led him inside. She locked the door behind them and took the body of the Pyro from his arms. Kennedy set the corpse aside and drew him under the light. She ran her fingers through his hair. "Where hurt most?"

Lincoln spoke in a daze, "I'm not sure."

Kennedy turned him gently. She pulled at the remnants of his clothing, examining his skin. He had bad burns up his left side. She bent down and hooked his feet to the floor, keeping him in place. Kennedy hissed and shook her head. "This will heal, but not until you've slept."

"Good, I don't need to fight tonight any longer. I put on a good show."

Kennedy slapped him.

Lincoln blinked in shock, the pain registering slowly. "Kennedy?"

"They get *more* Pyros now!" She flashed her fangs in fear and anger. "I heard better, they like the challenge! You fight another tomorrow, then another. Then what!" Tears filled her eyes. "You will be burnt every time!"

He spoke, his words mired in exhaustion, "I don't have to accept the fights, Kennedy."

"What if all they have? Owner will not let you send business away! I know this much!"

She stepped up behind him as tears floated around her face. "You will get killed."

"Kennedy, you don't know that." Lincoln shuddered as she put her mouth to his burns.

"I'm not stupid." Kennedy added her own numbing agent to his wounds. "I know this will happen."

Lincoln relaxed under her touch. "We'll deal with it as it comes."

"*You'll* deal with it as it comes, you won't let me."

"Kennedy, you cannot fight a Pyro."

"I can do as much as you did!"

"No!" He turned and reached for her, but she ducked out of his reach. Lincoln winced against the pain. "You are *not* fighting! That is one of our rules! You agreed to it!"

Kennedy hissed and pushed his arms aside, moving to another burn on his stomach. She knelt before him. "You should not be only one taking risks. You said we are equals."

"Yes, but I have more experience fighting. You are *seventeen!*"

Kennedy shook her head. "I don't want you to hurt."

Lincoln closed his eyes. "I deserve a fair bit, Kennedy. I can take it."

"No!" She licked him. "Now you are stupid!"

Lincoln swallowed. "For all the times I hurt you, I have earned this."

Kennedy pressed her forehead against his burnt stomach. "Don't talk about that."

"For the times I hit you, broke your arms, your jaw. Times I—"

"Don't talk about!" Kennedy burst into tears. "Don't want to hear! Be quiet! Be quiet!" She wrapped her arms around him gently. "Not talk about, Lincoln."

Lincoln touched her face with his long hair. "Why can't we talk about it? I think we should."

Kennedy shook her head. "Don't want to remember bad Lincoln, only good Lincoln."

"When was there a good Lincoln?" He gave her a crooked smile. "The times I was working and didn't hit you? The times I was too injured to beat you into submission?"

Kennedy cringed. “Good Lincoln exists too. I know. I haven’t forgotten of him.”

His female Instinct hissed in his ear. “Look at her, so pathetic. Tell her what she is.”

Lincoln’s lips moved as he fought with the words. He shook his head, straining not to say anything. The pain across his body heightened into agony. Lincoln hissed. “No.”

The female laughed. “You don’t need her. I can make you forget your pain. You know I can. Let me in, Lincoln. Let me in and everything will be better. We’re meant to be one.”

Kennedy rested her head on Lincoln’s thigh. “I know, even if you do not. You are there too and you are good. You are kind.”

Lincoln shuddered and curled over until his head was near hers. He whispered, “Get back.”

Kennedy shook her head. “No. You are there. Inside, I know.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Lincoln put his teeth to her hair. “I’m not strong enough. *Please* get away from me!”

“No! I won’t go!”

Lincoln flicked his claws out. “*Please*, Kennedy.”

The female Lincoln laughed. “Where did she get this idea there was a good Lincoln? She must have quite the imagination.”

Kennedy turned her head, exposing her neck. “You have been good to me this time down here. You are showing more.”

“I have been for—” Lincoln choked on his words. “I—” he raised his hand, seeking to cause her pain to feel his own less.

Kennedy’s lips moved against his skin. “You won’t stop hurting if you do that.” She lapped at a burn.

Lincoln flinched. “Why are you staying near me?”

Kennedy closed her eyes. “This is *my* role.”

Lincoln shook under the strain of keeping his limbs locked. “Kennedy, *please*. You are not my mate; you must fight me or flee!”

Kennedy held on to him. “I will not fight you, but I will not flee. I am staying.”

“I’m...I don’t know if I can stop.” Lincoln ground his teeth. “I’m *sorry*.”

Kennedy spoke in a whisper, “I know.”

The female Lincoln cackled. “Hit her! Do it now!”

“No!” Lincoln hissed.

“Do it!” The female Instinct grabbed his arm and forced his claws to extend.

Lincoln snarled and bit his wrist. Muscle tore and bones fractured beneath his teeth. He howled into the wound. Agony radiated from the cuts.

Kennedy sprang to her feet. She tore his arm from his mouth. “Stop!”

Lincoln snapped his fangs towards his wrist, struggling to bite his hand off. Kennedy grabbed his hair and drew him into a kiss. Lincoln bit into her, maddened. He tasted her blood and groaned. He clutched at her, intoxicated on her flavor and blinded by pain.

Kennedy pressed into his body as heat infused her and desire inflamed her senses. She wrapped her arms around him, needing him near. She returned his kiss just as hard and sharp, her fingers brushing the burns on his back.

Lincoln held her close, and the torture of her touch tipped into euphoria. Over the pain, he heard nothing; he sensed nothing but Kennedy. He shuddered and pleasure bloomed in the agony.

Kennedy smelled the change and unthinking she sought out the worst of the wounds and scraped her fingers across them. He screamed, but did not pull away. Kennedy kept his wail

inside her mouth letting no sound escape. She flicked out her claws and raked them down his back, but not enough to cut his skin.

Lincoln grew hard and rubbed against her. He roped her hair around his hands, drunk with desire. Lincoln slurred his words. "Make me yours."

Kennedy hissed and dug her claws into his muscle down to the bone. Lincoln bucked. Kennedy moaned and sank her teeth into his shoulder. Lincoln gasped and passed out from the pain. His body went limp in her arms.

Kennedy pushed him to the floor, her chest heaving, her eyes wild. Her skin was hot and sweat-slicked. She trembled and panted; she'd never felt like this before. What was happening to her body? She ran her hands lightly across his skin. What had she done to him?

Tears floated around her face. She didn't understand what had passed between them. Kennedy stared at his vulnerable body. She'd wounded him; she'd deliberately acted to cause him pain, and he had given in. He'd welcomed it and pulled her along. He'd wanted more.

Kennedy traced her tongue along a talon wound. She tasted his blood and shuddered. Her skin flushed. She touched a cut she'd given him and hunger settled in her stomach. Kennedy poked at his flesh and a purr grew in her chest. She remembered the sounds he'd made, the way he'd reacted. She liked hurting him, and he liked taking it.

Kennedy threw her arms around him and hugged him. She pressed her face against his chest, confused. She was sorry, but still aroused and afraid of what this meant, of what he might do when he woke. Lincoln would be angry, she was positive.

Kennedy covered her mouth and crawled away from him. She pulled her hair over her eyes and tucked her knees to her chest. She had done wrong in hurting him. Marx and Tasanee were not this way; Ravil and Rake were not this way. She looked at the wounds that crisscrossed Lincoln's body...one's she'd given him.

He'd hurt her plenty of times, but never when she was already wounded from someone else. Lincoln wouldn't have done that to her, even at his worst, the good Lincoln always took over and cared for her. Kennedy let tears escape her eyes. Did this mean she was just like the bad Lincoln? That when given the opportunity she'd hurt him?

Kennedy caught his foot and dragged him to her. If that were the case, wouldn't now be the time to do the worst? Kennedy leaned over him. She cupped his cheek with her hand. The desire to hurt him was gone. Kennedy kissed his lips gently and wrapped her hands in his writhing hair. She only wanted him to be better, to feel good. She wanted to feel good with him.

Kennedy looked at his body and a quiet thought joined the rest. Perhaps the only way to make him feel pleasure was to make him feel pain. She remembered the sound of his voice, desire and pleasure. He'd wanted her...not some memory of his dead mate, not a fantasy, but *her*.

Kennedy stared sightlessly as she tended to his burns. She could not move forward with the thought, unable to see that as a reality, but the memory remained. Lincoln desired her, wanted her to continue, and she would have if he'd stayed conscious.

Evgeniy watched other soldiers pick through plants and overturned tables. He paced, oddly nervous, but so far the sweep of the entire level had revealed nothing and they had been here for hours.

Evgeniy had been left to himself. With an officer's rank and no commander, those around him stuck with their orders. Though they might personally wonder what he was doing there, none questioned him.

Evgeniy took a tour of the hallways. Dirt and wilting leaves hit his helmet and cluttered the air, but no Emmalethe. No chewed on debris, there was no trace of her at all. He punched the wall in frustration.

A message came from the overhead speakers, "Damage to level has been resolved. Power flux has been corrected. Cleaners return to stations once plant matter has been restored."

Evgeniy resumed his walk, considering his next steps. He could wait here and see if she returned, though perhaps whatever had caused her to create such a mess, might also have been the reason she'd left in a hurry.

Two pink-clothed Cleaners stepped out of the room next to him. Evgeniy froze, startled. The Cleaners appeared to be petite women, but like none he'd ever seen. Long, trailing gray dreadlocks stuck out of their skulls and hung down their backs like twisting tree roots. Their eyes were large and silver, framed by gray lashes. Their skin was light gray with greenish spots near their bare hands. The exposed parts of their bodies glistened and rippled as they walked, giving them the appearance of being damp and having loose skin. One scratched her neck, peeling a layer of dead skin away. The other took it from her and ate it. Evgeniy fought his urge to vomit.

They did not look up at him, but continued their course down the hall.

Evgeniy kept to the walls, his eyes on the lookout for more of those *things*. He saw a group of Ampyr looking similarly ill. Evgeniy stepped up behind them and listened to their group communication.

"Situation is handled here. We are returning to the detention ward."

Evgeniy perked up; the detention ward was the last known location he had for Danny and Oro. The group walked away from him and headed towards an elevator. Evgeniy grabbed a straggler, broke his neck, and took his things.

A Cleaner clinging to the ceiling gasped. Evgeniy shoved the body at her in surprise. The Cleaner took the corpse, sniffed it, and the dead body broke out in mold and fungi. Evgeniy watched in horror as the Cleaner reduced the body's biodegradable parts to fertilizer. The Cleaner packed the material up and carried it to one of the ransacked labs.

Evgeniy shuddered and ran after the other Ampyr. He wondered if Emmalethe had seen something similar and bolted. Had he been up here alone in the dark with one of those things, he might have done the same. Though he'd never tell anyone he'd run from a clammy, five-foot-tall woman.

Evgeniy stepped into the elevator after the other Ampyr; they did not notice a difference between him and the other soldier. Evgeniy smiled behind his mask as the elevator went up. He was getting good at this. Not even a challenge.

Oro sipped on a packet of food. He smacked his lips and spoke in a singsong voice, "Tasty gruel, I love you tasty gruel. You make me a lovesick fool. So full and happy. I'm ready for a nappy! Tasty gruel!"

Danny smiled and examined his bruised ribs. "Yes Oro, it's actually edible."

"They give prisoners pretty tasty fare." Oro tossed his food bag and glanced over at Lloyd. The Ampyr youth was huddled up in Danny's bunk. "Didn't he get any sleep?"

Lloyd had a blanket wrapped over his head and shoulders, only showing his face. Dark circles hung around his eyes. He looked in Oro's direction without meeting his gaze. "You may address me directly, you know. I can understand your improper accent."

"Oh, may I?" Oro grinned. "Wonderful! You've just made my day!"

Lloyd clenched his jaw. “Every time you speak my dislike for your impolite behavior grows.”

Oro laughed. “Oh, poor baby. It must have gotten big by now then. May I see it?”

Danny kicked Oro’s leg. “All right, you’ve gotten your morning flirting out of the way. Now shut up.”

“Flirting?” Lloyd’s nose wrinkled. “That sounds—”

“Sexual?” Oro captured him with a smoldering gaze. “It is. We’re fucking with words, Lloyd. Doesn’t that just blow your mind?”

“I—” Lloyd blushed and turned in Danny’s bunk to face the wall. He hugged himself, trying to focus on his plan. Lloyd could save them from their depravity. He just had to be calm, but his thoughts would not straighten out. He was full of misdirected and warring emotions. Confused, afraid, angry...Lloyd didn’t know how to feel about, let alone respond to, Oro.

Danny glared at Oro and spoke in English, “Why do you feel the need to do this to him? You’ve already gotten him back for slapping you. He kissed you yesterday. Leave it alone.”

“Maybe I want more.” Oro smirked.

“And this is how you get it?” Danny gestured at Lloyd. “Poking at him like a hornets’ nest until he goes postal on us both?”

“Does that end up in sexy fun times for me?” Oro grinned.

Danny stabbed his finger at his mattress. “*No one* is having sexy fun *anything* in this goddamn room while I’m in it, especially *you!*”

Oro frowned and bounced in his bunk. “I want to get laid before I’m executed, come on. It’s a sin to die horny, you automatically go to hell.”

“He doesn’t want to have sex with you, Oro.” Danny rubbed his temples. “He thinks being gay is a sin!”

“Yeah, I’ve heard *that* line before.” Oro looked Lloyd over. “I don’t want a relationship with the queer, just an angry fuck. He deserves it.”

“Oro, shut up.” Danny closed his eyes. “You’re as bad as Rake when he’s not around.”

“I’m taking that as a compliment.” Oro sat up straight.

Danny grimaced. “Why couldn’t you take after *Mica*? He was a good role model.”

“Mica turned into a twat.”

“He’s not a twat anymore. He got over that.”

Oro laughed. “But he was and even you think so!”

Danny smiled. “I think even *he* thinks so, Oro.”

Oro stretched. “So what happened to no English speak?”

“I don’t think Lloyd needs to know the specifics of what you’re saying about him.” Danny shook his head. “Frankly, I don’t want to know either.”

Oro stuck his tongue out at Danny.

The door to their cell opened. Four armed guards entered, all with their masks on. Oro pointed and laughed. “Don’t tell me you have breathing masks on. That’s freaking amazing.” He breathed in their direction. “Don’t let the gay get ya.”

“Oro!” Danny barked. “Settle down.”

The one in front pointed at Lloyd. “We’re here for the boy.”

Lloyd looked over his shoulder. “Me?”

The soldier nodded. “Come with us.”

“All right.” Lloyd turned to get up.

Danny put his hand on Lloyd’s shoulder and kept him still. “What do you want him for?”

“Questioning.”

Oro eyed the soldier in front, the way all four of them stood. They clenched and unclenched their fists and shifted from foot to foot. Violence was on their minds.

Oro recognized this scene, and a cold sick lump dropped into his stomach. He swallowed back nausea and looked between the guards and Lloyd. He spoke in English, “Don’t let him get up.”

“Why?” Danny glanced over.

“Just don’t.” Oro took a deep breath. He grinned at the soldiers and hopped to his feet. “What’s wrong with questioning me? I *love* questions.”

“We want the boy.” The soldier in front shoved Oro aside and reached for Lloyd.

Oro lashed out and kicked the soldier in the back of the leg. “But I’m so much cuter and I’m feisty!”

Oro took an elbow to the cheek.

A growl grew in Danny’s chest. “Oro, *stop antagonizing* them!”

Lloyd flinched and tugged on Danny’s arm. “What is happening? Why are they doing that to him?!”

Oro whipped his leg chain and caught it on the guard’s calf. “Whoops, clumsy me.” The soldier punched Oro, knocking him back to the other three guards.

Danny moved in front of Lloyd. “Oro, what is going on?”

Oro spat blood and grinned. He put his hands to his temples. “Angry, angry!”

The first guard turned to him and drove his fist into Oro’s stomach. “You want to go with us instead?”

“Oh yeah.” Oro struggled to breathe. “I’m sensing some sexual tension of the deviant variety. *So totally, I’m there.*”

Danny clutched at his chest as his heart skipped a beat. “Oro, *no!*”

Lloyd covered his eyes. “Stop it!”

Oro flipped Danny off. “Pass it along to the phobic. I’m *saving* his virgin bitch self.”

“No, Oro!” Danny tugged on his leg chain frantically. “No! Goddamn it! No!”

Oro made kissy faces at the guard. “Prison sex has always been a fetish of mine.”

“No!” Danny got to his feet as the guards unlocked Oro’s chain. He lunged at the guards, but they were out of his reach. “Oro, don’t do this!”

Oro complied as his hands were tied behind his back. “They won’t *kill* me.”

“Oro, fight them! Please!” Danny pulled on his chain, but it wouldn’t give. Angry tears filled his eyes. “Damn it, Oro! Don’t just stand there! Put up a fight! Oro! Please!”

Oro shrugged. “Why fight? You said I couldn’t have sexy fun times in the room.” He gave the four a loaded look. “I’m so happy right now; it’s like a dream come true. I’m really good I promise.”

“Leave him alone!” A blood vessel burst in Danny’s eye. “*I will kill you!* Don’t touch him! Don’t you *dare* hurt him!”

The soldiers pushed Oro out the door and it locked behind them.

“Oro!” Danny yanked on his chain. “Oro, goddamn it! Oro! *No!*”

Lloyd opened his eyes. He reached out and ripped Danny’s chain in half. He grabbed his arm. “What’s going on?”

Danny looked from the severed chain to Lloyd. He blinked tears out of his eyes. “Why didn’t you do that *ten seconds ago!*”

Lloyd slid away along the bunk. “I...I didn’t know you wanted me to.”

Danny shoved him off the bed. “Oro!” He ran to the door and pounded on it. He scratched his fingernails along the edges, ripping at the surface until his fingers bled. “Fuck! Fucking hell! Oro! Oro!”

Lloyd righted himself and leaned over to watch him. “What’s going on? Where did they take Oro?”

Danny turned around and put his back against the door. “Where’s he *going*? He’s going to be assaulted in *your* stead, Lloyd! That’s where he’s *going*!”

Lloyd blurred and stood nose to nose with Danny. “What does that mean? What are you talking about?”

Danny blinked and tears escaped his eyes. “They came here for *you*! *You*, Lloyd!”

“Yes.” Lloyd searched his face. “And he volunteered. So they’re going to ask him questions instead, right?”

“They’re not going to ask him questions, Lloyd!” Danny turned and punched the door with both of his hands. “They weren’t going to ask *you* any questions either!”

“But they *said* they were here to ask questions.” Lloyd gulped. “That’s what they said, Danny.”

Danny nearly hit Lloyd in the face, but the kid only looked confused and lost. He grabbed Lloyd by his shoulders and shoved him back towards the beds. “Your little *display* yesterday earned you payback, and *Oro*’s taking it for the both of you.”

Lloyd touched his lips. “The kiss? But I was warning them away. I was trying to help.”

“You were also making fools out of them and *you’re Ampyr*. Oro told me you guys make it your business to kill homosexuals, especially the Ampyr ones.”

Lloyd leapt for the door in a panic. He scraped at the smooth surface. “They’re going to kill him? We have to save him! I can save him! They don’t need to do that! I have a plan! I made a plan to save him!”

“They can’t kill him yet.” Danny pried Lloyd from the door. He wrenched Lloyd’s arms behind his back. “They have him scheduled for execution. He’ll live...”

Lloyd escaped Danny’s grip and latched on to the door again. “But you said they’re going to hurt him!” Lloyd pounded on the door. “We have to get out and save Oro! Help me! I have a plan!”

Danny looped his arms around Lloyd’s waist and pulled. “Let *go*! There’s nothing you can do!”

“*You* let go!” Lloyd dug his fingers into crevices. “Maybe I can break the door! Maybe I can get them to come back and then I can explain to them! I’m strong!” He threw Danny off and slammed his foot into the door. He didn’t even make a dent. Lloyd held his foot and jumped back, knocking into Oro’s bunk. “That hurts!”

Danny pushed Lloyd down to Oro’s bed. “Don’t bring them back, you fool! They’ll only rape you too!”

Lloyd stilled and stared into Danny’s eyes. “They’re going to... to...” He couldn’t bring himself to say the word. Tears formed in his eyes. “To Oro? Why?”

“Because they’re hateful pieces of shit.” Danny shoved him. He wiped his eyes. “What did you *think* I meant?”

“Beat him up?” Lloyd trembled.

“There’ll be some of that too I’m sure.” Danny sank down to his knees. “*Goddamn* it, Oro. *Damn* it! *Damn* it!” He punched at the floor, splattering the surface with his blood. “*Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!*”

Lloyd stared at the ceiling, paralyzed by confusion and fear. His voice slipped out a whisper, “Why did he do that for me? How? How could he do that for *me*? He *hates* me, I know he hates me.”

“No, he—he doesn’t.” Danny swallowed the sobs that threatened to escape. He wiped his bloody knuckles on his pants. “He *likes* you, a lot.”

Lloyd jerked at the words. He stared at his hands. “But, but I’ve been mean—”

“Doesn’t matter what *you’ve* been, he’s stuck on you.” Danny rested his head on the mattress as he remembered. “He wouldn’t let *you* go through that. He’s...” Danny shuddered.

“He’s what?” Lloyd searched his face for answers.

“Been through this before. *Fuck!*” Danny dug his fingers into his scalp. “I should have known! I should have anticipated he’d do this! *Fuck!* I’m a *failure!* *I failed!*”

Lloyd felt as though all of his blood were in his feet. His head was light. He sat up in a daze. He reached out and touched Danny on the shoulder. “Maybe you’re wrong? Maybe, maybe they’ll just question him and call him names?”

Danny ignored Lloyd’s innocently hopeful questions. He grabbed Lloyd by his shirt and pulled him close. “If he...no...no matter what condition he comes back in, *you*.” Danny pressed Lloyd to the wall. “You say another bad thing about what he is or who he likes and I’ll *wring* your *fucking neck* until your eyeballs *burst*.”

Lloyd froze. “I won’t say a thing.”

“Not even a *look* out of place. No tones, no gestures, *nothing!*” Danny hissed.

Lloyd nodded frantically. “Okay!”

Danny let him go. “Good.”

Lloyd trembled as unformulated thoughts and fears raced through his head. He struggled to understand. “Wh...what happened before to...to Oro before?”

Danny rolled up his shirtsleeves. A tattoo of tally marks went from his elbow to his wrist on both arms. Danny pointed to three of the marks. “*They* happened.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means I had a *just cause* and in Texas, that’s enough.” Danny leaned into Lloyd, his voice gravelly, “And if I get the chance those four soldiers are getting added to my score.”

Rake bumped up against someone in the dark. “Sorry, Alec Guinness.”

Alec sighed. “Why do you keep calling me Alec Guinness?”

“Code names.” Rake nodded in the dark. “Part of my way you know.”

“Oh,” Alec replied. “I follow the way of the Force.”

“Yeah, that, well *I* follow the way of *Rake*.”

“What is this? I have never heard of it.”

“I—” An elbow shut Rake up. He rubbed his side and kicked at Katarina. “Bitch.”

She laughed in the dark. “Come on you guys, we’re supposed to be hiding.”

Mica turned and bumped into Sammy. “I still think we should have tried to get away.”

“You can’t.” Rake grinned. “*It’s your destiny!*”

Mica huffed. “Bullshit it is. You *got* us caught because you want to get freaky with the princess!”

Rake smirked. “And you can’t, because she’s your sistah!”

Mica kicked towards Rake’s voice. “She’s not Lara!”

“Ow!” Darq hopped on one foot. “Ow! Why was that necessary? I am getting dented!”

“Sorry, Darq.” Mica apologized. “Can’t see. Meant for Rake.”

Sammy beeped and lit up in the dark. "Hey, I thought we were on movie names?"

Katarina hissed. "Will everyone *shut up*? They're going to send the probe in."

Sammy snorted. "Hey guys, we're going to be probed!"

The sound of footsteps grew closer. The group went silent.

Voices carried on above them, "Look, fertile master, I can handle myself."

"But I should be the one protecting *you*, especially now."

"Oh yeah, you're doing a fantastic job so far! *I* didn't get my arm hacked off by an old man! Hello, blind much, it was a goddamn glowing sword!"

"I had never seen such a weapon before. I will not let one get me again."

"Right, look, you don't know this movie. So be quiet. We're supposed to get jumped any second."

"No one is jumping you but me."

"Really, Marx? If you want that to happen you might want to defend me this time and not get your arm chopped off!"

Marx hissed. "That one will not catch me unawares again!"

Rake burst out of the floor and leapt on Marx's back. "Surprise assault!"

Marx smashed Rake into the ground. He lifted his hand and saw Rake's face. Marx gaped.

"I think I broke his neck."

Tasaneé shoved Marx out of the way. "You fucking *dumbass*! What's *wrong* with you?"

"He jumped on my back!" Marx gestured at Rake.

"What happened to your sense of smell?" Tasaneé touched Rake's face. "Couldn't you like tell it was him?"

Marx stared at his hands. "No."

Darq crawled out of the floor. "Can I help?"

"Hey, Darq. Nice outfit." Tasaneé pulled him over. "I think Marx ruined Rake's day."

Katarina poked her head up. "Rat, is that you?"

Tasaneé grinned and tipped her hat in Katarina's direction. "Yo!"

Katarina gave her a once over. "You're a Storm Trooper?"

Tasaneé examined her taupe uniform. "Is that what I am? They called us the scanning crew. Do you like my bitchin' hat?"

Darq turned to Katarina with tears in his eyes. "Mom! Marx killed Rake!"

Rake kicked Darq in the face. "Back off, little man! Didn't you learn the first time?"

Darq snarled and clawed at the ground.

Katarina leapt on him and pinned the Rexos to the floor. "Rake, are you trying to kill all of us! Don't piss him off!"

Rake smirked. "He can't heal shit. He ain't a Rexos anymore. He doesn't have *rages*. He's a goddamn droid *fluent in over six million forms of communication* and that's it!" Rake cracked his neck.

Darq touched his teeth. "He's right. I don't have fangs." He sighed. "This would explain my lack of healing capabilities, both for you and for me."

Tasaneé poked Marx. "Maybe that's why you got your arm cut off. Lack of Hunter skills." She snapped her fingers. "I've got no spark either come to think of it."

Katarina looked down into their hiding spot. "Mica? Green and growing?"

Mica shook his head and stood. "Nothing."

Rake sat up. "Then if Ravil is here, she'd be powerless as well. That's why she hasn't come to us yet."

Katarina let off Darq and looked to Tasanee. “Don’t suppose you’ve seen her around?”

Marx and Tasanee shook their heads. Marx sniffed the air, disgruntled. “I cannot sense *anything*. Is this what it is like to be one of your kind?”

Alec climbed out of their hiding spot and stared at Marx and Tasanee, confused. “Who are they?”

Marx snarled and leapt on Alec. He slashed through his throat and bit his face. Marx lifted and slammed the limp body into the ground. “Cut off my arm now, old warrior!”

The rest of the crew stared as blood pooled around the corpse.

Rake choked and pointed. “You just *killed* Alec Guinness!”

Mica frowned at the corpse. “Well...he was going to die *anyways*.”

Katarina leaned over his body. “The plot is *fucked* now. Thanks, Marx.”

Sammy rammed into the corpse. “Maybe he comes back to life?”

The body vanished.

Sammy spun around. “Okay maybe not. We’re fucked.”

Marx’s scanning crew clothes disappeared and Alec’s robes appeared on his shoulders. The others stopped and stared. Marx turned to them and wiped blood from his lips. “Why have I changed garb? What am I now?”

Rake grinned. “A fucking Jedi master.”

Marx nodded. “Master over whom?”

Rake pointed to Mica. “Him. Do you have a lightsaber?”

Marx checked his things and pulled out a silver cylinder. His eyes narrowed. “This device is the one that severed my arm.” He turned it on and waved it around. He pretended to parry blows. “I like it. Do you have one, Mica?”

Mica nodded, changed his mind, and shook his head. “Uh. Yeah, maybe.” He secured the weapon in his pocket. “I...I’m not really skilled or anything.”

Marx grinned. “Let us practice together, *student*.”

Mica wiped his forehead. “We just did that, all tired out.”

“Practice again.” Marx advanced on him. The group backed up in the tiny hall space on the ship.

Rake edged towards Marx. “Can I see it?”

Marx took a step back. “No, I want this thing. It is mine. I have earned it by defeating my enemy.”

“*Wait*.” Tasanee frowned. “Doesn’t Marx have to go fight Vader and die now?”

Marx made a face. “I am not *dying*.”

Mica nodded. “Yeah. He has to at least get the tractor beam fixed, and then he can die.”

“I am *not* dying.” Marx curled a lip.

Rake smirked. “Too bad, *it’s your destiny*.”

Mica turned to Rake. “Stop *saying* that to *everyone!*”

Rake grinned and made a slashing motion across his hand. “I think you should say goodbye to it now.”

Katarina clapped her hands together. “Right, okay. We’re not changing plans. We’re pushing through. Rake, get those two dumbass Storm Troopers up here. Darq, Sammy, get ready to go. Sammy, you’d better remember your part. Marx, you’re coming along with us and following the plot.”

Tasanee folded her arms. “What about me?”

“No hard feelings, but you’re an extra. Maybe you can figure out what the hell’s going on.”

Tasanee smiled and walked towards the cockpit of the ship. “Right, well, have fun. I wonder if they have a radio on board.”

Marx grabbed her hand. “I want you with *me*.”

“No way!” Tasanee pulled out of his grip. “You’re going to fight Vader and die. That sounds like a terrible idea.”

“I’m not going to die.” Marx waved towards Mica. “You...*you* are my servant. Go fight this Vader for me. Die in my place.”

Mica balked. “No, that’s *not* the plot. *You* have to fight him.”

“I am your master.” Marx loomed over him. “You must *obey* me.”

“No way!” Mica stepped back behind Katarina. “You can’t change the plot like this! You can’t ad-lib!”

Marx smiled. “Why not? What will happen if I do?”

Sammy beeped. “Maybe we can get out of the game if we break it. I think Marx is on to something, you guys.”

Rake shook his head. “You already tried breaking it, and the same stuff happened anyways. Marx, you have to go to this duel and be killed so that you’ll come back as a space ghost and harass Mica for rest of the movie. Mica can’t be the hero on his own. He needs you to boss him around.”

“Hey.” Mica glared at Rake.

Marx flicked his wrist. “I am not losing a duel on purpose. That is dishonorable.”

Katarina sighed. “Marx, you *have* to fight Vader. He was your former student and now he’s come back to fight you.”

“He disobeyed me?” Marx raised an eyebrow.

Katarina nodded. “Yeah, like in a major way.”

Marx put his lightsaber away. “A fight between master and student.” He glanced over at Mica. “I seem to have two disobedient disciples.”

Mica pointed. “I’m *not* being disobedient, and I’m not your disciple! In the movie Obi-Wan did not order Luke to fight Vader!”

“He should have.” Marx sniffed the air. “Fine, I shall duel this Vader and *kill* him.”

Rake gaped. “You can’t kill—”

“Yeah.” Katarina cut Rake off. “Sounds great, Marx. Let’s go, guys. We have a movie to churn through.”

Sammy bumped up against Darq. “I still say we should break it.”

A Storm Trooper walked into their midst and cocked his head. “Freeze?”

Katarina tackled the Storm Trooper and choked him out. “We just have to get to the end of the movie and it’ll be done.”

“How does that make sense?” Rake checked his blaster.

“Well, it will end and then we’ll be free.” Katarina punched the second Storm Trooper, sending him flying down the passageway. “Rake, that one’s yours. Get suited up, Mica. We’re doing this right.”

Mica slipped on the Storm Trooper gear and kept his eyes on Marx. “Doing it right, running through a movie the *right* way.”

Katarina picked Mica up and tossed him back. “Don’t smart off.”

Marx smiled at Katarina. “I like you this way. You should be this strong all the time.”

Darq grinned. “You’re like a Rexos now!”

Rake shoved Darq out of the way. He had white body armor on. “How do I look?” He

waved his gun around. “Better than Mica?”

Mica secured his white helmet over his head. “We look the same.”

Darq walked up to Rake and punched him in the stomach. He threw Rake down the ramp that led to the rest of the Death Star. He hopped up beside Katarina. “Can I walk with you, Mom?”

“Sure.” She smiled at him.

Rake gasped from his spot on the ground. “Traitorous Wookiee!”

Marx kissed Tasanee on the cheek. “I will be back.” He grabbed Mica by his chest armor and followed Katarina and Darq.

“Let me go!” Mica pulled against him. “Let me go, Marx!”

Sammy trailed them. “Do either of you have force powers?”

Rake limped by the trio. “Don’t remind them about that. Neither one of them deserves it.”

Marx followed Sammy, ignoring Mica’s protests. “What is a *force* power?”

Sammy whistled. “You’re going to love this, Marx. Listen up.”

Ravil kicked at the dark walls of her prison cell. She muttered, “Stupid, stupid, stupid.” She caught her foot on her white sack of a dress. She grabbed the hem and ripped. The fabric tore along the seams. Ravil pulled along the edge, turning the entire thing into a skirt. She threw the material on her bunk and laughed. “Ha!”

The dress grew back. Ravil hopped up and down. “Ipsos, come on! I don’t see anything funny about this!”

Ipsos’s high voice came over the speakers, “That’s because you’re not trying to have any fun with it!”

“Yeah, obviously!” She glared at the ceiling. “Why can’t we just talk?”

“In your current condition that would be pointless. Sorry, but true.”

Ravil punched the wall, frustrated. “For all I know you’re some lunatic implanting memories while you kill my friends!”

“Hurtful. I know you don’t want to play, but you’re about to whether you want to or not.”

“Ipsos!” There was a crash and bang outside the doorway, followed by muffled voices.

Ravil jumped to her bunk. “What was that?”

“Your fun has arrived! Gotta get back to work. I can’t pay attention to you right now, but we’ll catch up later I promise.”

Ravil leaned towards the door. Shouting grew louder. The door shuddered and opened; two Storm Troopers fell through, one on the back of the other. The one doing the carrying slammed the rider into the wall, knocking him off. The rider got up and tackled the other soldier, taking him out at the knees.

The carrier kicked the rider in the face and rolled to his feet. He looked up and saw Ravil. The Storm Trooper took a step back and cocked his head.

The one on the ground looked up and froze.

Ravil glared right back at the pair. “*What?*”

The standing Storm Trooper turned to the one on the ground, patted him on the head, and walked out. The door closed, leaving Ravil and the other one alone.

Ravil folded her arms. “Well? What now?”

The Storm Trooper jumped to his feet. He grabbed his helmet and pulled, but it wouldn’t come off. He punched at the side, frantic. He pointed to his head.

Ravil sighed and grabbed the helmet, put her foot to his chest, and kicked. She fell into her

bunk, the helmet in her arms.

Rake gasped for air and dropped to his knees. The lights in the room dimmed. The sounds and sights faded out. He reached for her. This had to be a dream. “Ra...Ravil?”

“Rake?” Ravil tossed the helmet. She hadn’t sensed him there at all. “*Rake?*”

“Ravil!” Rake jumped to his feet and swept her into a hug. This was real. Ravil was here, safe in his arms.

Touching her brought a rush of sensations that set every nerve in his body alight. Rake dove into it headlong. He kissed the crown of her head and managed to speak, “It’s you!”

“Yes, I’m—” Ravil coughed as he squeezed her, “Rake, Rake! Your outfit hurts, I can’t breathe!”

Rake loosened his grip, but didn’t let her go. He held her gently, one hand against the back of her head, pressing her face to his throat. Rake choked. “You’re...you’re not dead! I thought...I thought I was never going to see you again.”

“I’m fine, I’m safe,” Ravil spoke into his neck. She closed her eyes, expecting a lecture. “I’m sorry I left. I just couldn’t let it get you guys. I—”

“We can talk about that later.” Rake cut her off. “I’m just glad you’re safe.” He breathed into her hair. “I didn’t know what I would have done if you’d been hurt.”

“I’m so sorry!” Ravil held on to him until it hurt her. She knew he missed her as he’d miss any of the others, but for a moment, she pretended it was something else, something special. She blinked back tears. “I’m sorry, Rake.”

Rake’s voice broke. “You don’t need to apologize.”

“Yes, I do.” She leaned back to look in his eyes. “I mean it. I won’t do that again.”

“I won’t let you.” Rake kissed her forehead and closed his eyes, struggling for calm. Memories flooded his head of the last time they’d been like this, the moment before she’d left. He felt their last kiss that was too brief, he heard her rushed words, and he remembered his shocked stupor. Pain and guilt roiled in his guts.

Rake’s shame forced him to face himself here and now. He had not been honest and brave when she had been. He’d failed to measure up in what could have been their final moments together, and he had no excuse. He was a coward and because of it she’d disappeared just like Lara.

Lara...He had spent years clinging to a memory of Lara and a wrecked heart. He never expected that anyone could ever be able to make him feel again, but Ravil had. She’d told him she loved him, she’d opened herself to him, and he’d done nothing but deny her. He’d willfully ignored his heart, pushed her away, and pulled himself back, but he couldn’t hide from the truth anymore.

Ravil had cracked and broken through the wall he’d built. When she disappeared, she had ripped his heart out and taken it with her, because it was hers. With her here in his arms, he felt complete. His blinders were gone. He saw himself clearly.

He loved her. All encompassing, no strings attached, head over heels, undying love.

He trembled as his heart skipped a beat. He gasped and clutched her. Rake couldn’t hold her tight enough. He wouldn’t let her go again. No matter who came looking for her, the Empire, the Resistance, or another Navigator; she was his, and he was hers.

She deserved better. He’d known that all along, but he assumed it meant someone else, someone different, not *him*, but who was he fooling? He’d let no one else near her. *He* had to be better. He would correct this, starting now. Rake pressed his cheek against hers. “Ravil, I need you to know that—that I—I lo—”

“Hey!” A helmet free Mica fell through the open doorway. “We’re taking heavy fire out here. We gotta go! Hi Ravil!” Mica waved, grinned, and glanced at Rake. Rake’s look of death made him jump back to the doorway. Mica held up his hands and backed out slowly. “Right, uh, we’ll uh, hold them off for a minute more. Take your time. No rush.” The door closed.

Ravil laughed. “Mica’s *Luke!* That’s awesome.” She looked up at Rake. “What do you need me to know?”

Rake forced a smile as blaster fire hit their door. Fucking Mica, he’d kill the little bitch later. He pulled out his gun. “I followed your last command. Being here isn’t my fault. I didn’t do anything stupid.”

Ravil blushed, remembering what else she’d said to him. She was glad he hadn’t brought up her love confession. Ravil forced the thought aside and pushed at him playfully. “I think I used up the stupid quotient for the both of us. I’m sorry I’ve gotten you all involved in this *Star Wars* mess.”

“Sorry?” Rake managed to smile. “I’m playing Han Solo.”

Ravil smiled. “Yeah, but I’m not the right princess.”

“You’re perfect.” Rake gave one of her hair buns a squeeze. “A bitch, a badass, a babe.”

Ravil laughed. “I’m *not* a babe.”

Rake grinned and sighed wistfully. “I can’t wait until the *metal bikini.*”

Ravil thumped him on the arm. “Cretin.”

“Scoundrel, Your Worship.”

Ravil pushed at him. “*Don’t* start that.”

“I have to. It’s my role.” Blaster fire punctuated his words. Rake took her hand. He’d get another chance to tell her he loved her, or he’d make another goddamn chance. “Shall we go for a walk?”

Ravil grinned. “Are you rescuing me? I thought that was Luke’s job?”

“We fought for it, Mica and I. I won of course.” Rake opened the door and looked outside. Laser fire hit the wall near his head. “Where’s our cover fire?”

Katarina ran down the hall towards them. “Well, it was just me since you decided to...*Ravil?*”

Ravil picked up the edges of her dress. “Hi, Kat.”

“Good to see you.” Katarina ducked into an alcove and fired at the Storm Troopers that followed her. “Where’d Mica go?”

Rake frowned. “I thought he was with you.”

Mica poked his head up from a hole in the wall near their feet. “I found the garbage chute.”

Rake looked down. “You’re not supposed to go there yet.”

“You stole my thunder.” Mica frowned. “What should I have done? Waited around?”

Ravil grabbed a gun from Rake’s belt and fired down the hall. “Right, so officially, I’m sorry you guys are sucked into this. It’s my fault.”

Katarina fired down the corridor. “Where are we really?”

“That I don’t know, but there’s another Navigator involved.” Ravil got a few more shots off. “You were right, Rake.”

Rake frowned and fired over her head. “There really was a Navigator *in* the black hole? I thought that killed them.”

“Well, maybe not?” Ravil pressed herself back against the wall. “I don’t really understand her or what she’s doing, but this place is her creation.”

Katarina scowled and ducked as blaster fire scorched the wall above her. “Don’t suppose

she'll let us go.”

Ravil shook her head. “She has an agenda, and no, we don’t get to leave until it’s finished, whatever that means. She seems a bit unbalanced.”

Rake fired at Storm Troopers. “Then it looks like we might be in this for a bit.” He covered Ravil. “You don’t have your abilities do you?”

“Nope, none.” She shook her head.

Rake nodded. “Then keep under cover and go with Mica.”

“It’s not that bad of a drop.” Mica took Ravil’s hand and helped her into the hole. “It’s sort of fun.” He slid down with her.

Rake gestured towards the opening. “Get going, Kat.”

“No way.” She wrinkled her nose. “You first.”

“Stop being a baby.” Rake shoved her towards the hole and jumped down after her. The pair landed in a pile of damp garbage in a small, dark room. Rake stood up and inhaled. “I always wondered what it smelled like in here.”

Katarina held her head and sloshed away from him through the dark water at their feet. “God my sense of smell is stronger! Nasty!” She doubled over and gagged.

Rake laughed and pointed. “That’s what you get! Movie karma!”

She coughed and gestured in his general direction. “I’m going to *laugh* when we get to Lando!”

“Wrong movie.” He kicked at fetid muck and floating trash. “This place isn’t so bad.”

Ravil waded to the small exit hatch and tried to open it. “Locked. I don’t remember what I’m supposed to do exactly. What happens next?”

Mica gestured towards his feet and frowned. “Well, I’m about to get jacked. Don’t suppose we can get around that.”

Rake kicked Mica in the ass, sending him towards the deep end of the room. “No way, this is your *destiny*.”

Mica went red. “I swear to...stop *saying* that!”

Ravil grabbed the hems of her dress and slogged towards Katarina. “That’s right, Luke goes under, and then we get squished.”

Katarina plugged her nose and swayed on her feet. “I think I’m going to pass out.”

A moan emanated from nowhere and everywhere and bounced along the walls. Mica sighed and looked towards the garbage.

Rake laughed at him. “Get ready!”

Mica tossed Rake his gun. “Keep that dry for me at least.” He made a face. “Yep, *something’s alive in here*.”

Katarina heaved in the corner. “You’re such a martyr, Mica.”

Mica grimaced. “*Something just moved past my leg*.”

Rake stood next to him. “Now remember, plug your nose and don’t open your mouth. It’s just like swimming lessons.”

Mica glared at him. “You always dunked me! You fuc—” his legs shot out from under him and he went below the water.

Rake clapped and laughed. “Best part so far! Oscar worthy!”

Katarina and Ravil shot at the water. Katarina looked to Rake. “Come on and help!”

Rake eyed them both. “Why? He’ll get spit up eventually, just give him a minute.”

“Rake!” Katarina glared at him.

Mica surfaced and clawed at Rake’s legs. A tentacle wrapped around Mica’s neck, but he

got his hands on Rake's arm. Mica grinned. "Come on down!" He pulled, hauling Rake under the water with him.

Ravil and Katarina gaped and redoubled their blaster fire. Rake's arm appeared above the waterline. He made a fist and punched the soupy mess of liquid and garbage. A tentacle grabbed his wrist and yanked. Ravil shot it in half.

Rake jumped free and shouted at the water, "Don't grab the lifeguard, motherfucker!"

The walls shuddered and mechanical grinding and clanging filled their ears. Katarina put her gun down and sat on a solid pile of garbage. "Now the fun *really* begins."

Ravil continued to shoot at the water. "We'll be fine though, right? I mean we *can't* die."

Katarina shook her head. "Marx already killed Alec Guinness and Rake got shot earlier."

Rake rubbed his neck. "So we might be able to die."

"No way." Ravil glared at the ceiling. "Ipso! You didn't mention anything about *dying!*"

Ipso's laughter bounced off the walls, and the machine resumed crunching.

Ravil scowled. "She doesn't mean it, she wouldn't *dare*."

Mica sputtered and clawed his way out of the garbage. "Why're you all standing around?"

Rake smirked and flicked garbage at Mica's head. "You seem to be able to handle yourself okay."

Mica climbed onto a pile of debris. "Well, I've got some bad news. You remember that little communicator thing?" He patted himself down. "Lost it."

Katarina shrugged weakly. "Sammy knows what she's supposed to do. She'll come through for us."

Ravil and Mica shared a worried look. Mica dug in the garbage near his feet. "You're trusting *Sammy* to save us?"

"Yeah."

Rake grabbed a steel pipe and braced the walls. He pressed against the metal. "*I've got a very bad feeling about this.*"

The walls rumbled and inched closer. Mica watched Rake's pipe bend. "Hey look...*the walls are moving.*"

Katarina braced her feet against the ground and pushed against the metal. "Sammy *will* save us. It's always the last second, but that's how it's supposed to go."

Rake grimaced. "She's probably dicking around and forgot about us."

"Rake! She's your sister!"

"Yeah." Rake nodded and pushed at the wall. "I know her real well. We're probably going to die."

Ravil plugged her nose and dove beneath the surface of the water. Rake watched her in horror. "Ravil! Princess Leia does *not* do that! Get out of there!"

Ravil surfaced and took a breath. Rake swiped at her but missed as she dove beneath the water. "You stop that right now! You're going to get sick!"

Mica snorted. "Sounding very Han right now, Rake. Pretty sure he'd let her dunk and dive."

"Oh and what about *Luke*?" Rake snarled and waded deeper into the muck. "You're supposed to be the hero! You save her!"

"I'm supposed to be the hero? Really?" Mica grinned. "Are you sure?"

"Oh fuck off then!" Rake jumped in the water. "Ravil, get up here now!"

Ravil popped out of the water. "Found it!" She handed the comlink to Mica. "Go for it."

Mica flipped it on. "*Sammy! Darq!*"

Rake looped his arms around Ravil's waist and hauled her out of the water. "Stop doing things by yourself! We are a team!"

Ravil blushed. "Sorry."

Rake put her on top of garbage. "I wish you'd include me in these ideas of yours. You never let me in."

She pushed back her wet hair. "You always respond with no."

"With good reason!" He checked her for injuries. "I should be the one doing that kind of thing, not you!"

Katarina looked back at the pair. "Sounds like someone needs to go have couples therapy."

Mica tossed the comlink towards Katarina. "I think we're fucked."

Katarina caught the device. "Why?"

"Sammy's laughing on the other end and won't stop."

Katarina frowned and spoke into the comlink, "Sammy! You listen to me right now!" She got an earful of maniacal laughter. "Darq! Darq, are you there? I'm in trouble, Darq! I need help!"

Darq's voice sounded far away, "I can't! She's taken my head off, Mom. Sammy's gone mad!"

"Taken your head *off*?" Katarina rested her head against the encroaching wall. "Oh we're *fucked*."

Marx slid along an unremarkable gray wall, so far strangely unnoticed during his quest. He peered into a dark humming room that was lit with strange broken lines of light that ran up and down the walls. The space had a platform crossing the center with the pillar he was here for offset to one side. He frowned, looked up, and looked down. The room had no ceiling or floor that he could see, just this never-ending pillar and the platform that touched it. Marx shook his head. "What a terrible design." He darted to the center of the room and slid around the pillar to access the control panels imbedded in the structure.

Marx looked at his hand where Sammy had written his instructions. He flipped a few switches on the control panel, and the sound in the room changed. The Hunter made a face. This was his *big* responsibility, his moment? Flipping *switches*. He was a grand master here in this place, and all he got to do was turn a machine off and then go and die.

Marx stared at the instructions on his hand and back at the machine. He concentrated and flipped his wrist. The buttons sparked and shorted out. He grinned.

An alarm turned on.

Marx glared at the speaker. The sound cut out with a squeal and blue smoke as the sensors fried. Satisfied that he was done, he stepped around the side of the control panel, back onto the thin bridge that bisected the room. "How amusing. Such a waste of ability."

Storm Troopers ran into the room. They raised their weapons. "Stop!"

Marx waved his hand and threw the men over the edge with his new powers. More followed behind and he did the same to them. On the third suicide wave of Storm Troopers, he got an idea. He held his hand up. "Can you stop for a second?"

The Storm Troopers stopped. "Yes?"

Marx folded his arms. "Tell me about this *Vader*."

The soldiers looked between each other. "Uhm..."

"What is his best attack?" Marx waved his hand in the air. "What does he do the most?"

The one in front shrugged. "He chokes people."

The other two nodded. “Yeah, yeah force choking is his thing.”

Marx raised his hand. “Like this?”

All three clutched their necks and fell over the edge of the bridge. Marx watched them plummet and grinned. “Thank you.” He took out his lightsaber and crossed into the next room.

Rake slammed into Katarina at an intersection of halls. He scraped at the air with his hands. “Wait, I want to go with *her!*”

Mica smiled and draped his arm around Ravil’s shoulders. “Too bad, she’s *mine*. What’re you going to do about it?”

“Kick your ass is what I’ll do! Ravil! Ravil, don’t go with *him!*”

Ravil turned away from Rake and stalked down a side hall. Mica followed her and flipped Rake off. “Bye!”

Rake shouted, “Come back! Damn it! Don’t *kiss* him at least! Please don’t kiss him!”

Katarina lifted Rake off his feet and ran the opposite direction, taking him with her. “We’re supposed to stick to the story!”

Rake kicked his feet. “Mica cutting us out of the trash compactor with his lightsaber *wasn’t* part of the original plot.”

Katarina eyed their surroundings. “We didn’t have a choice there.”

Rake struggled. “I want to be with *Ravil!*”

Katarina tossed him down to the floor. “I think she would have gone with you if you’d said something meaningful before we were all nearly squished to death!”

Rake rubbed his ass and started to stand. “But Han didn’t.”

Katarina hit him upside the head, knocking him back down. “You were facing death and all you could say was *we’re all going to be a lot thinner?*”

“That’s what Han *says!* *You* were the one that said to stick to the story, that’d we’d live if we just followed the plot!”

“And we *are* alive.” She pulled Rake to his feet.

“But—but now she’s irritated with me!”

Katarina got in his face. “Stop being a baby, she’s Leia, she’s *supposed* to be irritated with you. Start shooting some extras, *Han.*”

Rake fired blindly. “Stupid Wookiee.”

Marx leaned on a wall as his enemy came in to view. He sniffed the air and flicked his wrist; his lightsaber turned on with a hum. He smiled and waved it around casually. Vader said nothing, but approached, his own lightsaber turning on red. Marx frowned at the difference in color. “Why is mine not red? I want one that is red.”

Vader stopped and recited his lines, “*I’ve been waiting for you.*”

“Good.” Marx gave him a once over.

“*We meet again, at last. The circle is now complete.*”

Marx dropped into a Hunters’ crouch, balancing on his toes. He envisioned disemboweling his opponent in black.

Vader appeared unworried. “*When I left you, I was but the learner; now I am the—*”

Marx threw out his hand. Vader flew into the wall with a satisfying thud. Marx grinned, enjoying his new abilities.

Vader leapt to his feet, responding with a wave of his own.

Marx leapt to the ceiling and flipped behind Vader. He caught the edge of Vader’s cape on

the lightsaber and sliced it in half. Marx moved in a blur of speed and tagged Vader's arm, scoring his armor. He ducked a swipe by Vader and back flipped towards the hangar, more or less following the cues Sammy had instructed him on earlier.

Vader followed him as Marx knew he would. Marx stuck out his tongue to taste the air. He waved his lightsaber around, enjoying the sound it made.

Vader stalked him. "*Your powers are weak, old man.*"

Marx hissed. "I'm going to *let* you strike me down." He made a face, irate that this was apparently necessary. He eyed Vader's helmet. He had designs on leaving some permanent mark of his presence. Marx dove forward, gouging the black material. He slashed and jumped backwards, leaving an X on Vader's helmet.

Marx danced back, the hangar coming into view. He sighed. "This had better be worth it."

Rake and Katarina stopped just behind an open doorway that looked into the docking bay where their ship was currently trapped. Rake eyed the soldiers that stood between them and their vessel. He cocked his head. "Hear any lightsaber action?"

Katarina shook her head. "No. Think Marx screwed us?"

"Eh." Rake leaned out of the doorway. "He'd take one for the team to keep Rat safe."

Ravil and Mica ran up from another corridor, panting. They stopped on the other side of the doorway near Rake and Katarina. Ravil rubbed her hands; rope burns made them red.

Rake reached out and smacked Mica on the head. "Why was *she* the one holding the rope?"

Mica blushed. "I'm the better shot."

"I hear the fight." Katarina shushed them. The four went quiet and listened.

The Storm Troopers between them and the ship wandered off to watch the battle.

"There's our cue." Rake smiled and grabbed Ravil's hand. She flinched. He let go.

"Sorry, forgot."

A flash of gold marked Darq's escape towards the ship from the room he'd been hiding out in. He ran with a limp; his left foot was on backwards.

Sammy followed him and beeped. "Stop being so *pissy!* You're all back together."

Darq picked up his pace. "You get away from me! You're insane!"

Sammy raced to catch up with him. "I was doing it for the good of the group."

Rake, Katarina, Ravil, and Mica focused on Sammy as she got in their line of sight. Rake pointed. "You *bitch!*"

Sammy stopped dead in her tracks. She swiveled towards them and beeped. "Oh, hi guys. Glad to see you made it."

Katarina left the cover of the doorway and stomped towards Sammy. "You irresponsible *child!*"

"What?" Sammy backed up and ran into Darq. "Hey, gold ass, move it!"

Katarina jumped on Sammy and punched her metal sides. "You almost killed all of us!"

"But you lived!" Sammy spun in a circle, trying to knock Katarina off. "I'm improvising! Trying to break the program."

"We can *die* in this program!" Katarina pried at Sammy's sides.

"Darq *didn't*, he rebuilt fine. Hey! Come on we're supposed to be having fun! How is this going to be fun if there aren't any surprises?"

"You didn't know he would be okay before you started! You didn't know *we* would be okay!" Katarina picked Sammy up and threw her towards the Millennium Falcon. "We could have been hurt! What if we'd died?"

“But you didn’t! We’re fine!” Sammy rolled on her back like a turtle. Her feet kicked uselessly. “Someone help me up.”

Katarina touched Darq’s shoulder. “Are you all right, honey?”

Darq nodded. “Now, yes. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you, Mom.” He blinked back gold tears. “I thought you were going to die and I couldn’t help you.”

“It’s not your fault. We coped.” She gestured towards the ship. “Get on board and strapped in, we’re leaving soon.”

“What about Sammy?”

Katarina glared at Sammy. “I’ll get her.”

“Marx just bit it.” Ravil ran past her as Katarina went for Sammy. “Time to flee.” She ran on board the ship.

“Marx *down!*” Rake hooted. “Way to be a team player!” Storm Troopers took notice and shot at him. Rake shot back. “Someone, cover me!”

Mica fired at Rake’s side. “Rake, what are you doing?”

“Marx left his lightsaber!” Rake ducked down and pointed across the expansive space. “It’s just sitting there!” He crawled forward, ducking under fire.

“Rake!” Ravil ran out of the ship. “*Rake*, you stop right there!”

Rake stopped. He looked over his shoulder. “What?”

“Get back here!” She pointed at the ramp. “You’ll get hit doing that!”

“I’ll be fine!” Rake grinned. “Mica’s a *great* shot!”

Ravil picked up her skirts and headed towards him. “Then he can cover the both of us.”

“No!” Rake got up, ran back, and tackled her. He held her down. “Are you trying to get killed?”

She met his gaze. “Are you?”

“So.” Mica stood over the pair and shot at movie extras. “I could *probably* cover you, but Vader *is* over there.”

Rake looked into Ravil’s eyes. “You don’t want me to go?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Fine.” Rake let her go. “Mica, we’re leaving.” He covered Ravil as she ran back to the ship.

“No worries.” Mica squinted and fired, hitting Storm Troopers in the heart. He shot a few more. “I bet I could do this all day.”

Marx appeared near Mica’s side as a ghostly figure. He force-slapped Mica across the face. “Get on the ship and protect my mate, student.”

Mica held his cheek and gaped at Marx. “Oh, no way!”

Rake laughed. “Yes! Marx, you rock!”

Marx smiled and faded out.

“Come on!” Mica and Rake ran up the ramp into their ship.

Rake sprinted straight for the cockpit. “I’m hoping Marx *got that tractor beam out of commission or this is going to be a real short trip. Okay, hit it!*”

Katrina flipped switches and the Millennium Falcon stirred to life. She glanced over at Rake and smiled as he slipped into his seat. “Surprisingly, the lines are still apt.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rake tossed his blaster to the side as their ship left the Death Star. He raised his voice, “Hey Mica, are you ready to shoot?”

Mica stood in the doorway to the cockpit. “I guess.”

“Then get ready.”

“Right.” Mica turned to go.

Marx whapped Mica upside the head. “Where did Tasanee go?”

Mica scowled at the ghostly image of the Hunter. “There are no extras on board in this scene, so she’s gone.”

Marx growled. “Find her with your powers.”

“I *can’t*, you fucker. Leave me alone! Why aren’t you gone too?” Mica pushed around him.

“Because, I became more powerful than you could possibly imagine.” Marx grinned and curled his claws in the air. “I shall find her myself.”

Mica eyed him. “Does that mean you’re leaving me alone?”

“For now.” Marx faded out.

Mica sighed and stomped towards the gun controls. He muttered, “Didn’t get to rescue the princess, my master is a giant *cat*, what else is going to suck?”

Ravil passed him in the halls. She ducked into an alcove and jumped in the other gun chair. “I’m shooting too!”

Rake slid into the small room right after her. “No way!”

“Yes way!” She grinned and looked over the controls. “I don’t get to do enough cool stuff in this movie.”

Rake sat down next to her and shoved her with his hips. “You are not getting to shoot.”

She punched at his leg. “Stop being mean!”

Mica cheered as he shot a TIE Fighter out of space. “One for me!”

Rake picked Ravil up and set her on his lap. “Fine, shoot away. You’re just going to get us killed.”

Ravil wiggled, getting comfortable. “*Here they come.*” The ship bounced. Ravil grinned and fired, hitting a ship on its first pass. “Ha!”

“*Don’t get too cocky.*” Rake smirked into her hair. “One for *us*, Mica!”

“Here come more!” Ravil turned with the guns, blowing up another.

Rake set his hands gently on her hips, enjoying the sensation. He closed his eyes as she cheered and bounced. He sighed through his nose. “Ravil, can you tell what I’m thinking?”

Ravil stood, fired, and missed. “Here in this place?” She concentrated. “Nope.”

Rake smiled and looked at her bottom. “Interesting.” Good more like it. He leaned back in his seat. Finally, a chance to think whatever he wanted without her overhearing on accident. Now he could plan.

Mica blasted the last enemy ship. “We’re done!”

Ravil turned in his lap and grinned. “That was fun.”

Rake folded his arms behind his head. “Yeah, it was.” He looked her over. Her hair was mussed; her white skin was flushed faint pink. He cocked his head. Having her here in his lap, looking like this, he wished he could freeze the image and keep it. This was perfect.

Ravil smiled shyly under his scrutiny. “Sorry I took your scene. I couldn’t resist at least trying it. Maybe Sammy’s right. Maybe we do need to mix things up. Perhaps that’s what Ipso’s looking for.”

“You think so?”

Ravil shrugged. “Might as well give it a try right?”

Rake sat up and wrapped his arms around her. He smiled. “If you’re sure.”

She blushed. “Rake, what are you doing?”

Rake leaned in to kiss her, but the scene went black.

“Damn it!” His voice faded out.

Lincoln stood just outside the edge of the fighting ring. He touched the key around his neck, fingering the floating metal. He glanced towards the stairs, wavering between going back to Kennedy or staying down near the fights. He fought his urge to see her. He turned towards the cage and watched Waitrey slaughter a Hunter, but his thoughts were stuck with Kennedy.

He'd woken up early in the morning to find her passed out by his side. She'd barely stirred when he'd brushed his hand through her hair. Blood had been on her lips and hands, *his* blood. She'd spent the night cleaning him, aiding his wounds in healing, but he knew that wasn't what all of the blood was from.

Lincoln remembered the night before in patches. His stomach muscles flexed, recalling their kiss. He touched his lips without realizing it, thinking of her fangs pressing into his flesh, into his neck. Lincoln's temperature spiked and his hair rippled.

Hunters nearby glanced over in curiosity. Lincoln ignored them. He knew the sensation, the indications. His body wanted to seal them together with blood. Lincoln had no doubts after last night that theirs would be passionate pairing.

He wanted to go to her, but what she'd done...the injuries, how could he have *liked* that? What did it mean? He had never been the submissive partner when it came to sex. Not that he was foolish enough to think that being submissive meant taking pain and liking it. That was something else.

Lincoln pressed his forehead to the metal fence that surrounded the ring. He was confused over what he felt and what would be good for the both of them. Lincoln touched the key. He'd locked her in the room before she'd woken up. She had food and water. He hadn't approached the door since he'd left. He needed time away from her to think. Letting her out meant he had to watch over her.

His female Instinct hissed. “Why not let her out, let her leave, let her get killed. She deserves it after last night!”

“No.” Lincoln stared straight ahead.

“She struck us!”

Lincoln groaned in pleasure. “Yes.”

His Instinct gazed on, horrified. “You do not let her do that to us! She hurt us with her failure, now she hurts us with claws and teeth? You have punished her by keeping her locked, *good*. Now go punish her more! Make her realize she can never do that to us again!”

Lincoln looked at her through his rippling hair. “Punish?”

“She cannot even care for your wounds as she should, she gives them to you! She serves no purpose!”

“She cared for me.” Lincoln let the thought sink in. “She kept me from harm.”

“She hurt you!”

Lincoln gazed at his Instinct. “As do you, but...” he ran a finger across his chest. “Her wounds have healed by morning, while yours linger.”

“That is not true! I make you strong! You do not need her! I will give you strength, I make you feel good.”

Lincoln hooked his teeth on the fence. “Could you make me feel like she did last night?” He rubbed up against the metal. “So, good—”

Waitrey drifted down to his side. “I...oh, sorry to interrupt.” She laughed and gazed at his Instinct. “Not so many Hunters can do this; I thought your kind was driven to extinction outside

the Ampyr collections and the pirates! How quaint!”

Lincoln and his Instinct gaped at Waitrey. Lincoln swallowed. “You see both of me?”

“Yes!” Waitrey stuck out her tongue and panted. “The displacement. You know normally that goes into a weapon. A nearly lost art.”

Lincoln’s Instinct hissed. “I am not a *that*.”

Waitrey purred. “Has she no weapon to live in?”

Lincoln frowned as he thought back to what Marx had told him. “A weapon?”

Waitrey touched Lincoln’s chest. “No, missing a weapon. You’ve done this backwards. First the weapon, then the displacement. You have no weapon, and it has turned to wield your limbs instead. You are the tool for it, what a funny, strange thing. I want to see more of you.” She looked around. “Why is your doctor not with you?”

“My doctor?”

“The little one.” Waitrey shrieked, making those around her duck under tables. She laughed. “I think I will take your fights tonight. Go upstairs, she’s lonely.” Waitrey smiled at Lincoln’s Instinct. “It was nice to meet you too. Go away now and give them a night.”

Lincoln turned and walked for the stairs, slipping the key off his neck. He only realized halfway up the stairs that he was following Waitrey’s mental orders, this will not his own. He frowned and shook himself, stopping on the steps. He looked at the key in his hand then upwards.

Kennedy paced behind the door to their room, her boots clicking against the ground. He approached the door and she stopped in her tracks. There was a scuffle as she backed away from the door. He put the key to the lock and turned, pushing the door inward. He slipped the key around his neck, using the few seconds before he looked up to steady himself.

Blood saturated the air. His eyes flicked up and widened. He darted into the room, slamming the door behind him. He rushed to her side. “What did you do?”

Kennedy flinched and shrank into the corner. Nearly naked, she was covered in self-inflicted cuts and gouges. Clotting blood hung suspended in the air, clouding his vision. Lincoln crouched over her. “Kennedy?”

She threw her bloodied hands up in front of her face. “I’m *sorry!*”

Lincoln hissed. “Why did you do this?”

“Because I *sorry!*” She hid her tears with her hair. “I mean it! I’ll never do again! Never hurt you again. I’m *sorry!* Please don’t be mad!” She tilted her head to the side, exposing her neck.

Lincoln kissed her beneath the ear; he pulled her into his lap and put his mouth to the closest of her wounds. She had hurt herself continually, not allowing her wounds to close. He spoke quickly, “Let yourself heal.”

Kennedy gulped air. “*Please*, I’m *sorry!* I’m *sorry!*”

Lincoln frowned. “*Heal*, Kennedy.”

She scrambled from his grip and curled up into another corner. “*Sorry!*”

Lincoln stared at her, confused. “What are you doing? Why are you running from me?”

“I truly *sorry!*”

Lincoln turned to where his Instinct would be, but she was absent. He groped for what she would have had him do. The answer slipped past his lips, “Have you hurt her.”

She whimpered. “Please don’t. Please! I *sorry!* I do hurt to me first! You no hurt because I did first!”

Lincoln held out his hand. “No! No, I’m not going to do that! I want you to heal so that

you'll be better, not so that *I* can hurt you!"

Kennedy watched him between her locks of hair. She sniffled. "You lock me in to punish."

"No, not to punish you." He edged closer. She flinched. He stopped. "I needed time to think by myself."

"All day?"

"Yes, all day!" Lincoln snarled. "I'm confused! I'm *still* confused!"

"I'm sorry!"

"Stop apologizing! This isn't your fault! I shouldn't be yelling." He took a deep breath. "Please heal, Kennedy, and let me see you."

Kennedy closed her eyes and extended a foot towards him, expecting to be dragged. Lincoln came to her instead. He took her by the wrists and pried her arms apart. He gazed down at the lacerations across her body...ones he realized matched his from the night before. Pain took root in his chest. "Don't *ever* do this again." He licked her shoulder. "I don't want to be that way anymore, Kennedy. I'm trying to be better."

Kennedy spoke in a whisper, "How am I to know which? Smarter to assume the bad is out, than the good."

Lincoln breathed out through his nose. The pain from his chest settled in the rest of his limbs. "For what I've done to you, in all aspects, I deserve to be the one confused and hurting. Not you." He moved from her shoulder to her back. "You shouldn't have to worry anymore."

Kennedy gazed at his hand, his fingers working their way between hers. "Don't want to talk about."

Lincoln put his hand over her mouth gently. "This is what started us down that path last night. Listen to me." He lapped down her spine. As he watched, her body knitted the tissue, closing the wounds. Lincoln worked to clean her off. He moved her to the side, getting to the small of her back. "Marx and Tasanee were right to take you away from me. I'm *sick*."

Kennedy gulped. "I know, but you can get better."

"I'm trying, but I am not well yet, Kennedy." The more of her he tasted, the more he wanted. Lincoln turned her in his arms so that he licked her ribcage. He breathed hard and spoke softly, "Marx and Tasanee are right. As I am now, I am only poison, a *danger* to you." He trailed his tongue up across her sternum. His licks turned to kisses. Lincoln sank down and kissed her black spots. "I should leave you alone."

Kennedy opened her mouth to protest, and he covered it again. Lincoln moved in-between her legs, kissing her bellybutton. He trailed his tongue across her skin. "And I will, I promise, but I can't now. Not with our situation." He panted into her skin. What was he doing? "You must promise me something."

"What?" Her eyes flicked down to his.

"You can't forgive me, and you must not trust me." He swallowed hard. "What you did last night was the right thing to do."

"No!"

"Yes." He growled. "You stopped me from hurting you. I want you to stop me, Kennedy. I *need* you to stop me. I need you."

"I need you too."

Lincoln kissed her stomach and laughed. "No, no you don't. Despite everything, you are healthier than I have been in some time. Resilient, strong, optimistic."

"A good mate?"

He nodded. "You would be. You will be to someone."

“To you.”

“No.” Lincoln sat up on his elbows and gazed towards her face. “I forfeited that right, which makes my being with you now all the worse.” He sighed and licked a streak of blood. He poked her bellybutton. “Are you feeling better?”

Kennedy nodded and twitched, wanting to protest his statements. Lincoln crawled up her body and looked down into her face. Gazing at her now, he could not understand what had ever driven him to hurt her. He bumped their noses together. “I have no more fights tonight. Do you want to watch the Jungay fight?”

She shook her head. She wanted to stay right here, like this. Kennedy touched his arms lightly. “Can we stay here together?”

Lincoln nodded. He was torn between taking a spot at her side and continuing to embrace her like this. Lincoln knew what the right thing to do was. He kissed her forehead and pushed off.

Kennedy grabbed for his arm and pulled him back. She kissed his lips. “Thank you for cleaning me.”

Lincoln examined her skin and pulled back once more. “There’s nothing to thank. I did a poor job of it.”

Kennedy licked her hand. “Better than it was.”

Lincoln moved her to her side and threw an arm over her waist. He intertwined their legs, lying together as they used to. Lincoln put his mouth to her hair and let his Velcro tongue catch blood droplets.

Kennedy broke into a purr, twitching at the unexpected gesture.

Lincoln placed his fingers on her stomach, feeling the rumble in her abdomen. He smiled and spoke into her hair as he cleaned, “I never did this enough.”

Kennedy blinked in shock. “You never touched me that way when awake.”

Lincoln drew his tongue from the base of her neck to the crown of her head. “I know. Only while you slept.” He chewed lightly and Kennedy went limp in euphoria. Lincoln massaged her shoulder while continuing. He licked absentmindedly and ran his tongue across the scarred stripe on her head.

She shuddered and gasped.

Lincoln pushed himself up and looked at her face, locks of her hair still sticking out of his mouth. “Kennedy?” He inhaled and was hit with her pheromones.

Lincoln slumped over her. His tongue brushed her scarred stripe. Kennedy pressed into him, her muscles tensing. Lincoln gripped her as her hips rolled. She panted. He watched her face and realized with a shock that he’d brought her to the brink of an orgasm without meaning to.

Lincoln froze. He didn’t know what to do. He’d never gotten this reaction from her before, but then he’d never done this while she was awake. He knew it was possible for some Hunters to experience sexual pleasure through their sensitive hair, but he’d never met one who could. He kissed a curling tendril of hair and she moaned.

Lincoln put his lips to her hair and kissed. He worked his hands through her locks, massaging them. Guilty and aroused, he would not have started this if he’d known where it would lead. Kennedy pressed against him, still mindless and needing. Lincoln stared at her. It was not that he sought to deny her pleasure. He did not want to hurt or confuse her, but now she was here. To not follow through would be uncaring. Or at least that’s what he told himself.

Lincoln bit gently. She reacted in small movements. He took a deep breath and held her

tight. He put his tongue and teeth to her hair and resumed grooming.

She cried out. Lincoln listened to her cries and closed his eyes, memorizing her sounds while controlling his impulse to take this further. He bit on the inside of his cheek, focusing on the pain, rather than the sensation of her naked flesh brushing up against his.

Kennedy gasped and interlaced her fingers with his. Her mouth opened, showing razor-sharp white teeth. She shuddered and her body relaxed into his arms. She exhaled and purred.

Lincoln opened one eye, unsure what her reaction would be. She blinked, sleepy and sated. He sniffed her. "I didn't intend for that. I'm sorry, Kennedy. I didn't mean to."

Kennedy turned in his arms and gazed into his eyes. "Is that what sex is like?"

"Somewhat." Lincoln watched her lips instead of meeting her gaze. "I am not trying to confuse you. I was not expecting that to happen. I swear. I still meant what I said before."

"Accident?"

"Yes, yes an accident."

"Okay." She looked sad.

Lincoln rubbed her arm. "Still I...I hope that was...nice."

Kennedy smiled hesitantly. "That was my first."

Though he'd known that, her mentioning it made him blush. "I...I know."

Kennedy curled up against him and closed her eyes. "Does that happen with your hair?"

"I...no." Lincoln watched her settle in. He wished it did.

Kennedy yawned. "I'm special."

"You are." He rested his hand on her back. "Still, I am very sorry."

"I'm not." She kissed his chest. "We sleep now."

"Oh...okay."

Evgeniy followed his new unit through the halls of the detention level as they patrolled. He gazed at each of the doors as he passed, all marked. He was not as familiar with the written language as he was with spoken Ampyr. He frowned, trying to translate the markings in his head to discern which room Danny and Oro had been placed inside.

The unit stopped to let another by, and Evgeniy concentrated on one of the doors, forcing his mind to translate. His unit moved and pulled away from him. Evgeniy swore under his breath. He made a move to follow and found he couldn't. Evgeniy looked down and around, but his body did not obey. He was last in line and no one ahead looked back.

Evgeniy concentrated. He did not feel anything holding him, he'd heard no vocal command, and his suit was not remote controlled. He just could not work up the impulse to move. Evgeniy looked at the door, his attention drawn back there. He stared at the lettering.

Evgeniy ground his teeth as his anger flared up without reason. He had a need, an all-encompassing desire to go there. He was going to go through that door and no one was going to stop him.

His muscles relaxed, letting him go. He slammed his foot into the door, cursed, and pressed the open button. The door slid back, revealing the room beyond. Evgeniy stumbled through the doorway. The stench of blood made him gag.

Oro was on the floor barely conscious, bleeding, and naked from the waist up. It was his blood in the air, though most of it was on the hands and feet of the four soldiers that stood around him. They were dressed, though two pulled clothes off as Evgeniy stepped inside the room.

Evgeniy fought his urge to throw up.

Oro raised his head. His left eye was swollen shut and weeping blood. He coughed up something and spat red saliva. "Hello, hello. Another?"

A soldier kicked him in the head to shut him up.

Evgeniy restrained his impulse to attack and calculated. Could he reasonably take four at once without jeopardizing Oro? They were not armed as far as he could tell, and they were not on guard.

The nearest soldier interrupted his calculation, "Has the Warden come looking for him?"

Evgeniy thought fast. "Warden. Yes."

One Ampyr grabbed Oro by his braid and lifted him from the floor. "I thought you said we would have time?"

"I did too." The soldier that had spoken first turned to Evgeniy. "Is he at the cell yet?"

Evgeniy shook his head. "Soon."

"Shit." The first soldier gestured to Oro. "We won't have time to get him to the Rexos."

"We shouldn't have wasted our hours with this first." The third man punched Oro.

"Should we kill him?" The second soldier looked between the others.

"No." The first folded his arms. "We haven't done anything to be executed over, yet, and beatings aren't going to get us shot."

Evgeniy cocked his head. "Executed?"

"We didn't get ourselves dirty!" The first looked to Evgeniy. "We didn't! We didn't break any rules! All we've done is rough him up. There was no blood contact, no sex!"

"Well." Evgeniy shot the first soldier in the back and drained the remaining Ampyr of their speed and reflexes. He smashed his useless blaster against the neck of the second; he kicked the third in the head and tackled the fourth. Evgeniy pressed the struggling man to the floor by his neck, cutting off his oxygen. The soldier went limp. Evgeniy let him go. "You intended to."

Oro smiled towards the ceiling, splitting his cut lips open. "You speak shitty Ampyr, Czar. Your *Ruskie* shows through."

"Has not yet been problem." Evgeniy closed up part of Oro's uniform and hooked an arm around Oro's limp waist and legs. He lifted him gently and flinched at Oro's uncontrollable trembling. He adjusted his grip, attempting to touch the least swollen spots. "You have broken ribs."

"So *that's* what the terrible pain every time I breathe is." Oro shook his head and flinched. "Never would have guessed. Funny, I think my pelvis is broken too...ten too many stompings. I'm not screaming so I must be in shock. Right? I read that somewhere..."

"We will get you healed." Evgeniy turned to the doorway. "Where is Danny? They do this to him too?"

"No." Oro touched his bruised temples with broken and bloody fingers. "I don't know. I've gotten my head fucking kicked, punched, and smashed into the floor. I don't even know how long it's been since I last saw him." His voice trailed off into a moan. He groped at his torn jumpsuit. "I don't suppose you have an extra I can put on? I can't let him see me like this. He'll lose his shit."

"No, not worry of right now." Evgeniy recalled his map of the floor. "Getting healed is priority. Which way to room?"

"I have no clue."

"I will solve." Evgeniy stepped into the hall. A squad of Ampyr stopped and stared, their matching black helmets giving no indication of the expressions beneath. He jerked his chin back towards the room. "Executed four for impure things done with prisoner."

The unit stepped back. The officer in charge nodded. "Understood." He tapped the speaker at his neck. "Cleaners to detention ward. Respective squads, report for possible sweep." He gestured to Evgeniy. "Return him to his cell. A Rexos will be sent along. I will inform the Warden."

Evgeniy looked right and left behind his visor. He had a fifty-fifty chance of fucking this up.

Oro swallowed. "Go left."

Evgeniy went left; the soldiers did not stop him. He frowned as they walked away. He spoke softly, "I thought you did not know where room was?"

Oro waved his hand and winced. He held his broken wrist. "Intuition."

Evgeniy turned a corner and looked from right to left. "Where now?"

Oro pointed at a door. "That one at the end of the hall."

Evgeniy marched down there and put his hand to the room lock. The door slid open and Evgeniy stepped into the cell.

Oro was torn from his hands. Evgeniy received a punch to the face that threw him back through the doorway and cracked his helmet. He held his head as a black blur grabbed him by the throat and hauled him back into the room.

Lloyd punched Evgeniy in the stomach. "Scum!"

"Don't kill him, Lloyd." Danny held Oro in his arms. "I'm going to do it *slowly*."

Oro coughed and pawed at Danny's clothes. "Don't, its *Czar*."

"What?" Danny stared.

Evgeniy fell back against the cell wall. His head rolled to the side, dizzy. "I found Oro."

Danny grabbed Lloyd before Lloyd could punch Evgeniy. "Czar? What are you doing here?"

"Came to find." Evgeniy stood on unsteady feet. "Not much time to talk. Lincoln and Kennedy on board, I followed. All here to rescue you. Undercover."

Danny handed Oro to Lloyd. "Take care of him."

"I will." Lloyd cradled Oro in his arms and sat on a bunk. He rocked Oro and closed his eyes.

Danny looked away from the boys. "What is the plan?"

Evgeniy shook his head to dispel the ringing from Lloyd's punches. "No plan yet. Escape vessel not here. Rake and Ravil have not come yet."

Danny lost his smile. "Shit. Get the fuck out of here. We can't hide on this boat, not with Hunters on board. They'll find us *and* you."

"I will be near. This thing will not happen again." Evgeniy gestured to Oro. "They are sending Rexos for him." He backed out. "We go as soon as I hear from Kat."

Danny nodded. "Thank you for bringing him back."

Evgeniy saluted and locked them back in, memorizing both their location and the markings on their door. He would be able to find them again. He examined the hall, noting the position of the elevator. They were in a prime location for rescue, but Danny was right. Without a way off the ship, there was no point in running.

Evgeniy adjusted his helmet. Lloyd had cracked it with his punches, and now he was covered in Oro's blood. He needed a new suit before anyone noticed. Evgeniy focused on his mental map of the level and retraced his steps to a supply room.

Evgeniy slipped inside the room and popped off his helmet. He tossed it to the side. He examined the uniforms and looked at his, deciding to switch out his patrol garb for the reinforced

gear of a prison guard. If he was going to be a guard, he had to look the part. Evgeniy kicked his boots off and snapped open his collar.

The door opened behind him. Evgeniy went still. His brown hair was dark enough perhaps to fool someone if they did not scrutinize his features, but his skin was brown, not pale like an Ampyr.

“Freeze for a sweep check!” A female voice came from behind.

Evgeniy smiled. He could take down one soldier. He turned and was met with five soldiers, unmasked, all with guns. He held up his hands. “I am officer.”

They examined his badge, then his looks, the two contradicting each other. The Ampyr in front was an officer of his rank. She frowned. “I do not recognize you. *Surrender your weapons and follow for questioning.*”

Evgeniy felt the pull of her voice, but ignored it. He stood still, contemplating whether he should attack now or attempt to bluff his way out of the situation.

The officer gave him no option. She slammed the butt of her rifle into Evgeniy’s throat, cutting off his ability to speak. Evgeniy choked and kicked in her direction, but missed.

The officer’s face opened up with bloody scratch marks. The body was tossed into the others. The other Ampyr jumped back, surprised. Necks opened, eyes popped out, limbs broke with wet snaps. The five were down and incapacitated in under a minute.

Evgeniy coughed and rubbed his bruised throat. “I’ve been wondering where you’ve been.”

“I have *pirate* things to do, Nee.” Emmalethe faded into view and touched his throat, concerned over his injuries.

Evgeniy smiled; she was a welcome sight. Not only had she saved him, but she was also back to wearing her favorite outfit—nothing.

Emmalethe took a plant from her coiled hair and chewed on it. “I go between you and Kennedy, long walks.” She held out her hand. “Up you go. Is your throat well?”

“It’ll be fine.” Evgeniy wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her. “Where are the Hunters?”

“Down in strange place, dark, don’t like there. Call Cagetown.”

“They’re fine?”

“Fine yes, both strong.” She kissed his lips. “You smell of Oro.”

“He got hurt, it’s his blood. How did you find me?” Evgeniy picked up the first Ampyr body and dumped it down a vent.

“I still have smell sense.” She touched her nose. “I know your smell.”

Evgeniy sniffed himself and picked up a second body. “Have you been eating enough?”

Emmalethe showed off plant matter rolled into tight packages, which were tucked under her chitinous hair. “I fine.”

“I found your mess in the greenhouse.”

Emmalethe smiled, her clear needle teeth showing. “I found better place, kitchen for officers, much more. No soggy women.”

Evgeniy grinned, shoving the last body into a vent; she’d run into the Cleaners too. He stripped off his old uniform and put on a new one. “I have to stay on this floor with Danny and Oro. Are you going back to this Cagetown?”

Emmalethe shrugged. “Do not like there. My alpha strong on own, the Lincoln one obeys.” Her camouflage spots shifted across her skin. “No place to sleep there. The Hunters will smell me out.”

Evgeniy yawned; he was running on little to no sleep. “I haven’t slept either.”

Emmalethe took his hand in hers. “Come with me. I’ll show you best spot.”

“I’m not as small, cannot go through too many vents.”

“Be quiet, I already thought of.” Emmalethe tugged on him.

“I need to watch over Danny and Oro.”

“You can’t watch if no sleep. You’ll make another dumb mistake. You sleep with me, then go back out and be dumb, but alert.”

Evgeniy smiled and followed her as she climbed up to the ceiling and pushed open a grate. He watched her ass and sighed, wishing they had the luxury of fooling around.

Emmalethe kicked at his face. “I thought no looking.”

Evgeniy crawled up after her. “I think helping me out will earn you your coming of age badge.”

Emmalethe smiled and stayed out in front. “Good, I want you mine again.”

Evgeniy grinned. “Me too.”

Danny turned from the door to Oro. Lloyd sat on the bed with Oro in his lap. Both looked like they were asleep.

Danny knelt at Lloyd’s side and looked Oro over, trying not to break down into tears at the sight of him. He examined Oro’s broken fingers, cuts, bruises, and torn outfit. There was no place he could touch that wasn’t damaged. He took him from Lloyd and hugged him carefully. Danny whispered, “I’m so sorry, Oro. I let this happen again. I fucked up. I’m *sorry*.”

“Not your fault.” Oro opened his working eye. “Don’t worry. I’ll be okay.”

Danny kissed Oro’s forehead and smoothed back his black hair. Tears slipped out of his eyes. “I can’t do anything else *but* worry. You’re my boy.”

Lloyd’s eyes shot open. He stared at Danny.

“Not a baby anymore,” Oro mumbled and dribbled out red spit.

“You still are to me.” Danny gently wiped Oro’s lips with his sleeve. “I...” He gulped down air. “Did they...”

“It wasn’t like last time.” Oro coughed, a wet sound, and cringed. “Czar found me before they could get to the fin...finale. I just got a beating and verbal abuse.”

Relief spread across Danny’s face. “How did he get you out of there?”

“He killed them.” Oro groaned and touched his jaw. “I think that’s fractured too, a la boot to the face.” He glanced up at Lloyd and gave him a crooked smile. “Do I still have my teeth?”

Lloyd nodded numbly. “Some...”

“I hope—” Danny’s rage mixed with nausea over Oro’s injuries. “I hope *they fucking suffered*.”

“I...” Oro curled his legs to his chest. “Hurts to talk.”

“Then rest.” Danny touched his head. “Just sleep. I’ll take care of you.”

“Kay.” Oro closed his eyes and went still.

“Shit.” Danny placed Oro back on his bed. He sat on the ground and rubbed his eyes as Oro drifted to sleep. He shuddered as the first snore slipped out of him. He pressed his fingers to his temples. “Caroline, I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Who’re you talking to?” Lloyd’s voice came out a whisper.

Danny wiped his eyes. “Oro’s mom...my—my wife.”

“Oh...” Lloyd wrapped a blanket around Oro’s body. He tore out stray threads of the blanket until his nerves had calmed enough to look at Oro’s face. The blood and swelling were too much to take in, so Lloyd focused on Oro’s messed hair. He gently unwound Oro’s braid; he

ran his fingers through the hair, fixing knots and pulling out clotted blood until the black hair was fine once more. He braided it again. Lloyd blinked and tears escaped. His hands trembled. He bit his lip to keep from crying.

Lloyd could not take his eyes from the myriad wounds that ruined Oro's features. Wounds *he* would have taken if Oro hadn't gone in his place. Lloyd didn't understand it. Oro had protected *him* after all the mean things Lloyd had said to him. Lloyd didn't deserve it, and Oro did not deserve the pain and hurt he felt.

Oro twitched as he fell into a deeper sleep. Only then did Lloyd open his mouth. A wild and agonized sound seeped out of his chest. The moan turned to a keening wail, charged with power.

Danny felt the wordless command to grieve. He sat next to Lloyd and wrapped an arm around him. "He'll be okay. He's stronger than he looks."

Lloyd leaned on Danny and sobbed. He'd never experienced violence, lust, or hate before. Now he felt all of these things at once and it was too much to handle. He gnashed his teeth and pressed his face to Danny's shirt.

Danny hugged him. "You'll be okay too, just breathe slowly." He took a deep breath. "Just like that." Danny rocked Lloyd. He'd dealt with grieving teenagers more times than he could count. He knew that every slight they incurred felt like a mortal blow, the stirrings of lust and love as if they'd never feel anything that strong again. Everything was immediate, it was now, and to them, there was no end to what they felt. Lloyd didn't know how to cope.

Danny rubbed his shoulders. "You'll be okay."

"No!" Lloyd managed words. "He's *hurt!*"

"We'll get a Rexos and everything will be fine."

"Where! Where is the Rexos?" Lloyd twisted his fingers in Danny's clothes. "Where?"

"Soon I'm positive. *I promise.*" Danny nodded. "I promise, Lloyd. It'll be all right, you just have to trust me."

Tears streamed down Lloyd's face. He choked. "You really promise?"

"I do, and I'm old. I know what I'm talking about."

Lloyd nodded and breathed deeper. He looked down at Oro. "I *hate* them."

"Who?"

"Those Ampyr!"

Danny nodded, agreeing. "They're dead now."

"Good!" Lloyd scratched at the blankets around Oro. "I wish I had done it!"

Danny sighed. "No, you don't, Lloyd."

"I do too!" His black eyes were bright.

"You're not a violent person."

"I will become one!"

"Then you'd regret it." Danny forced him to stay still. "Don't give in to your anger. It will only end up hurting *you.*"

"I need to help him! I—I had a plan!"

"Violence does not help Oro. That is not what he needs."

Lloyd gulped. "What does he need? What can I do for him?"

"Be his friend." Danny managed a smile. "He needs someone to keep him from getting in trouble in the future. His mouth gets him into spots if you hadn't noticed."

Lloyd nodded. "Order him not to do that anymore! He's your son, make him obey!"

"That doesn't work, Lloyd." Danny shook his head. "I *wish* it did. Oro's like Rake, the

pair follow their emotions, not their minds.”

Lloyd wiped his eyes. “I’ll protect him, and I’ll fix him.”

“You can’t *fix* him, Lloyd.” Danny gripped his shoulder.

“But I—I—” Lloyd looked down at Oro. He sniffled. “I made a plan...to help him with that.”

“I know it might feel to you right now that it’s possible...to change someone. But trust me, you can’t change people. You can’t make them be who you want them to be. People change but they do it on their own terms and because *they* want to.” Danny tried to catch his gaze. “The only person you can change is yourself. So you need to decide...you either like them as they are or you don’t.”

Lloyd realized Danny was no longer just speaking about the here and now. He looked away. “Maybe you can like them, but hate yourself for it.”

Danny gave him a nudge. “Now is that any way to live?”

Lloyd sulked. “I don’t know.”

Danny smiled at the genuine teenage behavior. “Kid, you might not have a long while to live. When it comes right down to it, all you should really focus on is making yourself happy.”

Lloyd said nothing in response.

The door to their cell opened and a Rexos woman stepped through. Her features were blank. She moved stiffly and held her arms out for Oro. “Now.”

Lloyd handed the Rexos Oro, but watched her every movement. The woman brushed her hands across Oro’s skin and his wounds healed with snaps and spasms. His swelling went down, but he didn’t stir at her touch. She handed him back to Lloyd and walked out.

Danny watched her go. “Strange, the Warden didn’t come.”

Lloyd placed Oro in his bunk and lay down next to him. “Is he all better?”

Danny ran his hands across Oro’s body; the bruises were still there, but the cuts and broken bones had been mended. He frowned at Oro’s blotched skin. “The bare minimum is all he got. He’ll still be in a lot of pain. Don’t move him around too much. He needs to rest for a while.”

“Okay.” Lloyd adjusted himself to be near, but not bumping Oro. He repositioned Oro’s pillows and blanket, making sure everything was right for him.

Danny moved back to his bunk. He watched Lloyd fidget over his son. “Lloyd, he’ll be okay. Now, can I trust you watch over him?”

Lloyd looked up. “I will.”

“You’re not going to harass him as soon as he wakes up? None of this *plan* nonsense, okay?”

“Oh...okay.” Lloyd shook his head. “I won’t say anything, but—”

Danny sighed and pulled his covers up over his body. “What?”

“What if he tries some...something?” Lloyd’s cheeks burned bright red.

“Then say no, and wake me up if he becomes a bother. If he’s still in pain, he’s probably going to be gunning to irritate you to make himself feel better. So keep that in mind.” Danny adjusted his pillow and faced the door. “Give him some leeway until he feels better.”

Lloyd nodded and stared at Oro’s face as Oro slipped deeper into sleep. Oro’s braid came loose. Lloyd’s hand darted out, caught the hair, and repositioned it. The act of moving shifted the blankets. Lloyd fussed over them, moving everything back into place. He smiled, as things were correct once more.

Oro twitched in his sleep, messing it up. Lloyd sat up do to it over again.

Danny sighed. “*Stop*, Lloyd. Just go to bed. *I’ll* keep watch.”

Rake came to on a moving cart. He yawned and leaned towards Ravil. "Hello, Beb." Ravil rubbed her eyes at the change in light. "Now what? Where are we? Hi, Kat." Katarina looked around from her spot on the cart. "Looks like we made it to the Rebel base."

Mica stretched and grinned. He was on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He kicked his feet. "I get an X-Wing! I get to blow the Death Star!"

Rake smirked. "Don't get too excited." They came to a halt and Rake jerked his head toward some extras. "Ravil, go to tell that guy about Sammy here, they're expecting you to." Rake thumped his hand down on Sammy's head.

"Got it." Ravil hopped off the cart.

Sammy squirmed. "Let me go!"

"No way." Katarina picked up Sammy's robotic body. "You are officially on lockdown, babe."

"This is no way to treat your woman!" She kicked her treads. "Come on, guys! I was just having fun! Enough of the heavy already."

The lights dimmed. Rake looked on after Ravil. "Scene change!"

Mica fell into a chair. He touched his orange flight jacket and smiled. "About time."

Tasaneé leaned over and nudged him. "For what?"

Mica jumped in his seat. "Rat?" He looked her over. "Danny is going to *die*."

She made a face and looked down at her matching outfit. "Why?"

He grinned. "I think you're supposed to be *Wedge*."

Tasaneé frowned. "Does that mean I get to live?"

"All the way through to the end." Mica smiled. "You've graduated out of extra status."

Tasaneé clapped her hands. "Righteous!" The other pilots looked back at them. Tasaneé ignored them. "Where's Marx?"

Mica frowned. "Floating around as a force entity. Last I heard he went off to find you."

Tasaneé jumped in her seat. "Someone goosed me!" She turned in her chair and pointed. "Sammy!"

Sammy rolled backwards. "I totally didn't! Kat, back me up!"

Katarina looked over from Rake's side. "I didn't see her move."

Tasaneé clapped her hand down on her breast. "Ow!" Her eyes narrowed. "Marx, you fuck. Where are you?"

The pilot in the next chair flew into a wall. Marx appeared in the seat as a ghostly image; his tongue was out. "I found you." He pawed at her. Tasaneé swatted at him, but her hands went through his body. Marx grinned. "Excellent disparity."

"Oh, great." Tasaneé folded her arms. "Now I get to be ghost molested."

"Shh!" Rake glared at them. "You have lines coming up."

"I do?" Tasaneé craned her neck and watched an old man talk at the front of the room.

"What's going on? Hey, there's Ravil! Hey, Ravil! Did you guys know she was up there?"

Katarina smirked. "Yeah."

Rake stepped up behind Mica and shouted in his ear, "*That's impossible, even for a computer!*"

Mica jumped in his seat and rattled off Luke's line, "*That's not impossible, I used to bull's-eye womprats in my T-16 back home, and they're not much bigger than two meters.*"

“Good boy.” Rake pushed on his head. He made a face at Marx and Tasanee. “Time for shit to get real. Ravil!” He jumped over chairs as the group dispersed. “Hey, Ravil wait!”

Ravil jumped up. “Rake?”

“We need to talk. Come over—”

“Here!” Rake tripped over a pile of boxes and landed on hard ground. The scents and sounds were different. “Scene change?”

“Yep.” Katarina helped him up.

Around them, an intercom went off. “*All pilots man your stations. All pilots man your stations.*”

Rake touched his forehead. “This jumping around is getting to my brain.”

Mica punched Rake in the arm and grinned. “*So, you got your reward, and you’re just leaving?*”

Rake rubbed his arm. “Actually no, I’m going to look around.”

Mica lost his smile. “What?”

Rake smirked. “They could use a good pilot like me, don’t you think?”

Mica frowned. “Rake, if you don’t get out there I’m fucked.”

“Is that your way of telling me I’m the hero? *I save the day.*” Rake cupped his hand around his ear. “Am I hearing this correctly? Kat?”

Katarina smiled. “I think that’s what he’s saying, Rake.”

Mica glared at them both. “Assholes.”

Rake handed Katarina the last of the boxes. “Seriously, I actually just *need* to find Ravil.”

Mica shook his head. “You can see Ravil after you save me!”

“I’m not leaving her on this planet when our only hope at success is *you*. We’re both leaving this place pronto and not looking back. No way am I coming back for you. That would be like suicide or something.” Rake grinned.

Mica glared at him. “What will it take for you to get out there in the Falcon?”

“To save your ass?” Rake looked at Mica’s belt. “Where’s your lightsaber?”

Mica patted down his clothes. “I don’t think I have it in this scene.”

“Well.” Rake shrugged. “*May the force be with you.*”

Mica walked backwards to his ship. “You’re a *dick*.” He turned and ran off.

Katarina smirked. “Why do have to tease him like that?”

“Tease him? I’m serious.” Rake started towards the ships. “I have to get Ravil. I am not relying on Mica to save us.”

Katarina grabbed Rake by his arm and lifted him into the air. “Oh no, you’re not.”

“Hey, let go!” Rake kicked his feet. “I know what I’m doing! Kat! You’re supposed to have my back!”

Mica ran, looking back and forth at the ships. He spotted Ravil wandering around, confused amongst the crowd. He grabbed her. “Hey.”

Ravil stood on her tiptoes to see better. “Hey yourself. Have you seen Rake? He wanted to talk about something.”

“No, haven’t seen him.” Mica turned her away from Rake’s direction. “Haven’t seen him at all.”

“Oh well. This will be done soon anyways.” Ravil frowned and looked into his eyes. “You’re going now, right? How are feeling?”

He rubbed his neck. “Stressed.”

Ravil smiled and gave his arm a pinch. “You’ll do fine. Besides, Rake and Kat will be right there to guard your back.”

Mica looked ill. “Yeah, I bet.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have Alec Guinness anymore you know, just Marx. I don’t even know if this is going to work.” He stared at his hands. “I don’t have any powers that I know of, I—”

“Don’t worry.” Ravil kissed him lightly on the lips. She patted his cheek and wandered off. “Maybe I can find Rake for you!”

Mica smiled as she walked in the wrong direction. Wait until Rake heard she’d kissed *him*. That would serve him right. He grinned and walked under his X-Wing.

Mica climbed up a ladder and watched as servicemen loaded Sammy in. He sighed. “Sammy.”

“Mop head!” She beeped.

One of the men looked up. “*This R2 unit of yours seems a little beat up. You want a new one?*”

Mica eyed Sammy. “Well, if you’re *offering*—”

Sammy beeped. “You ditch me, and I’ll fuck you! I’ll fuck you dirty!” She twisted and dropped into the ship. “Fuck off!”

The men backed up to get away from her.

Mica hopped into his cockpit and crossed himself. “Don’t get us killed, Sammy.”

“Why would I want to get *myself* killed?”

“That’s right.” Mica put his helmet on and secured the straps under his chin. “You just put everyone *else* in jeopardy.”

“Mica!” Darq hobbled over and waved at Mica to get his attention. “Mom says you’ll be fine. She has Rake handcuffed and in the ship. She says *she’ll* drive if she needs to. Uhm, she also told me to tell Sammy ‘Come back in one piece or I’ll start dating the Millennium Falcon.’” Darq made a face. “That was *her* quote.”

Sammy beeped angrily. “Well, you tell her that I—”

“Thanks, Darq!” Mica flicked the engines on, drowning out the rest of Sammy’s retort. He focused. “All right. I’m good to go.”

Marx purred in his ear. “As am I.”

Mica groaned and put his hands on his controls. “Go away. *Please* go away.”

“Mmm, no.”

Mica looked up. “Why don’t you watch over *Tasanee*?”

“Is she in one of these ships?” Marx’s voice faded in and out as his attention wandered.

“Yeah and she’s going out to fight too. She’s in danger!”

“Unacceptable.” Marx growled and vanished.

Mica breathed calmly. Marx’s presence had disappeared. Stars and the dark replaced the docking bay scenery.

The leader called roll over their radios, “*All wings report in.*”

Mica listened as the rest of the pilots called in.

Tasanee’s voice popped over the radio. “Red-two, represent. Ow! Marx, you mother—”

Mica flipped on his radio. “*Red-five standing by.*” He stared at his controls. His hands shook. Mica ground his teeth together. “Please don’t let me die today. Please don’t let me die today.” He stared straight ahead as the Death Star came into view.

Sammy laughed. “Thar she blows! Ahoy!”

“*We’re passing through the magnetic field. Hold tight. Put your deflectors on double front.*”

Mica jerked and stared at his controls. “Sammy, is that your job or mine?”

“Uh...” She beeped.

“*Sammy!*” He looked over his shoulder.

“I can do it! I can do it! Don’t worry! Just concentrate and you’ll be fine.”

Mica stared at the Death Star as it filled his view. “Easy for you to say.”

Tasaneé flipped on her radio. “Fucking hell, Mica. I knew you liked balls, but seriously that one’s huge! Sure you want to blow it?”

“*Cut the chatter, Red-two.*”

“Bite me, Red Leader.”

Red Leader ignored her and recited his lines, “*Accelerate to attack speed.*” The ships sped up. “*This is it, boys.*”

Mica breathed out and looked to Tasaneé’s ship. “They’re going to start firing, Rat, keep it sharp.”

He listened to the radio as Gold Leader started his attack run. Other pilots talked as they flew over the surface of the Death Star. Two X-Wings broke off and drew fire towards their position. Mica tracked Red Leader’s progress. “Sammy?”

“I’m ready.”

Tasaneé whistled. “Some heavy fire or something at, uh, fuck...I don’t know, you’re all going to die anyways!”

Mica shook his head and spoke into his radio, “*This is Red-five; I’m going in.*” He swallowed hard. “This is going to *suck.*”

“I’m the one on the outside!” Sammy beeped.

His X-wing dove and he fired at the surface of the Death Star. Explosions went off around the ship, temporarily blinding him with white light. Mica pulled up on his controls as his ride got bumpy.

Sammy hooted. “That ain’t too bad! Lightshow!”

The command to pull up blasted over their radio.

He replied on cue, “*I gotta a little cooked, but I’m okay!*”

Tasaneé laughed. “Dumbass!”

“I’d like to see you do better!” Mica soared past her ship.

Tasaneé flipped her X-Wing and fired at the Death Star. “Like that!” She blew up a tower. “Yeah, how about that!”

Mica grimaced and weaved around laser fire. “You have Marx helping you, don’t you?”

She snorted. “I’m just using what you’re not.”

Mica fired at the Death Star and she went for another pass. “I’m the one with *the force* you know, and I’m the one that blows the Death Star.”

“Or are you?” She laughed.

Mica white knuckled his steering wheel. “Tasaneé, if you take this away from me I’ll *never* forgive you.”

Red Leader interrupted their conversation. “*Watch yourself! There’s a lot of fire coming from the right side of that deflection tower.*”

“*I’m on it.*” Mica sighed. “I mean that, Rat.”

Tasaneé laughed. “I’m just fucking with you. I don’t want anything to do with it. Marx, go

back and help him.” She pointed at something outside of her cockpit. “Hey, hey the fat guy is going in! Yeah fatty! Go, fatty, go!”

Mica shook his head as Red-Six dove down to meet his death.

Tasanee cheered until the ship blew up below them. “Oh man. That’s harsh. I forgot about that part of the scene.”

Mica spoke into his radio, “Watch yourself, Rat. Vader’s going to be out shortly.”

Marx hissed in Mica’s ear. “Vader? Where?”

Mica shook his head to dispel the noise. “Kidding! He’s on the Death Star, gotta blow it up.”

“Are you lying to your master?” Marx growled.

Mica looked from side to side. “No.”

A voice came over the radio, “*Squad Leaders, we’ve picked up a new group of signals. Enemy fighters, coming your way.*”

Mica gripped his controls. “Fucking hell, here they come.”

Marx force-slapped Mica in the face, scoring the side of his helmet with claw marks. “You lied to me.”

“Fuck you!” Mica blinked to regain his focus. “That’s *not* Vader!”

Red Leader broke into their conversation. “*Keep up your visual scanning. With all this jamming, they’ll be on top of you before your scope can pick them up.*”

“Heh.” Sammy’s snicker was barely audible above the background noise.

“Marx, I have to go help someone.” Mica looked around. “Come on, radio in.”

Biggs came over the radio, “*I can’t see it!*”

“Yeah! I’ll be right there!” Mica cranked on the steering controls and fell into a chase with a TIE Fighter. He watched the ship blip around on his screen. He fired, blasting the ship into pieces. Mica pulled up and away. He looked around. “We’re going to take a hit. Sammy, get ready.”

“Totally prepped, boss Jedi Mica.”

Tasanee laughed. “Now one’s on *your* butt.”

“Swell.” Mica grimaced as the ship took the hit and jostled. He spoke into his radio, “*I got hit, but it’s not that bad.*”

Sammy beeped. “He’s still behind us!”

“I know!”

“*I’m on it, blondie.*” Tasanee whistled and fiddled with her controls. She shot past Mica. “I’m the *real* Thai fighter, bitch!” She blasted the ship out the sky. “Another kill for me!”

Mica grinned. “Thanks, *Wedge.*”

“This ship is tits!” Tasanee whooped.

Radio dialogue interrupted their chatter. “*Red Leader, this is Gold Leader; we’re starting our attack run.*”

Mica watched the Gold team fly into the trench. He took a deep breath. “All right, all right. Sammy, almost our turn.”

Sammy beeped. “I’m ready, are you ready? I’m ready. Who’s ready? We’re ready! So fucking ready!”

“Are you high?” Mica glanced over his shoulder. Sammy responded to him with laughter. He looked forward and swallowed. “I am going to die.”

The Gold team members got picked off one at a time, sending them crashing into things with appropriately cinematic explosions.

Mica shook his head. "That's still depressing."

Sammy laughed, mimicking an actor. "*They—came—from—behind!*"

Red Leader called for Mica, "*Luke, take Red-two and three. Hold up here and wait for my signal to start your run.*"

Mica flew towards his new position. "Sammy, let me know when you see anything."

Marx hissed in Mica's ear. "Vader is out here now. *Attack* him! Avenge me, my disciple!"

Mica jerked. "I am *not* your disciple!"

"Kill him!" Marx pushed him around in his seat.

"*You* kill him! I'm busy!" The X-Wings below him flew lower.

Red Leader came over the radio, "*This is it.*"

"You're just going to have to wait, Marx." Mica chewed on his bottom lip and followed their progress from afar. "I'm going to have to help someone in just a second."

Marx made Mica go blind. "Do as I say."

"Marx, fucking hell!" Mica hit his radio and spat out his line without having to see, "*Coming in point three five. Marx! Stop! Tasanee, Marx is trying to kill me!*"

Tasanee snarled over the radio. "Marx, vendetta elsewhere!"

Marx let Mica go in time for Mica to watch Vader shoot his teammates. Mica punched his controls. "Fuck!"

Sammy beeped. "Look at it this way...they were going to die anyways."

"*Not* helping." Mica focused.

"Well sorry I tried. I'll just *beep* from now on."

"Right now, that would be the best." Mica double checked his equipment. "Rat, we're up."

Tasanee gestured from her cockpit. "But he hit the big ball!"

"It wasn't a hit." Mica tapped his headset. "Listen."

Red Leader spoke before Tasanee could, "*Negative! It didn't go in. It just impacted on the surface.*"

Tasanee shrugged. "All right then. Slap this bitch, Mica."

Mica nodded. "*Let's close it up. We're going in full-throttle, that'll keep those fighters off our backs.*"

Tasanee blasted after him. "Right-o, boss guy! Come on Red-Three, where are your balls?"

Biggs responded, "*Luke, at that speed will you be able to pull out in time?*"

Tasanee and Sammy snorted at the same time.

"*It'll be just like Beggar's Canyon back home.*" Mica grinned. "Or the Grand Canyon." He smiled. "Rake would love this."

Tasanee laughed. "You did *not* buzz the Grand Canyon."

Mica dove into the trench that cut into the surface of the Death Star. "You bet we did."

Sammy beeped. "It was badass!"

"Mica!" Tasanee followed him into the trench. "What am I supposed to be doing? That tower? Am I blowing that?"

"*You worry about those fighters!*"

"What fighters?" Tasanee looked out her windows. "I don't see any fighters." She looked up. "Oh, *those* fighters." She grinned and flipped her X-Wing around. "Let's go, boys! Come on, Red-Three, let's do this!" She hit her controls. "Eat movie laser beams!"

Mica shouted, "Tasanee, you can die here so take it easy!"

"No duh, Mica. I already died back in the space bar, and I am alive to tell the tale. You just respawn. Die motherfuckers!" Tasanee took a direct hit. "Oh! Fuck that shit! I'm hit!"

Marx snarled and watched the trio of TIE Fighters. “That is Vader! He has struck my little rat. Mica, kill him now!”

“Rat, get clear!” Mica shouted. “Marx, *no!*”

Biggs interrupted them on the radio, “*Hurry Luke—*”

“Yeah I know, Biggs, coming in faster. You can’t hold them. I got it.” Mica dodged laser fire. “Sammy, where’s my power increase?”

“Just waiting for you ask,” she replied and applied the change.

Mica jostled in his seat as his ship sped up. “Thanks!” Behind him, Biggs was shot out of the sky. Mica turned on his targeting computer and hissed. “Sammy, it was nice knowing you.”

She yawned. “Calm down, Mica.”

“But without—”

“You can do it. Luke did it by himself in the movie, so you can too. Just chill. Come on, Mica, *use the force.*”

Mica took a shaky breath. “Right.”

“*Let go.*”

Mica nodded and closed his eyes. He gripped the controls. “Letting go.”

Sammy changed her voice to match that of Alec Guinness. “*Luke, trust me.*”

Mica smiled despite the situation.

Sammy laughed and kept the voice going. “Do this and Rake will need to kiss your feet, Mica.”

Mica laughed. He pressed a button on the control panel, and the targeting computer moved away. He cut the command call off. “*I’m all right.*” He looked over his shoulder. “Sorry, Sammy.”

She switched her voice back to her own. “Whatevs, I can take some damage.” On cue, a barrage of laser fire fried her circuits. Sammy screamed and went dead.

“I’ve lost Sammy.” Mica winced at her scream. He eyed the TIE Fighters behind him and muttered, “Come on, Rake. Come on, Rake. Save me, you arrogant bastard.”

One of the three TIE Fighters took fire and was blasted to bits.

Mica grinned. He looked out his window and turned his radio up.

“That’s for hitting my sister, motherfucker!” Rake snarled over the radio. The Millennium Falcon flew by and shot the second TIE Fighter. The hit ship collided with Vader’s, destroying the first, and sending Vader’s ship into space. Rake shouted into his mic, “You’re all clear. Blow it, Mica! Send us home!”

Mica grinned. “Roger that.” He concentrated on his target and fired. The torpedoes shot off. They found their mark, disappearing out of sight and into the Death Star. Mica pulled back on his controls to get the ship out of the trench. “Time to run.”

Tasaneé blew by him in her X-Wing. “Bang bang time?”

“Oh yeah.” He grinned.

Rake tailed their ships in his. “How’s Sammy?”

Sammy sparked from her spot on Mica’s ship. “Alive, I guess barely,” she croaked.

Katarina took over the radio. “Are you in pain, Samantha?”

“Oh, so much!” Sammy wailed. “I want to fucking die for reals! Put me out of my misery! Where’s a conveniently placed handgun when you need one?”

“Sammy!” Rake and Katarina shouted in unison, “That isn’t *funny!*”

Sammy burst into laughter. “I think it is.”

The Death Star exploded behind them, filling their view with light. Tasaneé cheered.

“Boom! Boom, boom, boom!”

Rake buzzed her ship. “We have sound effects, Rat.”

“Mine are better!” She outpaced them. “Now what?”

Rake’s smile was evident in his tone. “Now we get medals and we get out of here!”

Awesome shot, Mica, really. *One in a million.*”

Mica smiled and looked over at the Millennium Falcon. “Thanks, Rake.”

Rake snickered and dove at Mica’s ship. “You owe me your lightsaber.”

Mica frowned. “*What?*”

“See you at the base, *farm boy!*” Rake accelerated away.

The group disappeared as the scene changed, and they found themselves parked back inside the Rebel Base. Mica shook his head, dazed at the sudden transition. He smiled and undid his straps as the cockpit opened. He jumped out of his ship and hit the ground. “I rule!”

Ravil pushed through the crowd and hugged him around the waist. “You saved our asses.”

Mica picked her up. “Least I could do.”

“Yep.” Rake slapped Mica on the back. “It’s all downhill from here for you, kid. Give me my Ravil.”

Mica held on to her. “Instead of the lightsaber?”

Rake leaned in. “What do you think?”

Mica set Ravil down at his side. She grinned at Rake and dashed for his arms.

Darq skidded to a stop between them. He elbowed Rake back and pushed him over. The golden Rexos-robot pointed a stiff arm at Sammy. “Mom’s mad at you! She says I’m not to give you *any* of my spare parts.”

“Well fuck you too.” Sammy threw sparks from atop Mica’s ship. “I’ll get my own private parts.”

Rake reached around Darq and grabbed for Ravil. “Hey, can we talk?”

“Sure.” She smiled at him.

“I—” Rake and Mica were jolted back as the images around them changed. Mica fell into Rake’s arms as the new scene settled into place. He groaned. “This is making me ill.”

Rake helped Mica up. He stared at his hands where Ravil had just been. He glared at the large doors in front of them. “This is getting ridiculous!”

“That’s what I’m saying.” Mica adjusted his new outfit as fanfare poured out of the air.

“Looks like the end.”

“Yep.”

Both men turned in surprise. Katarina looked between the two of them. “What? Did you forget that I was supposed to be here?”

“No.” Rake looked her over. “This just fits into my plan even better.”

Katarina eyed him. “What plan?”

Rake looked around them and back at his friends. “You’re my wingmen, right?”

Mica caught his expression and lost his smile. “Of course.”

Katarina nodded. “Sure. What’s the deal?”

“Good, any shit goes down, you cover me.”

Mica frowned. “What are you planning on doing?”

Rake grinned as a huge set of doors opened ahead of them. “Just follow my lead and don’t accept any fucking medals.”

“Huh?”

“Buy me some time, nimrod.” Rake stepped out into the light and bowed as applause and

cheers washed over him. He pointed to Mica and clapped. "Pay attention to him, he's the hero, he's the one." Rake grabbed people out of the crowd. "He needs some love! Show Mica some love. Come on, Kat, help me out."

"Rake?" Mica frowned and pushed exuberant rebels away as Katarina shoved them at him. "What are you doing, Rake? Kat, stop throwing people at me!"

"Can't." She smiled and shoved a few more people towards him. "Just go with it."

Rake edged out of the crowd's way. He looked to the end of the aisle. Ravil stood waiting on a wide set of stairs; she wore a long white dress and her hair was redone. She smiled and cocked her head at his behavior. Rake's chest swelled with happiness. He smiled and sprinted down the aisle towards her.

Tasaneé leapt out by his side and ran alongside him. "What're you guys up to? It looks like fun."

Rake put a finger to his lips. "Shh." He ran up the stairs and stopped in front of Ravil. He took her hands in his. "Finally."

Ravil smiled at him. "I thought I was handing out medals?"

Rake wrapped her in his arms. "We'll get to that. I have something more important to take care of."

Ravil blushed. "Rake, what are you doing?"

"Improvising." He held her tight and drew her in. Rake gulped and planted his lips on hers. Ravil stiffened in surprise. She sensed he wasn't kidding, closed her eyes, and kissed him back. Rake smiled into the kiss. Ravil melted into his arms, pressing her body to his.

Katarina hopped up the steps. She put her hand on Sammy's newly refinished dome.

"Well, look at *that*."

Sammy trilled. "Go bro!"

"No one gives anyone any medals!" Mica tripped as he ran up the stairs. He pulled out his blaster and panted. "No medals!"

Tasaneé laughed and sat on the lower steps. "They're extending the scene. Rake's actually done something requiring forethought!"

Ravil broke off for air. She smiled wider than she thought she could. "What...what is that for?"

Rake kissed the tip of her nose. "I've been an idiot."

Ravil blushed. "Does that mean I get a kiss every time you're dumb?"

"No, well, yes." Rake kissed her lips quickly. "I'm sorry I'm slow." He set her down.

"I...I need you to know something. I've been trying to tell you—"

White flames burst out of the ground next to the pair. Sparks engulfed everyone and froze them in place. The fire changed colors, and Ipsó cheered from within, unaware she had interrupted anything. "Hooray you're done! Congratulations!"

Rake frowned; he couldn't move anything besides his mouth. "Uh, what's going on?"

Ipsó gestured at Sammy. "Where is the Marx one?"

Marx's ghostly form appeared at Tasaneé's side. "What is this?"

The flame ignored the question. "Points winners in this round are the Sammy and the Marx. You may spend points on prizes of your choosing at whatever time you choose. Hooray!"

Sammy found her body freed as a series of numbers glowed overhead. She spun in a circle. "I won! Yeah! See what improvising gets you? And all of you doubted my plan!"

"What plan? And what are you getting besides pretend points?" Katarina gestured to the fire. "Look, flame girl, we have real life responsibilities we have to attend to. It's been fun here;

we all had a good time.”

Sammy beeped. “I sure as shit did.”

Katarina nodded. “So, now that we’ve had our fun quotient, we can go like you said.”

The flame twisted into a helix. “Not yet. Not done with all of it.”

Ravil put her hands together. “Please, we have to go!”

“Calm down, just relax.”

Ravil rubbed her temples. “*Seriously*, Ipso!”

Ipso formed into a girl of flesh and blood; she was clothed in a flowing green dress that appeared similar to Ravil’s. A fine mesh gold veil obscured her face beneath her scarlet eyes. She frowned and held out a clear blue clipboard. “I *am* being serious. You just need to see. I’m helping all of you, especially Ravil.” Ipso took a step, tripped on her skirts, and tumbled off the first step.

“Whoa there.” Mica caught her. “Don’t spill it. Up you go.”

Ipso blushed as Mica set her on her feet. She tugged on her unfamiliar clothing and gave Mica a formal curtsy. “Thank you, *Luke*.”

Mica shook his head. “It’s Mica actually.” He bowed in return and kissed her small hand. “Nice to meet you, Ipso.”

Ipso smiled up at him. “Mica.”

“Ha!” Rake pointed at Ipso. “She’s teeny-tiny. Micro-Navi. Tiny-Tot. What’re you like eight?”

“There is nothing wrong with my size.” She glared up at him. “And my stage is none of your concern.”

Katarina walked over. “Look, kid, we can’t do this whole playtime thing with you anymore.”

“I’m not a kid.” Ipso frowned. “And it’s not your choice. Stop being so impatient, I have work to do...science...things you wouldn’t be able to comprehend.” She dissolved into flames. The fire billowed around the room. “Time to move on!”

The lights shut off, the stars came out, and the credits rolled.

Tasanee cheered. “We can leave!”

Katarina sighed. “I don’t think so.”

“But it’s ended. Doesn’t this mean we get to go?”

The scene shuddered and the opening crawl of *The Empire Strikes Back* flashed across their field of vision as a familiar fanfare blasted in their ears.

Rake laughed. “Hey Mica, guess what you lose soon? Say goodbye to your hand!”

Mica hissed. “Hey Rake, have fun being *frozen!*”

Marx reached for Sammy. “What do these *points* do, Sammy?”

Kennedy awoke in Lincoln’s arms. The rumble from downstairs hadn’t lessened. The bar was still open for business, which meant artificial day had not yet come to Cagatown. She shifted in Lincoln’s embrace, seeking to get closer.

Lincoln opened a yellow eye and regarded her. “Cannot sleep?”

“I slept most of the day.” Kennedy looked into his eyes and blushed as memories of earlier came to the forefront of her thoughts.

Lincoln surprised her by breaking eye contact first. “Well.” He searched for something to say. “Are you—”

Banging on their door interrupted the conversation. Lincoln rolled on top of Kennedy and

covered her in a crouch. He sniffed and flicked his ears forward. Outside the door were acrid scents, flesh, alcohol, and leather. He ducked down and roped his hair back in to a braid. "Get up against the wall."

Kennedy's eyes were large and round. She nodded and clung to the wall silently.

Lincoln crawled towards the door as the banging came again. He sniffed, Pyros, drunk and dangerous. He flicked his eyes to Kennedy, then back to the door.

Heat washed against the door and a woman shouted, "Come out, kitty, or we're burning your room down!"

Lincoln hissed. "You wish a match in the ring?"

"The match we signed up for! Not the Jungay bitch!"

Lincoln flicked his claws out. "If I come out, will we fight in the ring or in the stairwell?"

The Pyros laughed. "What choice do you have?"

Lincoln counted three by their voices. If they were skilled, he was as good as dead.

"Lincoln," Kennedy pleaded. "Don't go."

"I must." Lincoln waved Kennedy back and raised his voice, "Then I will come out." What choice did he have? He opened the door and stepped out quickly, shutting it behind him. He looked at the three. They were young Pyros, drunk but full of energy. Their brown skin was tattooed with flames. They wore leather to protect their bodies, and all three smelled of oil and sweat. Their long blonde hair was pulled back out of their faces and tied into tight buns.

Lincoln stood taller than them by a head, but they appeared unworried. All three carried lighters and matches, not yet schooled at creating their own flame, but they could make up for their lack of skill with raw youthful power. He gestured towards the stairs. "After you."

"So you can slice our throats when we turn? No." The teens waved their hands. The girl grinned. "After you, kitty."

Lincoln stepped in front of them and took to the stairs. He kept his ears cocked, expecting to be hit from behind. The stairwell filled with the click of lighters and the scratch of matches and laughter. They were toying with him. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned back to the trio. "The ring?"

"The street." They pointed towards the backdoor.

Lincoln remained in place. He couldn't leave Kennedy here. "Why?"

The girl struck a match and controlled the flame. "Because we say so. You don't have a choice."

Lincoln walked towards the backdoor on his talons as he considered the situation. This could be a blessing. No doubt, Kennedy would come for him if he fell in the ring. In this way at least, if he died, his body would be taken before she could react and throw herself at the mercy of those in the alleys. Lincoln stretched his arms and legs.

The three behind him snickered.

Lincoln pushed open the backdoor and stepped out into the darkened street. Hunters stood in the alleys, looking for scraps. Two utility vehicles waited across the street, both had Ampyr occupants. Those in the closest vehicle noted their arrival and backed away.

Lincoln hissed. "What is this?"

The girl stepped around Lincoln, her boots humming as they kept her locked to the floor. "You made us lose money by backing out of the fights."

Lincoln watched her. "You could have fought the Jungay."

The girl smiled. "Our patron did not wish our *deaths* or our sanity." She flicked her wrist towards the Ampyr officers. "We fight in the Cage arena."

“Then why did you come *here*?”

“We heard there was a good fighter here. Our patron thought you might be a good add to our ranks. He wished to see your skills against ours. Not a fight to the death, but then you backed out.” The girl grinned. “You cost him money, and you hurt our reputation.”

Lincoln growled. “How will killing me in the street gain you anything back?”

The two boys laughed. “*You* won’t gain us anything, Hunter.”

Lincoln flexed his arms. His eyes flicked back to the building. He snarled. “You can’t have *her*!”

The girl smiled. “Guess you’d better win then.” She snapped her fingers and threw a torrent of flame.

Lincoln recoiled as a fireball slammed into the ground next to him. He lashed out with his feet, catching one of the boys by his ankles and breaking the bones. The boy went flying as an errant fireball hit him in the chest.

Lincoln scrambled along the metal street. Flames seared his lower back. He twisted and rolled, but where he moved to, fire followed. He threw his hand before his eyes and caught the brunt of a blow. His talons cracked; his skin blistered and burnt away. He smelled his own flesh on fire.

Lincoln unhinged his jaw and roared, momentarily paralyzing the remaining Pyros. He lunged for the girl, using the claws on his functioning hand to rip through her leather and into her stomach. He twisted and pulled, tearing out organs. Lincoln turned, hurling her into the side of the building.

The last boy scratched a match. Lincoln spun. He backhanded the Pyro. The boy’s neck cracked under his hand. Lincoln cradled his burnt hand and sliced through the boy’s throat to make sure he was dead. He coughed and sucked down air.

A click made him whirl in the opposite direction. The girl spat fluid and flame as she crumpled in death. Liquid soaked Lincoln’s hair, and the flames that followed caught and burned. His hair began to melt.

Lincoln went to the ground on instinct, screaming in agony. He rolled to put the flames out, but even once gone, he burned. He could barely breathe; he couldn’t think straight. He crawled for the backdoor of the bar, tracking his way back by scent alone. His burnt hand floated uselessly beside him.

A highly decorated Ampyr officer broke from the remaining vehicle and walked over quickly, his boots clicking on the ground. He stood and glanced over his three dead Pyros and frowned. His right eye ticked and his hands trembled. “Just *had* to do this did you...”

The officer skipped over to Lincoln’s side and gave him a once over. “Still alive?” His hands fluttered over Lincoln’s burnt skin. He pulled out his sidearm. “I don’t have a Rexos near enough to save you. Poor thing.” He discharged his weapon into Lincoln’s back.

The officer looked up and down the street and waved his soldiers forward. “She’ll be coming out. Get her to the elevator and up to my suite.” He passed the men a collar with a bell hanging from the leather. “This one, make sure she doesn’t damage the bell that was expensive. Yes?”

The Ampyr soldiers nodded and pushed into the building. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” The officer slid back in to his vehicle and waved to the driver. “Come on, let’s get going, go, go, go. No more dawdling. I’m simply *starving*.”

“Yes, Reloy.”

The man smiled as the vehicle pulled away.

The backdoor to the bar burst open and bloodied soldiers dragged a kicking and screaming Kennedy out of the building. She lashed out and ripped open a soldier's throat. She spotted Lincoln on the ground and kicked off her attackers. Kennedy crouched at his side. "Lincoln! Lincoln!"

Lincoln smelled her over his burning flesh and hair. He curled one finger around hers, comforted by her presence.

Kennedy stared at his injuries in horror, unconcerned with anyone around her. She cradled Lincoln, her hair brushing across his face and chest. She mewled and rocked him.

Rough hands tore Kennedy away from his side and towards the remaining car. Lincoln reached after her and struggled to pull himself from the ground. He couldn't move his legs, and he couldn't feel them either. Lincoln coughed up blood and looked over his shoulder down the length of his back. The shot from the officer had missed his heart, but hadn't missed his spine.

He groped at the ground, pushing his pain to the side. He hissed and pulled his useless legs after him. An Ampyr soldier stomped on his face. Lincoln saw stars and light.

Kennedy wailed and a sharp snap cracked through the air.

Lincoln's world went dark.

Evgeniy rolled over in his sleep. Emmalethe turned with him, her black hair clicking as it rearranged itself around her neck. Her jaw worked while she slept, going along with her dreams of food.

Muffled footfalls passed overhead. Evgeniy and Emmalethe's eyes snapped open at the same time. Evgeniy put his hand to his gun; Emmalethe faded invisible. The pair stilled, listening. They caught the faint conversation of whoever walked above them. Soldiers exchanged orders and passed on.

Evgeniy kissed Emmalethe's shoulder and sat up. Emmalethe's face shifted to pale green. "Why up?"

"I need to check in on the boys."

Emmalethe reached up into her hair, pulled out a piece of fruit, and gnawed on it. "I go too."

"Have you slept enough?"

"Stalker not need sleep like you, weak Nee."

Evgeniy pushed at her face and smiled. "I don't need as much food as you, weak Emma."

Emmalethe bit at the air. "I not need food, I *like* it."

"Uh-huh." Evgeniy pulled her into a hug, wishing he could kiss her, grope her, and do other things.

Emmalethe purred. "You will ask Danny if I ready now."

Evgeniy smirked. "If I get the chance, but we don't have the time for that even if he gives us the okay."

"I *make* time." Emmalethe stuck her tongue out as he slipped his boots on. "I want sex."

"I know you do, so do I." Evgeniy tried to keep sex out of his thoughts. "But it's unprofessional."

"Eh." Emmalethe jumped to the ceiling above and climbed towards the exit. "You not virile *that* is why you hesitate."

Evgeniy slapped her bottom and walked beneath her. "That is lie."

Emmalethe dropped the tone of her voice to mimic him. "*That is lie. That is lie.*"

They reached the exit hatch. Evgeniy listened for movement beyond it. "Are you going

back down?"

"No, I will follow you. You will make dumb mistake again, and I will rescue."

Evgeniy smirked and shook his head. He unlocked the hatch and stared at her. "I'm waiting."

Emmalethe faded out of sight. "I watch you."

"Like a nude guardian angel."

"What *that*?"

Evgeniy opened the hatch instead of answering. He climbed out into a storage room. Evgeniy sealed the hatch and waited. The door opened and shut as Emmalethe checked the hall outside of the room. Evgeniy slipped his opaque helmet over his head. He examined his uniform and officer bars. He looked like any other prison guard.

The door opened and Emmalethe snapped her fingers. "Come on, slow one, it all clear."

Evgeniy walked through the doorway and looked around. The hall was empty. He leaned in the doorway. "Did you hear any squads?"

"One turned corner."

Evgeniy nodded and slipped just inside the doorway. He'd need to stay out of sight until he could join with a patrol. He cocked his head and listened. The faint click of boots caught his attention. Evgeniy stood still and waited.

A squad of twenty guards marched past, their eyes on the soldier in front of them. Evgeniy caught the trailing member and dragged him into the supply closet. Evgeniy snapped his neck. "Can you get rid of?"

Emmalethe grinned, only her teeth showing. "I can, go, go, I find you."

Evgeniy darted out of the room and joined the Ampyr squad. He followed them, passing Danny and Oro's room. He recalled his mental map; they'd be passing more cells, interrogation rooms, and then the mess hall and Rexos office.

The officer in the lead drew them to the mess hall. Inside, rows of food bags were set out, other Ampyr already collecting some for distribution among the prisoners. Being the last group to arrive they had the least desirous job left, and Evgeniy, being the lowest rank, had the worst. He grinned behind his mask, recognizing the markings on his bag of food.

Evgeniy picked it up and tucked it under his arm. The team sat as one unit and waited for their rotation on the floor. He remained as still as the others, unsure how long this would take.

An invisible presence settled in at his side and leaned on his arm.

He smiled behind his mask as Emmalethe put her hand in his.

Oro cracked his eyes open. The room was dim, and he was in his bed with a rough blanket up to his chin. Danny snored in the next bunk over, but he couldn't move his head to take a look to make sure it really was him. His body hurt in too many places to count. The pain blended in to one aching sensation that covered him from head to toe. He felt like a leaky bag of wounds with some blood and bones in it.

He could see out of both his eyes at least, and his bones weren't broken, but the Rexos hadn't healed the strains, sprains, or bruises. She'd only fixed the life-threatening injuries.

Oro coughed lightly and cringed as pain wracked his chest. A pale, cool hand brushed his cheek. Oro flinched and a soft moan escaped his lips. "No..."

"Sorry. It's just me." Lloyd rolled up on his arm to look down at Oro. "You should rest more. Why are you awake?"

"Hurts too much." Oro licked his lips; they were dry and cracked. He didn't have the

energy to act surprised over Lloyd's proximity. "I need a drink—"

Lloyd put a water bag to his lips. "Can you swallow?"

"Hope so." Oro managed a slight smile. He took a sip and the cold water soothed the throat he'd screamed raw hours earlier. He grabbed hold of the bag and drained it. Oro let go and gasped. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Lloyd's attention fixed on a strand of Oro's hair. He tucked it behind Oro's swollen ear. "You hurt still."

"Very much." Oro dropped his gaze and stared at the center of Lloyd's black jumpsuit. "The Rexos came?"

Lloyd nodded.

"Good." Oro stared into space.

Lloyd twisted his fingers in worry; Oro gave him no witty retorts or teasing remarks. He was unsure of what to say. He plucked at the edges of Oro's torn jumpsuit that peeked out from under the blanket, needing something to do. He seized upon an idea. "We have others, replacements that are better, whole. You will feel better if you are in a clean suit. I know it." Lloyd nodded to himself.

"I know *you* care about that kind of stuff, but I don't think I can move that much right now, Lloyd." Oro rolled his shoulders slowly to get comfortable. "I'll do it later. Just...sit by the snore machine if I'm getting my contaminated whatever all over you."

"I will help you."

Oro tried to shake his head, but winced and stopped. "Lloyd, you don't have to do this. You can wake him up if it means that much to you to have order in the room. He can do it."

"No." Lloyd stared at the shredded, blood-encrusted jumpsuit. "I will do it for you." He peeled back the material at Oro's neck to look at the skin underneath, but the fabric was stuck to Oro with dried blood and would not peel easily. Oro flinched as he pulled. Lloyd stopped. "Is it bad?"

Oro gave him a small shrug as tears of pain filled his eyes. "It's tolerable compared to...it's fine."

Lloyd bit on his lip and grabbed a full bag of water. He squeezed the liquid into one of their blankets and wiped Oro's face and neck. Lloyd focused on his task, taking off the dried blood, leaving only the discoloration of bruises behind on Oro's dark skin.

Oro watched him, uncertain of his motives. He wasn't sure whether to feel nervous or grateful. "I'm surprised you're doing this."

Lloyd tore Oro's collar in half so that he could peel the fabric down to his chest. He spoke without meeting Oro's gaze, "You protected me, and you didn't have to." He ducked his head. "I am in your debt."

Oro made a face and flinched from the pain. He attempted to push Lloyd's hands away. "No, you're not. You don't owe me anything. We already went over this debt stuff. Stop please. I mean it."

"I don't mean it like that. I *want* to do this." Lloyd ignored Oro's weak pushes and removed the blanket. He looked over what he had to deal with. There was a significant amount of blood-soaked cloth. He breathed out through his nose and controlled his anger. "You...you are my friend now. Friends care for one another."

"Uh..." Oro gaped, unable to keep his surprise from showing. "You want to be *friends* with *me*?"

"I—I—" Lloyd blushed at Oro's reaction. "I have never had a—a friend. Good people are

the ones you should be friends with. I think you are a good person, Oro..."

"What?" Oro gave him a once over. "Since *when*?"

"Well—well," Lloyd stammered. "What you did was brave, and has put my actions and attitude towards you in a shameful light." Lloyd dampened Oro's jumpsuit so that he could peel it away without pulling at his tender skin. "I judged you on one facet of your being, thinking nothing else was of worth. I have not treated you with respect, when clearly you deserve it."

Oro pressed his lips together; he looked to where Danny slept in the other bed. No doubt, they'd had some interesting conversations while he had been gone. Oro looked back, but did not meet Lloyd's gaze. "No one deserves what they would have done to you. *No one*. I would have done that for *anyone*, Lloyd. It had *nothing* to do with you. So—"

"That is why you are a good person. A better one than I am and that is reason enough to hold someone in esteem. I understand if you do not wish to be friendly towards me after the things I have said to you, but I will help you now regardless, because I know you would do the same for me." Lloyd washed Oro's chest gently. "You should sleep. I can do this while you rest. You need to heal."

"I don't want to sleep. I'll dream of it if I do." Oro didn't want to close his eyes, but the act of saying it made the images come back regardless. The last few hours of pain blurred together with the hours of years before. Oro forgot all about Lloyd's comments. He clenched his jaw. "I can see it."

Lloyd leaned over Oro. He looked down with concern. "May I help?"

Oro blinked and tears escaped his eyes. He covered his face and his voice broke. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

Lloyd frowned. "You are lying. You are not okay. I can tell." He placed his hands on Oro's cheeks. "You need comfort."

"That would hurt." Oro wiped his runny nose and turned towards the wall. "I...I'm okay, really, I'm fine."

Lloyd dropped his hands down on either side of Oro's body and hugged him lightly, placing the least amount of pressure he could. He rested his cheek on Oro's forehead. He spoke towards the wall, "I cried earlier too. Your father was nice to me. He is a nice man; you are a nice man too."

Oro's chest convulsed and he sobbed quietly into Lloyd's shoulder. He needed someone to hold him that wouldn't hurt him; someone to remind him that he wasn't the vile things the soldiers had called him. He was better than what they'd brought him down to. He needed someone to care.

Lloyd took the spot on the bed between Oro and the wall. "You are a good person. I just didn't understand before, but I see it now." He gave Oro a shy smile. "I know I have not met many people, but you are the best I've met so far."

Oro cracked a smile through his tears. "One out of four, huh."

Lloyd smiled with him. He wiped away Oro's tears with his sleeve. "It is not much, but I do not have much to offer to you."

"This is all I need right now." Oro put his hands on Lloyd's arms. "You distract me."

Lloyd worked his fingers into Oro's hair, unraveling his braid. "I love your hair."

"What?" Oro laughed into a wet cough. "You do?"

"It is very nice." Lloyd nodded. "You could do a lot with it. My grandmamma showed me how to style her hair like the Ampyr royalty; your hair is long enough. I will show you sometime."

Oro smiled and hid it in Lloyd's shirt. "That sounds nice. Maybe I'll give you dance lessons, if you want."

Lloyd sighed wistfully. "I love dancing. I have studied all the Ampyr forms of dance, though I only had Hesper to practice with and she got distracted easily."

Oro leaned back to look him in the eyes. "You love dancing?"

"Yes!" Lloyd grinned. "Besides painting, it is a hobby of mine."

"I love dancing too." Oro smiled. "Though I don't know any of your Ampyr dances."

"We shall show each other." Lloyd let go of Oro and sat up, his eyes on Oro's torn clothes. "But I must finish this now before anything else."

Oro turned to lie on his back. He stared at the ceiling. "You're sort of obsessive compulsive aren't you?"

Lloyd wiped down Oro's ribs five times and went to do the same to his right side. "What does this mean?"

"Never mind." Oro watched him. "Aren't you worried about getting unclean?"

Lloyd didn't look up. "Danny said not to talk about things like that. I promised him I wouldn't talk about that. So I won't talk about it."

Oro sighed. "I don't want you to upset yourself, Lloyd."

"I'm not upset." Lloyd looked up quickly and met his gaze. "I'm not. I mean it."

"Back on our ship, you could barely stand to have me around, like breathing near me would infect you. You *hated* me. Now your hands are covered in my blood. You *hugged* me, Lloyd." Oro trembled. "I don't understand you."

"I—" Lloyd peeled more of the suit off. "You saved me from much worse. A contaminated person would not be this way for one like me, you see. Therefore caring for you in this way is not wrong. It is not unclean, because you are not un—"

"But I like men." Oro watched Lloyd's face for a change in expression. "I've been with men, and I will be again. It's who and what I am, Lloyd."

Lloyd trembled. He dug his fingers into the washcloth. "Do we have to talk about that? Can I not just do this thing for you and we leave the rest alone?"

Oro sighed. "You can tolerate me as long as you don't really accept what I am? Is that it?"

Lloyd gulped. "I accept you."

Oro raised an eyebrow. "Do you?"

"I accept that you are what you are." Lloyd looked in to his eyes. "I accept that you believe you are okay as you are. Despite your habits, you are a far better person than the Ampyr we have met thus far. I do not know what that means, and I am confused by it." Lloyd had only honesty in his features. "I...it makes me think and question what I know...what I've been told."

Oro touched Lloyd's hand, trailing a finger across his palm. "How much?"

Lloyd pulled his hand away slowly. "I wish to be friends with you, Oro." He looked at his hand. "That is what I want only."

Oro sighed. That was better than earlier at least. "All right."

Lloyd looked back at his task. "May I concentrate on this? I do not want to hurt you."

Oro sensed the dual meaning in his words and did not push any further. "Yeah."

Lloyd grabbed a clean jumpsuit from their tiny wall locker. He peeled the rest of Oro's outfit off in a quick motion. The look on his face went from anger to revulsion and horror.

Oro frowned at his reaction. "You have seen a dick besides your own before, haven't you? I am pretty well endowed, but it's nothing to get your panties in a bunch over."

"They hurt you." Lloyd was white as snow.

“Yeah, I was there for that part.”

“They *hurt* you.” He touched Oro’s thigh, and his hand came away sticky with still congealing blood.

Oro grew lightheaded at the sight of the blood. “Oh, they must have done a number on me while I passed out. Lots of stomping.” He gulped. “I...I still have you know, uh, all of it?”

“Yes, it’s still there, if our anatomy is the same.” Lloyd moved his leg and checked. He covered his mouth with his clean hand, trying not to throw up. Oro’s lower body was a mass of bruised and bloodied flesh. He shook and started to cry. Lloyd grabbed another bag of water and mopped at the blood with a look of determination in his face, working despite his tears. “I *hate* them. I *hate* them.”

“At least they didn’t cut it off.” Oro tried to look at the positive. “I was already circumcised too, so they couldn’t do anything there.”

Lloyd tossed the bloody blanket towards the door and grabbed another. “*Animals*, wretched individuals. No child of Sidersi to carry them on, no place in the light.” He hissed. “No place, no right in light, no continuance, no rebirth. None of that for them...”

Oro frowned. “What are you babbling about?”

Lloyd jolted out of his rant. “Afterlife.” He washed Oro’s calves. “For us...”

“Oh, doesn’t apply to me, got it.” Oro closed his eyes.

“It applies to all, *everyone* with a soul at least.” Lloyd unrolled a clean jumpsuit and slid it on over Oro’s feet. “To be clean, it makes you light in weight, and the children of Sidersi can carry your soul onwards to the resting place.”

“What happens to the dirty bastards like me?”

Lloyd frowned at Oro’s choice of words. “The unclean and soulless are lost and wandering in undeath, never-ending without rest.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad.” Oro smiled as Lloyd pulled his suit on. He gave Lloyd his arm as he worked higher. “I could think of worse things, like burning in fires for eternity.”

“Your soul will dissolve until you become nothing at all.” He fixed up the front of Oro’s outfit. He leaned over Oro and brushed his hair back. “You would be lost forever.”

“Still not as bad as hellfire, sorry.” Oro looked up at Lloyd. “Dissolving slowly sounds peaceful.”

Lloyd lay down by Oro’s side and gazed at Oro’s profile. “If you were tired maybe it would be.”

“I *am* tired. Life is tiring.” Oro smiled sadly. “Besides, being light sounds like a lot of work.”

Lloyd cracked a smile. “You are lazy.”

“Yes, pretty much.”

Lloyd traced Oro’s face with his eyes. “You are that way with everything.”

Oro shrugged and flinched as his neck cramped. “It’s honest at least.”

“Honesty is a virtue.” Lloyd touched Oro’s shoulder gently and rubbed at the muscle. He rested his head on Oro’s arm while he continued to massage him. Lloyd kept his eyes on Oro’s lips. “Has this made you feel better?”

“It has.” Oro nodded, ignoring the harder that his heart pounded the longer Lloyd stayed in contact with him. He took a deep breath. “You’re the nurturing sort when it comes right down to it.”

Lloyd smiled. “My grandmamma always said that to me, Oro.”

“Yeah?” Oro glanced over at him.

“They were...*are* old, so I helped cook and clean for them. I also repaired their clothing.” Lloyd stared into space, remembering. “I can mend things well enough. Our sewing machine broke years ago and I had to learn by hand, but I found the task soothing.”

Oro watched his face, finding it harder to believe as each moment passed that this boy was a crown prince of the Empire that seemed comprised of dicks. Oro took Lloyd’s hand in his and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Lloyd kissed Oro on the cheek and darted back, rolling to his side to look away.

Oro smiled and touched his cheek. He whispered, “Lloyd?”

Lloyd peeked over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“It would make me feel better if I could be held, just until I fall asleep...” Lloyd was over and his arms around Oro before he finished his last word. Oro smiled. “You won’t have to do it long. I’ll be asleep before you know it.”

“I don’t mind. You need it.” Lloyd shared a pillow with him.

Oro couldn’t imagine exactly what Danny and Lloyd had spoken about, but this was a new Lloyd, not completely converted, but way better than before he’d left the room. Oro smiled; maybe he should be more selfless more often.

“What are you happy about?” Lloyd whispered in his ear.

Oro closed his eyes. “That even though something bad happened something good happened too.”

“Did it?”

Oro patted Lloyd’s hand. “I like having new friends.”

Lloyd smiled. “Me too.”

Oro snorted. “I’m your *only* friend.”

“Why should I make many when I have one good one?”

Oro’s cheeks turned pink. He gazed up at Lloyd. “Thanks.”

Lloyd smiled. “You’re welcome.”

The door to their cell opened without warning. An Ampyr soldier strolled in. Lloyd placed himself between Oro and the soldier in a blur of speed. Danny was up and alert quick enough that Oro had doubts that he’d been sleeping at all.

Danny cracked his knuckles. “Try anything and you’re getting your ass beat.”

Oro yawned. “It’s just Czar.”

Danny looked between Oro and Evgeniy. “How can you tell?”

Oro shrugged. “Dunno, but it is.”

Evgeniy held up his bags of food. “Bag one, bag two, bag three. Delicious prison grub.”

Danny sighed and took bag three. “Is this wise? Coming here?”

Evgeniy pointed to his collar. “I am lowest ranking, they give me worst.”

Oro smirked. “We’re the worst? Who else do they have? Five-year-olds?”

Evgeniy shrugged. “Did not check. Glad you are up, Oro.” He gave Oro a once over. “Healed, all over.”

Oro licked his teeth. “Yeah, I’m dandy now except for looking black and blue. Thanks for saving me again.”

Emmalethe appeared halfway up the wall. “Ask him *now*, Nee. You do this.”

Danny gaped. “Where did *she* come from?”

Emmalethe grinned. “I here *whole time*.”

Lloyd gawked at her naked body. “What is *that*?”

“I not a that!”

Evgeniy waved her aside. “I need to tell you that—”

Emmalethe pushed Evgeniy back and addressed Danny, “You are pack leader. Tell me if I am ready. I help you here. I save him. I earn rights this way.”

Danny looked to Evgeniy. “You got saved by a teenager?”

Evgeniy nodded. “Yes, she saved my life.”

Danny sighed. “Yeah, fine you’re an adult.”

Emmalethe grinned at Evgeniy. “We can have sex now!”

Danny frowned. “Wait, *whoa*, I didn’t say anything like that. How old is she, Czar?”

Emmalethe faded out. “Not matter now. I am of age. Can’t take back.”

Evgeniy smiled behind his mask. “Thank you, Danny. Now—”

Danny stood up. “You’re not going to—”

Oro flinched and threw out his hand. “Shut up both of you.” They stopped and looked to him. Lloyd helped him sit up. “Czar, your boss’s boss is going to be here shortly, I suggest you leave. Thanks for the munchies. Dad, let them screw. We might all die so they might as well, and he saved my ass so let him get some.” Oro held his side as it hurt to breathe.

Evgeniy saluted. “Be back later.”

Emmalethe laughed and followed him out of the room. “I *like* Oro.”

Oro lay back on the bed and groaned. “Who doesn’t?”

Danny glared at him. “He was trying to tell us something.”

The Warden stepped in with two soldiers behind him. He gave Oro a quick glance before addressing the group, “Your allies have still not handed themselves over.”

Oro coughed. “But we’re getting a stay of execution for at least another day because your Navigator is exhausted.”

The Warden hissed. “Did the soldiers that—”

“No, not a lot of talking *there*.” Oro grimaced. “The jumps have been sloppy pieces of work and have stopped happening often. Kind of obvious why.”

The Warden’s eyes narrowed. “After the *incident*, I have been forbidden to level any physical assault against you, lest your weak heart stop.”

Oro gave him a thumbs up. “Sweet. Now get the fuck out and don’t come back unless you have better food or some good news.”

The Warden went red in the face and turned with his guards. All three left and locked the door.

Oro sighed and lay back down on his pillow. “Thank God for that.”

Danny kneeled by his side. “How did you know that about their Navigator?”

“I just said how.” Oro yawned.

“How did you know we were getting a stay of execution?” Danny frowned. “For that matter, how did Czar find you?”

“Dunno, he just did. I’m lucky.” Oro yawned. “Sleepy now. Want Lloyd huggies.”

Lloyd lay down by his side and tucked Oro in. Danny eyed the pair. He focused on Oro and thought about what a fucking prick he was.

Oro opened his eyes. “Fuck you too.”

“I didn’t say that out loud.” Danny stabbed a finger at Oro’s chest. “You read my mind!”

“I did not.” Oro cracked a smile. “What a load of shit.”

Danny glared at Oro and thought that Oro’s tactic at getting Lloyd to cuddle was clearly manipulative, using their friendship to get physical attention. Oro blushed, but kept his mouth

shut. Danny locked eyes with him. He concentrated on Oro. *You can hear me, Oro, can't you.* Oro's eyes widened. *No.*

Danny clapped his hands and laughed. "Fucking brilliant!"

Oro closed his eyes and put his hands to his head. "No, no, no. Not happening!"

Lloyd looked between them, confused. "What's going on? What are you talking about?"

"Oro, you're adapting to a Jungay. You've been picking up thoughts for a while now, not on purpose, but you have." Danny took his seat back on his bunk and watched Oro. "That's how Czar knew where you were. You called out to him."

"No." Oro shook his head. He concentrated on just his own thoughts and shut out everything else. "That's stupid, that's—" pain tore through his skull. Oro gasped and held his head. "God!"

Lloyd's hands fluttered around his face, worried. "What is happening? What is wrong with him?"

Danny got to his feet. "Oro! Oro, stop! Stop fighting with it! You're making it worse!" He grabbed Oro's hands. "Damn it, focus on me!"

Oro stared at Danny's face. Through the haze of pain, he felt Danny's worry, desires, his thoughts, but they felt like things he could have been feeling. By concentrating, he distinguished them as if they had a different flavor from his own. Oro gasped as the pain faded. "Oh, shit. No way."

"It's like Darq thought. You're fighting an adaptation and your body is suffering because of it. Just accept it." Danny patted Oro's hand. He looked to Lloyd. "You know of Jungay?"

Lloyd nodded. "Yes, some. I have not met any."

"What can they do? Just read minds?"

"That and they can send messages, get in dreams, and the strongest can force their will over you." He glanced at Oro. "They can make their thoughts seem like your own." He frowned. "So that a person would be inclined to do or feel something they would normally not ever think or do..."

Danny grinned. "Oro, can you do that?"

Oro ignored him and looked to Lloyd. "I didn't. I *swear* I didn't. Never." Lloyd's lips drew into a line. Oro sensed that he was not convinced. He closed his eyes. "I really didn't, Lloyd. I didn't know I..."

Lloyd fought with his urges. "I—"

"Drama *elsewhere* you two." Danny took Oro's hand. "Did you send the guards away?"

Oro looked to the door. "Not on purpose."

"But you wanted them to leave, and you thought about them leaving."

"Yeah." Oro nodded. "But, that doesn't mean anything. We don't have proof of anything."

"Try it."

"How?" Oro frowned.

"Make me do something."

"*No.*" Oro made a face. "That is creepy and I don't want to. I don't want to know what everyone is thinking. I don't want to have that *gift*." He covered his eyes. "I don't like this."

Danny gripped his shoulder. "Oro, if you have the power to control what they think—"

"That's *shitty*, Dad!" Oro glared at him and coughed. "I don't want that power, I *don't!*" He lay back down and pulled a blanket over his head. "I want to go to sleep. Leave me alone. I'm in pain!"

Danny sighed and sat back. "Sorry, Oro."

Oro stayed under the covers. “You’re forgiven.”

Lloyd frowned. “What is going on? Why can Oro do this? He is *not* Jungay.”

Danny eyed Lloyd. “Sorry, but confidential information as to why, just accept it as it is.”

“Fine.” Lloyd frowned and slipped under Oro’s blanket. He lay on his side and stared at Oro in the darkness.

Oro opened one eye and looked over with fear on his features. He was disgusted that he might have forced *his* feelings and desires upon Lloyd. Oro put his hands to his lips and whispered, “If I did, I’m sorry, Lloyd.”

Lloyd’s features were inscrutable. “With your past I understand. You didn’t do anything on purpose.” He rolled over and faced the wall.

Oro would have written off Lloyd’s mixed feelings of disgust, fear, and confusion to his body language and tone, but now Oro knew that Lloyd actually thought it. Lloyd would forgive him this once, but that was as far as his forgiveness extended. Lloyd’s thoughts moved to what Danny had told him of Oro’s past.

Oro cringed and covered his ears, though it didn’t block anything. Oro whispered, “Please don’t think about that, Lloyd. Please.”

Pain and memories flooded his thoughts, overwhelming the things he got from Lloyd. Oro held in a cry and curled his knees to his chest. He’d managed mostly to block out the memories, but they came back along with the slights and insults he’d received over the years since he was a child.

Oro could remember everything clearly, photographic, but more than that. There were feelings and tones, voices, smells, things he saw in the background of his own memories that he did not remember from the first time. His brain buzzed with activity, but it all came circling back to that afternoon when Rake and Mica had gone off for a flight test, leaving him alone and at the mercy of others.

Oro whimpered.

Lloyd went rigid, his nails digging into the thin mattress. He turned back to Oro and drew him into a tight hug. Lloyd patted Oro on the head. “Bad thoughts go away. Shoo.”

A musical score and an image replaced Oro’s nightmares. Oro opened his eyes and looked at Lloyd’s face. Lloyd had his eyes shut, recalling a dance lesson. Lloyd interlaced their fingers and imagined leading Oro on the dance floor.

Oro smiled. Oro led, he wasn’t led.

Lloyd frowned in the image. He led; only *girls* let themselves be led. He tugged on Oro’s braid...*he* was the more girlish, not Lloyd.

Oro thought his hair short in the shared thought and made Lloyd’s long. Lloyd frowned.

Oro snorted. Lloyd laughed.

Danny smiled in his bunk and looked over at the pair. “You’re like two ten-year-old girls in a sleepover.”

The pair ignored him. Oro let Lloyd take the lead in their thoughts. He drifted towards sleep, his thoughts occupied by something happy.

Rake and Mica appeared in a gray set. The pair looked at each other, then at the space around them. Rake folded his arms. “What’s this? I don’t remember *this* in the movie.”

A pile of snow dropped on their heads. Mica fell backwards into a forming snowdrift. “I’m guessing Hoth is getting built.” Behind him, the wind-swept horizon filled out and bitter icy wind picked up.

“Great.” Rake poked at his outfit as it shifted to snow gear. He flipped his furry hood up to block the snow and wind. “This stuff had better actually be warm and waterproof.” He looked from side to side; all he saw was snow. “Mica?” A creature shifted in the ground beneath him and stood up. Rake grabbed on to the reins to stay on top of the tall furry beast. “Shit! Mica?”

Static passed on their radio, and Mica called in on his wrist radio, “*Echo three to Echo seven, do you read me?*”

Rake grinned. “Loud and clear. Where did you go?” He turned in his saddle. Snowflakes hit his face and melted on his skin. Wind whistled around him.

“I think we’re in our movie spots now.”

“Right.” Rake took out his binoculars and scanned the horizon. His line of sight was shitty at best. “Are we in chasing distance of each other?”

“Chasing distance?” Mica frowned and peered through his binoculars, trying to spot Rake. “Why?”

“Your lightsaber, I want it.”

Mica grimaced. “You’re supposed to go back to the base.”

“Yeah and you’re supposed to get hit in the face by a furry snow monster, really want to do that?”

“No.” Mica frowned. “But I have to, to get the message from Ben.”

“You’ve already seen this movie. You already know what he’s supposed to tell you.”

Rake’s voice crackled on the radio. “But, if you really think you need to get hit in the face and scarred up, fine. If you don’t want my help, I’m going to go in because my tits are freezing.”

“I don’t *want* to get hit by anything.” The Tauntaun moved underneath him, and Mica grimaced. “But I’m about to.”

“Stop being so fatalistic, Mica.” Rake oriented on Mica’s location. “Fight back, you namby-pamby.”

“What happened to *it’s your destiny?*” Mica unsheathed his lightsaber. “Come on, you fucking furry nightmare.”

Rake huffed. “I don’t want to be frozen in carbonite, thank you very much! Does it need to be this fucking cold, seriously?”

A growl came from behind. Mica twisted around in his saddle and slashed. His green lightsaber sliced through a white, furry horned creature, throwing its arm into the snow. The Wampa raced away into the growing blizzard. Mica smiled. “Ha!”

Marx hissed in his ear. “Why the arms? Go for the *neck*. The fatal blow.”

“Shut up, Marx.” Mica growled at the air. “Leave me alone.”

Rake galloped towards him. “Hey, I see you and *the precious*.”

“Mine, Rake!” Mica watched the Wampa disappear in the distance. “You can’t have it. I *need* it.”

“All my good deeds already forgotten.”

“Good deeds?” Mica put his lightsaber away. He stopped speaking into his communicator and shouted towards Rake as he got closer, “You tried to leave me in the climax!”

Rake pulled up alongside Mica and smirked. “I *always* leave during the climax. Let’s go.”

“Asshole.” Mica flicked his reins. His mount took two steps and keeled over, throwing him into a bank of ice. Mica rolled and landed on his back. He stared at the sky in shock. “Bloody hell! What was *that* for?”

Rake grinned. “What did you think would happen? Your Tauntaun had a date with death. Want some help up? I’ll give you a lift for your lightsaber.”

Mica sat up. "Fuck off."

"Come on." Rake kicked at his Tauntaun. "You're not even playing with it!"

"I haven't had the chance." Mica looked up at him. "Are you going to help me up?"

"Not for free. I think I'll leave you out here for a while. Your attitude might change."

Rake grinned. "Now that I think about it, I *do* have to go bother Ravil. See you in a bit." His mount groaned and swayed dangerously. Rake grimaced. "What now?"

Mica edged back from Rake. "Doesn't yours die when you find me?"

"*Shit.*" Rake jumped off and landed on his feet in several feet of snow. He glared at his dying ride. "Motherfucker!"

Mica laughed as Rake's beast hit the snow. "Serves you right, I think."

"Oh, now we can both freeze to death! What a fantastic turn of events!" Rake gave his dead Tauntaun a kick. "Stupid!" He hit his radio. "Hello? Hey, somebody listen to me! Anybody, Empire droids included!" He got static as a response. "Well, this fucking sucks."

Mica held his side. "I think I broke some ribs from that fall."

Rake stomped over and knelt by his side. "Are you injured anywhere else?" He examined Mica's face and hands. "You look okay. Can you walk?"

"I think so. Besides freezing and the ribs, I'm fine."

Rake rubbed his hands together to keep warm. "Ravil and Kat know the story. They'll save us."

Mica smiled. "If you don't return, who's to say that they even get to their scenes?"

"Fuck you and your logic." Rake tried his radio again. "Is anyone on the goddamn comms?"

Darq's voice came back scratchy, "I am, is that Rake?"

"Yeah and Mica, look is anyone around? Can I talk to Kat or Ravil? Even Sammy if she's all we got."

Darq sighed. "No. Screw you, Rake." The line went dead.

Rake stared at Mica. "That little shit hung up on me!"

"What did you expect? You constantly bicker—" Mica's eyes rolled back in his head and he went unconscious.

Rake stared at him in dismay. "Stop speeding up the plot! You're not supposed to do this until nightfall!" The sky abruptly turned dark. Rake kicked at the snow. "*Fuck!*"

Marx purred and appeared glowing against the backdrop of snow. "Do you need the assistance of a Jedi Master?"

Rake picked Mica up. "What do *you* think, Marx? Yes! Go tell *someone* that we're in danger! Find Tasanee."

Marx curled a lip. "I do not want my little rat in this weather. She is with child."

"What? She is? Uh, congrats!" Rake set Mica down by his dead Tauntaun. "Get someone else then, like Ravil, anyone but fucking Darq!"

"I shall see what I can do." Marx faded out.

Rake looked from Mica to the dead Tauntaun. He dropped to his knees, tired and cold. He recalled the scene and a grin graced his features. "Oh that's right." He rifled through Mica's belongings and pulled out his lightsaber.

"Score!" Rake flipped it on and giggled at the sound. He waved it around and sliced his Tauntaun open; its guts spilled onto the snow. Rake looked at Mica. "I'm keeping this, thank you." Rake turned the lightsaber off and tucked it into his belt. He shoved Mica's feet into the Tauntaun.

Mica's eyes blinked open. He saw where he was. "Oh, gross! Why do I have to be awake for this part?"

"Beggars can't be choosers." Rake gave him another shove. "Marx is getting us help."

Mica frowned. "Where is my lightsaber?"

Rake grinned. "Mine you mean."

"Dick." Mica threw guts at Rake's face.

Rake stumbled backwards. "Some got in my mouth!" He ran and shoved Mica in the rest of the way. "Enjoy your warm stank guts."

Mica breathed through his mouth. "You'll freeze if you don't join me."

"No way!" Rake sat with his back up against the animal. "That's like the opening to some gay ass porn. We're *not* cuddling." He turned on Mica's lightsaber and waved it around in the darkness. "Awesome!"

"You're going to get chilled," Mica grumbled as Rake played.

"Chilled, chilled!" Rake mocked Mica's accent. "Rather be frozen than smelling like you right now."

Mica looked out into the night. "Aren't you supposed to be building us a shelter?"

Rake sliced at snowflakes. "With what exactly? Snow?"

Mica nodded. "I believe that's called an igloo and actually if they're built correctly, they can be plenty warm. Or you can just check our belongings."

Rake shivered and put the lightsaber away in his things. "Look at you all clever and shit." He pulled at the packs on the dead Tauntaun. "All right, there should be gear in here." Rake opened a bag and made a face.

Mica strained to see what Rake had found. "Anything?"

Rake pulled out a tent set. "This isn't period appropriate." He fiddled with the blue nylon bindings. "But it'll do."

Ravil paced in a room packed full of adult actors. She glared at those with her in the Rebel Base Command Center. "Well, *where* are they?" The actors went back to their tasks, confused by her question. Ravil tossed her headset. "Ipsos! Why hasn't Rake come in yet? Where are they?"

Ipsos appeared on a wall monitor. "Summon them."

Ravil ran to the monitor and tapped on it. "How? Which button does that?"

Ipsos frowned. "How did you forget this much stuff? I bet you're teasing me! You have to know the basics!"

Ravil stomped away from Ipsos's image. "Fine, I'll find him myself."

"That's the spirit!" Ipsos smiled at her.

"Shut up." Ravil zipped her white, puffy snow jacket up to her chin and left the room. She only had one choice of hallway so she ran through it, passing by droids and soldiers. What was Ipsos getting at? Ravil was *not* uneducated or forgetful; she was one of the most learned Navigators of her age. Ravil's hands flashed with light. She stopped and punched the ice wall, sending a shockwave through the ice.

A series of voices bounced back along the halls. "A miracle with potential."

"Not seen in thousands of years."

"Reflexes are within normal range, but her mental capabilities are astounding."

"Will they all come back now that she has?"

"She wasn't the first; I doubt she'll be the last."

Ravil turned to find the source of the voices, but the actors around her were frozen in place, the scene paused. Ravil got dizzy and leaned on the ice. “Who’s there?”

“A masterful feat, Ravilaea,” said a voice tinged with sorrow.

“Will it draw him out?” This one was hopeful.

“That is the theory.”

“Our hope. Our only hope.”

“Who is that?” Ravil pushed past frozen actors. “Who’s speaking?” A fissure in the ice let in light near the floor. Ravil crawled to it. “Hello?”

Ravil put her eye to the gap and looked in on a scene from the movie. Darth Vader dragged *her* to Tarkin. Ravil watched herself attack the general and mouth off. The images froze as her actions at the time broke the scene. The old Ravil ran to the new Ravil’s crack and peeked through; bringing both of them face to face, but the old version did not see her, but something else.

Ravil backed away from the fracture as her other self clawed at the hole. She hissed in fright. “What is this shit?”

“Weird, huh?” Ips0 leaned on the ice. She wore a green jumpsuit. She’d bound her long white hair in to a ponytail.

Ravil whirled around. “What are you doing to me?”

Ips0 looked up at her. “This isn’t *my* doing. Well, *bringing* you here is, but the echoes are yours.”

Ravil put her finger in Ips0’s face. “This never happened before *you* got in my life!”

Ips0 was unfazed. “Technically, this started when you came back to your engine. Even had I not been in residence, this would have happened. It may be due to the *design* of the machine, but this is still not *my* fault, because as you should know engines change to their—”

“Bullshit.” Ravil grabbed Ips0 by the arm. “Tell me what’s going on!”

Ips0 ignored the physical gesture and pointed to the area around them. “You were skating blind on cracked ice, Ravil, but now you can see the damage and the water beneath. It is scary, but it is not new.”

“No.” Ravil’s eyes flashed. “*You* are doing something!”

Ips0 frowned. “I am simply observing as you do. I am learning with you, and I am trying to make this educational, fun, and calming.”

“Calming?” Ravil’s skin flickered. “I am not calm!”

Ips0 looked her over from head to toe. “I can see that.”

The fissure in the wall healed. Ravil fought off fear and a headache. She let Ips0 go. “I just want to leave, Ips0. I want to go home.”

Ips0 nodded along with her. “But you have no idea where that is.”

“Says the one that’s lost! Let me go!”

Ips0 shook her head. “No.”

“Why?” Ravil leaned on the ice.

“You leave and you’ll take the capabilities of your engine with you, and I cannot allow that. Especially when I do not understand, and *you* do not understand, how you lost it in the first place.”

“But I don’t want it.” Ravil glared at Ips0. “Maybe I tossed it.”

“Possibly. It will follow you now regardless; it is a part of you.” Ips0 took Ravil’s hand. “I’m trying to help. I’m walking the trails, same as you. There is a block in you, a dam and the water is overflowing, creating new streams.” Ips0 made a fist. “We find the artificial wall and

pry it open slowly to relieve the pressure.”

Ravil took a step back. “I don’t want to break my mind!”

“It will break on its own if you run from it! The stress is already showing, *here you see* the cracks.” Ips0 grabbed her wrist. “What are you afraid of?”

“Going mad!” Ravil shook her head. “You are crazy; I don’t want to be too.”

“What if I’m sane and you’re mad?” Ips0 shrugged. “Either way, you’re the one cracking, not me. I’m just trying to help you.”

“What if I don’t want your help?” Ravil pushed her way. “Maybe if there’s a block there’s a reason for it! Besides you’re not a Jungay!”

“Yeah, thankfully.” Ips0 eyed her. “Aren’t you curious about what’s hidden?”

“*No!*” Ravil’s voice echoed through the halls. The floor rolled beneath them, knocking them to the ground.

The radios buzzed in static. “Astounding, marvelous—”

Ravil covered her ears. “Stop it.”

“Marvelous, marvelous work—”

“So many...so many...lives long, and they return.”

“Miracles.”

“She came back.”

“Ravilaea, I am so very sorry.”

Ravil shuddered. “Stop it!”

Ips0 jumped to her feet and threw out her hand. Ribbons of light ripped out from her body and sealed the fine lines and cracks that formed around Ravil. She helped Ravil to her feet.

“Just a patch, but this is going to get worse.”

Ips0 pulled out her glowing, blue clipboard and gazed at the data on it. “You seem to be able to recall the auditory information far better than anything else. This seems like something a skilled Jungay could have done, but not entirely...or perhaps, a backdoor purposefully left in by them. Curious. I’ll look into it. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t *worry?*” Ravil backed away from her. “Are you serious? How can I *not* worry?”

“Your friends are with you. Everyone is safe here. You were worried about them, but they are okay now. Therefore, you can go and relax. Enjoy yourself.” Ips0 gave her an encouraging smile. “Make the most of it. There is no hurry.”

“Oh, screw off! I have friends to find.” Ravil shoved past soldiers blocking her way. “Move!”

Ravil ran. She held her breath to keep from crying. She wanted Rake; she *needed* Rake. He’d help her and he’d calm her down. Ravil had to have someone to talk to about this, someone she trusted.

She stormed into the main hanger deck. “Someone tell me what the fuck is going on!”

Katarina looked up from her spot atop the Millennium Falcon. “Where’s Rake? He hasn’t checked in.”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.” Ravil looked over her shoulder, but Ips0 was nowhere in sight. She set her thoughts of Ips0 aside and focused on Rake. “I haven’t heard from him.”

Katarina tossed her welder and jumped down to the ice floor. “Maybe they’re improvising?”

“They would call in.” Ravil paced. “They *would.*” He wouldn’t worry her on purpose. Rake wouldn’t do that to her.

A popping sound rang in Ravil’s ears. She looked up. The edges of the scenery cracked

and shifted at the seams. Sunlight glinted off the ice as children laughed. Their indistinct voices turned to screams.

Ravil backed away from the walls, her heart racing. She stepped in grass and looked down. The floor was solid ice, but she could feel earth under her feet. The air was warm, and sunlight beat down on her back. There was chanting, laughter, voices raised in anger, songs, too many to understand at once. She covered her mouth.

Ravil turned to Katarina, but the woman was in conversation with a deck officer and had not noticed. No one saw anything but her. Ravil looked away to hide her tears. She really, *really* needed Rake now before *everything* crumbled around her.

Katarina walked over to Ravil. "No one's seen them."

Sammy rammed in to the back of Darq, herding him to Katarina. "You tell them or I will, gear bit!"

Darq stumbled and blushed copper. He looked between Katarina and Ravil. "I...uh."

Katarina frowned. "What is it, Darq?"

"They, uhm well, they..."

Ravil grabbed him. "They called in."

He looked down. "Yes."

Ravil let him go. "When?"

"I don't know when, the scene changed!" Darq held up his hands. "It was just Rake."

Sammy beeped. "But he said Mica was with him!"

Ravil gasped. "What did they say?"

"He—"

Sammy rammed Darq's calves, pushing him to the side. "Darq hung up on them! We didn't find out what they wanted."

"Why didn't you stay on the line?" Ravil growled.

"I..." Darq scratched at his arms. "I was angry with him."

Katarina put on a furry jacket over her bodysuit. "I'm going out."

Darq frowned. "I'm sorry, Mom, I—"

"Darq, not now." Katarina turned to Ravil. "I'll find them. You stay inside. It's getting colder and darker out there by the second."

Darq reached for her. "But my computer brain is telling me that *the chances of survival are—*"

Katarina gripped him by his shoulder. "Try not to channel him too much, Darq. No one likes Threepio, especially when he's doing *that*."

Darq frowned. "Then why was I given his call sign?"

Sammy rammed his legs again. "Gives ya something to think about, don't it?"

"You are denting me!" Darq swatted at her. "*Mom!*"

"Sammy, stop it." Katarina jumped on a mount.

Ravil eyed them. "You'll be safe on that thing?"

"Safe enough." Katarina patted the furry beast. "We don't have fliers yet, but miraculously they'll be ready by tomorrow morning."

Ravil gulped. "Will you let us know as soon as you find them?"

"Yeah." Katarina nodded. "But if this movie plays out, I'll be outside all night regardless, so send the fliers for us." She angled her animal towards the cold.

A deck officer called after Katarina, "*Your Tauntaun will freeze before you reach the first marker!*"

Katarina kicked the man in the head and saluted Ravil. “They’ll be fine. Want me to pass anything on?”

Ravil glanced over at Sammy and Darq. She shook her head. “Tell him we can talk in person.”

“Sure thing.” Katarina flicked her reins and raced into the snow.

Marx appeared behind Sammy. “I know where Rake and Mica are.”

Ravil pointed after Katarina. “Go to Kat. She just left!”

Marx nodded and looked around. “I will, but has anyone seen Tasanee?”

Sammy beeped. “She’s not here until the Battle of Hoth if she’s still Wedge.”

Marx frowned. “Battle of Hoth? What is this?”

A Tauntaun ran into the back of Ravil, and she shoved it back. “Get these fucking smelly things away from me!”

The creature chirped at her.

Behind the group, Ipso examined an ice wall and the minute fractures that remained on its surface. She flashed her hands, but the ice did not heal. Ipso made a note on her clipboard and vanished as the group turned in her direction.

Lincoln’s bones and flesh healed in snaps and tugs. His body burned in waves as pain raced across his nerves. Talking, indistinct and fuzzy, reached his ears from time to time. He reached for a dark shape, but his hand was pushed back. He tried to speak, but his mouth was too dry, and his voice came out a moan. Water was thrust at his lips.

Lincoln guzzled it greedily. He gasped. “Who is there?”

“Shh.” Waitrey ducked her head to his face, her milky blue eyes becoming visible in the gray haze. She touched his nose with hers. “Stay quiet.”

Lincoln closed his mouth. His vision blurred and he gained a few feet of clarity. He was back in the room above the bar. Still in Cagetown. Waitrey moved out of his sight, pacing it sounded like. He inhaled but could only smell his burnt hair and charred skin. Lincoln tried to move his head, but pain bloomed in his neck.

Hands ran across his spine and the pain slowly faded. A Rexos shifted her spot and kneeled in front of his face. Her yellow features were blank.

Waitrey kept a finger to the Rexos’ scalp as the woman twitched. The Jungay smiled at Lincoln. “How strong you are! So quick to be up!”

Lincoln eyed the connection between the Rexos and Jungay. He tried to cover a shiver of revulsion. “How did you find one that you could control?”

Waitrey shrugged. “I called through the ship, the nearest open came. Strong enough though timely, slow, boring. Head dull with the calm drug. Rexos easiest to get in.”

Lincoln was too tired to hide his surprise at her capabilities or her brazen attitude at showing her power on an Ampyr warship.

Waitrey grinned, crossed her legs, and floated in the air.

Lincoln eyed her. “Why did you do this for me?”

Waitrey frowned. “It was my fault they came for you. I did not read their intentions, as I should. I was distracted.” Her eyes went fuzzy. “Someone else of strength calls on the lines. It creates a wheel, which drifts into the stream, and makes little creatures in the dust. It is the gold I’ve seen, and it takes my thoughts in strange roads and he dreams...he dreams and dreams...” her voice trailed off into lunacy.

Lincoln tuned her out and rested his chin on the floor as the Rexos finished with him. The

woman was no Darq and he settled in for a wait. The pain that wracked his body gradually departed, but he was without energy. Blinking his eyelids took effort, even breathing left him drained and lethargic.

Lincoln touched his hair. It wrapped around his fingers, healed. He felt along his spine, but no damage remained. He flexed his feet and nearly cried out with joy. He had feeling in them. He could move his toes. Lincoln took a deep breath. "Did you see where they took her?"

Waitrey snapped to attention and gave him a hunk of cooked meat. "See who took who?"

"The Ampyr." Lincoln gorged, speaking between swallows. "Those that attacked me. They took Kennedy. I have to find her..."

Waitrey put her finger to her lips. "Shh, little doctor?"

"Yes!" Lincoln pushed himself up. "Yes her! Did you see who took her?"

"No one took her." Waitrey shoed the Rexos out the door. She locked it behind her. "Are you addled? Shush I said!"

"No!" Lincoln snarled. He hooked his claws into the wall and pulled himself up. "I have to find—"

Kennedy slept against the wall. Lincoln pointed at her. "How?"

Waitrey looked to where his finger pointed. "She escaped. She got you back inside before passing out there."

"But..." Lincoln recalled his last moments before blacking out. "She was apprehended."

"She is Resister, yes? They did not know." Waitrey smiled. "Ha-ha funny! Be *quiet!*"

Lincoln crawled to Kennedy's side. "We're in danger here. They'll be coming back for her, for me. We have to leave! Kennedy, wake up!"

Waitrey pressed Lincoln to the floor with surprising strength. "All dead and the dead think we're dead, dead together. Dead, dead, dead! All quiet in the two-floor bar, quiet, street, bang snap then gone in a flash!"

Lincoln grabbed on to Waitrey's wrist. "Focus Jungay, you rave!"

Waitrey stilled. "Rave." She flipped back her floating red hair. "Yes, much." She touched Lincoln's face. "Don't wake up that one."

"We have to go."

"And I say no you don't want to."

His desire to leave evaporated. He glared at the Jungay. "Why?"

"Do you want to see a funny?"

"*No.*"

Waitrey grabbed him by the arm and pulled him to his feet. "Yes, you do."

Lincoln followed her out of the room obediently, too tired to even attempt a fight. He turned back to the door. "Aren't you going to lock it?"

Waitrey waved her hand. "No one will come, doesn't exist anymore that room but to you and I." She tapped her temple. "Secret!" She hauled Lincoln down to the first floor.

Lincoln gaped. The place was empty, the rooms charred. He swiped a finger along the wall and came away with a light coating of ash, but the material underneath was undamaged. "A fire?"

"Big quick fire! Voosh then gone!"

Lincoln grimaced; the Pyros must have started one during the fight. He hissed. "How many people died?"

"Some, but most just run, shoo-shoo flee!" Waitrey grinned and pulled Lincoln into the backstreet where the Pyros had attacked him. "See funny!"

Lincoln stopped and stared. Heat had warped and burnt metal as far as he could see. Lincoln followed streaks of black upwards. He craned his neck; a single point on the ceiling was scorched. He turned on unsteady feet.

The Ampyr utility vehicle that Lincoln had seen Kennedy loaded into had been reduced to a blackened husk; the skeletons of the Ampyr soldiers twisted and curled in agony. Not a Hunter stirred in the shadows; no drunks lingered in corners. Lincoln strained to hear, but no one spoke or shifted on the street.

The overhead lights were on full power several streets away. He gazed upwards; the lights above them had been shattered, the bulbs exploded. Lincoln swallowed. "What happened here?"

Waitrey spun on her heels. "Big boom bang!" She stepped into the air and floated. "Boom! So much power close to engines!"

Lincoln shook his head. Exhaustion overcame his surprise and curiosity. "May I go back inside?"

She noticed his lack of energy. "Yes, rest, I make sure no one comes. You go in now."

Lincoln panted. "I can't move...cramps."

Waitrey slipped an arm around his waist and floated him back inside. "I like to eat noodles."

Lincoln closed his eyes. "That's nice."

Waitrey helped him up the stairs. "With sauce, purple sauce, but not the clear with green specks allergic. Yes, paralyzing, see?"

"Uh-huh." Lincoln's head rolled on her shoulder. "Purple yes, green no."

Waitrey laughed. "Purple yes! Green no! Purple yes! Green no! Off of me and in you go!" She shoved him into the room with Kennedy. She grinned and locked him in.

Lincoln floated until he hit a wall. He crawled across the floor and slumped over Kennedy. He threw an arm over her and drew her in. She slept soundly, not stirring at his touch. Lincoln struggled to stay awake, to examine her for injuries. She appeared whole, only a fine dusting of ash on her features, and the ends of her hair were frizzy.

Evgeniy leaned on a wall locker as his squad came off duty. He was tense, wondering how long he'd be able to keep his helmet on. So far no one else had even made a move to remove theirs, though he was unsure of why.

Emmalethe hung around him, invisible. She pulled at his helmet.

Evgeniy shook her off quickly. "What?"

She whispered, "We go sex now."

Evgeniy sighed. "Can't."

"Why not? Off duty."

He kept his voice low. "They'll notice if I don't take a bunk with them. I have to keep my cover..." Evgeniy dropped his voice as several Ampyr walked by.

A soldier stopped. "Aren't you coming?"

Evgeniy nodded and followed. Emmalethe hooked her arm in his and walked with him, invisible to everyone. The rest of their squad paid no attention to their departure. He took note of that for the future.

The group of four stopped at the main elevator. Evgeniy stopped with them. They pressed in a series of codes and stepped inside; he followed. The doors closed and they dropped. They went down, deeper than he'd started on the ship, down to the bottom. He shook off waves of

nausea as gravity lessened to nonexistent.

Emmalethe gripped his wrist and tapped his fingers, using the code he'd taught her earlier. She'd been down here before. Evgeniy looked over the heads of the Ampyr as the doors opened. Scents of food and sweat rolled in to the elevator. Colored lights illuminated a long walkway. Vendors on either side called out with their goods. Evgeniy took it all in.

He stepped out of the elevator and followed his group; they seemed to know where to go. They kept to the main thoroughfare and headed to a large—Evgeniy cocked his head—*arena*. A crack shook the buildings around him; cheers went up from the seats, the roar near deafening. His squad appeared intent on going there.

The soldiers he was with flashed their badges at Hunter bouncers and stepped through a wide double doorway into the arena building. Evgeniy followed them in. Hunter adolescents lined the hallway, peddling sex or drugs he assumed. Emmalethe pressed in to him as Hunters picked up her scent and frowned. Evgeniy kept his hand on his gun.

He saw the opening to the seats, but the men he was with went off to the side, stopping in front of shabby looking, colorfully dressed Ampyr. Badges were flashed, bets were placed, and receipts handed over. Evgeniy made note of the transactions.

The first Ampyr to finish gestured him over. "Here, free spot."

Evgeniy shook his head, and one of the other soldiers elbowed the first. "After what he lost last night, no way. He hasn't got any money left I bet."

Evgeniy affected a sad shrug. "True."

The others laughed at him and pushed on to the arena. "You get to just watch tonight then, Kistas."

Evgeniy said the name to himself. He was Kistas, the low-ranking security guard that failed when it came to placing good bets. He nodded and stepped out into the arena seats. As he looked around, he realized calling them seats wasn't correct; they were platforms to lock your boots to and a railing to grip. All three sides surrounded a ring, which was a bare metal cage with hoops, bars, and raised metal platforms. The area was scorched, bloodied, scratched, and deformed.

Two teams of two squared off in the ring. A pair of Hunters bedighted in metal hooks and chains hid behind metal walls, and two women that could have passed for sun-darkened Russian peasants waited on the other side of the ring, floating a few feet off the ground. They were short, stout, and had plain brown hair in braids; they wore yellow jumpsuits and looked like twins with chestnut-colored skin.

The Hunters dove over the metal barriers, racing to reach the women. They roared, making most in the audience flinch in fear.

The women in yellow snapped their fingers.

The Hunter on the left screeched and held its head as its eyes, nose, and mouth hemorrhaged blood. The Hunter on the right twitched. Its legs exploded below the kneecaps.

Evgeniy was glad he wore a mask and helmet. Now it was obvious why everyone else was still wearing them too.

The Hunters yowled in pain. A bell went off, signaling the end of the fight. The audience broke out in moans or cheers. The three beside him clapped. Evgeniy flicked gore off his visor and reached for Emmalethe, but she had left his side. He pulled his hand back, knowing she'd return when she wanted to.

The Ampyr next to him clapped him on the back. "Crackers and Poppers, *best* entertainment by far."

Evgeniy nodded and slapped his thigh, sending blood into the air. Yes, gore, lots of it, how *funny*. He looked from side to side; Lincoln and Kennedy were down here somewhere. Not in the arena, he hoped. He failed to see how they'd survive for long in a place like this.

A second bell sounded and gates opened, letting the winning pair out and Rexos in to heal the losing pair. Evgeniy gripped the railing as Cleaners descended upon the ring. Several went through the stands, collecting and breaking down blood and bits of flesh before carting it all away. The Ampyr gave them a wide berth; most made hissing sounds towards the gray, damp creatures.

The soldier next to Evgeniy retched. "Disgusting."

"Untouchable." The soldier beside him turned his eyes away from the Cleaners.

Evgeniy touched his throat. "Sick."

The others waved him off, understanding his urge to throw up. Evgeniy followed the Cleaners up the stands, easy to do since all others moved away. He trailed them as they turned a corner, leaving the stands for the circular building that surrounded the arena. They walked through an empty gray hallway and crawled down a shaft in the floor with the molds and fungi they'd created.

Evgeniy slipped down the narrow tube after them. Black mold covered the metal walls, and bulbous orange mushrooms grew from that. He reached the ground under the arena floor and wondered what he was doing. Clapping and stomping feet reverberated through the metal above him as the next set of fighters entered the ring. He paid that no heed, drawn onwards by the sounds of footsteps ahead of him.

Evgeniy passed by luminous toadstools and pulsating slimes. The air was clogged with water droplets and, this far in, the only thing illuminating the passages was the bioluminescent fungi and mold.

Evgeniy turned a corner and stopped short with a click of his boots. The Cleaners in front of him turned at the sound. They squeaked and threw up their arms to ward off a beating.

Evgeniy ripped off his helmet to make sure he saw clearly.

In the dark and damp, the women shimmered like liquid metal. Their silver eyes shined bright in the darkness. Their bodies gave off light in pastel and neon shades. Opalescent ribbons of pigment ran through their steel-colored skin, coming together at the tiny gills beneath their ears. Their dreadlocked hair bloomed bright blue at the tips, lighting up with each pulse of their blood. Their bodies were lithe, their skin firm, their muscles filled out. Their webbed fingers and toes left streaks of radiant color on the surfaces they touched.

"Yes pretty pretties!" A pitch-black woman stepped away from the wall. Her red hair glowed neon in the darkness, her red lashes were the color of blood, and her eyes reflected only white back at him. She smiled. "Evgeniy."

Evgeniy pulled out his gun, sending the Cleaners dashing for the darkness, but the Jungay remained. He raised the weapon. "You know my name?"

"I see it in the head of the Lincoln and Kennedy, your friends?" She flicked her hand out towards him. "What is the strange thing I feel with you? Animal?" The Jungay gestured at Evgeniy. "Show your pet or I will take it apart in *madness*."

Emmalethe faded in to view; her green skin lit up neon in the dim hallway. Her appearance drew Cleaners out from side passages Evgeniy had not seen. Cleaners gaped at Emmalethe's shifting skin, entranced by the moving colors. Emmalethe pressed in to him.

Evgeniy wrapped an arm around Emmalethe and kept his eyes on the Jungay. "What do you want?"

“Want? Want? Jungay just sees.” Waitrey touched her midnight blue lips and looked at Emmalethe. “You are strange ones, hard to see, so mixed, unique, even the Lincoln *different*. You are friends too with the caller. You have *invaded* this ship.”

Emmalethe spoke in Russian, “Do we kill her?”

Waitrey laughed. “Kill, kill! Me? Do you mean it?”

Evgeniy frowned and responded in Russian, “You know my language?”

“What is language to me?” Waitrey rocked on her heels. “What are words of the mouth, only extensions of thought, and I see many thoughts in the minds of all. You have a sword and shield.” Waitrey drew her finger through slime, raising rainbow colors. “A father and mother, the reader, the bard, the butcher, *others*.” Waitrey sucked the goop off her finger and smiled, showing off blue gums. “A lure only useful if it works. Hmm?”

Evgeniy frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Nice chat. I let you go now.” Waitrey giggled.

Emmalethe hissed. “You *let* us go? What are you?”

Waitrey laughed and hissed back playfully. “One of the accursed, us as all the four. I am mad you see, but bored easy, and so I stray from the paths that she wants us on and I keep my thoughts muddled and my secrets forgotten.” She blinked her white, fathomless eyes. She grabbed Emmalethe’s shoulders and drew her in. “When you stare too long, and you know, but can’t say or escape it? Makes little splinters which crack open every mind linked.” Waitrey let her go. “You, both the silencers, bring a respite, I felt you, but now responsibility calls. I must go and stop listening for pieces. Smaller evil instead of bigger, unfortunate? Always fortunate.”

Evgeniy and Emmalethe shared a confused look. Evgeniy held his hand out. “I don’t understand.”

Waitrey took his hand, tore off his glove, and touched him skin to skin. Up close, Evgeniy saw that she was not black, but dark blue. She purred. “You’re not any higher if you revile the lowest. And what that makes us is dregs and waste imprisoned in time and in power. A poor trade.” Waitrey patted his hand and watched the Cleaners. “They are not bad just because they are strange; they had a culture too once, a religion, a people, a palace subterranean. It was stripped bare and taken, overrun. Overrun, not even to see the good things, just to take and take and take. She takes, always taken.”

Waitrey let him go and drifted into the darkness. “Everyone was something else once in the time before the time...” her voice grew quiet. “For some only their shadows remain, the space no longer occupied and echoing. Others...others never cast a shadow. They glimmer into the infinite night, the ghosts and demons of the void absolute.”

Evgeniy and Emmalethe stared, but the passageway ahead was empty. Emmalethe looped her arm around his. She trembled. “They approach.”

Evgeniy looked over her head to the Cleaners that climbed on the walls, out of grates, and along the ceilings. He looked at every one and back to Emmalethe. “They are like your kind.”

“My kind?”

“Only female.” He turned and stood nose to nose with one that floated. He bit his cheek to keep from flinching.

The Cleaner popped her lips, and the other Cleaners did the same. She looked past Evgeniy to Emmalethe, the clear object of attention.

Evgeniy nudged her. “Emma, make some colors.”

She folded her arms. “I *not* a show.”

“Just do it, *please*.”

Emmalethe pouted, but fireworks of colors flashed across her skin, racing from her toes to the crown of her head. The Cleaners froze in place, their eyes locked on her. Emmalethe created spirals, flowers, and simple shapes. The Cleaners clicked their teeth in excitement. A few hooted.

Emmalethe's lips quirked up at the corners. She made her skin show Ampyr symbols, strings of text she'd seen around the ship. The Cleaners chirped. Emmalethe chewed on her lip and her body darkened, and then shifted colors to match their markings until she lit up just like them, her silver eyes and theirs appearing all the more similar.

The Cleaners trilled their lips and ducked their heads. Evgeniy smiled as Emmalethe turned for them. She looked to him with a smug grin on her face. "I am *appreciated*."

A crack of metal broke the mood. Evgeniy whirled around to face the noise. An Ampyr soldier stumbled down the hallway, drunk and without his helmet. Evgeniy put his arm out to cover Emmalethe, but she was gone. The passage was empty but for him.

The Ampyr hiccupped. "Where'd they...where'd you guys go?" He steadied himself on the wall as his boots struggled to work through the slime. He pulled his glove away from the muck, and he gagged at the sight of the ooze. "Why here? Why down here! You *bastards!*" He threw his bag of booze into the wall, bursting it open on the metal.

A Cleaner stepped out of a side passage and collected both bag and the liquid, paying the man no attention.

The Ampyr shrieked and threw a punch, knocking the Cleaner back. "Get away! Get back, you contaminated *freak!* Don't touch me!" He fumbled for his gun.

Evgeniy reached for his sidearm, but the man went still. A silver finger was pressed against the back of his neck. A Cleaner slid out of the shadows. The man bucked and writhed. White bacteria broke out across his jumpsuit and tiny mushrooms burst out of his pores. The soldier shook and dissolved into free-floating fungi and mold.

Evgeniy put his gun back in its holster.

Emmalethe reappeared by his side. "So quick."

The Cleaner ate a mushroom out of the air, as another helped the struck girl up. The evidence of the Ampyr was gone entirely; even his path through the drifting muck dissolved away.

Evgeniy let his breath out, appreciating their title and talent even more. What he would have given for that talent back in the day. He shook his head. "That's *amazing*."

A Cleaner stepped up to Emmalethe with a ball of water contained between her hands. She held it out. "Nutritious."

Emmalethe wrinkled her nose. "Plant eater *only*."

The girl ducked her head. "We saw in greenhouse. You seem very hungry." She held the water out. "Algae better, stronger for longer."

Emmalethe licked the water and smacked her lips. Her expression changed to curious. She drank the water and swished it around in her mouth. She swallowed and nodded. "Tiny plants, Evgeniy." She touched her tongue. "Little ones."

Evgeniy nodded, his eyes making a sweep of the passageways. "These waterways...they go all over ship?"

The Cleaner next to Emmalethe perked up. "Very clean, pure filtered." She rapped her knuckles on a metal pipe. "Very clean, water recycled, made better."

"Ah..."

"Clean," the girl continued. "The Ampyr see purpose for old ones and make for us a

placement now yes, but Ampyr still don't like, and we don't like from moving. They blame themselves and us for the lost ones, and then Ampyr forget what the blame is for. So blame keeps on our heads and hate follows blame...but we remember, we could not help. We liked old job far more. Far more. The light ones gave us purpose in the deep."

"*Purpose*," the others crooned.

Evgeniy shook his head. "The Ampyr have issues with...dirt."

The Cleaners around him chirped in unison. "For garbage, for mess, for death, for waste, and water, Cleaners." They touched their chests.

"But it's leaking down here." He made a face.

"No dummy, they make wet on purpose." Emmalethe sniffed a pipe. "Damp all over like swamp, like home."

The Cleaners nodded. "Home! Water caves, big lagoons in caves, in the deep. We came from the deep down with the shining stars of the subterranean. Now we sail with stars in night open. Always in the dark."

"No sick there in the deep!" Another called from the ceiling.

"Clean!" Said one on the floor.

"Speaking of." Evgeniy looked down at his blood and muck-covered jumpsuit. "I suppose I could get helped out then before I leave?"

"Yes, we make clean, but not go that way." They gestured deeper into the dark. "Don't go back that way, bad sorts out, go this way. Safer. Cleaner."

Evgeniy and Emmalethe followed their new guides. They noticed dozens of Cleaners peeking out of side passages. Emmalethe looked up at him. "Not many visitors."

The woman turned. "None see us, but we see them. We see clearly."

They walked in the dim pulsating glow of slime. Organic swirls of light and pictures had been etched into the walls, stories and a language unfamiliar to Evgeniy and Emmalethe. They caught glimpses of portraits, battles, and the scenery of a planet, of a palace and caves, of glowing people that swam among the stars on lines and rings of light.

Evgeniy put his hand in Emmalethe's and squeezed. They slipped past the history of a civilization written in light and reduced to the darkness of sewers and drains.

"All right, I *order* you to do it." Danny smiled.

"Danny!" Oro sat up in bed.

"Don't *Danny* me, Oro. Not anymore." He frowned. "I mean it."

"Rake and Sammy say Da—"

"They don't have any respect for anything or anyone." Danny folded his arms.

Oro took a deep breath. "*Dad*. I don't even want to try! Do you really want me to become a power mad lunatic? Do you want *me*, Oro, to have the power to control your whims and desires? Seriously? *Me*?" Oro pointed at his chest. "I would be the worst ruler in the history of *ever*."

"Your protest has been noted, but the order still stands. Do it." Danny held out his hands. "Now."

Oro glared at him and thought of Danny clapping.

Nothing happened. Danny frowned. "Well?"

"I'm trying!" Oro scowled. "It's not just imagining stuff."

Lloyd leaned over Oro's shoulder and spoke into his ear, "You must make him think it is his will. That is how Jungay work; it is not a direct command like Ampyr. Be insidious, make him

want it.”

“Want it, huh?” Oro nodded and thought about how much Danny wanted to click his heels.

Danny clicked his heels. He looked down. “Why would I want to do that?” He wrested control back and stopped moving.

Oro flopped back onto the bed. “Looks like you can overrule me. Oh well. What a crappy talent. Time to stop. Gosh, I’m tired.”

Danny grabbed Oro’s wrists and hauled him back up. “I didn’t say you were done.”

“Let go.”

Danny did. “Oro, your bitching just got old. Do it *again*.”

Oro held his side as he sat back down. “You’re straining my fragile body. I need to rest.”

Lloyd moved to sit beside Oro. He handed Oro some water and brushed his hair back. “Are you in much pain, I—”

Danny lifted Oro to his feet. He spoke in English, “You’re a big faker and your bruises are fading. Now, do what I say, or I tell him you’re just pretending to feel bad so that he’ll continue to dote on you.”

“I still *do* feel shitty...That second Rexos session didn’t do much more.” Oro grimaced at Danny’s expression. “*Fine*.” He thought Danny could probably use some sleep since he was being such a big, grumpy jerk.

Danny yawned, let Oro go, and lay down. All he wanted was a nice long nap. He hadn’t been sleeping very well at all lately. One nap and they could go right back into training. Everything would be fine if he just relaxed and let go.

Lloyd frowned. “Danny, I thought we were practicing?”

Danny bolted upright. “We were.” He rubbed his eyes and caught Oro’s grin. He inclined his head. “Nicely done. Why did *that* work?”

Oro shrugged. “Maybe I’m persuasive when it comes to being lazy. It’s my area of expertise.”

“Right. Did you do anything different this time?”

Oro drummed his fingers along the mattress. “I thought of the action, and then a *reason* for the action.” Like the fact that Danny was about to jump to his feet and shout, because *it was a momentous moment for the trio*.

Danny hopped to his feet. “Damn it, this is wonderful! What a momentous moment!”

Oro sighed. “*That’s* your shout? You just copied my thoughts?”

Danny frowned, looked around and then down at Oro. “That was you too?”

“Yeah, now can I stop?” Oro scratched his head.

“No.” Danny punched Oro in the shoulder.

Oro scooted away. “Ow! What the hell? I’m still fucking *bruised!*”

Danny socked him in the arm again. “Tough love.”

“Ow!” Oro kicked at Danny, but he was too sore to do much. He gestured to Lloyd who looked on in shock. Oro raised an eyebrow; Lloyd should defend him right about now.

Lloyd grabbed Danny’s wrist. “Stop it.”

Danny looked between them. “Was that you or him?”

Oro shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Lloyd let Danny go. “I would have done it anyways. Do not hit him when he was just injured. That is mean.”

Oro smiled. “That’s right, how *mean*. What a heinous old bastard you turned out to be.”

“I am not old.” Danny growled.

Oro looked to Lloyd and laughed. “Who’s he trying to fool, not you or me? Forty-seven, ancient, I mean seriously talk about over the hill.”

“Oro.” Danny glared at him.

“Sensitive topic?” Oro cocked his head and grinned. “So sorry. Maybe you should take that nap. Bet it sounds pretty good right now.”

Danny yawned and clapped his hand over his mouth. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?” Oro flopped back on the bed and looked at Danny. “You’re getting sleepy, so *sleepy!*”

Danny kicked at Oro. Lloyd caught his foot an inch from Oro. He frowned at Danny. “Why must you be violent when everyone else is?”

Danny pulled his foot back. “I wasn’t going to do it *hard.*”

Oro snorted. “Not that you can, old man.”

Danny pointed. “I will throw you over my knee and spank you like you’re eight.”

Oro rolled onto his stomach. “Where did you think I got the spanking fetish from?”

“Stop being vulgar.”

“You think *that’s* vulgar?” Oro closed his eyes. “Let’s see if *this* power works.”

Danny covered his eyes. “God Oro, stop it! Stop it!”

Oro laughed. “Not good enough? How about this?”

“Oro!” Danny rubbed his eyes.

Lloyd sat on the edge of the bed and looked between them. “I want to see.”

Danny opened his eyes as wide as they could go. “No, you don’t! Okay, point made.” Oro released him and Danny shuddered. “*Never* do that again. You’re disgusting sometimes. I didn’t raise you to be that way.”

“Rake would appreciate it.” Oro smiled.

“Rake whored himself for *drugs.*”

“So his tastes are edgy.” Oro grinned. “I consider myself an avant-garde artiste.”

Lloyd perked up and smiled. “I’m an artist *too*, Oro!”

Oro smiled at him. “Are you?”

“Yes!” Lloyd grinned. “I paint landscapes. What do you do?”

“I can’t tell you.” Oro smirked.

“Why not?” Lloyd lost his smile. “I want to know!”

“My art needs to be *experienced.*” Oro dropped his voice. “I’ll show you, but it’ll have to wait until we’re back on the ship. That’s where my studio is located.” He let his mind wander.

Danny jerked in his bed. “Oro, for the love of God, *stop it!*”

Oro laughed and cringed in pain. He touched his side. “I miss Darq, I miss him. Me want Darq.”

Lloyd looked between him and Danny. “Who is that?”

Danny focused on the question to forget what he’d seen. “He’s our Rexos. If he’d seen to Oro, there wouldn’t be any lingering problems.”

Lloyd clasped his hands in his lap. “*Oh.*”

Oro grinned behind Lloyd’s back. “He’s a pretty awesome dude. Really great guy.”

Lloyd made his features blank. “That’s nice.”

Danny sighed. “He’s a five-year-old.”

Lloyd shifted in his seat. “Oh, advanced for his age.”

“Yeah, he can be a little prick sometimes.” Oro yawned. “I think we should play *guess what Danny’s adaptation will be.*”

Danny glared at Oro. “No.”

Oro kicked his heels in the air. “Yes.”

“No, you need to concentrate and train.”

“But I can’t.” Oro stretched. “So many *distractions*.”

“Oro—”

“You know what I need.” Oro smiled. “Music.” He splayed his fingers. “And a camera.”

“You are *never* touching a camera again!” Danny frowned. “Besides...why do you need that?”

“To create my *training* montage of course.”

Danny sighed and put his head in his hands. “Jesus Christ, Oro.”

Lloyd put a blanket over Oro’s shoulders and fluffed his pillow for him. “What’s a montage, Oro?”

Rake woke up naked and submerged in a tall, clear tube of water. He opened his eyes, but everything was blurry. He spun and made contact with flesh.

Mica punched him in the face.

Rake kicked him in the shin.

Mica pushed him into the sides of the Plexiglas tube. The water drained out around them. Hands descended and pulled the pair out. Katarina set them on bare, tile floor. “There.”

Rake shoved off Katarina’s help and rounded on Mica. “Where’s my lightsaber?”

“Your lightsaber!” Mica grabbed for Rake, but tripped on unsteady feet.

Rake fell into the wall. “It’s mine. I earned it!” He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Sammy, Darq, Katarina, and Ravil stood watching the pair. Ravil’s cheeks were pink at seeing him naked. Rake grabbed Mica and pulled him in front of his body. “Clothes?”

Katarina tossed them white robes. “You should be glad we have extras.”

Sammy beeped. “You two were so cute *snuggling* in the water. Oro would have loved that, good thing I took pictures!”

Rake and Mica dove for Sammy. She backed into Darq. “Hey! No messing with the computer bits!”

Rake saw a flash of gold and threw a punch in that direction. “You little shit!”

Darq jumped away. “I’m sorry!”

“You should be!” Rake snarled and clawed for him. “We nearly had to do unspeakable things to stay warm! It was awful!”

Darq backed up and hit the wall with a clink of metal. “I didn’t know!”

Katarina grinned and shoved Rake back. “You two looked pretty comfy in the tent when I found you. Seems like you had fun, some real quality bonding. Whose idea was it to share a sleeping bag and pillow? The spooning? Was that your idea or Mica’s idea?”

“The only reason I stayed out there *at all* was to try and get his lightsaber, which I now don’t have, not fucking worth it at all.” Rake turned to Ravil. “Sorry I missed *our* lines, but we need to talk—”

Ravil slapped him across the face.

Rake held his cheek. “What was that for?”

“You nearly freeze to death simply so you can have a glow stick!” She turned for the door. “Unbelievable!”

“Okay, I deserved that, I guess.” Rake grabbed her arm. “But hey, come on. It wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t as if we were going to die or anything. Rat said we respawn.”

“I don’t care!” She shook him off.

“But I was *fine*.”

“Leave me alone!” She ran to the door, but it wouldn’t open. Ravil pounded at it, furious and sad. “Fucking movie scenes!” The ice around her cracked. The strains of music that were so familiar floated through the air. Ravil covered her mouth, her eyes wide in fear.

Rake wrapped her in a hug. “I’m sorry I worried you, but everything is okay now.”

Ravil pushed at him. “No, it’s not!” Tears filled her eyes as she saw shapes at the corners of her vision. “Just stop acting!”

“Why are you so upset right now?” He hugged her tighter. “We were just having fun.”

Ravil slipped out of his arms and shoved him into the others. “You’re all *playing*! Everything you’re doing is just a game to go along with your fucking movie! We’re here because something is happening to *me* and none of you care!” Ravil dug her nails into her palms. “I don’t know what to do! Nothing is making any sense!”

“Tell me what happened.” He edged closer to her. “I’m here now.”

“I don’t want you here for me *now*; I want you here for me all the time!” Her cheeks flamed red. “When I *actually* needed you, you weren’t here! I was alone!”

Rake paled. “What happened? Did someone hurt you?”

“Nothing! Just forget about it.” Ravil wiped her eyes. “I can handle this on my own!”

“Ravil, please—”

“No!” She pushed on the door. “Open!”

Katarina nudged Mica. “I think you guys have to have your kiss thing for the scene change.”

Rake hissed. “No, they’re *not* kissing!”

“Why not?” Ravil turned towards him. “Maybe I *want* to kiss him!”

“You are *not* kissing him!” Rake loomed over her.

“Who’re you to say who I can or can’t kiss. Mica, come here!”

Mica looked between Rake and Ravil. “Uhm...probably shouldn’t, Ravil.”

Rake blocked him. “You’re not kissing him!”

“Why not!”

“*Because!*”

She shoved at him. “Because *why?*”

Rake ignored the others. “Because, because.” He gestured to her. “You—I mean you—”

She folded her arms. “I’m waiting.”

“You glow!” Rake blurted out. “To me, and I—”

“I *what?*” The ice at Ravil’s feet melted an inch and steamed.

Rake watched the reaction and swallowed nervously. “You glow?”

Her face drained of its color.

He gestured frantically. “You have since you aged on Earth! I’ve been called, and so I know how you feel, and you can’t be with him because I—”

“Rake!” Ravil ran into his arms.

Rake hugged her, relieved. “See, everything will be okay. We can work this out, we—”

“You *bastard!*” Ravil kned Rake in the groin. “I could have used that information weeks ago!” She pushed him into the wall. “And you’ve known all this time?”

“I—” Rake gagged and fell to the floor. “Thought you’d be happy.”

“*Happy?*” Ravil backed away. “All you’re doing is adding one more thing for me to stress about. I swear, all you exist for is to make my life *worse!*”

Rake cupped his crotch. "But I—"

Ravil grabbed Mica, kissed him, and pushed him to the side. She shoved Katarina into the wall, jumped up, kissed her, and let her go. Ravil grabbed Darq by the shoulders and drew him into a passionate kiss that made his skin shine. Behind her, the door opened. Ravil ran out of the room. "Screw you, Rake!"

Rake gasped and reached after her. "What's happening?"

Sammy rolled over and bumped into Rake. "*Guess you don't know everything about women yet.* Heh."

The loudspeaker squawked. "*Headquarters personnel, report to command center. Headquarters personnel, report to command center.*"

Rake kicked Sammy. "What the hell just happened?"

Katarina folded her arms. "You really need a summary?"

Rake winced and eyed Darq's dreamy expression. "Stop that! And yes, I do."

"You upset her." Katarina frowned.

Mica sighed. "Way to state the obvious, Kat."

"He wanted a summary and that was simple enough." Katarina glared back at him.

Rake groaned. "Damn it."

Katarina put her hand on his back. "She's been acting strange, Rake. I think you threw her over the edge on the stress she could handle."

"Okay, but why is she taking it out on my dick? What did it do to her?" He winced.

"I think it's more what it didn't do, if you catch my meaning." Sammy laughed. "Right? Huh? Yeah?"

Katarina slapped Sammy. "Shut it."

"Basically you...no, not basically." Mica helped Rake up. "You outright *lied* to her, straight to her face, Rake."

"Yeah." Rake gestured to the open doorway. "But I just told her the *truth*."

"Yeah, *finally*." Sammy rammied into Rake's legs. "After she had a mental breakdown from guilt and stress."

Katarina nodded. "She's been honest with her feelings the entire time, and now she knows that you've been lying to her. You not only fucked up on a romantic level, but as friends, Rake. She has no reason to trust you."

Darq recovered from his kiss-created stupor. "You lying bag of *excrement*! You have no idea what you've done to her! And what *I* did because she was misled, you *bastard*! I could kill you, Rake!"

Rake stared. "But, it was for her own good!"

"Really?" Darq snarled. "It might just be glowing to you, but to her it has a biological reaction which you have messed with through your lying and omissions! This isn't just emotional! You've damaged her physically!"

Rake took a step back. "What do you mean?"

"Keeping two called Navigators apart is *torture* the Ampyr employ to psychologically break them, and you are doing it because you are *stupid*!" Darq leapt for Rake.

Katarina caught him round the waist and held him in the air. "No, Darq!"

Rake backed up. "I'm *not* adapting to be a Navigator!"

"Cut the shit, Rake." Katarina pinned Darq in place. "You *are* adapting to one, and if you deny it one more time, I'm going to let Darq go."

"Okay, fine, whatever, I am." Rake looked away. "Happy now?"

“Not to make it worse,” Mica spoke up. “But Ravil might think you were lying about the glowing thing just so that she’d forgive you just now.”

Rake rubbed the back of his neck. “Seems more like she’ll *kill* me.”

“Someone should!” Darq snapped his teeth at Rake.

Katarina pressed Darq to the floor. “Rake, why didn’t you say anything before?”

“At first I didn’t know it meant anything.” Rake looked at his feet. “And once I did, I was scared. I’ve been too afraid to say it out loud, but...I *love* her.”

The room went silent.

“I love her.” Rake sniffled. His eyes flooded with tears. He wiped at them. “I love her...”

Mica grabbed Rake’s arm. “Then go make it right, Rake.”

“How?” Rake looked at him in distress. “She *hates* me now.”

“Say to her, what you just said to us. Then it’ll be all right.” Mica gave him an encouraging smile. “She loves you too.”

Katarina gestured to the door. “And I suggest *begging* for forgiveness at this point. On your knees begging.”

Sammy beeped. “Cry, tears, lots of them.”

Darq clawed for Rake. “Blood too, bleed a bit! Bleed everywhere, Rake!”

“Darq!” Katarina shook him. “We don’t need any more violence.”

Those in the Command Center stood by uncomfortably as Ravil sat on the floor, sobbing with her head resting on the wall. A nervous looking man stepped over and mumbled, “*Princess, we have a visitor.*”

“I don’t care.” Ravil gulped for air.

He pulled at his collar. “*We’ve picked up something outside the base in zone twelve, moving east.*”

Ravil curled up on her side. “So?”

Rake raced into the room and didn’t see her. “Damn it, where is she?”

Ravil stayed quiet and out of sight. Rake gestured towards the man in charge. “Well?” At blank looks, he swore, “Fuck!” He spoke into his radio, “She ran off. Damn it!” He sprinted from the room.

Ravil hugged her sides; she paid no attention as the scene shifted. Rake had lied to her. Lied for weeks, he could be lying now. Why had he done that to her? He’d said she’d find someone better, that she’d meet the one for her, but it was *him* and he’d known that all along. He’d tricked her and led her astray. Rake had put her through this on purpose.

“Damn it!” Rake barked out on the comlink. “I’m out in the goddamn snow again! Ravil! Ravil, where are you? Please, we need to talk!”

Rake shot something and growled. “Stupid idiot! Why did you say it that way?” He mumbled as he trekked through the snow outside the base, “Shouldn’t have kissed her first, should have done that afterwards, or something, or...” he fired again. “Fucking scene, fucking end already. Do I really have to say it?” He raised his voice. “*It’s a good bet the Empire knows we’re here.*”

The man near Ravil nodded. “*We’d better start the evacuation.*”

Ravil crawled into a cubby and tucked her knees to her chest.

Mica raced for his flier as an announcement blasted over the speakers, “*The first transport is away.*”

Mica ignored the cheering and kept going.

Tasaneer tripped him. "Ha! I'm back!"

Mica hit the icy floor and looked up at her. "Oh, glad you're back. Still Wedge?"

"I have no clue." She looked at her flight suit. "Is this the part where we destroy some of those robot elephants?"

Mica hopped into the cockpit of his ship. "*Imperial Walkers* and yeah, we do."

Tasaneer grinned. "Sweet. See you out there."

"Right." Mica looked over his shoulder as his partner Dack went through his lines. Mica fiddled with his helmet. He said Luke's lines without thinking about it, "*I know what you mean.*"

He watched the scene change and his flier appeared mid-air. Mica practiced with the flight controls, hoping they really were able to respawn if they died. He looked up and spotted the Imperial Walkers on the horizon. "Great, *Echo station Five-Seven. We're on our way.*"

Mica turned his ship to full throttle. "*All right, boys, keep tight now.*"

Tasaneer laughed. "Dirty—"

Dack's voice cut her off, "*Luke, I have no approach vector. I'm not set.*"

"*Steady Dack. Attack pattern Delta. Go now!*"

"Mica." Tasaneer sounded disappointed over the radio. "Hey Mica, I don't have a gun. Where's my gun?"

Mica smiled. "You have a gunner."

"That's what that guy was for?" Tasaneer mumbled.

Mica frowned. "What was that?"

"I kicked him out of the ship."

Mica glared at her ship from his cockpit. "Are you *serious?*"

"Yeah, he was annoying."

"You *need* your gunner in this scene!" Mica gestured at the horizon. "You bring down one of those things."

"Well." Tasaneer sighed. "Oops."

Marx purred through the radio. "I will help you, my little rat."

"How?" Mica and Tasaneer asked at the same time.

Marx appeared in the empty seat in Tasaneer's ship. "This way."

Tasaneer looked over her shoulder. "You do as I say."

"Always." He smiled.

Mica focused. "*All right, I'm coming in. Tasaneer, stay with me.*"

Marx yawned. "May I shoot something now?"

Mica shook his head. "*That armor's too strong for blasters.*"

"But you said we brought one down?" The Hunter frowned.

"Yeah!" Tasaneer joined in.

Mica shook his head at the pair of them and started in on another run. "*Use your harpoons and tow cables. Go for the legs.*"

Marx stretched in his seat. "Why are you not making use of your force powers, disciple?"

"I haven't gone to my *new* master yet." Mica ignored Dack's panicked voice. "So I don't know how."

"*New* master?" Marx glared at Mica's ship. "You are replacing me? I am still here."

"Whatever, *Marx.*" Mica weaved through bolts and explosions. He didn't need to look behind him to know that Dack had died. "Right, this is where you come in, Rat. Follow me on the next pass, and fire the harpoon."

“Coming around, Mica face.”

Mica smiled as they dove through the legs of an Imperial Walker. “Okay, Rat.”

Tasaneer grinned. “Fire!”

Marx flicked his wrist and the Imperial Walker exploded into a ball of flames.

Mica eyed the blast. “You didn’t use your harpoon.”

“Who needs a harpoon when you have *the force*?” Marx purred. “Is she done?”

Mica turned in his seat to watch them. “With that part, yes.”

“Good.” Marx disappeared and reappeared in Tasaneer’s lap. “We are done for now.” He grounded their plane on the ice.

Mica watched them park. “What are you *doing*? The scene isn’t over.”

Marx shredded Tasaneer’s flight suit. “It is for us.”

Rake sprinted from hallway to hallway. “Goddamn it, Ravil! Where are you?” An explosion shook the walls, sending Rake to his hands and knees.

Ipsos helped him up. “She’s been in the room with the archaic computers the whole time. She’s hiding.”

Rake eyed her. “Why are *you* helping me?”

“She is sad. Ravil shouldn’t be sad.” Ipsos gazed in to his eyes. “You are her friend aren’t you?”

“Yes!”

She pointed. “Then make her feel better.”

He looked down at her. “Why do you care about her?”

Ipsos scowled. “Why do you people think I shouldn’t care about things? Of course I care! She’s one of my own, she’s on the list, she’s my *friend*.” She faded out of view. “What is this universe coming to? Doesn’t *anyone* help each other anymore just to be nice?”

Rake frowned and ran. “Weirdo.” He took a left turn and skidded to a stop in the Command Center doorway. “Ravil?”

Darq stood in the room looking confused. “Now I am here? How did I get *here*?”

Rake waved him away. “Get back to the ship, Darq.”

Darq saw him and hissed. “What are *you* doing here?”

“None of your business. Get going or Kat is going to flay you!” Rake stalked past him and shrugged off Darq as the boy tried to tackle him. “You and I can deal with each other later, but not now! Kat and Ravil aren’t safe until we’re off this planet. Got it?”

Darq calmed his emotions. “Yes.” He ran out of the room.

Rake jumped on a desk and looked around. The base shook. He hopped down as ice fell around him. Rake pulled open cabinets. “Come on, Ravil! We have to go!” Rake pushed rebels out of the way. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the glowing! And I promise we can talk about it, we *will* talk about it, but not right now! You need to come with me before this whole place comes down on our heads!”

“*Imperial troops have entered the base.*”

“*Shit.*” Rake saw a flash of white as Ravil sprinted for the doorway. He leapt after her. “Ravil, wait! Please!” Ice fell on his head but he ignored it. Cracks raced along the walls as fast as he could run. With each footfall, the ground became less firm. It melted into slush. “Ravil, stop!”

Ravil turned down a hall and disappeared from sight. Rake grabbed the wall and slid around the corner. She’d stopped just beyond, catatonic. Rake ran into the back of her.

In the contact, he saw the world as she did. The ice beyond had dissolved in to a grassy field, and Rake's motion threw them both into the image. They tumbled from ice into warm air. Rake wrapped his arms around her. "Shit! What the hell is going on?" They landed on the ground, but that broke apart under their feet.

Ravil came out of her catatonia and twitched in his embrace. "Let me go!"

"No way!" Rake held her tighter. "Not here I won't!"

"I hate you!" She elbowed him.

"You do not *hate* me."

Ravil slammed her head into his chin, sending them tumbling through floating chunks of planet. "Maybe I did like you at one point, but I don't anymore, you lying, immature, self-centered, son of a bitch!"

Rake kissed her.

Ravil scratched his face and broke away. Tears ran down her cheeks. "You think kissing me solves anything! It doesn't!"

Rake held her hands. "I know it doesn't, but—"

"I don't want to hear any buts. I don't want to hear your excuses! I don't care why you lied!" Ravil threw his hands off. Her eyes lit up. "Do you understand? I don't *care* why! There is no reason good enough!" Bursts of light shot from her skin, obliterating anything they touched. She touched her chest. "Leave me alone!"

Rake reached for her. "I can't. I want you."

Ravil hugged her sides. "That's our difference, you *want* me."

"Yes, I do!"

"But I *need* you!" Ravil kicked back. "And I don't want to. You're brash, unreliable, and immature. All of that I could handle, but you *lied* to me."

"I'm sorry!" Rake jumped from a floating rock. "I didn't know the glowing was such a big deal until recently."

"I told you when you got back from detoxing!" She pointed an accusatory finger at his face. "I told you *everything* and you still lied to me!"

"You also said only Navigators can be together." Rake pointed to his hair. "I'm not one!"

"Then what the fuck are you, Rake?"

"I don't know but I'm..." Rake looked down. "I think I'm *adapting* to be one."

"Well, good for you! *You* can fly the ship! You can do it all and leave me alone!"

"I can't do any of the stuff you can! All I have is you glowing!" He focused on her and her body bloomed in the darkness; sparks and stars raced across her skin and hair. The background faded away until it was just the two of them. He gasped as his skin burned. "I can't stop this, I need you."

Ravil felt the pull, but turned away from him. "You faked it fine for long enough. No reason to stop now."

Rake's chest ached. "Don't do this to me, Ravil."

Ravil whispered, "You did it to me. This is fair."

"*Please.*"

"No."

"Why?" Rake's voice cracked. "Why can't you forgive me?"

"Why should I?"

"We're supposed to be together."

"You forget." Ravil eyed him. "Females can wait until they find more than one Navigator

to choose from. I might be the only one for you, but you aren't the only one for me, and frankly I deserve better."

"I'll *be* better!"

Ravil closed her eyes. "Your promises have proven themselves worthless."

Rake dropped to his knees. "Ravil..."

Ipsa appeared between the pair. "There you are! Went off the grid a bit didn't we..." she took in their expressions. "Oh, uh well..." she coughed. "Time to go back." The view changed and Rake and Ravil dropped into the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon. Rake landed in his seat, and Ravil landed in the seat behind him.

Katarina chewed on her lip and tore through the asteroid field. She glanced over and flinched at the sight of them. "Gah! There you are! Want to take over?"

Rake stared straight ahead in shock. "No." The ship shuddered as asteroids hit the hull. "I'm fine."

Ravil got out of her seat and headed towards the back, getting out of sight of Rake. The ship flipped and she knocked into the wall. Ravil staggered and climbed, tears blinding her. She slipped as the ship bounced. "Shit!"

Darq caught her. "Strap in here, it's safer."

"Thank you, Darq." Ravil burst into tears and curled into a ball.

Darq hugged her and tied her down. "You'll be okay."

In the cockpit, Katarina eyed Rake. "It didn't go well."

Rake stared at his hands. "She won't forgive me."

"Rake, you knew she was going to be upset."

Tears slid down his cheeks. "She said she doesn't want me. That it doesn't matter if I was sorry." He hiccupped and tucked his knees to his chest.

Katarina looked at him seriously. "How would you feel in her place?"

"Like shit." Rake put his head in his hands. "I don't know what to do, Kat."

"Don't give up. Right now she's pissed and there's no way you can make that go away, because she has every right to be angry with you. When she calms down, then you can talk."

"She won't calm down." Rake wiped his tears and touched the bloody scratch marks on his cheek. "She *hates* me."

"You *hurt* her, Rake, *badly*."

"I know!" Rake slumped over his controls. "I'm fucked *forever*!"

"Stop thinking like that. She'll calm down. You need to focus on being genuine, Rake. From here on out, win her trust back by being trustworthy. If you love her—"

"I do!"

"Then act as if and expect to get your heart trampled. She's not going to take you back until you've taken the necessary amount of suffering for what you've put *her* through."

Their ship plunged into an asteroid cave. Rake whispered, "How could I have been so stupid, Kat?"

"You're only human." Katarina frowned. "Well you *were* only human."

Rake slipped lower in his seat. "That is no consolation at all."

Mica sat in his X-Wing and flew through the darkness of space. His emotions were mixed. He tapped on his computer. "You awake back there, Sammy?"

"Totally, just spacing out," she replied.

He frowned. "Thinking about them too?"

Sammy sighed. "I really hope he doesn't screw this up. He needs her."

"Yeah."

Sammy beeped. "You know, I told Rake how he felt when we were still back in swampland, but he refused to accept it. If he had then, she would have welcomed him with open arms."

Mica nodded. "He was still refusing to believe there could be anyone but Lara. To admit the truth meant finally putting her to rest."

"Are you upset with him?"

Mica frowned. "Why would I be?"

"For finding someone else."

Mica shook his head. "Lara wouldn't want him to be alone for the rest of his life, besides she—"

"What?" Sammy snapped.

Mica frowned. "Nothing."

"Don't 'nothing' me Mica, I heard a tone."

Mica fiddled with his controls. "Ready to go to the swamp?"

"Mica!"

"Right, I'm ready too. Off we go to!"

Lincoln gazed at Kennedy in their tiny metal room above the burnt bar. She looked back at him apprehensively. They'd been awake for an hour maybe more, but neither had moved or said a word. In the time they had slept, their hair had woven together in a net. They breathed in time, their pulses matched. Their hands were linked like their hair, but they stayed apart other than that.

Lincoln desired to reach out and bring her into his arms. He wanted to comfort her and ask her questions about what had happened, but the words and the energy to do so were trapped in his lethargic body. Lincoln was content for now, lying here with her.

He inhaled and sensed a change in the air. Kennedy felt his body react and she tensed. Lincoln looked up from the floor and disengaged them with a shiver that unwound their hair. He cocked his ears and breathed in deep. "One enters downstairs. Now another."

"What kind?"

"Ampyr."

"Who?" Kennedy followed his gaze to the door.

"Perhaps the owner." Lincoln wished he possessed Kennedy's skill at tracking individuals over subspecies. He could only smell a group of Ampyr men. "Looters maybe."

"Or the owner?"

"Perhaps." Lincoln slid all of his talons out in a smooth motion and unhinged his heel hooks from the perforated floor. He crept to the doorway and listened, but no conversation floated up from the floor below. Lincoln growled.

Kennedy was to her feet in an instant, her eyes darting back and forth. "What now?"

"We have no way out of the second floor."

"Waitrey got out, remember, she got to the roof."

"I will find it then." Lincoln put his finger to his lips. He turned the door handle, but the door wouldn't budge. Lincoln hissed. "She kept it locked from the outside."

Kennedy reached for her neck. "Where is the key?"

“The *Jungay* has it.” Lincoln put his back to the door and whispered, “She took it from you once you brought me inside.”

“I brought you in?” Kennedy frowned. “I don’t remember that.”

Lincoln waved the thought aside. “Not now.”

A painful drone rattled the walls and sent both Hunters to their knees. Kennedy wailed. Lincoln crawled to her side and covered her ears with his hands. The outer metal wall warped, groaning as the metal pushed in and out. Lincoln drew Kennedy into the corner, placing his body between hers and the outside.

Pressure and sound battered them against the wall, pulling the Hunters across the floor and slamming them back again. Lincoln struggled to get his limbs around Kennedy, protecting her body with his. Lincoln fought to breathe, unable to expand his lungs much. He gasped, “If the door breaks, go!” The blood vessels in his eyes burst, and his nose bled.

Kennedy wailed as the force increased in her ears and against her bones. “What is it?”

Lincoln hissed. “Crackers. Poppers.”

The pressure decreased making them dizzy. Kennedy sucked in thin air. “Why here?”

“I don’t know!” Lincoln bared his teeth. “There must be a *Collector* on board.”

Kennedy held on tighter. “Why?”

“I don’t know that either!” Lincoln held on to the wall. An Ampyr Collector was the last thing they needed harassing them.

The entire outer wall came off in a screech of metal. The air stilled, and debris floated in the air.

Lincoln bared his fangs at the gap, but nothing approached. He whispered, “If no escape is possible, do not let on your Resister nature until you see a chance to flee.”

Kennedy nodded.

A man coughed and spoke through a loud speaker, his tone dulcet and calm, “Now that we’ve gotten our needed *greeting* out of the way, perhaps you wouldn’t mind showing yourselves?”

Lincoln cocked his ears back recognizing the voice as the man that had shot him, but there had been no command in the voice. He stayed where he was and kept silent.

“Must we do this?” A sigh poured through the megaphone. “All right, as you wish, *I order you to show yourselves, now.*”

Lincoln felt the pull of the command and stalked to the opening in the wall, unable to resist. Kennedy followed him, playing along. The Hunters looked down into the street. The same officer that had attempted to kidnap Kennedy and kill Lincoln stood below them. He was tall and slender with his shiny black hair slicked away from his face. The man grinned at the sight of them, making his black eyes sparkle. “See, so hard? No, not at all.” He squinted and leaned forward. “And look at you two.”

Reloy gave them a once over, his eyes lingering on Lincoln and his indigo spots. “You know, I must say I regret my actions against you, Blue. If I had known how resilient and talented you were, well, I would have sent you straight to a Rexos despite the nature of your injuries and the pain it would cause! I was just so busy and distracted...so.” He bowed to them both. “My fault, but that’s behind us now. Both of you are alive and healthy.” He smiled at Kennedy. “And that would make you...Little Blue, come here now please.”

Kennedy climbed down to the street below, moving stiffly. She ignored Lincoln’s sub vocal growl. She walked to the officer’s side. The Ampyr grinned wider and patted her on the head. “So darling and young.” He snapped a collar around her neck. “Go wait in the car, kitten.”

Kennedy padded to the vehicle and sat in the back, her hands in her lap, head down.

“Reloy!” Waitrey snapped her teeth. “The blues mean nothing, they’re nothing!”

Reloy turned to the Jungay his soldiers had pinned against the side of the building. He sighed. “Waitrey, my beauty, he’s *rare*. How many blues are on this ship or elsewhere? None and after that light show he caused. Mmm.” He eyed Lincoln again. “So strong and tall, my instincts are telling me I need to take him too, and I never disregard those. No.” Reloy gestured to Lincoln. “Come down, Blue, you are joining me as well, a...do you know how to cook?”

Lincoln stepped down and shook his head once. “Only the basics, sir.”

“Well you will learn as we go.” Reloy eyed Waitrey. “Since I’ve lost mine to madness.”

Waitrey grinned and laughed. “You tossed me, Reloy! Ree-loy-oh! In a book, sleepy dinners!”

Reloy made a face. “It’s a pity you descended. You are a gem...a shame I never got in to you.”

“You tried!” Waitrey laughed, making the Ampyr soldiers around her nervous. “Failure! Weak!”

Reloy tensed. “Stop *laughing* at me!” He rubbed his neck and calmed. “I hate it when you do that, dear.”

Waitrey stilled. She stared at him without blinking. “*Reloy, Reloy, Reloy, Reloy.*”

“Shut up!” Reloy grabbed a gun from one of his soldiers. “I hate it when you say my name like that! Why can you not conduct yourself with some decorum? I made everything so easy for you.” He gestured with the gun. “You just tossed all of the things I gave you, laughed at the choices I gave you. I treated you very well for the Jungay that you are!”

Waitrey twitched and shook; her body wanted to express what was inside, but she was unable to. Instead, she laughed with a hiss through her teeth. She spit towards his face.

Reloy ducked to the side. “You know I hate losing good stock, Waitrey, but I think you’re too damaged, my fine dear. It is a pity, you know I mean that.” Reloy cocked the gun. “I so enjoyed our games.” He shot the Jungay between the eyes. Waitrey’s body hung in the air, limp, as blood pooled around her in dark blue droplets swirled with clear fluid. The Ampyr let her go and avoided the blood.

Reloy tucked the gun in his belt and looked up at Lincoln. He clapped his hands and noticed Lincoln’s talons. “Put those away around me, they’re so disagreeable. You’re a bit taller than I normally have.” Reloy grinned. “A good thing, you see, I have other Hunters to pair you with, tall children will do well, but sadly they are not on the ship, but back home. Oh, have you ever been back to the First Planet?”

“No, sir.”

“You’ll *love* it! Once we get the nasty garbage out of your head. It’s never like anything you’ve experienced I’m sure. I’m so glad now that I didn’t finish you off.” Reloy touched his chin and spun on his heels to look at Kennedy. “Oh, you two aren’t together, are you? That would serve no advantageous purpose to your blue line, keeping the blood all together like that.” He frowned. “It doesn’t really matter I suppose, no more of that.” He looked to Lincoln and gestured to Kennedy. “*No mating with that one*, it’s an order! *You’ll listen only to me. You’re both my wards now!*”

He peered in to Lincoln’s eyes and smiled, pleased with what he saw there. “Not controlled. Fascinating and a good thing truly...we are severely short-staffed at the moment but aren’t we always! *No more remembering dreams*. Aren’t you happy?”

The instructions settled in. The desire to be with Kennedy was still there, but Lincoln knew

if he tried to legitimately mate with her, his body would not obey. He gazed at Kennedy with longing and relief.

“Time to go!” Reloy clapped his hands. He gazed at his watch. “Oh yes, time, time, need to get you in uniforms, especially you.” He smirked at Lincoln. “Running around half-naked is not what my staff will do, not at all, Blue. I have rules, regulations, and uniforms, but I only have one bell at the moment.” He smiled at Kennedy. “I was only expecting to find one. And I know it’s not my job anymore, but...habits die hard don’t you know. *Come with me.*”

Lincoln followed Reloy to the vehicle, unable to control his limbs. He sat next to Kennedy and jerked as straps came down automatically to hold him in place.

“No, no.” Reloy swatted him over and sat between them.

Kennedy glanced up at Lincoln over Reloy’s head. Reloy threw an arm around her shoulders and fiddled with her loose and floating hair. “Do something with this please. Make it cute or at least utilitarian, dear.”

Kennedy braided her hair, earning her a pat on the head. She resisted the impulse to flinch when Reloy put his hand in hers. Instead, she kept her eyes forward as Lincoln did, mimicking his rigid suppressed rage. Reloy sighed, happily oblivious. He snapped at the driver. “Let’s get going.” He nudged Lincoln. “I find walking on ships so tedious especially with the gravity issues. Now a nice walk in the park *that is a truly lovely experience.* Oh, I miss my plants.”

Lincoln kept his eyes sharp as they passed the Cage arena. Their transport took them to the main elevator. Ampyr soldiers held the car door open, and Reloy gestured them out of the vehicle. “Time to go to your new home, yes.” He spoke to one of his aides, “Make sure the tailor is sent to my quarters.”

“Yes, sir.”

The trio stepped into the empty elevator. Reloy leaned on the wall and smiled at Kennedy. “Little Blue, come here.” Kennedy stepped up to him. Reloy touched her ears and examined what he saw. He smiled and she blushed. He elbowed Lincoln. “She’s bashful! She seems, well, rather virginal. Did she have a mate? It wasn’t you, was it? That would be in poor form for me.”

“No, only cousins.” Lincoln frowned at Reloy’s sparse use of his voice talent, and he wondered if this were some kind of obedience test. “I am her only family.”

“Oh, good.” Reloy grabbed Kennedy’s hips and pulled her close. “That makes you more valuable, Little Blue.” He looked up to Lincoln. “And you as family even more so. *You will guard her life as well as mine.* She has worth; I don’t want anyone damaging her. She’ll have such a fine body and strength when I am done with her.” He tweaked Kennedy’s nose. “You’re so cute. Yes, you are.”

Lincoln imagined eating Reloy as the elevator ascended. He pictured dividing his body parts and internal organs into dishes, which he would consume with pleasure. Lincoln rearranged his meal in his head, deciding which would be the best way to make this annoying creature vanish.

Reloy hummed a song as the elevator rose.

Kennedy watched the both of them and trembled, unsure of what to do. Lincoln could not escape and she would not leave him behind. Kennedy tried to catch his gaze, but his yellow eyes were fixed on Reloy’s neck.

The elevator opened with a ding. Reloy clapped his hands. “Out.” He hooked a silver leash on to Kennedy’s collar and wrapped the slack around his wrist. Reloy looked up at Lincoln. “*Safety first. Priority, me, second priority, her.* Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, Blue, but call me Reloy please and what’s your name?”

“Blue suffices.”

“As you wish.” He gestured out the door. “My room is next to the pilot’s.” Officers ducked their heads and saluted as Reloy went by.

Lincoln stayed in front, his eyes and ears alert for any sign of attack, his body primed to rend anyone limb from limb that attempted to assault them, but his mind was the one doing the attacks. He imagined every way he would cut this man, peel his flesh off, and devour his organs. Lincoln salivated.

Reloy glanced up at him. “Hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I shall show you the kitchen.” Reloy stopped at a plain door and put his hand to the palm lock; it read his fingerprints and opened.

An officer ran down the hall. “Commodore! Commodore Reloy!”

Reloy stopped. “Yes? I am busy.”

“The pilot would like to discuss the delays due to her Navigator.”

“Yes, I understand her Navigator is tired.” Reloy nodded. “So what will discussing do?”

“She wants to discuss how to address the station, they—”

“The station can wait. No amount of chatter there will speed our progress.” He caught the man’s worried expression and he sighed. “Patch her through to my quarters, but give me time with my new ones. Aren’t they lovely?”

“Yes, Commodore.” The man ducked his head and backed away.

Reloy tugged on Kennedy’s leash and the trio entered his suite. Lincoln surveyed the apartment quickly, only one entrance, but panels in the ceilings and walls could open. The rooms were soundproofed, no windows out, though monitors covered one wall.

Reloy smiled. “Home at last and enough of this *thing*.” He unclipped Kennedy’s leash and threw it aside. “Appearances and politics you know, so important to maintain among the others.”

Kennedy touched her collar, confused.

Reloy pointed towards the expansive kitchen. “It is not a proper kitchen, but it will do under the circumstances. You’ll get used to this, but if you’re sick for a day, I won’t mind as long as it is cleaned up. Without those Cleaners...I do not allow them in my space. No matter what they say, I *always* find *fungus* afterwards...”

Lincoln inclined his head. “Yes, sir.”

Reloy clapped and the lights changed. Lincoln staggered as his full weight returned. Kennedy swayed on her feet.

Lincoln understood Reloy’s possession of Crackers and Poppers now. The strain on his shoulders neared painful after having been mostly weightless since coming aboard the ship. He cracked his neck, aware of how easily he could be crushed into a pulp by the subspecies that Reloy employed. No doubt, there was a pair or two living in some cubby or offshoot to the suite.

Reloy had no such fear. He slipped on a robe and tied it around his waist. He opened the fridge and pantries, gesturing to the contents. “I have all the goods from home, First Planet that is, as well as plenty of spices and meats from the colonies.”

Reloy pulled out a jar from the fridge; it was full of pickled fingers. “There’s a Waster colony found in the, oh, I don’t even remember the region.” He laughed. “Not useful, no talents, but they have such a fine taste in the appendages. Strange looking things though, all hands and feet. Isn’t that bizarre?” He bit into a finger. “Can’t have too many or you’ll become ill.”

Reloy popped a finger into Kennedy's mouth. "Do you like the taste? What do you think of it?"

Kennedy crunched through the bone. "Sour. The owner is alive."

Reloy grabbed her chin and peered in to her eyes. "Are you an individual tracker?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"My." Reloy touched her cheek. "Oh, you are a beauty in so many ways." He kissed her on the nose. "Now, Blue, I would like a lunch, while Little Blue and I get—" a knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. "Yes? Come in."

A Rexos adolescent peeked in. She held up fabric. "Tailor."

"Yes, yes, yes." Reloy gestured her in. "Take Little Blue into the back and measure her, and then the big one...no wait actually do both at once." His monitor began blinking. "I have to take a call." He kissed Kennedy on the cheek. "So sorry I can't attend to you, but you'll be fine, dear."

Kennedy followed the Rexos without saying a word. She rubbed at the saliva on her face.

Lincoln followed her, his blood pressure skyrocketing. They stepped into a massive bedroom suite and the door slid shut behind them, cutting off the sound of the Commodore's call.

The Rexos tore their clothes off in one smooth motion. She took one look at Kennedy's spots and squeaked. "Oh." She looked past Kennedy towards the door. "Oh my." Her face went blank. "Well." The Rexos pulled out her measuring instruments and ran them across Kennedy's body.

Kennedy looked to Lincoln, confused.

Lincoln hissed. "Not alerting anyone, Rexos?"

The Rexos grabbed precut fabric. "Shh." She slipped off her top and unfolded an extra set of arms, the limbs modified with long slender fingers for sewing and cutting. She fitted Kennedy for a short tunic and sewed Kennedy into it with three hands, while the fourth grabbed for a syringe.

Kennedy growled at the needle. "What *that*? Not want."

"Camouflage. The Commodore likes to mess with pigments and patterns to stay in style. Now hush." The Rexos examined Lincoln, took a sample of his blood, and mingled it with the syringe's contents. She shook the liquid and jabbed Kennedy in the arm.

Kennedy shuddered as her skin darkened and her spots lightened from black to indigo. She marveled at the effect. "Look."

The Rexos clucked her forked tongue. "The color change will only last a few days on the outside." With two arms, the Rexos measured Lincoln while sifting through fabric with the other pair. "This will be quick."

Lincoln kept his ears focused on the door. "Is *he* royalty?"

She nodded without looking up. "Second cousin of the Emperor or something close to it. One of the original Houses I've heard."

Lincoln curled a lip. "Ah, he seems it through and through. Mad and oblivious."

Kennedy touched her new mini skirt and skintight panties. "Why does mine have hole in the back?"

The Rexos focused on sewing Lincoln's outfit. "I will get to that."

Kennedy squirmed. "Want hole near bottom fixed *now*."

"Be *patient*. I need to do this first." The Rexos ran her hands along Lincoln's clothing.

"No." Kennedy made a face.

The Rexos sighed and glanced over at her. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"When were you registered and removed off world?"

Lincoln stopped Kennedy from answering. He eyed the Rexos. "How can you tell we are both home worlders and not ship bred?"

The Rexos pulled Lincoln down to her height to sew his collar on tight. "I am a tailor not a doctor. I can see she was done poorly. At a camp, I would guess. No ship Rexos would sever the tail as hers was. So I am guessing another Hunter did it, meaning she was not born on a ship or a colony, but deep in the wilds. Rejoy will want that fixed and returned."

Kennedy kept her hand over the hole in her panties. "Returned?"

"It is in style, the all natural look." She finished with Lincoln and gave him a pat on the chest. "Not for you, one with military merit, but for the one being the house attendant. They will switch the girl back after a time perhaps, but not now with things as they are."

"What do you mean?" Lincoln frowned.

"I don't have time to lecture those with only recent wards. So please be quiet and let me work." The Rexos grabbed Kennedy's jaw and cracked the bone, repositioning it. She applied pressure, subtly modifying her bone structure to remove the damage a lifetime of abuse had caused. She turned Kennedy's face side-to-side, and nodded, happy with the adjustment. The Rexos lifted Kennedy's tunic up and jabbed her fingers into Kennedy's stomach.

Kennedy watched her work over the edge of the fabric. She unhinged her jaw. "Look what I can do now!" She opened her mouth wide enough to eat the Rexos' head if she so desired.

Lincoln forgot his questions and smiled. He reached out and touched her face, his hands shaking. Seeing an injury he'd caused be fixed made him happier than he thought he could be.

The Rexos clucked her tongue. "So many old breaks here and here. Bad healing all around I must say. Bad work."

"Our doctor is little."

The Rexos shrugged. "If your Rexos was only a doctor, she was not trained to do this fine work, only surgery, disease, and maintenance. Having to look nice is unimportant to those types, which is all well and good for your average soldier." She turned Kennedy around and pushed her hands away from the hole in her underwear. "Stop it. You are in my way."

Kennedy looked over her shoulder. The ends of her hair flicked at the girl's face. "What do you do down there, Rexos girl?"

The Rexos grabbed on to Kennedy's hips and ran her finger along her spine. Loud popping filled the air. Lincoln leaned over to watch, but the Rexos moved to block his view.

Kennedy squawked and her eyes bulged out. "Feels funny on my bottom!"

"Shh, stop being loud." The Rexos stood her up and pulled back with one arm. A meter long, bushy-ended tail whapped her in the face. "Done."

Kennedy saw her tail and gaped. She turned, following it. "Tail back! Tail back, Lincoln, look!" She reached for it and chased it in a circle. "Tail!"

The Rexos held her still. "Stop for a moment and remain still! I am not finished."

Kennedy stopped and smiled at Lincoln. She whispered, "Tail!"

The Rexos grabbed Kennedy's tail, and the appendage wrapped around her wrist. The copper hair at the end fanned out to a leaf shape. She pinched the skin and Kennedy yelped. The Rexos dropped the tail and nodded. "Fully functional. Now jump back."

Kennedy kicked back and stood by her tail alone. She mimicked kicking an opponent. "Tail back! Tail back! I have my tail back!"

Lincoln grabbed Kennedy and set her on her feet. He bent down and grabbed her tail, running his fingers out to the end. “Yours was never this long to begin with.” He remembered it short and stubby like most of the savannah dwelling Hunters. “This is a jungle tail.”

The Rexos nodded. “The Ampyr like them long. They don’t care what region you’re from originally.”

Lincoln bent it and felt the strong muscle underneath the skin. “But I doubt they want it usable.”

The Rexos slipped her top back on, hiding her extra arms. She smiled slightly. “I suppose, but I don’t ask. The Commodore doesn’t care or notice either way. He gives no instructions on that sort of thing.”

Lincoln’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you doing this for us? Why are you not telling him what she is?”

“Why should I? He has yet to bring us all under strict orders, just his ward, so I can do this if I want to.” The Rexos closed up her case of fabrics. “He is new here and only serving this ship for a short time before he returns home with his Military Service Badge pinned to his cap. You’ll be leaving with him at the station and going back to First Planet. I doubt once he realizes what she is that he’ll remember which Rexos had seen to her.” She dropped her voice. “I hope you kill him before he finds out and executes you.” She grabbed Kennedy’s hand. “Come on, little one, your Warden will want to see you now.”

Lincoln followed the pair, letting his eyes linger on Kennedy’s bare legs, shown off by the incredibly high skirt. Her tail hit him in the face. Lincoln swatted at it. “Control this.”

Kennedy coiled it into a spring shape and smiled at him quickly over her shoulder.

Lincoln wanted to reach out and kiss her, caress her, but he pushed the craving down, ignoring it. He could not afford to touch her with desire.

They walked back into the living room. Reloy sat on the edge of a couch and addressed a screen in the wall, “Then make the next jump, we are not far out. And remember, if you cannot control and focus your Navigator for that small of a distance, then perhaps you do not deserve one. Working with them is not a right, it is a privilege.”

The woman on the screen nodded quickly. “We shall make the jump. It will be perfect, Commodore.”

Reloy smiled. “It had better be.”

“At your leave I will begin preparations.”

“Go.” Reloy shut the screen off and turned to them; a smile graced his lips. “How perfect! You are excused, tailor.” He took Kennedy from the Rexos. “Oh Little Blue, how cute.” He took a seat on a couch and patted the spot next to him. “How do you like your uniform? They’re supposed to be comfortable and enhance mobility. The material is very nice as well, top quality. What do you think?”

Kennedy sat down and tugged at her skirt. “It is short.”

Reloy touched her bare thigh. “Of course, better to see your pretty legs.” He sighed longingly. “You will make a fetching addition for the princesses’ entourage, a pity in some regards.” He let his eyes trail along the seams of her dress. “Perhaps if they do not need or want you, I may have you for *my* staff. My home is *very* nice.”

Lincoln’s nose bled from the strain of fighting the order to protect Reloy. He focused on that hand, the one that trailed up and down Kennedy’s leg. He would bite it off; he would break it. Lincoln would rip each finger off and stuff them into every orifice the man possessed.

Reloy laughed and tickled Kennedy’s stomach. “Blue, put together something to eat for

Little Blue, her tummy is making the cutest little growling noises.” He got up and stretched. “I will shower, and then we shall eat a scrumptious meal, and play a board game! We will have so much fun together I know it!” Reloy skipped into his bedroom, leaving them alone.

Lincoln walked towards the kitchen. “You are not hungry.”

Kennedy’s stomach growl turned to a full throaty snarl. “He touches me without asking. I do not like this behavior.”

Lincoln examined his choices of food. “You are for someone else. He will not take it too far.” He hoped.

“What if he tries?”

“*Kill* him.”

“What of you?”

“I will cope with the fallout.” Lincoln pulled out a rack of raw meat from the fridge. “Now, come, enjoy the finer things while you have a chance. He does *not* slouch on his food selection.”

In Cagatown, Waitrey opened an eye. She looked right, she looked left, but the darkened street was empty, but for her. She climbed to her feet and examined the blaster mark to her left, the place the Ampyr had thought they’d seen her.

Waitrey stretched and smiled. She whistled and the glowing forms of Cleaners climbed out of pipes that ran along the floor. They crawled towards Waitrey cautiously, their eyes darting about. They checked her over for damage and dirt, but finding nothing, they gestured her down into the ship’s water system.

Waitrey gave the street one last look, and then glanced upward, as if able to see through the many levels of metal. She laughed at what she saw there and disappeared from sight.

Emmalethe and Evgeniy held on to one another as the ship readied for a jump. The pair had anchored themselves to the ceiling by a lengthy cord. Emmalethe hissed at the air in general. “I don’t like this.”

Evgeniy rubbed her back to settle her nerves. “You’ll be fine.”

“I puke twice.”

“Maybe you’re eating too much.”

Emmalethe pouted, her face pressed to his chest. “Not possible, stupid.”

Evgeniy kissed the top of her head as the final set of lights warned them of an imminent jump. The ship rocked and everything shifted to blue. Evgeniy twisted as the ship dove, and his back slammed into the wall. Evgeniy kicked off and braced for another impact.

Emmalethe squeezed her eyes shut. “I dislike!”

The ship shuddered and dropped from the in-between back into space. The bouncing stilled almost immediately, leaving the air calm.

Emmalethe sighed and smiled. “Done!”

Evgeniy frowned and shook his head. “That was too quick. Something did not go right with jump.” He unhooked them. He flipped end over end and climbed along the ceiling, stopping at a hatch. He listened against the metal. “They should have a message to whole ship soon. Do you think we can hear it down here?”

“Maybe.” Emmalethe crawled to his side. “But we go to deck and hear for sure.”

“Where? What is the deck?”

“Where Navigator is.”

He stared at her. “You know where the Navigator and pilot are?”

“Yes, you follow me.” She shouldered open a separate grate and crawled away.

Evgeniy followed her into the crawlspace. The footsteps of soldiers on the passage above them grew louder as they grew closer to occupied areas. Evgeniy looked up and whispered, “We are right below the floor?”

Emmalethe nodded. She stopped in front of a sealed door and twisted on the lock. It came open without a sound. Emmalethe kept going.

Evgeniy dropped his shoulder to fit through the hatch. “Tight fit.”

Emmalethe rolled over and kicked at his face. She smirked at his discomfort. “You *fat*.”

Evgeniy caught her foot. “I am not.” He crawled up her body and pinned her beneath him. He smiled and kissed her cheek. She wrapped her legs around his waist. Emmalethe popped open his collar. Evgeniy made a noise of surprise and shook his head. “No, not now.”

Emmalethe pouted. “But we have not yet.”

“I know. We will, but not now.” He kissed her lips. “Lead on.”

Emmalethe pointed up past his shoulder. “Deck above us, I no lead on. We need go no further.”

Evgeniy listened to the activity above them. “You mean the bridge.”

“Bridge, deck, place where Navigator is. Name not important.”

Evgeniy switched places with Emmalethe and set her on top of him. He listened and played with her rolling hair.

A man ran into the room. “What is going on?”

A woman responded, “Sir, she is...she is...”

“She is *what*?”

“*Tired*, Commodore Reloy.”

Reloy sighed and paced. His boots clicked on the floor with sharp snaps. “Are you telling me she no longer can handle the work? Perhaps needs to be replaced with another?”

“No, no, the strain of the ship is just too great right now. I—”

“Ah so *you* cannot handle giving her the concentration and control to move the vessel.”

“No, normally a ship this size would have two, a backup Navigator at least, but—”

The Commodore tapped his foot on the floor. “We are in the middle of a *war*, a battle for our souls, *pilot*, and we are running out of *Navigators*. We don’t get to have two, and you cannot afford to be tired or distracted.” The man paced. “Have a Rexos see to your Navigator; don’t we have a Boost Me on board?”

“No sir, he was transferred off at our last station visit. They needed him back at—”

“Blast and void!” Reloy kicked at a chair and hopped on one foot as he stubbed his toe. “Why? Why is our ship the one getting resources pulled? We have *nothing*!”

“Sir, the Boost Me’s—”

“Please, *don’t interrupt me* when I am ranting!” Reloy silenced the bridge. He scuffed his feet. “I know they are rare, Navigators are rare, *everything* is intolerably rare these days! The only things we seem to have in abundance are Fix-Its, Hunters, and Pyros! Maybe someone should teach *them* how to run a ship!” He laughed gaily. “Oh, can you imagine that?”

Silence reigned.

Commodore Reloy sighed. “Perhaps this will show my cousins that the fleet needs more resources, and that they should stop hoarding them on the *colonies*! Perhaps they should let me go back to my *real* work, work that *truly* aids all of us. Or maybe they could simply successfully harvest more Navigators, build a bigger fleet, and wipe out the Resistance once and for all!”

Reloy stalked to the door. “Give your Navigator rest and care, but we *must* complete this

jump before the day is out. Peak performance is expected of us...*all* of us. Remember, we must be perfect or we will crumble in our failure. That is the only destiny which we are assured." The door closed behind him.

The female pilot dropped to the ground above their heads. The sound of running feet marked where aides came to her from all sides. She sighed at their attention. "I am fine. Bring the Rexos and recalculate our course. I want a damage report from across the ship."

"Yes, sir."

Evgeniy motioned Emmalethe down the passageway. She led the way back to their sleeping hideout. Evgeniy frowned as they reached their hiding spot. "We need a contingency plan."

Emmalethe made a face as she climbed along the ceiling. "What that word?"

"Back up plan." Evgeniy folded his arms and floated in the middle of the room. "Can you find the Navigator's sleeping quarters?"

Emmalethe nodded. "Yes, I find anything. Why?"

"We may need to take control of the ship."

"Pirate!" Emmalethe grinned and jiggled in a way that entranced him. "Pirate ship!"

"Yes." He watched her jiggle. "Something like that." He shook his head to clear it. "For now, get me the location. We meet back here soon."

"Where *you* go?"

"To see Danny. We're not doing anything without his thoughts."

Emmalethe opened a grate in the floor. "I see you soon then, this task easy, I find best."

Evgeniy kissed her. "I know you will." He dropped down the hatch and grabbed the helmet and blaster he'd left tied to the wall. He slipped on the helmet and climbed down to the detention ward.

Evgeniy stopped at a door covered in warnings and pushed it open. He listened but heard nothing he needed to be wary of. Evgeniy slipped into the room and adjusted his suit so that nothing was out of place. His watch rotation would begin in twenty minutes, enough time for him to join at the tail end of his patrol without being noticed missing. At least, he hoped so. This was the longest he'd stayed with one group since he'd started making his way through various patrols. The worry of discovery was small, but it sat at the back of his mind as a constant reminder.

He darted across an empty passageway and made his way to Danny and Oro's cell. Evgeniy flicked the lock and the door opened. He stepped inside and looked around.

Oro rested his upper body in Lloyd's lap. Lloyd looked up from doing Oro's hair. Danny shook off sleep. Oro was unconcerned as he spoke, "It's Czar and he wants to..." Oro touched his temples. "Tell us that he's planning on taking over the ship."

Danny laughed. "Good one, Oro, right. Why don't you come up with something that's realistic?"

Evgeniy nodded. "Actually, that is plan. Emmalethe finding Navigator now."

"Besides that being ridiculous." Danny frowned. "Isn't our time up, aren't we there yet?"

"No—"

"The Navigator didn't complete the jump. She's tired," Oro interrupted him. He grinned. "And Czar hasn't had sex with his woman yet. Sucks to be you."

Evgeniy sighed. "Why I even come when you can pick from brains of others?"

Oro shrugged. "It's more fun this way. Think something in Russian."

"I always think in Russian." Evgeniy leaned on the wall. "It is best."

Oro smiled and spoke in Russian, "Evgeniy likes to blow dogs."

Evgeniy cocked his head. "How long have you known my language?"

"Since *now*." Oro smiled.

Danny eyed Oro. "Makes one wonder how well you actually did in class, and how much of it was you cheating off other students without knowing it."

Oro smirked. "Is there really a difference?"

Evgeniy smiled behind his mask. "We talk later. We still wait on Kat, that is plan one. Pirating the ship, only last resort for us."

Danny nodded. "Understood and thank you for the update, Evgeniy."

Evgeniy saluted and walked out, locking the door behind him. He crossed the hall and slipped into an alcove to reassess his position while he waited for his watch to come around the passageway. He heard the click of their boots and counted. At the nineteenth set of boots, he stepped out and created the caboose. None turned at his presence, unable to break formation.

Evgeniy smiled as his thoughts turned to Emmalethe. He wondered how soon he'd be able to get her into a proper bed.

Danny watched Oro settle his head back in Lloyd's lap. Lloyd's face was a mask of concentration as he twisted and braided Oro's hair in complex knots.

Oro smiled. He gazed up at Lloyd's face, content with life and things in general.

Danny shook his head at the pair. "What the hell are you two doing?"

Lloyd's fingers worked in a blur. "Hair."

Oro grinned and rested his cheek on Lloyd's thigh. He glanced over at Danny. "He's making me a pretty princess."

"An Ampyr of eligible age to be exact." Lloyd chewed on his thin lower lip. "This particular style is worn at the official presentation ceremony of girls to prospective suitors. Not the most appropriate for our circumstances, but one of the better looking styles in general."

"Yeah, what he said." Oro winked at Danny. "I'm a debutante. Now you can give me away to someone."

Danny rubbed at his lengthening grey beard. "Nice to know one of us will be looking good for our execution."

Lloyd's eyes flicked over Danny's features. "A beard is a sign of distinction to some."

Oro reached for Danny. "You can be my date, sugar daddy."

Lloyd turned Oro's head sharply, moving to another section. "Be still or I will need to start over."

Danny leaned back and watched them together. "Oro, I think your *date* is the one patiently braiding your hair."

Lloyd blushed and screwed up on a knot. "Oh! Your hair is not normal. This irritates me, Oro."

"Not *normal*? My hair is perfect." Oro puffed out his lower lip. "And I thought you liked it."

"It is thick." Lloyd frowned. "I am unused to this difference."

"Not any thicker than anyone else's."

Lloyd grabbed Oro's hand and forced Oro's fingers across his black hair. "Ampyr are far thinner."

Oro smiled. "It's like baby hair. Sir, feel Lloyd's head."

Danny held his hands up. "No, I'm okay."

Oro smirked. "Really?"

Danny got to his feet and felt Lloyd's hair between his fingertips. His eyes widened. "It really is like baby hair, *wait*—" he snatched his hand back. "You made me do that."

Oro shrugged. "Maybe, but you'll never know." He dropped his hand from Lloyd's head to Lloyd's thigh and kept it there, wondering how long he'd get to until Lloyd forced him to move.

Lloyd swallowed, acutely aware of Oro in his lap...hand, head, and face. He tried not to think about it for too long. Lloyd feared what he might feel about it now that he was sure Oro no longer interfered with what he felt.

Oro was aware of the fight and tension in Lloyd's thoughts, so he purposefully re-ran through the first season of *Saved by the Bell* in his head. He wanted to stay far out of Lloyd's mind. He snickered at the characters that moved behind his eyelids. He spoke into Lloyd's thigh, "This photographic memory perk is awesome. I can recall everything I've seen."

Lloyd jerked, immediately thinking of when Oro had seen him strip in the showers.

Oro then thought of the exact same thing. He held back a smile. "Hey, remember—"

"*Saved by the Bell*?" Danny looked up. "Yes."

"How'd you know?"

Danny repositioned his lumpy pillow behind his head. "You *humming* along with the theme song while I was trying to nap. Hard to miss."

"Sorry."

Danny smiled. "It's an improvement over *Step by Step*."

Oro snapped his fingers. "*Day by day*—"

"Oro!"

"Sorry."

Their door slid open and the Warden stepped in, framed on either side by two guards. Lloyd positioned himself between Oro and the men. Oro put his hand on Lloyd's shoulder to pull him back, but Lloyd brushed him off and maintained his spot.

The Warden folded his arms. He saw Oro's hair and made an unreadable face. "We are almost at our stopping point, your *final* stop." He snickered.

Danny scratched his head. "That was a terrible line."

The Warden glared at him. "You are being separated. Vader has been deemed healthy enough by the Rexos to begin interrogations. The *boy*." He gestured to Lloyd. "Will be moved to a separate cell." He waved them to their feet. "Now come with us."

Oro propped himself up. "We're not splitting."

"You do not have a choice. There's—"

The soldier to the Warden's left tapped him on the shoulder. "We have no free cells."

"No fr—free cells? None?" The Warden sputtered. "We just had them cleared!"

"There've been additions from a small fight that broke out on the lower decks."

"Then remove them at once and place them elsewhere!"

The guard shook his head. "We have nowhere else to move them to and they are being violent, on drugs, unable to be controlled even by simple commands."

The Warden pointed to Oro. "We will be coming back for you." He stomped out. The guards followed him.

Oro dropped down to the mattress and rubbed his temples. "Shit."

Lloyd leaned over him. "Are you in pain?"

"No." Oro shook his head. "Just tired."

Danny smiled. "Please tell me that was all you."

"It was." Oro wiped sweat from his brow. "How many riots do you honestly think they

have around here?"

"Not many."

Oro took deep breaths to calm his racing heart. "Why is that tiring? I feel like I just worked out."

Lloyd examined Oro's sweaty hair. "This won't do now."

Oro looked up. "Sorry Lloyds."

"No need to apologize. I will fix this." Lloyd looked around the room and stepped over to their bathroom unit. He turned on the faucet and collected water in his hands. He splashed it onto Oro's head before he lost it all. He rubbed the water around and untangled Oro's hair. He squirted soap into the mess.

Oro popped a soap bubble as it went by. "I wish we had some bubbly."

Danny nodded. "I miss beer."

"Oh yeah, beer." Oro smacked his lips. "I could drink a keg."

"What is beer?" Lloyd rinsed Oro's hair.

"An adult beverage." Oro closed his eyes. "Alcohol. Did your grandparents ever have any on board?"

Lloyd pursed his lips. "They did sometimes drink something that they wouldn't let me have and then they would get very happy and dance about their quarters." He parted Oro's hair and wrung it out into a small towel. "But I don't know if that is what you're talking about."

Oro shrugged. "Sounds close enough."

Danny swatted bubbles away before they burst on his side of the room. He glanced at the trail of water droplets leading from the sink to Oro. "Do you plan on cleaning this up, Lloyd?"

Lloyd raised an eyebrow. "Yes."

"Mind starting now?"

"Of course." Lloyd wrung out the other half of Oro's hair. He grabbed a towel, dabbed at Oro's brow, and mopped up the water on the floor.

Oro glared at Danny and spoke in English, "What the fuck, don't make him stop. I'm trying to enjoy myself prior to my execution."

"And I don't want to be damp prior to mine."

Lloyd caught the rest of the soap bubbles and left the wet towel by the door. He took a seat at Oro's side. "I don't need to keep bothering you if you're tired."

Oro switched back to Ampyr, "But you spent all that time on it. I want to see it."

Lloyd blotted his hair with a new towel. "You can't see it. We don't have mirrors."

Oro smiled up at him. "I can see it if you can."

Lloyd leaned over him. "Cannot."

"Can too."

Lloyd smiled and gave him a light shove. "Cannot!"

"Can too! Part of my new powers." Oro pinched at Lloyd's legs.

"Shut up." Danny hucked a pillow at them. He looked towards the door. "I wish we *had* gotten separate rooms."

Lloyd began a braid. "Why?"

"You two—" Danny hesitated at Oro's warning glare. "Best *friends* are really getting on my nerves with your best friend-ness. I wish you still hated each other."

Oro smirked. "You'll have your big, strong Evgeniy back, just as soon as we make our grand escape."

"Fuck you." Danny set in on a bag of food. "I just like the relatively mature company."

You forget I'm the only adult on the ship."

Lloyd looked down at Oro. "You're not an adult?"

Oro sighed. "He's being relative. Yes, I am."

"Not maturity wise," Danny grumbled.

Oro rolled his eyes. "Everything's relative."

"Oh." Lloyd sat with his back against the wall. He pulled Oro to him and focused on fixing his hair.

Oro leaned back on Lloyd and spoke in English, "Thank you."

"For what?" Danny glanced over at him.

"Not sending the prince running for the corner and *vomiting*."

Danny sucked down soup from a bag and grimaced at the texture. "He will, Oro, or do you plan on staying close *friends* forever?"

Oro looked away. "I'm fine like this."

"Are you getting in his head?" Danny caught Oro's expression and put his hands up. "I take it back, but what appeal is there in this?"

Oro clasped on to a braid that Lloyd put in his hand. "In receiving affection? I'm a living, breathing person. I need to be touched; everyone needs to be touched whether as a friend, as family, or as a lover. It's universal."

"But you want more." Danny looked up at Lloyd's face. "I know you do and he doesn't."

"If it happens it happens." Oro closed his eyes. "I'm friends with Rake and Mica. I can have guy friends. I *have* plenty of guy friends, Dad."

"Rake doesn't braid your hair."

"He used to." Oro smiled.

"When he was twelve!"

Oro grinned. "I think I'm allowed to regress if I want to."

Danny sighed. "I just don't want you to get hurt by this, Oro. All I can see is this going badly for you."

Oro yawned. "That makes two of us, but nothing risked, nothing gained."

"What happened to having relationships fall in your lap and being lazy?"

Oro gestured to himself. "This feels amazingly lazy to me."

"You *know* this won't last. If we get rescued, your vacation is going to end. He will be back to dealing with the real world. He'll see you around Rake and Mica and realize that what the pair of you has isn't just a close buddy relationship."

"Bit beyond my scope right now." Oro turned to his side as Lloyd directed. He closed his eyes. "Let me enjoy my moments while they last."

Katarina stood between Rake, Darq, and Ravil. The silence on the damaged ship was oppressive. She cleared her throat. "We have to get the ship repaired before we can move on to the next scene and I know everyone wants to move on. So Rake, plug Darq in. Ravil, I'll show you where you'll be working. We'll have this solved in no time and be on our way."

Katarina helped a listless Ravil to her feet; she glanced at Rake over her head. He looked worse than Ravil, as if all the life and spirit had been drained out of him, just like after Lara's death. Katarina shuddered and hurried out the door.

Rake stood up and gestured in Darq's general direction. "You need to get hooked up to the hyperdrive." He grabbed a cable and handed it to Darq. "So use this, or don't, I already know what you're going to say. And it doesn't end up mattering anyways."

Darq put his hand on Rake's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Rake shrugged it off. "For what? Leaving me in the cold? Old news."

"No." Darq looked at his feet. "For not knowing what your condition was. I underestimated you, to both of your detriments and that is my fault. I should have recognized and intervened."

"No one knew, and I didn't say anything when I should have, so it's not your fault." Rake walked towards the darkened cockpit.

Darq grabbed him by the arm. "Rake, I meant what I said before about this being torturous."

"Yeah." Rake smiled without mirth. "Now I'm getting my comeuppance. I get it, Darq, I deserve this."

"No." Darq locked his fingers around Rake's wrist. "I would not wish that upon anyone, you're not meant to be apart."

"Thanks for the concern, doc." Rake pulled away and stumbled into the next room. "But I'll be fine."

Darq watched the door slide shut. He stared at the wall of computers and walked after Katarina. "No. This won't do."

Mica stripped off his top and tossed the muck-sodden shirt to the mud. He looked around the swamp he'd crashed in and wrinkled his nose. "This place smells *exactly* like the trash compactor."

Sammy rolled up beside him and tossed a moss-covered stick at his well-muscled chest. "Nice man tits, farm boy. Been working out? Going to take it all off for me?"

"No, and the body is the Terraformer in me I think. I feel great for no reason." Mica smiled and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Why's it so hot here? Is it supposed to be this hot?"

Sammy balanced a toolbox on her muddy dome. "You'd prefer cold?"

"I'm done with cold." Mica lifted a crate from his half-submerged X-Wing and carried it beside her. "I'd prefer room temperature." He set the box down and sat on it. The pair looked out into the gurgling mist. Their line of sight was down to a few meters before thick fog obscured everything.

Sammy hummed and drew pornographic pictures in the mud with a stick.

Mica smiled at her. He gave her a kick with his foot. "So, what do these points of yours do?"

Sammy rotated her dome and flashed her lights. "Neat things. That's the word on the street."

"Like?"

Sammy spun around in a circle and waved her stick. "Secret, only point winners can know."

Mica tossed a tool at her. "Oh, come on!"

She batted the tool aside. "You keep secrets. So can I."

Mica pulled out his lunch. "Fine, be that way."

"I *will*."

Mica bit into a sandwich and chewed in silence. He watched Sammy continue doodling. "Think we'll get a Yoda?"

"I don't know." Sammy rolled back and forth in the mud, erasing her images. "Do you feel like you're being *watched*?"

Mica closed his eyes. He frowned, jumped to his feet, and threw out his arm. He grabbed a wrist and heard laughter. He opened his eyes. "Ipsos?"

The small girl leaned on a cane and curtsied. She cast a pale white glow on the ground around her. "Hello! Oh, what am I supposed to say at this part? Uhm, why are you here?"

Mica smiled and let go of her. "I'm looking for someone."

Sammy beeped. "*Looking? Found someone, you have, I would say, hmmm?*"

Ipsos laughed at Sammy. "Her voice is funny!"

Sammy spun. "*Help you I can. Yes, mmmm.*"

Mica sighed. "Right. Ipsos, have you seen a short little green guy wandering around—" He took in her cane, her short stature, and brown dress. "*Oh.*"

Ipsos hopped from foot to foot. "I hope you don't mind if I stepped into the role for a minute. I found it to be a necessity."

Mica sat back down. "Not really."

Ipsos hopped up beside him and sat down next to him. "Thank you, Mica. I appreciate your cooperation with my ongoing investigation."

"Yeah, about that." Mica looked away under her gaze. "Why are you involved in this? Why are *we* involved in this?"

"Overall? You calm Ravil down. Without you around, she would be less complacent. At the moment, however, I just need someone to talk to." She eyed Sammy. "And you seem to be the most level headed of the group."

Sammy beeped. "Kat's level headed too."

Ipsos made a face. "The one called Kat only wants to leave, that is her priority. She would not listen to me if I had to talk to her."

Mica stood up. "We all want to leave, Ipsos. We have friends in danger."

Ipsos jumped onto Sammy's head and stood on her so that she was eye height to Mica. "All things are in danger, all things die. That is the way of it."

Sammy beeped. "I am a person you know, tater tot. You can't just stand on me."

Mica reached out and lifted Ipsos off Sammy. He set her down on a stump. "We don't want them to die *yet*. How's that?"

"Uhm. I..." Ipsos stared at his hands. She shivered and looked up at him. "Understandable for *your* kind, but right now I must focus on Ravil's dangers."

"Why?"

Ipsos pulled out a glowing, blue clipboard and tapped it to activate the surface. Numbers appeared and faded away as he looked. "I am the Engineer. I must understand the extent of Ravilaea's condition before releasing her to the rest of the universe. It is my job."

"Her condition?" Mica frowned. "What condition?"

Sammy beeped. "Ravil mentioned something was wrong with her back on Hoth. Does everyone have a memory problem except for me?"

Ipsos nodded and looked down at Sammy. "She has a chunk of her memory distorted, and this vexes me."

Mica made a face. "She does? What part?"

"I do not know how large or how long. Time has never been my strong suit." Ipsos looked away under Mica's scrutiny. "Neither have locations or directions, but enough about that."

"What do you mean?"

Ipsos blushed. "She's not the only one in a bind. I'm lost, you see, and I need Ravil's help to go home, but that location I think is trapped in the part she cannot remember."

“But you’re like Ravil. Can’t you zip off just like she can?”

Ips0 nodded. “Yes, but I do not remember the way home. I think that perhaps if I can solve her memory loss, I can solve mine as well.”

“Then what do you need me for?”

Ips0 traced her fingers along her clipboard. “I want someone besides myself to talk to about this, perhaps help me see in the puzzle what I cannot.”

“Okay, fair enough. So why would her memory be gone?”

“I do not know, but hers is not *gone* exactly. I think it is more, uh, walled off. It is hidden to her, to me, to anyone.” Ips0 made a face.

Mica nodded. “Then why don’t we take her to a Jungay? Do you know how to find one of them?”

Ips0 hissed. “*Jungay*, undoubtedly the ones behind this!”

Mica frowned. “I thought you’d side with Jungay?”

Ips0 bared her teeth. “Then you think *wrong*, Mica.”

Mica shrugged. “Ravil doesn’t dislike them.”

“She is not in a state of mind to be trusted on what she knows to dislike or like. If a Jungay has tampered with her mind, they no doubt have implanted in her a desire to trust them.”

Mica frowned. “I don’t understand. I thought that you were all on the same side.”

Ips0 jerked back. “And who told you *that*?”

“Ravil...oh.” Mica looked to Sammy. “Are you keeping note of all of this?”

“Always.” Sammy beeped.

Ips0 hopped to the ground. “Come with me, Mica.”

“Where?”

“To the house, the warmer light place, we can converse there. I do not like this swamp; it is not a place made for talks and walks.”

Sammy revved her treads. “What about me? I have to be carried in this shit hole pretty sure.”

“You just want to be carried.”

“That’s not true and it’s mean.”

“Fine.” Mica looked to Ips0. “I can carry Sammy, she’s not that heavy.”

Ips0 eyed Sammy. “This is true, but I thought you had choices to make, Sammy?” She flicked her wrists and glowing orbs appeared around Sammy. “Those points don’t last forever, and Marx has already made his decisions. You might want to take the time to make yours.”

Sammy spun her treads in the mud, splattering Mica’s ankles. “Oh, sweet deal! Points allocation! Bye Mica, have fun being boring!”

Mica frowned and followed Ips0. “Uh, *bye* Sammy.”

Sammy laughed and attacked the orbs. “Righteous eggs, give me your power! Level up!”

Rake listened at a doorway to Ravil’s work area; there was a snap and a cry of pain on the other side of the door. Rake shouldered open the door and charged into the room. “Are you okay?”

Ravil dropped her welder and leaned on the wall in the tiny space. She muffled a sob. “I’m *fine*.”

Rake reached past her for the wall lever she was working on. “May I help you?”

Ravil rubbed her hand and kept her eyes on her fingers. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do in this scene?”

“Fuck the scenes.” Rake took her hand. “I want to talk to you.”

Ravil gulped. “We have nothing to talk about.”

“We have *everything* to talk about, and we need to speak while we have a calm moment.”

“Oh?” Ravil pulled her hand back. “You had hours, entire fucking *days* of free time back on the ship where we could have talked!”

“So, I suck at planning!” Rake shoved a hand up through his hair. “I’m sorry about that too! But now that we have time—”

“Are you trying to say you would’ve told me the truth if we’d had just *one more day* on the ship?” Her eyes flashed bright, casting the small space in a red glow. “Don’t think for a second that I’d believe that bullshit.”

“I know, I know, just please,” Rake pleaded. “I *know* I fucked up, and I made stuff worse, but please at least let me explain. If you’re mad after that and you want to punch me around some more, then okay, but let me at least speak my side first.”

Ravil flicked her eyes up to his; it was a mistake. His pain deadened her desire to leave his side and sparked instead a desire to help him, to comfort him. Ravil looked away, steeling herself. “*Fine.*”

“I’m a stupid dumbfuck. I’m admittedly one of the biggest screw-ups in space, *ever*. I can’t get anything right, and the stuff I do succeed in generally makes shit worse. I have no self-esteem, a track record of failure, and a past bad enough for multiple lifetimes. You...” Rake gestured the length of her body, “Are freaking *amazing*. You’re smart, you’re beautiful, funny, you can be a bitch, but I like that a lot. You can move ships across *galaxies* and create black fucking holes, and you’re some kind of Langone Navigator royalty where you come from. Kay, so, awesome space princess...you.” He pointed from her to himself. “Washout, former drug using whore...me.” Rake pointed back to Ravil. “Totally way out of my league.”

“Rake—”

“Wait.” Rake put his finger to her lips. “From an outsider’s perspective, I’m pretty much space scum and everyone knows you can do way better. Couple *that* with the fact that you’re younger—”

She pushed his hand away. “Not this again!”

“Will you *wait*? I like your impatience, honestly, but not right now.” Rake paused for her to close her mouth. “I don’t see you that way *anymore*. I don’t see you as a kid, but *God*, Ravil, when I met you...you looked like you were twelve! That took awhile to get over, regardless of what you look like now. So for a while I thought I was a pedophile, *great*, add that to my list of shitty things that I am. Admitting that you glow would have been announcing to everyone what a fucking creep I was.”

“But no one thinks that.”

“Yeah, *now* they don’t.” Rake frowned. “Well, Danny probably still does, but he’s in a minority of one. Even Kat’s on our side.”

“Took her long enough,” Ravil grumbled.

“I know, right...” he looked over at her nervously. “So that was point number two, and I think completely valid.”

Ravil stayed silent and hugged her sides.

Rake continued, “Back on the mountain I meant what I said about you meeting someone better, about deserving someone better than me. I am broken; I am damaged. I didn’t want to hurt you, but I hurt you anyways.” Rake swallowed. “I thought I was being noble, but I was being a jerk.”

“Yeah.” She kicked at the ground.

“I was condescending.”

“Agreed.” She nodded.

“Stupid and blind.”

“Pretty much.”

Rake rubbed his neck. “I thought I’d hold you back and bring you down.”

Her eyes glowed. “Rake, you’re the first person that’s ever given me a choice to do what I want! How could that be holding me back?”

“You haven’t met a ton of people. The Resistance—”

“Would treat me like a highly prized *tool*!” She met his gaze. “You treat me like a *person*.”

Rake shook his head. “I also treated you like a kid, thinking I knew better, that I was lying for your own good. What I didn’t say was that it scared *me*. I told myself it was for you, but I was the one being the coward.” Rake looked in to her eyes and his voice broke. “I don’t want to be hurt either.”

Ravil’s chest constricted. “Lara.”

Rake nodded once. “I *can’t* go through that again. It’s hard for me to even open myself up to that possibility.”

“What happened in your past is not my fault, Rake.”

“I know it’s my problem.”

She looked away. “Then what am I supposed to do, promise I won’t die first?”

Rake grabbed her and pulled her close. “All I want is a promise that we’re a team. I can’t function knowing you might disappear in a second to go suicide to save the rest of us.”

Ravil touched his hand. “Then promise made, but what are—”

“It was a good thing it happened, a needed shock to my system.” He let her go. “I’m fucking sorry that it took me thinking you were dead for me to come to my senses, but I did say I was stupid and slow.”

Rake closed his eyes, recalling how it felt when she’d jumped away. “Your leaving was the kick in the head I needed to realize exactly what I was missing and exactly how much of an idiot I’ve been. I don’t just want you, Ravil, I *need* you.”

She gulped. “What do you mean?”

Rake caught her gaze. “I need you to be mine, my girlfriend, my lover, my best friend. All of it. You are all of it for me.”

Ravil blushed and looked down. “I—”

“Ravil.” He leaned in and put his forehead against hers. “I wish you could feel that I mean it. I don’t feel anything else. I—” Rake swallowed. “I can live without everything else, *but not you*. I need you to feel alive, Ravil. There’s nothing else but you, I can’t see anything else but you. Everything I feel, everything I want...it’s all orbiting you.”

Ravil’s eyes widened. Her heart skipped a beat. She looked up to him. “Wh—what? Since when? When did you feel that?”

“Since ever.” Rake dropped to his knees and took her hand. “I meant what I said about being called. You glow like a star. You’re the one, and I know I’m the one for you too.”

Ravil shook her head as tears filled her eyes. “I...I don’t know, Rake. I—”

“Yes, you do too know. You feel it inside.” His eyes held a fierce, burning energy. “You’ve *always* felt it. I’ve just been an idiot and denied it.”

“But...” she wiped her eyes. “Those that are truly called they can’t deny it. It—”

“Come on.” Rake forced a smile. “I’m the master at denying myself a good time. If

anyone could do that, it would be me, deny *that*.”

“Okay, but...” Ravil couldn’t breathe; there was no air. “I...this.” She closed her eyes. “No one does—you don’t mean it. You *can’t* mean it. This can’t be happening.”

“I do!” Rake hugged her, pressing his face to her stomach. “I have a shitty way of showing it. I’ve been terrible, and stupid, and a bastard, and I understand why you think I’m a dick.”

Rake looked up at her. “But I’m also here at your feet, at your mercy, *begging* you to forgive me because I *need* you. Because all I want to do right now is kiss you, and hold you, and I’ll make this up to you for eternity. I’ll do *anything*, and I promise *nothing* is going to stand in the way of me being here for you, and protecting you, saving you, being around for you to punch when you’re angry. Ravil, I want to be the person you punch around.”

“You do?”

Rake looked confused. “Yes? I mean, to which part?” He shook his head. “Yes. I’m a bastard, and I’m scared, you can punch me, please forgive me. Please, please, please let me show you what I can be.”

She spoke in shock, her words slow, “And then what?”

He cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

“Are we friends? We’re more than friends?” Her energy came back and with it, the familiar frustrated anger she felt around him. She threw up her hands and paced. “What Rake? You’re so damn confusing. I honestly have no idea what I’m supposed to expect from you now.”

He hopped towards her on his knees. “My undying worship and affection.”

“Really?” Ravil took a step back. “And you’re not going to change your mind if you get depressed, or decide that this was a bad idea in a few minutes? That it would negatively affect our *working* relationship.”

Rake winced. “Our working relationship *is* our relationship. I just couldn’t see it before because I’m slow in the head, remember? I’m sorry for using our working together as an excuse too, that one was lame.”

“Yeah, it was.” She glared at him.

“Can I get up? My legs are going numb.” He smiled.

“No, but you can sit down.” Ravil sat down in front of him. “So now what?”

Rake sat down and stretched his legs out. “I thought we’d, you know, hang out and stuff.”

“*Hang out?*” Ravil curled her hands into fists. “Isn’t that just exactly what we’ve been doing since we met?”

“Well, yeah, I guess, but—”

Ravil got up and pushed past him. “God, this was a waste of time. Get out of my way.”

“No, look.” Rake grabbed her wrists and brought her back. “I know it sounds stupid, and childish and immature, but I—” he searched for words. “I...I don’t know how to do *this* any other way.”

Ravil pulled on her wrists. “Do what?”

“Relate to you in a...a romantic way.”

“You think hanging out is *romantic*? That’s like what—” Ravil frowned. “Like what *kids* do.” She looked in to his eyes as her chest ached. “Rake...”

Rake let her go. “Lara and I were real young when we started going out, and I’ve never...I didn’t date once she...once she was gone.” He leaned on the door. “The only thing I know how to do is what I did then and it’s not the adult thing to do, the mature thing to do, or any of that. But it’s all I know how to do so—”

“Rake.” Ravil sat down in front of him.
He looked at his feet. “It’s pretty stupid I know.”
Ravil closed her eyes. “You’re not stupid, Rake, and I don’t even know what we’re supposed to be doing either. I kind of hoped you would.”
“I should be taking you out to a movie.”
She smiled a little. “We’re in one.”
“Then dinner or—”
“Where? The mess hall for shared bagged goo?” Ravil rubbed her wrists.
“Yeah.” He looked at her hands. “But I could, I could cook dinner!”
“You’re going to cook me dinner?” She raised a white eyebrow.
“I can.” Rake pointed to his chest. “I can cook one thing really well and I’ll make it just for you.”
“What is it?”
“A surprise, but I’ll do it and we can have candles, and wine, and real place settings and it will be romantic.”
Ravil clasped her hands. “I’m looking forward to it.”
“Are you being serious?”
She smiled. “Yes.”
He perked up. “Does that mean you’re forgiving me?”
Ravil sighed. “I...don’t know. You hurt me.”
“I’m *sorry* times a million.” Rake took one of her hands in his. “I wish we had our connection back because you’d know I am telling the truth.”
“I don’t need the connection to see it in your face.” She closed her eyes. “Why’d this have to happen now?” She rubbed her temples. “Now when everything else is so confusing.”
He leaned in. “Can you tell me what’s wrong?”
Ravil pointed to her skull. “Ipsos says I have a part of my memory missing and the stress from it is creating problems in my head. I keep seeing and hearing things, voices, pictures, memories that feel like they’re mine, but I know they’re not.” Ravil shook. “I...can’t make any decisions right now. I can’t think straight, Rake. I’m scared I’m going crazy.”
“I won’t let you go crazy.” Rake wrapped his arms around her and drew her into his embrace. “And you’re not alone.”
“What if I need to be for this? Like it’s some kind of trial.” She rested her head on his chest. “I don’t know.”
He smelled her hair. “This feels better.”
Ravil nodded and held on to him. “It does.”
Rake kissed her forehead and brushed his hand across her arm. “I’ll keep you safe.”
“I can keep me safe.” She sniffled. “Can you keep me sane?”
“If that’s what you need, I’ll do it.” He kissed her cheek. The call came as he touched her skin, the rushing sensation of fire in his blood, the force in him that wanted to reach out and join with hers. He leaned in to her, drunk with it. He brushed his lips across hers. “I’ll do whatever you want, whenever you want it, Beb.”
Ravil wound her fingers in his shirt. Rake kissed her neck, giving her goose bumps. Her breath caught in her throat. “Rake?”
He kissed her beneath the ear. “Yes?”
“When two Navigators get the call.” She tilted her head back. “They’re supposed to consummate the bond.”

Rake pressed her to the ground, kissing down her neck to her collarbone. He whispered, “Is that so?”

“It is.”

“And you want to?”

Ravil gulped and nodded. “I’ve wanted to for a long time.”

“Are you sure?” He popped open a button on her top and smiled in to her skin. “*You’re trembling.*”

Ravil thumped him on the head. “I’m not *trembling*, you asshole.”

“Come on.” Rake laughed out loud. “I had to get to use *one* of my lines, Beb.”

“Rake, you—”

Rake kissed her and slid in between her legs. He cupped her head with his hands. Ravil scratched down his back, hooking her fingers at his belt. Rake smiled into the kiss and worked on her jacket.

Katarina threw open the door and grabbed Rake by his collar. “Nope! Not without birth control or condoms.” She hauled Rake to his feet. “Glad to see everything is settled between you two. Congratulations.”

Rake swung a fist at her head. “You were *listening in?*”

Katarina dodged the blow and shook him. “Pretty much the entire time. You two are okay, right?”

Ravil closed her clothing back up. “Uh, yeah.”

Rake stared at her in shock. “What the *fuck*, Kat!”

“We have *one* pregnant crew member.” She looked at Ravil. “Don’t need two. Sorry to be the one causing clitorference, but you’ll both thank me later.”

Ravil jumped to her feet, cheeks pink. She ducked past them. “We’ll talk later, Rake.”

Rake ground his teeth and glared at Katarina. “*Thank you, thank you very much.*”

Katarina laughed and let him go. “Oh, you’re perfectly welcome.”

“I *hate* you.”

Katarina patted Rake on the back. “Let’s go shoot some Mynocks and work off that sexual tension.”

He smoothed out his clothes. “*Fuck off.*”

She smiled. “You know it is better when you wait for it.”

Rake set his jaw. “I haven’t been with anyone for *years!* I’ve *been* waiting, Kat, and you’re being ridiculous. You have no idea what this is like for me! Why do you have to be such a bitch!”

“Don’t talk to *me* about *waiting*, Rake. I’ve been waiting for Sammy for *ten years!*” Tears sprung to her eyes. “So you can wait another day without flipping me attitude all right, fly boy?” Katarina wiped her eyes. “Shit you’ve made me cry, you jerk.”

Rake gaped. “Sorry...”

Darq stepped up to Katarina with concern on his features. “But you won’t have to wait for much longer, Mom! Once we get Sammy healed—” he twitched as Rake’s focus narrowed on his face. “I mean, I didn’t say that...I...oh dear. I’ve screwed up.” Darq hobbled out of the room at speed.

Rake looked from where Darq had stood to Katarina. “*What?*”

Katarina backed against the wall. “We were going to tell you!”

His eye ticked. “Tell me *what*, Kat?”

“Darq thinks he can heal Sammy’s body and get her personality back inside too! All we

need for it is her body back from Earth. Isn't that great?"

Rake fainted.

Katarina caught him before he hit the floor. She peered around the corner. "It's okay, Darq. I'm not mad."

Darq edged around the wall. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." She hefted Rake's dead weight in her arms. "He took it better than I thought he would. Now help me find some rope."

"Why rope?"

"I'd like to tie him down before he wakes up and tries to beat us to death."

Darq frowned. "But I'm the one that needs to heal Sammy. My death would be illogical."

"Firstly, you'd respawn and Rake would enjoy the satisfaction. Secondly, when has Rake *ever* made decisions based on logic? Rope, we need to find some. And track down Ravil; we might need her for this."

Ipsos eyes lingered on Mica's bare chest as he made himself comfortable in Yoda's tiny house. She fiddled with pots and pans and glanced up at him again. He caught her looking and she turned away.

Mica frowned. "You said you had something to talk about?"

"Yes." Ipsos cleared her throat, looked at her clipboard, and spoke to her feet, "I need to run through the..." her eyes flicked up to him and then away. "The, your..."

"Ipsos." Mica crossed his legs. "Is something wrong?"

Ipsos leaned back on the wall and forced a laugh. "No! I'm fine, I'm fine." She waved her hand and a robe appeared around Mica's shoulders. "You just seemed cold, it was distracting."

"Cold? It's hot here."

Ipsos changed the ambient temperature. "Better?"

"Yes." Mica looked around. "How can you do that?"

"I'm the Engineer." Ipsos set her clipboard aside. "You have not been with Ravil long?"

He puzzled over her answer. "No, not really, a bit over a month now I guess."

"Did you see the ones she was with before she came to be with you?"

"Her guardians?" Mica shook his head. "No, but Rake met one of them, and Marx knew of the others."

Ipsos made a note. "Do you know what kind they were?"

Mica closed his eyes. "A Feeler, a Rexos for sure, and a Pyro."

Ipsos's brows furrowed. "Strange mix of company. What of the stewards? Were they with her too? Did they assign her these *guardians*?"

"She didn't call them that, but maybe they were stewards." Mica scratched his head, managing to do that without scratching his knuckles against the ceiling. "I guess, I don't really know. I'm not the best person to ask about this. If you came back with us, we could save our friends, and I'd introduce you to Lincoln. He's our information guy. Knows all about the history and other stuff."

"Noted." Ipsos gave him a once over. "You are Terraformer."

"Yes." He nodded.

She marked a note on her clipboard. "What was your original subspecies?"

"Adapter."

"What is that?" She frowned.

"It's a new subspecies, like a few weeks old, recently discovered kind of new."

“Oh.” She nodded and made another note. “Is that what the others are, barring the Rexos and two Hunters?”

“Two Hunters? Oh, no, Tasanee was one of ours as well.”

“Then Adapter means to take on traits to be like others.” She nodded. “Interesting tactic. I like it.”

Mica smiled. “Didn’t you guys used to have Copy-That’s or something like that?”

Ipsos gave him a blank look. “Did we?”

Mica looked away. “Maybe not. I really only know about Ampyr, Rexos, Hunters and you Navigators.”

Ipsos stiffened. “Why do you address me as such?”

Mica balked. “I’m sorry, isn’t that what you are?”

Ipsos cocked her head. “You do not have the privilege or familiarity to address me using that title.”

“But everyone calls them, your kind, Nav— *that*.”

“Then you have not met many of us.” She sniffed.

“That’s true.” Mica shifted in his seat. “But Ravil calls herself a Navigator.”

“Rake is her pilot it seems...I can’t fathom why, so yes that makes sense I suppose for him and her, but none of you are mine.”

Mica ducked his head. “I didn’t mean any offense, Ipsos. What designation would you prefer?”

Ipsos looked up at him. “Do you not know?”

Mica gave her a sheepish grin and ran his fingers through his green and blonde hair. “Nope. On our planet we only recently became aware of the Empire and other subspecies at all.”

“Ah, a retaken seed planet.” Ipsos made another note and nodded. “This makes sense. Your lack of awareness is excused. Please forgive my shortness, I...” Ipsos looked him over. “You mean no disrespect with that usage; you may use the name if it is the most comfortable for you.”

“Thank you.” Mica leaned in. “May I ask *you* a question? You don’t have to answer.”

“Go ahead.”

“You are a child, aren’t you? Because, you don’t speak like a child, but...”

“I am not a child.” Ipsos hopped into a chair and rocked on her butt. “Why would you think that I am?”

“You look like one.”

Ipsos rolled her shoulders. “What does that mean for one like me?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess that’s what I’m asking. I don’t know anything about your kind besides what you can do. Ravil’s said so little and the codex doesn’t have much since it’s restricted. I know basically nothing about you.”

She eyed him. “How is this relevant to my exploration of Ravil?”

“You wanted my opinions. In order for those to be informed, I need to know more from you.”

“I see, yes, that is reasonable.” Ipsos stared at her hand and lights appeared under the surface of her skin. “What we are in fact and detail I do not know and find irrelevant, but our stories say we came from the stars, from Ether. Light made flesh, we inhabit these shells of skin and bone, we carry on, and then when we are full, we ascend to be free.”

“Free to do what?”

“Join the void.”

“A void? That doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“Well...” Ipso popped her lips. “It is said that our family is cursed on both sides. We work together to stay together, so we are bound to you...”

“Why are you cursed?”

“*That* is a long story, and I am not the Teller. It is also a tale I find to be highly *irrational*.” Ipso shook her head. “Whether we are cursed or not, we travel in ways no others can. You are a flesh creature, joined by Terra and Ether. We...” She touched her chest. “Are also of Terra but tied to Ether primarily.”

“Right, okay I don't really know what that means...”

Ipso smiled kindly. “Explaining things to others has never been a strong suit of mine. We, we're just different, you and I, at a very basic level.”

Mica reached out and touched her hand. “But you feel as real as I do.” He took her pulse. “You're a living, breathing person just like me.”

“Just like you?” Ipso smiled at him sadly and her hand unraveled into ribbons of light, which wrapped around his arm. “Or merely looking like you for a time.”

“Oh my God!” Mica gaped. “How...how are you doing that?”

She shrugged. “I am not bound by your constraints. Location, size, weight...these are not concerns that come naturally to me...though we can still be injured, just like you can.”

Mica couldn't take his eyes off the warm light. “Then why look like us at all?”

Ipso smiled and reformed her hand. “We have shared history and it binds us together.”

“Right...uh...so...” Mica rubbed his arm where they had touched. “So...we're all related if you back far enough in the past?”

“The past, yes.” Ipso sighed, melancholy.

“You don't like the past?”

“My memory of it...it does not make sense to me.” She looked away. “As if I have re-awoken again without the Teller to guide me.”

“Re-awoken again? What does that mean?”

“Cycled, died again, and gone through the reawakening without a Teller.” She mulled it over. “That is what this feels like, but that does not make sense.”

“Did you say died *again*?”

Ipso nodded. “Yes. I, as all Langone, have died many times. But never before have I had to suffer this long with a loss of memory. Always the Teller is there at our reawakening, but I cannot recall when I ended, or when I came into being again. I have been alone with no way to track my time passing. The lives I have lived blur into one another, pieces though...I can tell pieces are missing from all of them, as if holes were driven through each life and now each one is stitched together with no clear division between them.”

Mica shivered. “That sounds maddening.”

“It is not as bad as you might think. I am always Ipso, reborn as Ipso again and again...and again.” She frowned. “There is no cessation to me. I am me a hundred times over.”

“But—” Mica struggled to understand. “That's not possible—”

“It isn't? News to me.” Ipso smiled a little.

Mica thought of the Bible. “Well but that's...I mean...I...”

“We are born blank every time, yet I am me, I am Ipso. The Teller gives us our history and we become our complete selves, remembering all our lives. Death is but a sleep and refresher, but even without him...” Ipso folded her arms and stared into something Mica could not see. “Intrinsically we know the paths and places of death, the beacons...we can find our way home no matter the circumstances. I have not found my way home, Mica...”

She took a deep breath. “My people have travelled death many times, and will many times more. I have travelled these places as well, but I cannot remember where the nursery is. I cannot picture the places. I have small recollections only, not a full picture of anything.”

She rubbed her temples. “I might have power, but I cannot remember my home; I cannot remember how to travel there. The more I stay in this shape, the more I question what I know and what I’ve seen. Perhaps I have made up my reality as surely as this place I built here, a comforting image, an illusion...a story to suit my needs. Maybe none of you are even alive, but are ghosts caught in my net.”

Mica took her hand in his. “*I am real.*”

Ipsa intertwined their fingers. “You of them all feel the most solid to me.”

“I do? What about Ravil?”

“No, I do not include my kind in that assessment.” She smiled at the warmth of his hand. “I have dearly missed this.” Tears sprung to her eyes.

Mica squeezed her tiny hand. “What’s wrong?”

“I have been alone for much time. Now when I should fear strangers, I find you draw me in trusting and foolish. You could lead me to a trap...you bring down my guard when I should have it up the strongest.”

Mica stared at the little girl. “I don’t mean to do this to you.”

“And because you do not mean it, you draw me in more. You remind me of...” she shook her head. “Where others might seek to capture and possess, you do not.” She let go of his hand and patted it. “You are kind, Mica.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, any of it.” He tried to smile.

“Would it trouble you to know that I prefer things that way?” Ipsa wiped her eyes. “You represent no danger to me, none of you do, and I seek to maintain that imbalance.” She gestured to the windows. “I give your friends gifts to win trust, to keep them here, for company, for safety.” She sighed. “I can see why Ravil has taken up with you all. None of you seek to harm our kind. I am not used to this.”

“Why would *anyone* seek to harm you?”

Ipsa leaned on the wall. “Because we exist. Because we hold the keys to what all others seek.” She unraveled her long white hair. “You know, I think sometimes that I was fleeing something. That I was on the run, that perhaps I cannot remember my past because I do not wish to know what ill fate befell me.”

“Ipsa.” He leaned in. “How *long* have you been here alone?”

Her hands trembled. “I fear I have been lost for quite some time, Mica.”

“Can’t you find more of your kind to help you?”

Ipsa trembled. “I have reached out, but I hear only the faintest echoes of others on the lines. Ravil is all that I have.” She touched her heart and lights raced away from her fingertips. “The pathways are all but empty, and the traces I feel may be but ripples, memories of lives that have ended.”

“But the Empire has pilots and Navigators.”

Ipsa looked him over. “Have you seen them? Do they *truly* exist?”

“Yes, of course they do.” Mica took her hand again. “You are not alone, Ipsa!”

“I wish I could believe you, but I can’t take this knowledge on faith. Only facts...only facts matter.” Ipsa closed her eyes. “I must get her to remember what she cannot. Ravil will know...she *must* know what has happened to our people.”

“Have you told her any of this?”

“It is not fair with her stress to add mine to hers.” Ipsy shook her head. “And I do not believe she would understand my plight in her current state. Once we have her out of this place, it may help. Her ailment is connected to it.”

Mica looked around the house. “What place? Where are we really?”

“Her engine. From what I have overheard, you and your people have called it a black hole. What an odd name as it is not a hole or black.”

“We’re *inside* a black hole!”

“Of course. Where did you think we were?” She laughed lightly. “This swamp isn’t real, Mica.”

Mica gaped. “That’s not possible! We’d be crushed or mashed or stretched or something!”

Ipsy shrugged. “If you say so. But your ship is here and you are on it.” She waved her hand, shifting the lights at one end of the house. Their medical ship became visible just briefly, suspended in a web of lights. “You are all quite safe there.”

“There? I’m here.” He touched his chest.

“Your consciousness is. I did not think it wise for any of you non-Langone to have free reign in this place. I hope you do not take offense, but your skills are quite limited in this area.”

“I...I agree, I think.” Mica tried not to think about that too closely. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Well...if her ailment is from this place. Why don’t we leave?”

“That would be unwise. This place mirrors her sickness, but does not cause it. The key is somewhere in here. I must find the root of the problem in Ravil before we can go.” She hopped to her feet. “Will you accompany me?”

“Where?”

“I have made this scene a backdoor to her mind.” Ipsy picked up her clipboard. “I want to see if I can access in her memories what Ravil herself cannot. I sense she is getting distracted, joining into the thought creation game more.” Ipsy smiled and came out of her malaise.

“Meaning I can pry easier.”

Mica got up and bumped his head and shoulders on the ceiling. “Is that what this game is truly for? A distraction so you can run around unnoticed.”

Ipsy grinned. “I knew you were the right one to accompany me. So smart, Mica Terraformer.” She gestured towards the swamp. “Let us proceed.”

“All right, Ipsy Engineer.”

Ipsy flipped her hair over one shoulder. “It is Ipsy *the* Engineer.”

Mica smiled. “My apologies, *Miss* Engineer.”

Ipsy looked over her shoulder and stuck her tongue out at him. “You are teasing me.”

“I am not, it’s just my accent.” Mica took a long stride and walked beside her. He looked down. “Why do you stay so small if you’re not truly a kid?”

Ipsy frowned. “Personal reasons.”

“All right fair enough.” Mica stuffed his hands in his robe pockets. He looked around, shook his head, and laughed.

Ipsy looked up. “What is it?”

“Just this.” Mica jerked his head towards the swamp. “Being in a role we all pretended to play in as kids. It’s surreal.”

“Are you upset that you do not get to train as in the movie memory?”

He shrugged. “Not really, though being able to move things with my mind would be pretty amazing.”

Ipsy waved her hand. “You are granted access to the same abilities as Marx. I have given

you this for free.”

Mica concentrated and Ipso floated into the air. He grinned. “Excellent. How long can I do this for?”

“For the length of the game.” She looked up at him.

“But not past that.”

She smiled a little. “I will take that as a compliment, but no, my powers, though great, cannot grant you that outside of this place. Does this displease you?”

“Nope. Not if it means that Marx gets his powers taken away too once we leave.” He touched his cheek and thought of the multiple slaps he’d received recently. “No, I’m fine with losing those abilities once we are gone.”

Ipso eyed his belt. “May I see the sword of light?”

“Sure.” Mica tossed it to her and let her drop lightly to the ground.

Ipso fiddled with the device. “Are these real tools from where you come from?”

“No, they don’t exist outside this place.”

“Interesting.” She flipped it on and pointed towards a dark part of the swamp. “That is our destination.”

Mica held his hand out. “Sounds good.”

Ipso gave him back his lightsaber. She waved her hand and the way before them shifted to a path. The sounds of the swamp faded and a melody played instead. Ipso listened to it. “This song continues to play in her fractured memories. Do you recognize it?”

Mica listened and shook his head. “No, should I?”

Ipso wrinkled her nose. “Maybe, maybe not. I do not recognize it either, but it is trapped here amongst the things hidden.”

Ghostly images of children ran by and disappeared into the murk.

Mica stopped in his tracks. “What the bloody *hell* was that?”

“Random pieces of what is distorted in her memories.” Ipso stopped and put her hand out. “Wait.”

Mica looked around. “What now?”

“I think we’ve been noticed.” Nothing stirred in the swamp; no noise accompanied them but their breathing. Ipso tapped a series of spots on her clipboard and her clothing shifted to glowing green ribbons. She snapped and Mica’s lightsaber lit up and faded.

Mica eyed the weapon and whispered. “What—”

“Shh.” She tugged and strings in the air became visible as her fingers brushed them. Ipso stuck her tongue out. “Darn, I am rusty at all of this. Like relearning as a *child* does.”

“Rusty at what? I—”

A blur crept in to the corner of his vision.

Mica turned to face the shape. A swamp shadow formed into a dark man with pale blue eyes. Mica frowned. “That’s not from the movie.”

“It is a *Jungay*.” Ipso looked around Mica’s waist at the creature. “Guard dog.” She barked at the image.

Mica lifted his lightsaber. “Should I be worried?”

“Yes, *very*.” Ipso collected a handful of strings. “Let’s see what it does when I try and get in.” She tweaked the lines.

The Jungay blurred across the swamp, aiming for Ipso. Mica darted to the side and slashed down. The glowing edge of his lightsaber caught the blue man across the back. The Jungay swiped at Mica, but Mica moved out of his way.

The Jungay screeched, making visible black waves in the air. Mica threw up his arm and cut through the net. The Jungay cocked its head and eyed his lightsaber, analyzing the weapon in seconds. Mica kept his hands and feet moving, keeping himself between the Jungay and Ipso.

Ipsos focused on her task and light poked through the small holes she tore in the air. A scene became visible beyond the fog and trees. Ipso grinned. "I can see a bit! This is working!"

"Great!" Mica stabbed at the Jungay.

The Jungay ignored Mica and lunged for Ipso.

Mica jumped to Ipso's side and swung the lightsaber over her head, catching the Jungay in the midsection. The contact threw the man back towards the trees. The Jungay examined the burn in his flesh; it healed as Mica watched.

"Crap." Mica picked Ipso up with one arm. "Come on."

"Wait!" She threw her arms out towards the growing image.

"No." Mica kept his lightsaber out and backed away from the Jungay. "That thing isn't normal!"

"Of course not! It's an auto routine to guard the block in her memory, it *can't* die." She squirmed in his grip. "Just keep it occupied!"

"You're not serious."

"I am! What do you think I upgraded your weapon for? Auto block for countermeasures."

Mica set her on her feet. "This had better be worth it." He charged towards the blue man. "Come on then, attack me. You're not getting to her without going through me!"

The Jungay smiled, showing sharp white teeth. The man dropped to all fours and split into two midnight blue dogs. Mica made a face. "Now there are two of them!"

"I just need a minute more!" Ipso called back.

The dogs barked and came for him. Mica dodged, parrying bites with slashes that slowed the creatures, but healed within seconds. He took a claw to his thigh, and he cut a leg off in return. One dog rounded and leapt for his head. Mica dropped and stabbed upwards, driving the weapon through its jaw. He kicked the body back and turned for the other. Talons grazed his shoulder. Mica threw an elbow without looking. "Ipso, hurry up!"

"A minute more!"

Mica cut off his attacker's head and turned to gut the other. The first Jungay restored its missing part and went for Mica's ankles. Mica sliced at the dogs. They barked and jumped at each movement he made. Mica edged towards the pair. They dropped back to pace in front of him, staying just out of his reach. Mica kept both hands on his glowing blade. "Ipso? Did you do something to make them back off?" He eyed the creatures. "Ipso?"

Mica turned. A third dog had pinned Ipso face down in the swamp. Mica sprinted to her side. He cut the Jungay in two and hauled her to her feet. "Ipso!"

Ipso spat up muddy water. "Thanks!"

The dog Mica cut in two reformed into two separate creatures. Mica shook his head. "We're done here."

She reached for the glowing image of Ravil's memories. "But I didn't get to see it! Go back!"

"Can they do us physical harm?"

"Well maybe? I don't know!"

"Ipso! We're *done!*" He threw her over his shoulder and sprinted back the way they'd come. The Jungay reformed into men and slid back into the shadows.

Mica stopped. He set her down and grabbed her shoulders. "Run back there, and I'm going

to tackle you.”

Ipsos red eyes flashed. “Who are *you* to order *me*?”

“I am the responsible adult.”

“So am I!” She gave him a shove.

“I’m bigger.”

“That’s not fair!” Ipsos stomped her tiny feet. “Size doesn’t mean anything of importance!”

Mica shrugged. “If you so say so.”

“I am the Engineer!”

“I’m the botanist! I have degrees, more than one!” He gestured to her. “You haven’t even gotten out of elementary school!”

“I don’t know what any of that means!”

“Exactly!”

Ipsos sat on a stump across from him. She folded her arms. “But I was so close, Mica.”

Mica flicked his lightsaber off. “Then congratulate yourself for what you did get done, don’t focus on what you couldn’t do.”

“Mica, we have to go back!” She tugged at his sleeve. “We must!”

“No, it’s *dangerous*.”

Ipsos scoffed. “Afraid of some danger?”

He frowned. “I do not go in to battle unsure of what I am dealing with.”

Ipsos made a face. “You sound like my friend.”

“I bet he’s smart and doesn’t get himself killed.”

“Yeah he’s *great*.” Ipsos looked away. “I guess you just can’t handle surprises.”

“Surprises? It didn’t seem surprising to you.” His eyes narrowed. “Why didn’t you tell me those *things* were there?”

“Because I wasn’t entirely sure they would be there, so what was the point in worrying you?” Ipsos wriggled her toes. “This does give me some information though. Whoever messed with her head wants it to stay messed with.”

“Will they know that you’ve tried to get in?”

Ipsos turned thoughtful. “If they’ve set up the lock that way then perhaps they might.”

“So you might have just alerted whoever did this to the fact that you’re trying to get in.”

Ipsos blushed. “Okay maybe.” She scowled at his expression. “It’s not likely! That Jungay would have to be very powerful for that to work, and why would they do that anyways? If they could reach her like that, they’d just draw her in.”

Mica leaned back. “Why?”

Ipsos looked at him funny. “Because she’s Langone *obviously*.” She shook her head. “No. It has to be an auto routine, set to go off if tampering occurs.”

“So now what.”

“Clearly.” Ipsos gestured to the swamp. “We need to try again.”

“No.”

“But—”

“No!” Mica put his lightsaber away and stalked towards Yoda’s house. “That is dangerous and foolish. I don’t know a thing about what they’re capable of and neither do you.”

“But *Mica*!”

He turned back to her. “What if they decide to self-destruct and take Ravil with them?”

Ipsos frowned. “Oh, I didn’t think of that.”

“See?” Mica held out his hand. “Come on, I need to get going anyways.”

She looked up, surprised. “What for?”

“The rest of the movie.” He waved his hand. “I have a battle to run into.”

Rake pulled at his restraints. He sat in the backseat of the cockpit behind the chair he normally would have occupied. “Untie me!”

Katarina settled her hands on the controls of the Millennium Falcon. “Rake, shut up already!” She piloted the ship through pink clouds and spoke into the radio, “No, *I don't have a landing permit. I'm trying to reach Lando Calrissian.*”

The ship jostled as they came under fire from their recently acquired escort. Ravil looked over at Rake from the other back seat. “Can't we untie him?”

“Only if he promises not to punch Darq again.” Katarina looked over to Darq who sported two black eyes. The Rexos sat up front with her.

Rake gritted his teeth. “I promise I won't touch his shiny chrome self again, despite him being a fucking lying little dick shit head!” He kicked at the back of Darq's chair.

Katarina sighed. “No one lied to you, Rake.”

“No just omitted! Like that's *way* better!”

“We didn't want to get your hopes up about Sammy! We did it for you, Rake!” Katarina spared him a glance.

Rake looked over at Ravil and back to Katarina. “Omitting stuff for someone else's good is stupid!”

Katarina ground her teeth together. “Just because *you* had a revelation about yourself, doesn't mean it applies to everyone.” Shots burst outside the ship. Katarina flipped their escort ships off. “Yeah, that's right! Look at my hands! You're going to let me land anyways!”

“Kat! *Kat!* My wrists hurt!” Rake tugged at his bonds and seethed as Katarina ignored him. “Come on! If you keep me tied up you might as well just hand me over to my carbonite chamber now.”

Katarina looked over her shoulder. “No one's letting you get frozen.”

“Oh yeah? How?”

“We'll find a way.” Katarina turned back to steering. “Just relax, Rake.”

“No!” Rake kicked at her seat. “Untie me and then I will.”

“No!”

“Bitch!”

“I'm getting a headache from this yelling. Sorry Kat.” Ravil unbuckled her seatbelt. She pulled out a knife and sliced through the knots that kept Rake bound. “There. Feel better?”

“Lot's.” Rake grinned and kissed her on the forehead. “You're the best.”

“I know.” She handed him his blaster. “This is for killing Lando, not Darq.”

“Lando?” Rake wrinkled his nose. “I'm not killing Lando. Lando's awesome.”

Katarina parked the ship on a landing pad. She saw Rake out of his bonds, looked at Ravil, but didn't say anything about it. “Rake, we all discussed this while you were out cold. Kill Lando and take his role, no freezing.”

“No!” He stood up. “I'm *Han Solo.*”

“Han Solo get's *frozen*, and Lando is a good character.” Katarina faced him. “He gets to blow up the Death Star; you can rub that in Mica's face.”

Rake eyed the blaster. “*Fine.* I'd better get *points* for this *sacrifice* though.”

“You and your sister with these *stupid* points,” Katarina grumbled. “They don't do anything!”

“That you *know* of.” He took Ravil’s hand and led her towards the exit.

Katarina rolled her eyes. “Get off the ship.” She kept herself between Darq and Rake, eyeing the latter as he walked out of the cockpit. She took Darq’s hand and looked down at him. “No going off by yourself, remember? You have to stick with me while we’re here.”

“Okay, Mom.” Darq smiled.

Rake bumped Ravil with his hips as they headed towards the ramp out of the ship. “I know you had nothing to do with tying me up.”

“Of course not.” Ravil smiled as they stepped down the ramp and out onto the open-air landing platform. “You did kind of go crazy for a bit.”

He rubbed his neck. “I wasn’t that bad.”

“Yeah, you were. You spouted gibberish and threatened to burn the ship down to its landing gear during our scenes.”

“It was a *minor* disagreement between friends.” Rake looked up and flinched. “Oh, that’s it. I’m *fucked!*”

Tasaneer skipped across the platform. She stopped in front of them. “Hi guys!” She twirled. “I’ve got a cape!”

Katarina gaped at her outfit. “Oh, well...*that* changes the plan.”

Rake threw his blaster off the platform. “Screwed.”

Katarina pointed to the men that stood behind Tasaneer. “Kill one of them instead.”

“Those are minor characters!” Rake pointed at his chest. “I’m. Han. Solo!”

Katarina pushed him to the side. “Fine then, Han Solo! Guess you get to freeze, *just like him!*”

Tasaneer sidled up to Ravil. “Hey, hot stuff, wanna come back to my place while these two duke it out?” She kissed Ravil’s hand. “Your braid is irresistible.”

Ravil laughed. “I can’t resist a man in a cape.”

Rake turned at her laughter. “You get away from *my girl*, you traitorous *bitch!*”

Katarina rolled her eyes. “Is *bitch* your word of day or something?”

“*Your girl?*” Tasaneer wrapped an arm around Ravil’s waist. “Nah man, I know how this plays.” She brushed her hand back through her curly black hair. “I smooth talk the lady folk and I get a little princess action once you’re all captured and shit.” She laughed at Rake’s expression. “Calm down, Rake. Marx and I have this thing tied up. Don’t worry about the freezing. Not even a concern.” She gestured to the buildings. “Now come. Play in my city.”

Rake looped his arm with Ravil’s and pulled her away from Tasaneer. “We’ll play, but you keep your hands off her.”

Katarina smiled. “Besides, what would Marx say?”

“Threesome?” Tasaneer laughed at Rake’s expression. “Touchy.”

Ravil tugged on Rake’s arm. “So what is the plan?”

Rake turned to Ravil. “No idea, Beb, but I’m not going to leave it up to Rat. I’ll get a plan of my own going.” He glared at the others. “Everything’s going to be fine. Trust me.”

“Oh, Little Blue, you’re so clever!” Reloy clapped his hands and looked at the game pieces before them. He sat on the floor of his living room across from Kennedy; she was on her stomach, eyeing the game board. Kennedy smiled briefly at the compliment and waited for his move. Reloy saw her smile. “You are warming up to me!” He reached out and touched her cheek lightly. “I knew you would!”

Kennedy crossed and uncrossed her ankles, agitated and uncomfortable. Her feet had been

tied into patent leather flats, ones that forced her talons to stay retracted. She wore white gloves that gave her no grip or purchase. She'd spent the greater part of the day practicing how to pick up small objects.

Reloy dropped into silence, staring at his pieces.

Lincoln stood behind him against the wall, keeping watch while they played. The only good thing he could say about this was that Kennedy's current position allowed him to see down the front of her dress, and from this angle, he could imagine eviscerating Reloy without the man seeing his facial expressions.

Reloy moved his piece and grinned at Kennedy. "Your turn. Surprise me!"

"I try." Kennedy put her fingers to her lip and chewed on them.

Reloy grabbed her wrist. "No chewing on the gloves! Dear, I only have a few pairs and they are very expensive! Rationing of supplies, you know."

"Sorry, sir." Kennedy dropped her gaze. Her tail jerked anxiously.

"It's Reloy, please." Reloy rubbed her hand. "Oh, I didn't mean to yell...oh bother. I'm terrible sometimes. Here just take them off, please." His lips twitched. "I know. I'll give you another treat. Blue, get Little Blue a treat please!"

"What kind, sir?" Lincoln flicked his claws in and out, wishing he could feed Kennedy Reloy's heart. That would be a good treat.

"Surprise me!" He handed Lincoln her empty container of cream. "Something new!"

"Yes, sir." Lincoln padded out of the room.

"Oh, please do call me Reloy," he called after Lincoln.

Kennedy watched him go, and her heartbeat picked up. She wanted Lincoln back; she couldn't be alone with this man. Reloy made her nervous and confused. She couldn't read him, and his being friendly just threw her off. Ampyr weren't friendly; this was some sort of trick. She feared she'd kill him if he made any sudden moves.

Reloy edged around to her side of the game board. He lay down beside her and kicked his ankles up to match her. He played with the corners of the board game, thinking of something to say to her. Reloy bumped his shoulder into hers. "Please do not be cross with me, Little Blue. Please. I am sorry I raised my voice."

"I'm not mad." Kennedy struggled not to stare at him in shock. Had he just said he was *sorry*? She examined the game pieces, her nostrils flaring with his fragrance. She gulped, picking up something unusual in his scent.

Reloy touched her hair, trailing his fingers along her braid. "You seem unhappy."

"I am not."

Reloy frowned. "*Tell me the truth, Little Blue.*"

Kennedy felt the pull of his command. She ignored it and spoke honestly anyways, "I am not unhappy, Reloy, but I am scared."

"Scared?" Reloy made a frowny face. "Why, Little Blue?"

"I not know you very well, I don't understand you, and I never been to First Planet."

Kennedy made her eyes wide. "I so *frightened* of new place."

"Oh, Little Blue, you'll love it! There's nothing to be frightened of." Reloy rolled to his back and looked up in to her yellow eyes. "There's so much to see and do there! The hanging gardens, Court Imperial, the hunting grounds!" He sighed and unraveled her hair. "I wish I could take you to my home. You'd meet all sorts of wonderful people, Hunters like you. You'd have many friends. You would like it." He gazed at her fondly. "You could like me too, I bet, after you got to know me."

Kennedy blushed. "I think so."

Reloy broke into a grin. "You are such a darling! Never have I met one so sweet like you. Why are you sweet, Little Blue? Normally you Hunters are vicious as new acquires, not like the ones we have at home. Have you met any of them?"

"Yes." Kennedy nodded, recalling Hesper and Duma. "I have."

"Simply charming, but you have something they do not. Yes, you are wild, untamed."

Reloy took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. He inhaled. "You smell like freedom. Freedom, Little Blue."

Kennedy broke out in goose bumps. Her first thought was to bite Reloy, to make this confusion and oddity stop, but he hadn't hurt her. She struggled against the impulse. "I grew up free."

Reloy rolled onto one arm and placed the other hand on her back. He trailed his fingers down her spine. "On that ferocious home world of yours." Reloy made a face. "So brutal, but I suppose it has to be. I never liked it there, only went once to barter for cubs. I was shocked at the conditions, but the stock was good enough." He lowered his voice. "I work on all the special breeding projects in the Empire, it gives me access to top quality ones such as you, but don't worry, I like you the most of all."

Kennedy clenched her jaw. "Thank you."

"None of the Hunters I collected were like you though, you're soft." He brushed his fingers along her tail. "Sweet." He rested his hand on the small of her back. "Tell me why you're sweet, Little Blue."

Kennedy looked away. "When I was cub, my entire family was butchered, except for me. A Hunter came along after; she attacked me, beat me, and broke me. Her children had died in attack, and she blamed me. I did not blame her for what came next, but—" she heard Lincoln stop short in the doorway.

"But what?" Reloy urged her to continue.

"She left me to die, but she came back. I do not know why, perhaps she wanted me to replace dead baby." Kennedy's eyes filled with pain. "I couldn't be her child, but I tried. I was obedient. I learned how to be quiet, how to be soft, how to be cub again despite age."

Reloy nodded. "And did it work?"

"No." Kennedy stared into space. "But Blue came, tried to save me, came sometimes but could not stay."

"Why?" Reloy was ensnared.

"She was stronger than he was. So he tried to get stronger, but the stronger he became, the worse she was. He would come for longer, but then she would hurt me more. She wanted to kill me, to finish what she had started."

"No! What did you do?"

"As long as I did not fight back, she stopped before it went too far. And when she hurt me in the worst way, he would come and make me better. He loved me and he was the only one I had that did. He said I should be strong, so I became strong inside. He told me not to be scared, so I wasn't scared."

"You accepted it? You never attacked her to get free, that's *terrible*." Reloy looked her over and his expression grew soft, his eyes wet with tears. He petted her hair. "You're with Blue now and safe. How did that happen?"

"He overpowered her and took me. We left the planet together."

His breath caught in his throat. "You went on the run! How *exciting*, Little Blue!"

Kennedy nodded. "She keeps finding us."

"No!"

"Yes, I—" Kennedy closed her eyes. "I think she might kill me from spite, to hurt him."

Reloy shook his head. "That is not right!" He sat up and drew her into a hug. "I *won't* let her get you."

Kennedy jerked, sensing Reloy's honest worry and concern. She patted his back. "I okay."

"No, I will protect you from now on!"

Lincoln crouched by his side and growled. "So will I."

Reloy jerked. "Oh! Blue, you scared me! Oh yes, treats!" He took the bowl from Lincoln and handed it to Kennedy. "Eyeballs!"

Kennedy examined the dish, keeping her eyes from Lincoln's face. "My favorite."

"Really?" Reloy snapped up a big one and popped it into his mouth. He swallowed and grinned. "Me too! We have so much in common, don't we! Oh, this all makes me so happy. Wait here, I will be back!" He got up and dashed for his bedroom.

Lincoln put his lips to Kennedy's hair. She trembled and he sighed. "I am sorry."

Kennedy shook her head. "Not you, *her*."

"Kennedy." He bit down gently on her hair and sat back on his heels. "I won't let her hurt you that way again." He rubbed her braid and set it aside.

Kennedy purred as pleasure poured through her body. "*More.*"

Lincoln drew his hands back. "I cannot."

"Cannot have sex, can groom? Affection?"

"But I know what it does for you." Lincoln looked towards where Reloy had run off to. "And he will be back soon."

She tugged on his arm. "Then please before he returns something nice."

"Kennedy—"

"I want you, before him. He wants me, I can smell it now."

Lincoln cringed. "As can I, but he said—"

"Not *care* what one *says* anymore." Kennedy looked at him for the first time. "Body and instincts win over words and thoughts—always."

Lincoln snarled. "Then you will kill him and run."

Kennedy shook her head. "No, I cannot do that to you."

"*Kennedy*, I order you to!"

"No." She gazed at him evenly. "I am my own person, and I make my decisions. I adult, not child anymore. You protected me; I protect you now."

"Do not let him, Kennedy." Lincoln's chest heaved in a panic. "Don't!"

"I found them!" Reloy skipped back into the room. He held out a box to Kennedy. "Special imports for my special darling girl." He shooed Lincoln over and dropped to Kennedy's side, his body right up against hers.

Reloy opened the box and showed her an array of dried lizards. "I bet you'll like these, they're just the best! I actually went and spoke to a chef that specializes in them; his technique is perfect I swear. Some people don't think he's the best, but I do. These are of course from him. You have to try one."

Lincoln eyed them and dread sank in. "Ilums."

Reloy raised an eyebrow. "Another connoisseur. A good thing I picked you for the kitchen." He avoided the dark ones and picked out a small lizard, tossing it in his mouth. "So tasty. Now don't take too much though, or you'll trip out for *hours*. I learned *that* the hard

way.” Reloy grinned. “There’s a story to tell for another time. Let’s just say I ended up naked in a reflecting pond, *very* unseemly of me. Saré had to fish me out.” He blushed.

Lincoln growled too low for Reloy to hear. “Also aphrodisiacs in large quantities. Do not eat them, Kennedy.”

Kennedy took the lizard Reloy handed her. She smiled and ate it in one bite. It tasted amazing. She smiled. “Yummy!” As Reloy looked away to search for another, Kennedy responded to Lincoln in a low growl. “Do not kill yourself trying to fight it. Calm down.”

Lincoln watched the pair in horror. His mind spun. He addressed Reloy, “I will make a second dinner. You must be hungry.”

Reloy looked thoughtful. “Oh? How could you tell?”

“Your smell.” Lincoln inhaled. “I can tell many things.”

Reloy threw an arm over Kennedy’s shoulders. “Well, I think Little Blue and I will be fine with these tonight. We did eat splendidly earlier thanks to you.” He drummed his fingers along the game board. “Blue, you’ve done a great job today. You deserve a rest. Why don’t you take the rest of the night off? You must still be tired from healing. I can see you’re strained. For your own good, I declare it so. *Go to bed.*”

Lincoln had to stand; he had to turn to the doorway. He had to walk out, leaving her behind. Lincoln flicked out his talons, claws, and hooks. His hair rippled, and his heart pounded. He could do nothing to save her.

Lincoln dropped to his knees in the bed Reloy had provided for him, one in the hall right outside Reloy’s bedroom. Lincoln fell to his side and hit the plush mattress. He stared at the wall in horror, unable to move or lift a finger. A low keening wail escaped his lips. His ears cocked towards the living room, unable to plug them, unwilling to hide from what she did for him.

In the living room, Kennedy took deep breaths and ate another lizard. She focused on the taste, the sensation, hoping for calm, for focus and perhaps, if she were lucky, these intoxicating food bits would take the edge off her fear and it wouldn’t be so bad overall. She whispered, “We finish game now?”

“Games, no, I’m bored of *that* game. I’ve played all these so many times before.” Reloy leaned on her and smiled. “Little Blue...uhm.”

Kennedy looked at him; he smelled happy and very nervous. That made her nervous. “Yes?”

He dropped his gaze. “What...what would you think about being mine instead of me—instead of you—going to another?”

Kennedy gulped. “What mean yours?”

“You—you’d stay at my home.” He ran his fingers through her hair. “A permanent on...on my estate with my staff. You’d be staff, but more, I mean.”

Kennedy blushed. “On First Planet?”

“Yes, but also wherever I go, you’d go!” He put his lips to her bare shoulder. “You wouldn’t have to work, you’d be safe. You’d eat the best foods, have the best clothes, the best everything, Little Blue.”

“I—” Kennedy looked down. “I not good enough.”

“For me, you are perfect.” He rolled her to her side, so that they faced one another. “I like to give choices, Little Blue.” Reloy put his hand on her hip and played with the edge of her dress. “It gives me such a thrill to have choices, and doesn’t it make you happy too?”

“Having choice? No one gives me choice.”

"I would, I do." He cleared his throat. "I...I...I haven't been with...may I hold you?"

Kennedy's ears popped out in shock. "I...*what?*"

Reloy's face fell. "Oh...never mind. Nothing."

"No, you can," the words escaped her lips before she knew what she said.

Reloy gulped and pulled her to him. A nervous smile fluttered across his lips. He hugged her tight. "Would...would you like to come be with me? Would you like that kind of life on First Planet?"

"I think so." Her head whirled as she looked over his shoulder.

"Good. You'll have so many choices, like what color dress you can wear, what we'll have for dinner, what games we'll play. So many things to choose, I'm the nicest man you'll ever meet. I promise."

Kennedy closed her eyes and focused on Lincoln. "Could Blue come? Be protected too?"

Reloy nodded and let her go. "If you want." He kissed her collarbone. "What do you say? Please say yes."

"I—" Kennedy's mind fogged, and her skin grew hot. "I can't think well."

"Mmm." Reloy took her hand and placed it at his back. "That happens with these treats, but isn't it nice not to have to think sometimes? Nice not to have to remember anything."

"I don't know."

"Why do you need to think at all? Oh, you're a darling when you blush." Reloy rolled her to her back and leaned over her. "The first time I saw you I knew you were perfect. I'd never seen such a precious little one like you. And around all those other Hunters, leering at you, wanting to hurt you or take you. You weren't safe amongst them and none of them were good enough. So I saved you from that place." He kissed her neck.

"Oh."

"But." His voice was tinged with hope, "I'm good enough for you, aren't I? Perhaps I could be?"

Kennedy shivered as he stroked her arms and thighs. "Yes."

He smiled. "It's a pity you were broken when you were younger, but the results are undeniable, you're one of a kind. Like me in a lot of ways." He unzipped her dress slowly, gauging her reactions. "I love rare things and I think you're too rare to let go. I value you."

Kennedy swallowed and felt feverish, *good*. "Not rare."

"So bashful too." Reloy kissed her forehead. "You are though, but you do not know just how much. I love that about you, such an undervalued find. You're priceless, but free." He sank down and kissed her neck, his hands running under the cloth of her dress, over her stomach. "You're precious, Little Blue; I *must* add you to my home. I'll keep you safe. I'll make you happy. I promise."

Kennedy stared at the game board as he touched her. He wasn't rough; he wasn't violent. He didn't seek her pain for his pleasure. She looked to the ceiling as his hands roamed gentle and curious...well-versed but so strangely innocent.

Reloy toyed with the edges of her underwear. He looked in to her eyes and blinked back tears. "So what do you say? Are you mine? May I have you? All of you?"

Kennedy shut out Lincoln's growling. If she did this, they would be secure. They would be safe and have his trust. She nodded. "Yes, yours."

"You won't regret it." Reloy wrapped his arms around her. "You will love being with me." He smiled. "*You have my protection now, from all and any others. You are yours.*" He smiled and sighed into her hair as all the stress left his features. He wiped his eyes. "We'll have so

much fun, don't you think?"

"I do." She gulped, confused by his expression and his scent.

"Good!" His dark eyes were bright. "I have so many board games, gardens to play in, and libraries! I even have a maze! You'll see it all." Reloy grinned from ear to ear. "You are a marvel." He kissed her forehead and looked down her body. "And untouched, I love that you're untouched. Since you're a—a—I mean, never mind. I'll be slow, but those Ilums should be helping your nerves. Are they?"

Kennedy nodded. "Yes."

Reloy kissed her on the lips lightly and flicked the bell at her throat. "Good, they are for me too you know...for my ne—nerves and yours. I don't want you to be nervous." He gazed into her eyes kindly. "I won't hurt you, never ever."

"I am a *little* nervous." Her heart pounded. Lincoln's growling increased. She struggled for calm. "I'm okay, really."

"Consoling *me*?" Reloy gasped. "Your surprises are part of why you're so endearing." He sat up and unsnapped his shirt. He tossed the cloth to the side, revealing ice-white skin. He was lean and fit, but ragged scars crisscrossed his stomach and arms with grayish-pink streaks.

Kennedy gave him a once over. She touched a scar. "You—"

He snatched up her hand and kissed it, drawing her attention away from his old wounds. "I'm so glad you're willing to come with me. Hunters are the worst when they're unwilling with things. The most stubborn things alive, I swear. It takes so long to get them in line...though you probably know that better than I would."

Kennedy's face fell as she realized she'd completely misjudged him. "Oh?"

"All the teeth and claws when they fight." Something strange passed over his features. He shivered. "We've had to have ones declawed in the past, until they're settled in of course, but you don't need that. You don't need a Feeler; it is as if you were born for *me*. Yes, that must be it you're born for *me*! And me for *you*! You don't want to hurt me do you?" He trembled, watching her every reaction.

"No." Kennedy's heart thudded in her chest.

"That's what I thought." He tossed his belt and smiled down at her. "My instincts are always right spot on." Reloy kicked off his pants. His strange scars continued across his thighs and down his calves. "This shouldn't hurt; I slipped some painkillers into the lizards before I brought them out. I just...I wasn't sure if—"

Her mind raced. "Thoughtful of you."

"That's what I thought too! See we're so similar." He touched his forehead and grinned at her. "We're on the same wavelength. Sometimes I wish Hunters weren't the children races in need of tending, but maybe the appeal would wear off." He looked thoughtful. "But probably not. Right?"

Kennedy didn't know what to say to that. "Uh...yes?"

Reloy clapped his hands. "Where to start?" He popped off her leather shoes and kissed her toes. "Bottom to top, top to bottom, or in the middle? What do you think?"

Kennedy breathed through her mouth, afraid of the smell of anger and terror that Lincoln put into the air. She grasped for an answer. "Wherever you like, Reloy."

"So submissive, but you don't have to be, darling. Not at all. I'll give you a treat." Reloy dropped down and kissed her inner thigh. "A good, good thing for my sweet, little girl."

Kennedy ground her teeth and tensed.

Reloy coughed. He clutched his throat and sat back on his knees. His eyes watered. His

face turned red and he looked apologetic. “Must have had too many Ilums. I’m so sorry, Little Blue. I think I need to go to sleep now.” He passed out and fell into her lap.

Kennedy gasped and inhaled. Her pupils dilated. “Pirate!”

Emmalethe appeared at her ankles. She frowned at Reloy. “I not like this one for your mate. I not approve so I deal with.” She clicked her black nails together. She wiped blood from the one she’d shoved into Reloy’s back. “He sleepy time for while. That okay?”

Kennedy went limp. “I…”

Lincoln shouted from the other room, “What is going on?”

Emmalethe rolled Reloy off Kennedy. “I stop Ampyr man from sex. He not strong enough for my alpha, I know. My Evgeniy stronger times much.”

Kennedy tried to speak, but her lips puffed up. Her head fell to the side. “I still feel—”

Lincoln growled. “Stalker, is she okay?”

Emmalethe examined Kennedy’s eyes. “He drug her, I drug him, fair is fair.” Emmalethe threw Kennedy over her shoulder and grabbed Reloy by his hair. She carried both to Lincoln. She smiled at the Hunter. “What you do here now?”

Lincoln reached for Kennedy. “We were taken against our will.”

Emmalethe handed Kennedy over. She walked into the bedroom and tossed Reloy onto his bed. She stepped into the hall. “How that happen?”

“He ordered us to. I must obey orders, but she does not.” Lincoln cradled Kennedy. “She didn’t have to come with me. Why are *you* here?”

“I find Navigator right next to this room. See, I crawl around.” Emmalethe got to the floor and shimmied. She touched her nose. “Then I smell you both and come to see why. See tall, skinny boy with Kennedy, and she make strange face like *confused!* I fix for her!”

Lincoln inclined his head. “Thank you.”

“Why not hurt him?” She eyed Lincoln.

“We’re here in secret.”

“Like Evgeniy.” Emmalethe looked between the pair. “Want to leave?”

“I cannot, but she can.” Lincoln thrust Kennedy at Emmalethe. “Take her. Hide her wherever you’re hiding. Now!”

Kennedy snapped at Emmalethe. “You do not, beta, you leave me here.”

Emmalethe ducked her head. “As you say.”

Kennedy nodded. “Yes.”

“No!” Lincoln snarled. “Kennedy, leave! He will try again when he wakes up!”

Emmalethe looked into the bedroom. “Want that I kill him for you?”

“No!” Kennedy snarled.

“Yes!” Lincoln growled.

Emmalethe looked between Lincoln and Kennedy. “Alpha says no.”

Kennedy smacked at Lincoln feebly. “His death would be yours. You stop talking. Emmalethe, go now.”

Emmalethe nodded. She bit off a nail and wrapped Kennedy’s hair around it. “Poison to make him sleep, use if needed. Evgeniy plans on taking over ship if no rescue comes. We be real pirates together!” She turned invisible. “I like tail, Kennedy, I want one too.” She laughed and they heard her dart into the kitchen and out a wall panel.

Lincoln crushed Kennedy to him. “I want you to leave! Why won’t you save yourself?”

“No.” Kennedy blinked to stay awake. “I stay with you.”

Lincoln shuddered. “But he almost—”

“Didn’t.” Kennedy shook her head as her mind cleared. “My choice besides. My choice. I get my choice, no say for you.”

Lincoln hugged her with arms and legs. “Silly child.”

“I not child.” Kennedy pulled at her dress, exposing her breasts. “Adult.”

Lincoln grabbed at her zipper, blinking tears aside. “That doesn’t mean you need to get yourself hurt.”

“I not hurt.” Kennedy scratched at his hands. “I can dress myself.”

“Then cover your body.”

“I not want to.” Kennedy pushed against him. “Touch me. Want touch.”

Lincoln looked away. “I want to but I can’t, Kennedy. You’ve eaten those lizards. You’re not thinking clearly and we don’t know when that will wear off him. If he catches us—”

“But.” She purred. “I need a bath, smell like him.”

“Kennedy, you can bathe yourself.”

Kennedy grabbed Lincoln’s hair and hissed in his face. “I *want* you to! Why can’t you do what I want for *one night*?”

Lincoln froze under the intensity of her gaze. She snarled and flicked her claws out. Heat bloomed in his chest and loins. He nodded slowly, his eyes lingering on her body. “What do you wish of me?”

Kennedy kissed his neck. “Everything.”

“I...I cannot mate with you, he said—”

“Then not all the way...” She hooked a leg around his waist. “Make me forget him and see only you.”

Lincoln growled. The repressed desire of the previous day hit him in a wave. He squeezed a breast, grabbed her tail, and voiced the last reservation he had. “I want to, Kennedy, but...but your parents will *kill* me.”

She leaned in to him. “If we see them, *maybe*, but if you don’t, *I’ll* kill you.”

Lincoln looked up, startled. “What?”

Kennedy grinned. “Just kidding.” She kissed him and pressed her fingers to his scalp.

Lincoln bucked and purred. He breathed into her hair. His cares and worries left with each touch and smell. Lincoln kissed her neck; he pulled her dress from her shoulders, tossing it behind her. He peeled her underwear down, making sure not to tear them.

Lincoln glanced up at Reloy’s bedroom, but the man slept soundly. Lincoln lifted Kennedy and placed her down in the bed. He licked her shoulder, removing Reloy’s saliva. “Where else did he touch you?”

Kennedy grabbed his hand and placed it on her bottom. “There.” She took his other hand and slid it up her thigh. “There.” She looked into his eyes. “He kissed me too.”

Lincoln kissed her, releasing his pheromones, mingling their scents and tastes. He rubbed himself between her thighs, his hips remembering the rhythm. He breathed heavy, teetering on the edge of losing control. He slipped his hand up her thigh.

Kennedy moaned and spread her legs. “You are the only one I want there.”

“Am I?” Lincoln traced his fangs across her nipples, drawing blood.

“Yes.”

He slipped his fingers inside her. “And here?”

“Yes!” Kennedy threw her head back, her white fangs showing. “Only you.”

Lincoln panted as his body temperature spiked. “Only you.” He inhaled. “And to mate with you...only you...”

Kennedy blinked rapidly. “You...you would want to?”

Lincoln kissed her stomach and moved his hands against her. “Yes, that is my desire, bad or good. Even though I know wanting you will get me killed.”

“That’s what I’ve always thought about you.” Kennedy hooked her toes around his arms.

Lincoln grinned. “Too bad for us that I don’t care.” He slipped his tongue in between her legs and lapped.

“Neither do I—” Kennedy lost the ability to form words as Lincoln bent to the task of pleasuring her.

He gripped her hips, his movements slow, deliberate. Lincoln devoured her. Every ounce of him wanted to climb up and enter her. He could do it in seconds; he could bury himself and seal them together as they should have been from the beginning.

Lincoln bit her, sending his pheromones into her blood stream, tying them. He bit his tongue, absorbing her as well. He moaned and rocked against the ground as he licked. Lincoln wanted release, but knew he didn’t deserve it.

Kennedy ran her fingers through his hair, massaging it gently. The sensation drove thought from his mind. Kennedy moaned as his actions became impassioned, uncontrolled. Lincoln moved wild and feral, kissing and biting.

Her cries stopped and she gasped. Lincoln focused on her, moving as she did. She bucked and formed an arc as her muscles locked. Lincoln wrapped his long arms around her body, cradling her as she shook, moaned, and went limp in ecstasy.

Kennedy panted. She let his arms go, curling her toes around his hair instead. Lincoln purred and bent towards the motion. His body ached with need. He pressed his head towards the floor, fighting for control.

Kennedy pulled him up her body. She kissed him on the lips, on the neck. She grabbed his ass, and her toes worked at his pants.

Lincoln stiffened. “What are you doing?”

“Pleasure you?”

“No...I...we can’t do that.” He pulled back.

“Why?” She gave him a tug.

“You’ll start what we cannot stop, Kennedy.” Even as the words came out of his mouth, he did not stop her from removing the fabric that separated them. He shuddered as he felt her skin against his. “This is irresponsible.”

“You have control.”

Lincoln shook his head. “Of all the things I might have, control over myself is not something I have ever had.” He sat up. “So please, don’t go there.”

Kennedy looked at his erection and shook her head. “I do what I want now.” She shoved him onto his back and gripped him. “Understand?”

Lincoln did not fight her. “Kennedy, you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Kennedy bent down and kissed the tip. “I see little rat and Marx, I know enough.” She took him in her mouth and sucked from the base to the end. She wrapped her tongue around him and applied pressure.

Lincoln gasped. He looked down at her, watching her move. He wanted this, needed her. He let go and dove into the sensation.

Images superimposed themselves in his vision. A younger Kennedy, dull-eyed, pained, complacent. He saw himself, violent, uncaring, lustful made worse by desiring her pain. Lincoln shuddered. As the pleasure intensified, so too did the images. “No.”

She'd never complained, only cried if it hurt. Never pleased, never pleasuring, she'd been meat, warmth, something to use. She hadn't even been sentient as far as he was concerned. Lincoln closed his eyes. "Stop." He shook his head and touched hers. "Stop Kennedy, please!"

Kennedy froze with her mouth still around him. She looked up confused.

Hissing laughter rang in Lincoln's ears. His eyes flicked up to his Instinct and he shuddered. "Stop doing this to me! Go away!"

Kennedy sat up. "*She's* here."

Lincoln nodded and rolled to his side. "Go away."

His Instinct laughed. "No, no, no, not now. Not in our moment of triumph. You do this and you'll be weak, you'll let me in, in control again, yes. This is what you truly desire."

"No, it's not!"

"Yes, it is! You know what will happen." She grinned.

"What are you talking about?" He snarled.

"You don't remember?" His female Instinct replayed for him the scene of when he had taken Kennedy's virginity. Kennedy had been hesitant, afraid, but Lincoln had been in control, a brief moment of lucidity. The action had been tender, sweet, two consenting lovers, one wary and one—

"Under the illusion that he really could be anything but a monster." His Instinct sneered.

Lincoln had slept afterwards and she'd come, settling in stronger than before, using his complacency to invade the deeper portions of his psyche that had been left open for Kennedy. Lincoln had woken up with blood on his body, a broken boy by his side, too hurt to move, to make noise, nearly dead in his arms.

In the hallway, Lincoln gagged. "That wouldn't happen again!"

The female laughed. "Really? Are you sure? Would you like to take that chance?"

Lincoln pressed his palms to his eyes. "You can't get back in. You can't! I'm in control!"

His Instinct hovered over him. "Then fuck her and find out, if you're so sure." She looked back at Kennedy. "Please Lincoln, do it. Get her trust so I can rip it away again. Let me have control and I'll show her what sex *should* be like."

"No!" Lincoln snarled and swiped at the phantom. His claws made contact with Kennedy's flesh.

The female laughed. "You hurt her even as you defend her!"

Lincoln stared at the blood on his hands and the claw marks across Kennedy's chest. "I didn't mean to!"

Kennedy ignored the wounds and tackled him. "Tell her I say *leave!* You are mine now!"

Lincoln's Instinct hissed. "Strike her!"

"No, I will not!"

Kennedy snarled. "Mine, mine, mine!" She bit his neck. "I mark, I claim! Mine! Lincoln is mine now! Go away, bitch! I in charge here!"

Lincoln's Instinct stopped addressing him and screeched at Kennedy. "You dare! I will rip you to pieces! I will bathe in your blood, you useless, weak, child! I will rape you until you have no memory of any good thing he has ever done for you! You will know nothing but pain and misery! I will throw you to the dregs of Cagetown and watch as they—"

"You're the one that deserves pain and misery!" Lincoln throttled his Instinct. "You're the one that's no good, that's weak!"

"I made you strong!"

Lincoln raged at his invisible counterpart. "You are a symptom of how broken I am! You

are a bleeding wound that will not heal, a gangrene limb, a rotten break that lets the poison into the blood! *You are not me anymore!* I am not my wounds. I am a mother and a father, I am a person whole and good, I am a Hunter, and Kennedy will be my mate!" He slammed his Instinct's head on the floor. "I *love* her, and you will *never* touch her that way again!"

Kennedy watched on in shock as both sides of the conversation spewed out of Lincoln's mouth.

Lincoln slammed his Instinct into the floor a second time and the image faded from his sight. He unclenched his hands and fell back against the wall. Sweat poured down his face. His limbs moved in jerks and twitches.

Kennedy crawled into Lincoln's lap. She took his face in her hands and licked the sweat from his brow. She could smell his adrenaline and anger, his fear and arousal. Kennedy groomed his hair, her heart beating as fast as his. She wrapped her legs around his midsection, seeking to give him comfort in her nearness.

Lincoln stared through her. "I'm sorry I could not do that sooner."

Kennedy rested her forehead against his. "I love you too."

Lincoln hugged her. "I don't know—" Kennedy's tail smacked him in the mouth. Lincoln grabbed it. "I don't know why you would love me, let alone tolerate me, after what we've gone through."

Kennedy shrugged. "I've been in love with the good one from the start."

"You have not." He made a face.

"No, I have."

"Really? Since you were five? I find that hard to believe."

Kennedy smiled. "I knew." She tapped her forehead. "I smart like that."

"Uh-huh."

Her eyes narrowed. "You not think I smart?"

Lincoln yawned, tired as his adrenaline faded. "You're a brilliant genius."

Kennedy glared at him. "You make fun! But I am smart, and strong, and not weak, and strong, and—"

"You said strong twice."

"I am double strong!" Kennedy pouted.

Lincoln smiled and the weight he carried in his chest evaporated. He laughed at her expression. "Have I ever told you how adorable you are when you pout?"

"I not pout *ever!*"

"No, you're *double* strong!"

Kennedy thumped him on the chest with her fists. "You tease me!"

"Are those hits supposed to hurt?" He grabbed her wrists. "I thought you are double strong?"

She snapped her teeth at his face. "I will eat nose!"

Lincoln dodged her bites. "My nose?" He darted in and kissed her hair. He wrapped his fingers up in it. Kennedy went limp in his lap and purred. Lincoln held her close and stroked her head. "I suppose this isn't fair."

Kennedy's words were unintelligible as he groomed her. She wormed her way up his body and found his lips, kissing him. The pair smiled. Lincoln broke the kiss and nuzzled her neck. "You might highlight your strength, your genius, but what has always impressed me is your resolve to be happy and to see the best in others. You have carried us for a long way by yourself."

Kennedy blushed and kept her eyes averted. “No.”

Lincoln played with her tail. “And your capability for forgiveness. I do not understand how you could be this way.”

Kennedy squirmed under the compliments. “Short term memory only. I forget what for dinner already.”

“You also lie like no one else I know.” Lincoln leaned back and snuggled with her in his lap. “May we stay here like this until he wakes, or have you already forgotten what you like about me?”

Kennedy nipped his chest and rested her head on his shoulder. “Nothing to like about you at all.”

“Right, no reason to even think about being mates.”

“I not say *that*.” Kennedy glowered.

Lincoln smiled into her hair. He looked past her to Reloy’s bedroom. “If he even smells like he wants to touch you like that again, I want you to kill him.”

Kennedy purred and closed her eyes. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Cause I say so.”

“But Kennedy.” Lincoln swallowed. “I can’t protect you from him.”

“I be fine.”

“Your optimism is beyond stupid, it borders on frightening.”

Emmalethe flipped across a series of metal handholds, moving silently and invisibly towards her hiding spot amidst the service corridors and vents. She smelled oil, metal, and sweat, male sweat. She followed her nose and found Evgeniy organizing crates of weapons. Emmalethe stopped to view him; he had his uniform rolled down to his waist. She grinned and tensed, readying to leap on his back.

Evgeniy looked up. “Jumping on an enemy without seeing what they’re carrying.” He held up a handheld device. “Is unwise.”

Emmalethe frowned and changed color to become visible. “How did you know I am here?”

“Rigged all the entrances and exits while you were out. You might be invisible, but you can’t ghost through doors.” He kissed her. “Any luck?”

“I find Navigator and pilot *easy*.”

“Did you see both of them or just the pilot?”

“I saw both, and went back to their room. Only briefly for Navigator, she is kept locked away most often except for Rexos visit. No way into room when door is closed, but can get to pilot fine; she is tired, clumsy, stressed. To overtake, simple like Nee.”

“Uh-huh.” Evgeniy held his arm out and plucked her from the ceiling. “I have been busy collecting the weapons I’ll need.”

“Why do you need all these?” She sat on his arm and lifted up a clunky gun. “Not like others.”

“Blackout weapons, I spent hours looking for them. They shoot even when energy is off.” He grinned. “Not standard issue, no one carries them; I had to dig through discarded supplies.”

“All for you?”

“You may have one or two.”

“No.” Emmalethe eyed her claws. “I have fine ability.”

Evgeniy touched her hand. “What happened to your talon?”

“I gave claw to Kennedy.”

“Kennedy?”

She cocked her head. “I find them. They in funny in charge man quarters.”

Evgeniy started. “*What?*”

“In secret as *slave*.” Emmalethe nodded at her choice of words. “The boy tried to do sex with Kennedy, so I stab him in back and knocked him out.”

Evgeniy frowned. “Won’t that raise suspicion for them?”

“I discreet, poison heals wound and leaves system in few hours. It be fine.”

“What poison?” He looked her over. “I didn’t know you had any with you.”

“I am poison.” Emmalethe licked his cheek. “For arrows and blades. Makes sleepy.” She went limp in his arms. “Use on Sodas not under control.”

“Sodas are huge, one man is not.”

Emmalethe rolled her eyes and wrapped her arms and legs around him. “Then he will sleep for more than couple of hours, who cares.”

Evgeniy carried her to their makeshift quarters. “You do not plan ahead.”

“Cannot plan for everything.” She grabbed a floating piece of fruit and ate it. “I would not have done if not needed, Evgeniy. You trust my brain too, since I trust yours.”

“I know.” He set her down in their bed. “But why couldn’t Lincoln intervene?”

“He is under control by funny man, Kennedy was drugged.”

Evgeniy nodded. “Lincoln is not a Resister, but he didn’t attack you?”

“Not under orders to I guess or he did not see me do act. He could not save Kennedy or kill man either, but did not attack me.”

“That could be problematic.” Evgeniy stared over Emmalethe’s shoulder. He churned through scenarios in his head. “Are they kept inside or—”

Emmalethe cut him off with a kiss. She pinned his hands to the bed. “We talk about this later. We have time now. I finished task, you finished task. Get naked.”

“Emmalethe, no.”

“Yes.” She pulled at his pants.

“Sex drops alertness.”

“So does sleep.”

“One is necessary.”

“Yes, sex, sleep is not needed.”

Evgeniy looked her over. “Emmalethe, no sex on missions.”

She snorted. “Evgeniy, who said you in charge?”

He sighed. “You have a point.”

Emmalethe grinned and ran her hands across his bare chest. “I’m in charge.”

Evgeniy reached under the bunk. “It’s too bad though that I went through all the trouble to get these.” He held up a bag of sealed candied fruits. “I guess I’ll toss them.”

Emmalethe eyed the fruit and licked her lips. “No, I want. I’ll eat after. Give to me.”

He shook his head. “I’m sure they will spoil if not eaten right now.”

Emmalethe looked from the fruit to his face and back. She whined and bounced on his stomach. “Not fair! I get sleepy after eating all of it!”

He shrugged. “You don’t have to eat all of it at once.”

Emmalethe snorted. “What point of having all if not eating all? Have to eat all, Nee.”

“You could share.”

She gaped. “Share candy fruit? No, you got it for me. It is all mine.”

“Then I guess you have a decision to make. Sex or fruit.” He dangled the bag. “What’s it going to be?”

Emmalethe snatched the fruit from him. “Sexy time later, fruit time now.” She ripped open the bag and grabbed a handful of sugarcoated fruit. She stuffed her face and wiggled in happiness.

Evgeniy leaned back and watched her. He smiled and poked her thighs. “You know I want to be with you.”

Emmalethe nodded and swallowed. “Of course you do.” She licked her fingers and went for more. “You not stupid. I am perfect mate.”

Evgeniy grinned and sat up. He opened his mouth. “I want one.”

Emmalethe threw the smallest piece she could find into his mouth. “There, be satisfied.”

Evgeniy chewed and grinned. “You’re so kind.”

“I know.” Emmalethe licked the sides of the bag. She tore it open to get at the scraps at the bottom. “Where did you get these? I want more.”

“Not telling.”

Emmalethe punched him in the chest. “You tell me now.”

Evgeniy wheezed and rubbed his sternum. “Only bag left.” Besides the other stash he had hidden in scent proof bags.

Emmalethe eyed him. “I punish if I find out you lie to me.”

Evgeniy grinned. “I hope so.”

“Not *good* punish.”

Evgeniy wrapped his arms around her and pulled her down on top of him. “I know.”

Emmalethe yawned. “I serious, you’ll be in big trouble.” She closed her eyes. “Big trouble.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Evgeniy rested his hands on her back. “I know.”

Emmalethe relaxed. “Break fingers, tie up.”

“I’m terrified.” Evgeniy smiled and watched her slip into a food slumber. He ran his hands up and down her back. His smile changed to a look of desire. Evgeniy wanted her just as much as she wanted him. More so, he’d gone without sex for weeks, but she’d never gotten there. He felt her skin beneath his hands, soft and warm. If this were anywhere else, a situation where lives weren’t riding on what he did next, he’d have turned this place into a sex den, but as it was, there were things he had to do.

Evgeniy rolled to his side and set Emmalethe in the bunk. He tucked a blanket around her shoulders and kissed her forehead. He crossed the room to his crates of weapons. Evgeniy picked up the one he had out when she arrived. He disassembled the weapon, examined its parts, and practiced reassembling. He did it until he could go through the process with his eyes closed. When he was able to do that, he turned to the next weapon, beginning the process anew.

From the bunk, Emmalethe watched him with a smile on her face. Her man was a dedicated warrior. She admired his resolve and willpower.

Emmalethe licked her lips as her nose picked up the scents of the fruit he had hidden away. She grinned. She loved adding another thing to her long list of reasons to tie him up and strip him down. Once done with this place, his body was hers.

Oro hummed and washed Lloyd’s hair in their shared bunk. He ignored the rapid-fire thoughts Danny sent his way, choosing to enjoy his time without the guilt trip and worry that Danny was doing for the both of them. Oro grabbed a towel and rubbed Lloyd’s head. “Almost

done.”

Lloyd sat in-between Oro’s legs, his butt on the floor of their prison. He had his eyes closed. “Why did you do the scalp thing?”

“The massage? Because it’s nice. Our hair salons all do them, part of the experience, Lloyds. It’s all about the experience. Isn’t that right, sir?”

Danny yawned. “Yes, Oro.”

Oro grinned. Despite what he might be thinking, Danny was on the team when it came to verbal answers. Oro gave him a mental high-five. He tossed the towel and sat back on the bed, his arms resting on the metal bars above him. “All done.”

Lloyd ran his hands through his hair. He scooted up the side of the bunk and back on the mattress, so that his shoulders rested on Oro’s stomach and his legs trailed off the edge of the bed. He looked up at Oro. “Thank you, that was nice of you.”

“You’re welcome.” Oro glanced down at Lloyd, wishing for just a bit more. He sighed.

Lloyd frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Hmm? Nothing. Just thinking.” He left his hand on his thigh near Lloyd’s hand.

Lloyd climbed into the bunk all the way, grabbed a pillow, and put it on Oro’s lap. He rested on his back. Lloyd folded his arms over his chest and kicked his legs down the mattress. He looked up at Oro. “You’re bored.”

“Aren’t you? We’ve been stuck in this box...” Oro frowned. “I’ve lost count of the days.”

“But we’ve gotten to know each other better.” Lloyd peeked up at him.

Oro smiled down at him. “And that is the only reason this place is tolerable, Lloyd.”

Lloyd blushed. “That’s nice of you to say.”

“It’s the truth.”

Will you shut the fuck up already? This shit makes me want to puke.

Oro shot a glare at Danny. *Some of us are young, virile twentyish kids that still can get it up and want sex. So fuck off, Dad.*

He doesn’t want to have sex, Oro. Danny ground his teeth together. He just wants a friend.

Oro looked back to Lloyd. He put his fingertips on Lloyd’s temples and pushed his head from side to side gently. “I’m surprised you’re not bouncing off the walls. I would have been at your age.”

Lloyd held on to Oro’s hands and grinned. “I’ve always been calm.”

“Right.” Oro ruffled Lloyd’s hair and pulled his hand back. He called his new tactic touching in small doses. It seemed to be working so far.

Lloyd flipped over on the pillow and rested his chin on his folded arms. “I bet it was fun growing up with others.”

“It had its good points.” Oro winced and touched his temples. “Fuck!”

Danny jumped to his feet. “What?”

Lloyd blurred into motion. He sat up and cupped Oro’s cheeks. “Are you okay, Oro?”

“Get in your seats, something *bad* is coming.” Oro rubbed his temples. “I’m not kidding!”

Danny sat back down. He hissed. “What is it?”

“I think we’re going to be interrogated.”

Danny looked between Lloyd and Oro. “Can you send them away?”

“I don’t know.” The pain increased. Oro gagged. “I don’t think so.”

The door slid open. The Warden stepped inside followed by two men; one dark blue and the other could pass for an Earthling. The Warden smiled at Oro’s discomfort. “I see one of you is experiencing our little show already.” He took a seat on the end of Danny’s bunk. “No more

stalling.”

Danny reached out to grab the man. He dropped his hand, terrified. Danny clutched his heart and gasped. “I...I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe!”

“Yes, you can!” Oro glared at the Feeler and Jungay. “Get out of his head!”

Danny sagged as the intensity faded. He switched to English and spoke quickly, “Oro, we are military targets. This is a military interrogation.”

“I *know*.”

Danny looked over at him. “Lloyd is a civilian, Oro.”

Oro’s heart skipped a beat. “What is that supposed to mean!”

“He doesn’t have any secrets to give away if they get in his head.”

“Dad!”

“Oro, you *know* what your orders would be if we were back home, *follow* them.” Danny turned to the Warden and switched to Ampyr. “Now what?”

“Now?” The Warden smiled. “I sit back and watch. We do not need to ask questions, not when we can *dig*.” He snapped his fingers.

Danny crumpled over in terror.

Lloyd covered his eyes, gasping.

Pressure built against Oro’s skull. He fought against it. He focused on the Jungay, imagining a wall. His brown eyes locked with the blue eyes of the Jungay. Oro clenched his jaw. The Jungay leaned towards him.

The Feeler waved his hand at Danny.

Danny scratched at his scalp, drawing blood.

The Jungay smiled and Lloyd bucked in pain.

Danny screamed. “Ca—can’t let in!”

Oro went rigid. He turned all of his attention to Danny and threw a torrent of information into his head. He focused on the first thing he could remember—cartoons. Oro picked the bizarre and the off-world.

Danny slumped in his bed, forced to watch *Smurfs* and *He-Man* simultaneously. He twitched and the Jungay frowned, not understanding what he gleaned.

Oro closed his eyes and kept his focus, linking the pair together with Saturday morning cartoons. The pain in his head spiked behind his eyes as the Jungay turned his focus back to him. Oro squinted; he pinched the bridge of his nose. He could get through it. He’d had worse migraines.

Tell me your secrets and you won’t hurt anymore.

Oro fought nausea as the Jungay spoke directly into his mind. He yelled back, *I care, you care. We all love the Care Bears.*

This only prolongs your pain.

My bologna has a first name... Oro gasped and scratched at his neck, seeing insects. He ground his teeth. *I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream!*

“I am *not* like that!” Lloyd shouted. “I’m not!”

Oro couldn’t spare Lloyd a glance. He stared at Danny, forcing himself to believe and know that Danny was all that mattered here. His brain and Oro’s were the ones he had to protect. Their planet was at stake, their friends and families. Lloyd simply didn’t know enough to be dangerous to anyone.

Lloyd slammed his head into the wall. “Get out! Get out! Stop it!” He smashed his eye socket against the metal bars on their bunk.

Oro focused on breathing evenly, but his breaths turned ragged as Lloyd's cries of pain reached his ears.

Danny opened one eye, freed from the intensity of their attack. *They won't kill him. Remember that, Oro. Remember his reason for being here.*

Oro nodded. He hadn't forgotten. *I know.*

Lloyd slammed his head into the wall, making Oro flinch as blood hit him in the face. Oro reached out and grabbed Lloyd's hand, seeking to give him some kind of comfort.

Lloyd held Oro's hand in a death grip. He screamed in agony. He threw Oro's arm away and doubled over. "Fucking faggot!"

Oro jerked upright.

Danny dug his fingers into his mattress. *He doesn't even know the word, Oro. They're using him against you. Ignore it, Oro! It's not Lloyd!*

Oro couldn't turn away. He forced images and cartoons into Danny's head, but he was free to watch Lloyd.

"You!" Lloyd snarled at Oro. "Disgusting queer bitch! You're vile, dirty, waste of flesh and bone! No one loves you! Not even your mother loves you now!"

Oro swallowed, it was off the mark. His mother had died a long time ago. Oro took a deep breath. He could get through this. It was just random stuff. They were reaching for things to spew from Lloyd's mouth, hoping they'd hit something eventually.

Lloyd scratched at his face, his emotions warring against what he was forced to say. He threw out his hand. "Fucking pervert! Using me, I see what you've been doing and it won't work. I'm on to you!"

The Feeler joined the Jungay, and Lloyd's eyes burned with rage as his emotions synced up with his words. "You make me sick!" Lloyd heaved with anger. "Yes, that's right, *sick*. You're sick and you make everyone else sick too." He crawled across the bunk and got in Oro's face. He wiped the sweat from Oro's brow. "Everything you give off is pollution." He slapped Oro across the face. "You reek of it."

Oro grabbed on to the mattress and stiffened.

"I should kill you! I hate you! You should suffer for what you've done to me, to others! No wonder those men beat on you! You're *disgusting*, and you got what you deserved!"

Oro flinched. He backed up against the metal bunk and looked at the floor, focusing on the ground, anything but Lloyd.

The Jungay and Feeler grinned as a crack formed in Oro's mind.

Lloyd smiled and laughed. He grabbed Oro's braid and pulled him close. His voice changed and got a Texas twang. "*You're surprised? Looking like a girl, what did you expect we'd want with you?*"

Oro sucked in his lower lip and trembled. He shook his head.

Lloyd whispered in his ear, "*See, we've seen you looking at Charlie and Mica; do you have a thing for the blondes? Mickey here's a blonde, don't you want him too? Oh, don't pull away, that's not very nice. We're just trying to be nice to you, Oro. Isn't that what you want from a few handsome guys like us?*"

Oro curled his fingers into his palm and dug his nails into his skin. Tears rolled off his cheeks.

Lloyd sneered. "*Oh, are you going to cry? See, just like a girl. What did I tell you guys, not even any fight in him. Danny raised him weak. He let you be this way, Oro. This is your father's fault too.*" He pulled on Oro's braid. "*I bet Oro wants to get treated like a girl too,*

don't you? Huh? Don't you want a real man to show you a good time?"

Oro sucked in air, his pupil's pinpoints.

Lloyd hissed. *"Just sit tight, little girl. We'll get you fixed up real nice."*

Danny sat up in his bunk.

Lloyd laughed. *"Aww, guys he's shaking. Is it your first time? We'll be sweet then. Now don't be that way, no, stop struggling...oh, come on, Oro. Be quiet or we won't be nice anymore. Let's just get you out of these—"*

Danny smashed his fist into Lloyd's face.

Lloyd's head rocked back from the blow, toppling him over. Oro exhaled into a gasp, temporarily freed.

The Warden leapt onto Danny's back. Danny flipped him into the wall and drove his fist into his chin. The Warden reeled and tripped.

Danny ripped the sink out of the wall and hurled it into the Jungay's chest, throwing him back to the door. Danny snarled. *"Leave my boy alone!"*

The Warden pointed at the Feeler. *"Have him—"*

Oro tackled the Feeler and clocked him across the temples. Danny hauled Oro back and put himself between the two groups. His hands curled into claws. *"Get out, or I will rip off your arms and fuck you with them!"*

"I—" The Warden looked into Danny's eyes. He scrambled backwards. *"Out! Out! Get out!"* The trio ran for the doorway. The door shut behind them and locked itself.

Danny clutched his chest and held on to his bed as his world spun before his eyes. He sank to the floor. Blood dripped from his nose. He stared at his bloody hands in shock.

Oro sat at his side and touched Danny's cheek, pushing his head up. Oro gave him a once over. *"Your irises are purple."*

"Oh." Danny wiped blood from his upper lip.

"Like Darq's." Oro paled.

"Yeah." Danny blinked and the color faded away. *"I got that part."*

"Just checking." Oro waved his hand in front of Danny's face. *"How many fingers am I holding up?"*

Danny managed a smile. *"You're flipping me off, you immature shit."*

Oro patted Danny on the shoulder and leaned on him. He pressed his fingers to his eyes. *"They didn't get anything."*

Danny tamped down on his temper. *"How do you know?"*

"I know...I just do. They got He-Man and Care Bears and the story of my childhood, but no locations."

"Good."

Oro tucked his knees to his chest. *"You're adapting to Rexos, that's rad."*

Danny dropped his head to his arms. *"I guess. I didn't do that on purpose."*

"You got pissed off." Oro smiled.

"I don't even remember leaving my bunk, but I do remember hitting Lloyd." Oro and Danny looked across the room. Lloyd faced the wall and did not react at the mention of his name.

"Shit." Oro crawled up onto his bunk. *"Lloyd."*

Danny reached for him. *"He still could be—"*

"No." Oro sat down beside Lloyd. He pulled a blanket up over both of them and wrapped his arms around Lloyd. *"Come here. Come on, you're okay, everything's fine."*

Lloyd turned in his embrace and hugged him tight. "I'm so sorry!"

Oro sighed into Lloyd's hair. "You didn't have control. It's okay."

"It's not okay! I didn't mean it!" Lloyd grabbed on to Oro's shirt. "You have to know that I didn't mean it!"

"I know you didn't mean it, Lloyd. I'm not mad at you." Oro squeezed him. "I'm sorry I couldn't keep them out of your head. I'm not very good at this yet."

"I should have been able to stay in control." Tears rolled down his cheeks. "I saw what happened to you...they made me see and feel such—" Lloyd's voice cracked. "I'm...I've never...I never want to feel that way about anyone!"

"You won't. You're a sweetheart." Oro hurt from his fingertips to his toes. He clenched his teeth to keep it from showing. "You'll be okay I promise."

Danny's voice carried over. "I didn't break anything did I?"

Oro tilted Lloyd's face up; he was swollen and had a few cuts. He pulled the blanket down and looked back at Danny. "I can't tell. He hit himself before you hit him." Oro wiped the blood from Lloyd's cheeks and forehead. "Lloyd, open your eyes. You might have a concussion."

Lloyd opened his eyes, but stared at Oro's neck, unable to meet his gaze. He touched his upper lip. "I'm fine, just bruised."

Oro felt along Lloyd's jaw. "Are you sure? He walloped you *hard*."

Lloyd pushed Oro's hands away. "I'm fine! Stop being nice to me!" He scooted into the corner. "After what I said, just, I can't stand myself right now! Leave me alone!"

Oro looked at Danny. *I don't know what to do.*

Danny shrugged off his shock from the change. He leaned over, put his hand on Lloyd's leg, and shook it gently. "Your crying isn't making anyone feel better, especially you. Now, the only one feeling shitty about this should be me." He held his hand up to stop Oro's protest. "I prioritized who got shielded; I know the most, so I got Oro's attention. I'm real sorry that you had to go through that, but no one's holding it against you."

Lloyd sniffled. "I am."

"Well what for?" Danny gave him another gentle shake.

"I said those things." Lloyd gulped down air. "I made Oro think about it. I made him *cry!*"

Oro snorted. "Lloyd, welcome to the club of *everyone*."

Danny ignored him. "Did you want to do that, Lloyd?"

"No!" Lloyd looked to Oro. "I didn't I swear, but I couldn't stop myself!"

Danny nodded slowly. "And Oro can tell that, can't you, Oro?"

Oro refused to invade Lloyd's head, but nodded anyways. "I can tell."

Lloyd went limp on the mattress. "But I did it anyways. I called you all those terrible things."

Oro took his hand. "Lloyd, do you even know what a faggot is?"

"No." He sniffled.

"A queer, a bitch?"

"No."

Oro squeezed his hand. "So basically you were saying *blah, blah, blah, Oro, blah*." He leaned back on the metal bars of their bunk. "I'm over it already." He forced a smile. "Look at me, I'm fine."

Lloyd wiped his eyes and sat up. "Liar."

Danny sat back on his bed. "Oro is resilient."

“Oh.” Lloyd looked between the two of them and rubbed at his reddened cheeks.

Oro motioned him over. “Your face is all messed up, get over here.”

Lloyd scooted closer and sat at Oro’s feet. He picked at his fingernails. Oro reached to the sink, frowned, and switched his gaze to Danny. “Thanks a lot.”

Danny saw the hole in the wall next to the bunk. “Did *I* do that?”

“Yeah, Incredible Hulk, *you did.*”

Danny stared at his hands. “Jesus.”

“Just don’t Darq out on us.” Oro fiddled with the broken pipes and a jet of cold water shot into his face. He stuffed a towel in the pipe and carried water to Lloyd. “Use this.”

Lloyd let the water hit him in the face; he shook his head, sending water droplets flying. He rinsed his hair of blood.

Oro sat down, threw his arm around Lloyd, and pulled him into his lap. “If you wanted another head massage so much, you didn’t need to beat yourself up about it, you could have just asked.”

Lloyd smiled briefly and lost it just as quickly.

Oro ran his nails through Lloyd’s hair. He propped Lloyd up between his knees. “Come on, Lloyd. Wash your face.”

Lloyd took a towel and smudged the blood around. He closed his eyes. “I can’t get it out of my head. Those...those men, what they did to you—evil people—”

“They’re dead. They’ve been dead for *years.*” Danny cracked his knuckles. “Plenty dead, not just kind of dead...*really* dead. Drug through the desert from the back of my truck, beaten, and buried kind of dead.”

Lloyd perked up and splashed his face with water. “Buried alive?”

Danny shrugged. “They couldn’t have been alive for long.”

Oro sighed. “As much as I *love* to think about my rapists’ deaths, can we talk about, oh, *anything* else? Like...” He smiled at Danny. “Danny’s temper!”

“I don’t have a temper!” Danny flushed.

“Do too!” Oro forced a smile. “Makes a guy wonder how many of your tattoo tallies are due to a bit of Darqing out.”

“Darqing out? Darq is not a verb.” Danny rubbed his eyes.

“Is now.” Oro threw a fake punch. “You totally just Darqed out on those guys, you pulled a Darq, you gave Lloyd a Darq punch.”

Danny breathed out his nose slowly. “Oro, *shut up.*”

“Uh-oh, you going to get angry?” Oro wrapped his arms around Lloyd and hugged him from behind. “Watch out, Lloyds! Danny’s getting pissy!”

Lloyd smiled and held on to Oro’s forearms. “I’m scared, Oro.”

Oro spoke close to his ear, “Me too. I’m terrified!”

“Stop calling me Danny, Oro.” Danny sulked. “And fuck you both.”

“With our arms that you’re going to rip off?” Oro snorted.

“What?” Danny looked up.

Oro glanced towards the door. “You totally told those guys that you were going to fuck them with their own arms.”

Danny frowned. “I didn’t say that.”

“You did say something bad.” Lloyd wiped his nose. “I heard you.”

“A senile Rexos Texan.” Oro shivered. “God save us all.”

Lloyd laughed and glanced up at Oro. Oro made a face. Lloyd blushed and dropped his

gaze, but leaned back on Oro's chest. Oro rested his head on the metal and rocked Lloyd back and forth. "Don't worry, with your super fast reflexes and my brains we'll be able to keep the beast at bay. Deal?"

"Deal." Lloyd smiled and closed his eyes.

Oro rested his cheek on Lloyd's head. He inhaled, his nose and lips inches from Lloyd's ear. He pressed his fingers into Lloyd's ribs, desiring to grab him, to seek comfort in the flesh. Oro breathed deep, keeping the hug just a hug. He contented himself with Lloyd's smile, knowing it was all he could get and he needed *something*. He couldn't deny that this was more than a crush. This wasn't about getting laid anymore.

Danny sighed and shook his head at the pair. *You're going to get hurt by this, Oro.*

Oro looked up and met Danny's gaze. *Yeah, story of my life.*

Danny frowned. *Oro...*

I don't think I have a choice. He looked down at Lloyd. *Maybe I did before, but not now.*

Danny smiled sadly. *When you fall, you fall hard.*

Dad. Oro met his gaze. *What's the point of falling softly?*

Mica stood atop his X-Wing and gestured to Ipso. "I'm sorry, but Sammy and I really need to go."

"No, Mica, *you don't.*" Ipso scowled. "I need help here!"

"We have friends we have to rescue. We have to get through these movies and get out. That was the deal, right? We stay as long as these things take, and then you let us go."

She looked away. *Yeah.*

Mica nodded. "Then that's what I have to do. It's my responsibility. I can't turn my back on my friends, Ipso."

"Please!" She hopped in place.

"They could *die*, Ipso!"

"You don't know that." Marx appeared next to Ipso.

"And..." Ipso looked up at Marx briefly. "What Ravil can do...this is an *engine!* Her running around wielding it is dangerous!"

"Ravil might have a temper—"

Sammy snorted. "*Might* have, Mica?"

"Didn't ask for your opinion." Mica glared at Sammy. "And it doesn't matter. She'd never throw a black hole at someone. She's a good person!"

"You don't *actually* know that!" Ipso rubbed her temples. "She *should* be a good person, but something isn't right! We need to help her!"

"You keep saying that, but I don't know what *I* can do for you."

Ipso pointed to the swamp. "*Stay* with me *please*. Let's try it again."

Mica shook his head. "No, I see no wisdom in that course of action."

Marx sat down on a log. "You don't have to come back right now, Mica. Little rat and I have this taken care of."

Mica glared at Marx. "Right, I'm sure you do. Sorry if that doesn't make me feel any better about things."

Ipso pointed at Marx. "Listen to him!"

Mica looked to Sammy. "Sammy?"

"I hear my opinion being requested." Her robot unit lit up and beeped. "I'm ready to party in Cloud City, yeah baby!" She revved the X-Wing's engines. "Let's blast out!"

Mica bowed to Ipsos. "I truly mean you no offense in this, and I can tell that you have good intentions, but we have friends that are in *actual* danger, while this thing with Ravil could be nothing at all."

Ipsos threw down her clipboard. "Something has happened to her! Can't you see that? Why can't your brain understand what is simply and clearly laid out before you! It's obvious something is off with her!"

Mica took a step towards her. "What do you expect? She's not living in a tower! She's part of a war. As far as I can tell, she's had a *terrible* childhood, we all know about it. Maybe there's something she doesn't want to remember. Have you thought about that? Have you considered that what is hidden is better left that way?"

"And what could that be then, that involves her *engine*?" Ipsos's voice went up an octave.

Mica eyed her. "Do you really know that they're connected or are you piecing things together to fit the way you want things to work?"

"Her engine is *reacting*!" Ipsos stomped her foot. "Her block is here!"

"So is she." Mica shook his head. "I think you should stop your prying, Ipsos. Ravil was fine before."

"She's a lethal time bomb!"

"Then better that we get her away from the black hole, right? Better that we leave this place and never come back to it."

Ipsos hopped up and down. "That is running away from a problem!"

"And you're creating one! Perhaps creating one to keep us here around you."

Ipsos stopped and gaped. "You imply *foul* things about my intentions? How *dare* you!" Light bloomed around her hands. "Insolent, slow-minded little man!"

"No Ipsos, but." Mica jumped off the X wing and crouched down before her, unafraid of the light. "You can come with us, Ipsos, you *should* come with us. You don't have to be alone anymore."

"I need to go *home*! She knows where it is! She has to know!" Tears filled her eyes. "Ravilaea can lead us home!"

Mica looked to Marx in desperation. "Don't we have the coordinates of their home in the ship's computer?"

Marx shook his head. "Information such as that is classified."

"But, but we got clearance at the space station, right?"

Sammy beeped. "Navi homeland is still classified. They're like resource number one, Mica. Any and all info on them about that stuff is locked down."

Mica took Ipsos's hand. "Look, *I promise* I'll help you find your home."

Ipsos looked at her feet. "Sure you will."

"I promise!"

"And what does the promise of some *Adapter* mean to a Langone!" Ipsos stalked towards the swamp. "It means *nothing*! I can do this myself!"

"Ipsos! Ipsos, you'll get hurt!" Mica ran after her. She disappeared into a flame that melded into the mist. Mica kicked at a bush. "Fuck! Ipsos, come back! Come on!"

Sammy revved the engines. "Mica, the godly tiny-tot can take care of herself."

Mica put his helmet on and leapt back onto the X-Wing. He got in his seat. "I still feel like a dick. Sammy, *fire up the converters*."

"That's because you are. Cloud City Ho!"

Marx smiled as the X-Wing left the ground. He looked towards the swamp and back

towards the sky. He clasped his hands together. "Most interesting."

Ravil scuffed her feet on white tile and toyed with the ends of her thin robe. She was alone and pacing before the windows of her suite in Cloud City. She stopped and stared into the blue sky past the glass. Thoughts of the summer and the sun filled her mind. She smiled and imagined the heat, the way it would smell, the sounds.

Children's laughter filled the air. "Who are you? Where did you come from? Do you want to play with us?"

Ravil whirled around. "Who's there?"

"It's just me." Rake stepped through the doorway. He flicked his hands at his new costume. "Look at my pimp new outfit."

Ravil stared. "Is that all you can think about?"

"No." Rake jumped over low-lying couches and wrapped her in his arms. "I'm thinking about you and me, and the fact that we're alone." He rubbed her back with his hands. "Is that okay?"

She rested against him. "Yes."

Rake took in her expression. "You're worried."

She nodded. "It's not getting better, Rake."

His smile faded. "The sounds again?"

"The sounds...the *voices*." Ravil held on to him. "I think it's getting worse."

"We're not falling through broken pieces of planet anymore. That seems better, right?" He kissed her forehead. "That's an improvement."

"Yes..." Ravil leaned her chin on his chest and looked up at him. "There is that I suppose."

He looped his hands in her braids and gave them a playful tug. "We'll be out of this soon enough and back to reality."

She made a face. "If this plan even works."

"At least you *know* the plan." Rake glared at the door out of the suite. "Why can't they just tell me what the plan is? I'm being treated like Darq." He bit back his temper and took a deep breath. "But I'm going to trust and have a bit of faith and not think about it."

"That is so unlike you."

"Turning over a new leaf." He darted in for a kiss.

Ravil kissed him back.

A child tugged on her hands. "Who are you?"

Ravil flinched and jumped out of Rake's arms. "Get away from me!"

Rake put his hands in the air over his head. "What did I do? I didn't grope you!"

"It's not you." Ravil sank down on their white couch and put her head in her hands.

"Fuck."

Rake sat down beside her. He took her hand in his. "Tell me what you're seeing now."

"I'm not *seeing anything*." Ravil blinked back tears. "I'm hearing kids, feeling their hands on my hands." She turned and shouted into his shirt, "This is driving me crazy, Rake!"

"Did they hurt you?" He hugged her. "What can I do? Tell me what I can do and I'll do it."

"I don't know." Ravil dug her fingernails into her palms. "I don't know anymore!"

Rake lifted her and put her in his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and rocked her. "Anyone touches you, and they're going to get their ass kicked." He glared at the air. "Serious ass kicking will commence."

Ravil held on to his shirt. “I just want it to stop, Rake. I can’t take this anymore. I’m feeling emotions that aren’t mine; I’m hearing people saying my name, talking to me. I can’t stand it!”

Rake kissed the crown of her head and spoke in to her hair, “We’ll figure it out together. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“What if it isn’t?” She pulled back and stared into his eyes, her gaze haunted. “What if I...”

He frowned. “What if you what?”

“*Did* something.” Ravil swallowed and stared at her hands. “I did something *terrible*.”

Rake tilted her chin up. “As if you could do anything worse than what I’ve done.”

She grabbed his shirt. “If I did...if I hurt someone...will you—”

“Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I feel sadness, so much fear from the cracks. There’s so much pain coming from what is hidden, Rake, so many people crying. What if it’s my fault? Maybe that’s why I can’t remember. Maybe I’m running from it.”

Rake rubbed his thumb across her tears. “Listen, Beb, no matter what you might have done I’ll stick with you. So you have nothing to fear, okay?” He waved his blaster in the air. “And if anyone thinks they can come for you and push you around or punish you, they’re going to be in for a little bit of a fight.” He held her gently until she stopped crying. “All right?”

Ravil wiped her tears. “Violence seems to be your solution to everything.”

“Because it’s perfect.” Rake smiled. “But seriously, Beb. I don’t think there’s a damn thing you could do that would make me run, hate you, or freak out. We’re Team R ‘n’ R, the two most awesome forces in the universe combined.”

Ravil smiled. “If you say so, Rake.”

Katarina stalked into a junk room. She was worried and pissed off. Darq was missing and now she’d appeared here...just like in the movie. She hefted a metal pipe over her shoulder and surveyed the area. A furnace blazed at one end of the dark room. Scrap metal passed by on a conveyor belt and glittered in the dim light as it fed into the furnace. Little pig men waddled around her, paying her no attention.

Her fear for Darq reawakened her anger and fear for Danny and Oro. Katarina snarled and slammed the metal pipe into the closest pig alien. She kicked another into an open furnace, and grabbed the third, smashing his face into the conveyor belt. The fourth gaped and ran, squealing.

Katarina tossed the body she held. She shouted, “Darq! Darq, *where* are you?”

She spotted a flash of gold on the conveyor belt and nearly fainted. Katarina grabbed at his body parts, stuffing them under her arm as tears sprung to her eyes. “Shit, fuck, goddamn it! Fuckers!”

Ravil straddled Rake and ran her fingers through his hair. He slipped his hand up the back of her outfit; he slid his other hand down to cup her bottom. Ravil’s deft fingers tugged at Rake’s shirt. He kissed her, drawing her attention away from his roaming hands. She smiled into the kiss.

Katarina stormed into their suite with metal in her arms. She fell to her knees. “Look what happened to him!”

Rake jumped up, lifting Ravil off the couch. “Huh?”

Ravil gaped at the golden pieces of Darq’s dismembered body. “Whoa.”

Rake leaned over to look. "I thought he didn't wander off?"

"He *didn't* and this still happened anyways!" Katarina picked up Darq's severed hand. "He's in *pieces!*"

Ravil hopped out of Rake's arms. "Can you repair him?"

"I...I think so, I guess...I don't know." She wiped at her eyes.

Rake fixed his mussed up clothes. "What does this mean for the rest of the plan then?"

Katarina shrugged. "I don't know." She pawed through Darq's body parts listlessly. "I have no idea how to do this."

Tasaneer hopped into their suite. "The sexy black man stand-in has arrived!" She took in the group's mood. "What happened to Darq?"

Rake pointed. "Despite the changes to the plot, he still got scrapped."

Tasaneer frowned. "That's not cool."

"No, you know what's *not cool*? Being frozen in carbonite!" Rake's cheeks flushed. "That's not cool!"

"Sounds downright freezing." Tasaneer ducked back and held up her hands. "Calm down!"

"Ca—calm *down*?" Rake sputtered. "*You* calm down!"

Tasaneer folded her arms. "I *am* calm."

Ravil grabbed Rake's wrist. "That happened to Darq out of a scene. We're not going to let you get frozen while we're around. There's a difference, Rake."

Tasaneer nodded. "She's right."

Rake glared at Tasaneer. "Sure."

Tasaneer gestured to Katarina. "I can work on him for you."

Katarina shook her head. "I want to do it, but thank you."

Tasaneer hooked her thumb towards the door. "Well, you can stay here or come. I really only need these two for their date with destiny."

Katarina waved at them. "I'm staying. It probably won't really matter anyways."

Ravil looped her arm with Rake's and followed Tasaneer out of the room. "Just please stay calm, Rake. I can't handle everyone having a freak out at once."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know, sorry."

Tasaneer walked backwards down the hallway. "Marx informs me that Ipso's been trying a little bit of *Total Recall* on you in the memory department."

"What?" Ravil looked up. "How does he know what she's doing? How did he tell you?"

"He's floating around without substance. He's been watching what she's doing, and since she was with Sammy and Mica, he heard what was up over there."

Ravil dropped her eyes. "Supposedly there's something I can't remember and it's wreaking havoc in my head."

Tasaneer nodded. "You don't think it's true?"

Ravil held on to Rake tighter. "I don't know anymore."

"Well Ipso seems to think it is and since she's built this place from your thoughts she's doing some hacking into the rest of your memories through *this* one. Marx wants to know if he should kill her."

Ravil gaped. "She is one of my people. You do *not* kill her!"

"Well, what if she's a spy hacker? Please tell me you considered that." Tasaneer slowed her pace. "Marx thinks she's fishing for information."

"She's confused! She's lost or something, but she's not my enemy!" Ravil grabbed Tasaneer. "Tell Marx not to touch her!"

“Understood.” Marx appeared by their sides and floated with them. “But I want you to know it is an option. I believe I can catch her unawares while she is working.”

“Thank you.” Ravil leaned on Rake. “But it’s not necessary.”

Rake looked over Ravil’s head to Marx. He mouthed, “Do it if she backstabs us.”

“Understood.” Marx nodded and faded out.

Tasaneé stopped in front of a door. “Righty right, give me your blaster, Rake.”

Rake gripped his gun. “No way! Vader’s in there!”

“Yeah, and you’ll lose it immediately if you keep it, so give it to me.”

Rake handed the gun over. “I thought we were fighting and getting out?”

“Not yet.” Tasaneé tucked Rake’s blaster into her belt. “We can’t yet.”

“Why not? What are we waiting for?”

“The right time, man, jeez.” Tasaneé shooed them towards the door. “Go get captured already.”

Rake cracked his knuckles. “I’m punching him out.”

Ravil grabbed his jacket. “Who?”

“Vader!” Rake adjusted his collar. “You just stay back here, Ravil. I’ll take care of this.”

Ravil grabbed his arm. “No way! You’re going to get hurt!”

“I’ll be fine.” Rake kissed her on the cheek and ran into the room. A crack punctuated the quiet. Rake came flying back out through the doorway. He slid across the white tile and hit into a flight of stairs with a thump. He held his bruised cheek. “I’m still fine.”

An invisible force grabbed Rake, lifted him up into the air, and threw him down the hall. Rake tumbled and hit his head on the floor. “Still fine! Is that all you’ve got?”

Vader stalked past Ravil and flicked his wrist, tossing Rake into the waiting arms of Storm Troopers.

Ravil leapt on Vader’s shoulders. She punched at his black helmet. “Stop it!”

Vader flipped her to the floor and held on to her wrist. “*We would be honored if you would join us.*”

Rake got free from the Storm Troopers and threw his shoe. He hit Vader in the head with it. “Let her go, mouth breather!”

Tasaneé jumped on Rake before anyone else could. “What happened to sticking to the plan?”

He struggled against her. “I can’t stick to what you haven’t told me!”

Mica frowned from the cockpit of his X-Wing as he soared through the darkness of space. “I feel bad.”

Sammy sighed. “Oh buck up, she’ll be fine.”

Mica looked over his shoulder at her. “It doesn’t matter if she will be fine, I still feel bad about leaving her alone.”

“I thought you said she wasn’t a kid, that she can take care of herself.”

“Still not the point.”

Sammy snorted. “You can’t be everyone’s knight in shining armor, and if you hadn’t noticed, she didn’t seem to think very highly of you or your opinions.”

“She’s upset.” Mica faced forward and gripped his controls.

“Mica, if you develop a crush on an eight-year-old, you’ve officially crossed the line.”

“I don’t have a crush on an eight-year-old!” Mica flushed. “I just want her to be okay!”

“Uh-huh.” Sammy beeped. “Is that what it’s like, being a virgin?”

Mica closed his eyes and sighed. "Shut up."

"No way!" Sammy laughed. "Still? Not even in college? You never got any pussy or dick at all?"

"I thought about joining the seminary for awhile. I was going to be a priest." Mica scowled as Sammy snorted. "Oh, get off my back! Sex isn't everything in life!"

"Speak for yourself. Does Rake know?"

Mica white knuckled the steering controls. "What do *you* think?"

Katarina took a break from assembling Darq. She looked up, noticing that the scene had shifted to a dark prison cell. She looked back down to Darq's parts and frowned. "Thought so."

She fiddled with his head. "Don't get it on backwards, Kat. Be better than the walking carpet." Katarina turned his chest piece around and thumped the metal.

Darq sputtered to life and saw her. "I didn't go off alone, Mom. I swear!"

Katarina hugged Darq's torso. "I know, honey. Are you in any pain?"

"Pain?" Darq looked around at his dismembered body. "No, it's a curious feeling, but no pain." He poked his foot. "I don't even feel that, how *interesting*."

Katarina managed to smile. "You're so strange."

Darq looked up. "May we do this when we get back?"

"Cut you in to pieces?" She dropped him. "Are you kidding? Absolutely not!"

"But I'd be careful."

"No!"

Rake eyed Vader and lunged, but he did not move. Storm Troopers had tied his limbs to a flat machine. He was in a tiny interrogation room, completely immobilized. Rake looked down and saw the torture device from the movie. He thrashed around. "Fuck this! You don't even ask me any questions in this scene! Ravil! Rat! Get me out of here!"

The machine glowed red and heat blasted his face. Rake's eyes widened. "Lame, lame! Fuck you guys!" He jerked. "You all suck! I hate you! *Fuck everyone!*"

The machine drew closer. Rake screwed his eyes shut. "Balls."

The lights faded and dimmed. Rake sighed with relief. "Oh, that's right."

The scene changed.

Katarina chewed on her lip. "How's that?"

"Now I can't see." Darq jabbed his eyeball. "They're still there?"

"Don't poke your own eye." Katarina moved his hands away from his face. She connected a wire. "Better?"

"Much better!" Darq smiled at her. "Thanks, Mom."

She made a face at her lack of progress. "I haven't even gotten your legs on yet."

"You'll get there." He patted her on the head. "Look my other arm works now!"

The door opened and Storm Troopers dumped Rake into the room and backed out.

Rake hit the floor limply. He groaned. "I feel terrible! For the record, this plan blows so far!"

Katarina knelt by his side. She helped him sit up. "You look awful."

"Thanks." Rake took a seat on a bench. "Is Ravil okay?"

A separate door opened and Ravil ran in. "You're...you got hurt?" She glared at the ceiling. "Rat!"

Rake took her hand. “I don’t remember it.” He waved his hand towards Darq. “I think it’s like dismember-me-boy. I’m supposed to be fucked up right now so I am fucked up, even if I don’t remember getting fucked up.”

Katarina scratched behind her ear. “Okay, if that’s the case we need to get you out of Han Solo *now*. No plan of theirs will work if the next scene goes on and you’re still frozen afterwards.”

Rake nodded. “Rat’s gotta go along with it. Darq’s our proof.”

“Gotta go along with what?” Tasanee stepped into the room. She threw her cape back. “This plan is amazing.”

“He’s *injured*, Tasanee.” Katarina helped Rake up. “Look at him!”

Ravil nodded. “We need to switch him to someone else *now*.”

“No way.” Tasanee held up her hands. “Not going to happen.”

Darq reached out to thin air. “Can someone set me upright? I can’t see.”

Katarina picked up Darq’s torso and addressed Tasanee, “If we can’t change things drastically across multiple scenes, then he’s going to end up frozen.”

“Just trust me.” Tasanee gestured to Rake. “He’s fine.”

Ravil shook her head. “You didn’t say *anything* about anyone getting hurt. You said we’d be able to switch things out last minute.”

“And we will! But this ain’t last minute, is it? Besides, we don’t have enough points for all these changes. We can only modify a few things in the plot, so chill out!”

“The points?” Rake rubbed his eyes. “That’s what they’re for?”

Tasanee nodded. “We can change stuff, and Marx is offering his for this so you can all thank him whenever he shows his face again.”

“Oh.” Katarina looked around. “Where is he? What is he doing exactly?”

Tasanee shrugged. “What do you think a Hunter would do if he could be invisible?”

Katarina made a face. “He’s watching us then.”

“Probably.” Tasanee grinned. “Well, I’m out. Rake, sorry about the treatment, but we’re still solid. Just relax, have fun with your role, go with the flow, and trust me.”

Sammy beeped. “Cloud City! Cloud City!”

Mica flew through the pinkish sky towards the floating city. “What are you so excited about?”

“I totally save the day soon.” Sammy bounced in the X-Wing. “R2 only has a few big moments so let me revel in this one, virgin boy.”

Mica set his jaw. “You keep that to yourself please.”

“Hmm, if you tell me about Lara I’ll keep your sexless woes to myself.”

“*Only*.” Mica glared. “Only if not of word of it gets to Rake ever *or* Kat.”

“My electric lips are sealed, now tell me!”

Mica took a deep breath. “I think...I think Lara might have been seeing Charlie towards the end, right before—”

“*Charlie!*” Sammy beeped angrily. “What the fuck was he doing with a seventeen-year-old girl? What do you know? Spill it, virgin bitch!”

“I don’t know anything for certain, but he came around a lot when Rake was out on special assignments.” Mica angled the ship towards the looming city. “Charlie and Lara went for a lot of walks and talks, okay?”

“Did you see them fuck?”

Mica made a face. “No! She’s my sister, and no, they didn’t do that!”

“What about kissing?”

“Not that either! I just had a feeling okay. They were close. None of us were that close with him. We just idolized him, watched him *be* the cool guy, we all wanted to be like him.” Mica winced. “But those two...you just had to see them together, Sammy. He let the barriers down with her; he wasn’t mister suave all the time. He was just a guy and she was a girl.”

“How come Kat never said anything? She would have noticed.”

“You and Kat were constantly fucking!” Mica looked over his shoulder. “I’m surprised either of you passed high school.”

Sammy snorted. “I’m a genius, bro. School is for pussies.”

“Look, you’re not going to say anything to him are you?”

She sighed. “No. You don’t have solid proof anyways besides *walks*. Maybe Danny asked Charlie to mentor her. Charlie was an amazing pilot, and so was Lara, maybe it was that. Maybe they were talking about what to major in when she went to college. Maybe Danny wanted Lara to be like Kat and join Charlie’s team to mentor the younger group.”

“Yeah, maybe a lot of things.” Mica aimed the X-Wing towards an empty landing platform. “But there was something between them. Whether it was romantic or not, she wasn’t all about Rake like he was about her.”

Boba Fett and a group of Storm Troopers marched Rake, Ravil, and Katarina into the carbon-freezing chamber within Cloud City. The new room was large, dark, and steamy, and nothing like the rest of the sky city.

Katarina carried Darq strapped to her back. He held his legs in his arms and looked around, humming along with the overbearing soundtrack.

Rake walked behind them and glared at the golden Rexos. “Hey Darq, how about you don’t sing my death march.”

Darq’s hum died on his lips.

Ravil reached out and grabbed Rake’s arm. “You’ll be fine, Rake.”

Katarina eyed the red-lit walkway and jets of steam. “This place is more intimidating in person.”

“No kidding.” Rake hissed. He turned around and spotted Tasanee. “So amazing plans, huh?”

Tसानee looked up at him. “Uh, yeah, about that.”

Rake stopped in his tracks. “Why the tone, Rat?”

She looked sheepish. “Marx kind of, uh, maybe—”

Marx appeared, interrupting Tasanee. “I see what Sammy has used her points for, and I am making some slight adjustments to my spending.”

“*What?*” Rake lunged at Marx and flew through his ghost. “You cock-gobbling, cat fucker!”

Ravil looked to Tasanee. “What do we do now?”

Tसानee folded her arms. “Everything will be chill. We just had to make a few changes to the original plan.”

Ravil stepped over to her. “Are you going to tell us what they are?”

Tसानee gestured to Boba Fett and Darth Vader as they chatted. “Don’t think that would work real well right now. Know what I mean?”

Rake shouldered Storm Troopers back. “Fuck you guys! Save me now!”

Katarina grabbed Tasanee's shoulder. "You better make this work."

Marx hissed with laughter. "It will be interesting regardless." He disappeared in the mist.

Rake pointed at Tasanee. "I will fuck—" A Storm Trooper punched him across the face, shutting him up.

"Hey!" Katarina decked the Storm Trooper. "Don't touch him!" Two Storm Troopers jumped for her. She kicked them over the edge of the platform. "Back off!"

Rake hopped up and down. "Yeah, Kat! Use that Wookiee anger! Free me!"

Ravil fell over, woozy. The smell of grass, roasting meat, and vegetables filled her nose. Tears sprung to her eyes as sorrow surged through her veins. She crawled away from the fight. A Storm Trooper grabbed her arm and wrenched her back. Ravil cried out in pain.

Rake snarled. "Kat, help Ravil!"

Katarina lunged and tore the soldier away from Ravil. She threw the Storm Trooper at Vader. "Get back!" She helped Ravil to her feet.

Tasanee elbowed Rake. "Kat! Kat, stop seriously you'll screw stuff up! Rake, tell her to stop!"

A Storm Trooper shot Katarina in the arm. Katarina grabbed her shoulder. "Ow!"

A stray blast hit Ravil's calf. She stumbled to the side. "Why're they shooting at us?"

Tasanee shoved at Rake. "Damn it, Rake, say your lines or everyone is going to get hurt!"

Rake glowered. "*Chewie! Chewie, this won't help me. Hey!*"

Katarina froze and shook her head.

The blasts stopped. Two Storm Troopers came forward and slapped cuffs on her wrists. Katarina stared at them; she touched her head. "What happened?"

Darq smiled from his spot. "You have a temper, just like me! That was fun!"

Ravil hung on to the railing to keep from throwing up. "Must you be happy about *everything*, Darq?"

Rake scooted to her side. "Are you okay?"

Ravil shook her head. "No, but I'll be fine." She stood up straight and cringed at her leg pain. "And you? You're going in?"

Rake looked at the soldiers with their weapons drawn. "Yeah, looks like. They'll hurt you two if I don't, and I said I wouldn't let anyone hurt you." He ducked his head and kissed her, putting all of his focus into it.

Ravil grabbed on to his shirt, returning the kiss as if she needed it to survive.

Tasanee clapped. "Nicely done."

They broke apart breathless. Rake grinned and whispered into her ear, "Regardless of what happens next, we still have our dinner date planned."

Ravil nodded. "Looking forward to it."

Rake kissed her cheek as Storm Troopers grabbed his arms. He kept his eyes on her. His lips twitched in fear, but he didn't struggle as they pulled him backwards. He saw Ravil eying the guards. "I'll be fine, Beb. Han was fine. Just a little chilly is all."

Ravil nodded, unable to say anything.

Rake gulped as they left him to stand on the platform alone. He smiled nervously at Ravil. "I love you, you know."

Ravil's lips twitched into a smile. "*I know.*"

"*Badass*, Beb." Rake grinned. The section of floor beneath his feet lowered. Rake lost his smile.

Ravil sucked in air. She didn't want him to go. She reached for him. "Rake!"

“I’ll be fine!” Rake kept his eyes on her and shouted over the din, “Besides, if this plan doesn’t work, then I’ll get to see you in that sexy metal bikini when I wake up! It’s win-win for me, Beb.”

Ravil managed a shaky smile. “Yeah, Rake, sure thing.”

Rake winked as he dropped below the level of the platform.

Ravil fixed Tasanee with a look. “You’d better get this right.”

Tasanee looked away.

A plume of mist shot up out of the hole in the floor, obscuring everyone’s view.

“Is that it?” Ravil rubbed her eyes and looked through it. “Rake? Rake?”

The mist stopped and a giant ceiling claw descended into the pit.

Katarina chewed on her fingernail. The tongs brought the carbonite slab to eye level.

Rake’s body appeared in the prop. Katarina sighed. “He is going to fucking beat our shit over this, Rat.”

“Rat!” Ravil shouted at Tasanee. “I thought you said he’d be fine!”

Tasanee held her hands up. “Cut it, ladies, don’t need the chitter chatter.” She threw her cape back. “I’ve got work to do.” She knelt by the metal and fiddled with it. “Of course I don’t even know how this thing works.”

“Rat,” Ravil snarled. “If he’s hurt or in pain, I’ll—”

Darth Vader’s voice cut in, “*Well, Calrissian, did he survive?*”

Tasanee nodded. “*Yep, stuff stuff. And in perfect something blah blah lines.*”

Vader turned to Boba Fett. “*He’s all yours, bounty hunter. Reset the chamber for Skywalker.*”

An imperial officer stepped over. “*Skywalker has just landed, my lord.*”

Vader nodded. “*Good. See to it that he finds his way here.*”

Katarina frowned. “Mica and Sammy! We have to save *them* at least.”

Tasanee waved at Vader as he addressed her. “Yeah man, I got it.” She looked at Katarina. “Where is the fucking faith?”

“It’s frozen in carbonite!” Ravil shouted at Tasanee.

Katarina knelt by Rake’s frozen form. “Can’t we press the combo and get him out of this?”

Tasanee watched Vader go. “Will you guys just calm it down already? God!” She darted to the platform. “I just need to wa—” The lights faded. Tasanee looked around. “Hey wait—”

Mica ran down an empty corridor. “Hurry up, Sammy!”

“Yo! *You* move fast on treads! This shit ain’t easy! And in the movie you *walked* around like you had all fucking day to do this shit, so fuck you!” Sammy followed the sound of his footsteps. “What do you want to go so fast for? You’ll lose your hand all that much sooner. The only thing you have left to do in this movie is get your ass handed to you by Vader.”

Mica turned on her. “Don’t remind me.” He looked around. “Besides, we have to get Rake.”

“They probably have already done that, Mica.”

“Right, I’m sure they have.” Mica looked down the halls as they passed them. “Everything looks the same.” He skidded to a stop at an intersection. He recognized the scene and peeked around the corner. He darted back and pulled out his blaster. “There’s Boba Fett.”

Sammy rammed the back of his legs. “Does he have, Rake?”

Mica nodded and whispered as Rake’s carbonite floated by, “There’s popsicle boy. See, I *knew* they’d fuck this up.” He dashed after the soldiers as they disappeared down a hallway.

Mica stopped and watched them step around a corner.

Sammy beeped. “So, are we going after him or running after Ravil?”

Mica waved her back. “Going after Rake. Nothing bad happens to Ravil *and* she has Kat to watch her back.”

“So you’re going after the perfectly capable healthy young man, and leaving the women and children to fend for themselves. Chivalrous to the end, Mica.”

Mica glared at her. “Shut it, sexist trash can.”

She rammed into the back of his legs. “Make me, *virgin*.”

Blaster fire scorched the wall above his head. Mica dropped and fired back at Boba Fett. “Shit, Sammy, you’re distracting me!”

“Sorry.” She rammed him. “Sorry. So sorry.”

“Stop dry humping my leg!” Mica looked around the corner. “Now he’s gone! Thanks, Sammy!”

“That happened in the movie. I didn’t do anything wrong.” She sulked and rammed his legs. “Come on, move it!”

“What are you so anxious for? Just stay here a minute.”

“Mica, leave Rake. Let’s go for Kat!” Sammy beeped angrily as he ran up a flight of stairs. “Come on, I can’t follow you up the stairs that way!”

“You did in the movie somehow, so come on!” Mica rounded a corner and skidded to a stop as Storm Troopers blasted his direction. He caught sight of Katarina. “Hey Kat!”

Katarina whipped her head around. “Mica? Mica!”

Ravil elbowed the Storm Trooper that held her like a shield. “Mica, they have Rake! Don’t follow us, get *him!*”

Tasaneé sighed. “What the fuck, guys! I so have this under control!”

Katarina snarled at her. “You fucked up, so shut up, Rat!”

“I did not!” A door closed between them and Mica, cutting their conversation off.

Mica cocked his head and looked back at Sammy as she motored closer. “I see you got up somehow.”

She flashed her lights. “Eat my ass with chopsticks. What did they say?”

“To get Rake.” Mica smirked and took off in a different direction. “Not to save them. Come on.”

“Why’re you going *that* way?”

Mica stepped through a doorway into a dark room. “Isn’t this the way?”

“No, you dumb fuck that’s where—” The door sealed shut. Sammy sighed. “Have fun with Vader.” She raised her voice. “Don’t worry! You have special powers! You’re a virgin, nothing bad ever happens to virgins in movies!” Sammy buzzed. “Though maybe that’s just horror movies.”

Sammy snickered and turned around. “Let’s see. Points purchase number one...activate GPS.” A glowing map appeared in front of her robot. She beeped happily. “Locate Katarina, chart a course, uh, fewest doorways and *no* stairs. That shit is bull.”

A line appeared on the map. She whistled. “Here kitty kitty, I am coming.”

Sammy rolled the direction the arrows pointed her. “*I love little pussy, her coat is so warm, and if I don't hurt her, she'll do me no harm.*”

Sammy turned a corner. “*So I'll not pull her tail, or drive her away, but pussy and I together will play. She will sit by my side, and I'll give her some food, and she'll like me because I'm gentle and good.*”

Sammy rolled through a doorway and rechecked the map. “Oh kitty Kat, kitty Kat, are you in for it now.”

Mica frowned and looked back the way he'd come. Ominous music poured out of unseen speakers. He pounded on the door, but it wouldn't open. Mica made a face. “Screw this.”

He flicked out his lightsaber and cut through the door. Mica jumped through the hole and found himself in the same room.

“What the hell?” Mica turned around and jumped back, but that room appeared to be identical. Mica's stomach churned and a sinking realization set in. “I am *so fucked*.”

Mica turned off his lightsaber and put it back in his belt. He had no choice but to move forward. He stepped on a platform, and an elevator engaged, ferrying him to the carbon-freezing chamber.

The elevator stopped. Steam floated around the room colored by red and white lights. Mica clenched his jaw. “Right.”

The lights overhead turned on like a spotlight. He swallowed and looked around. “I know you're here.”

“*The force is with you, young Luke Skywalker, but you are not a Jedi yet.*”

“Shit.” Mica's heart thudded in his chest. He turned on his heels to face the voice. He glanced at his hand. “Doesn't have to happen. None of this *has* to happen.”

Mica raised his eyes to the top of the stairs. Vader stood backlit in blue. Mica gulped. “Okay, you know what he's going to do, what you should do, what you shouldn't.” He turned his lightsaber on. “This should be doable. Right, it's doable. Totally. *I'm* the hero.”

Mica hopped up the first few stairs and puffed out his cheeks. “You can do this. Come on, Mica.”

Vader turned his weapon on.

Mica eyed the red, glowing sword. “You can *still* do this.”

Vader stepped forward and their blades neared, almost touching. Sweat dripped down Mica's face. Vader made no move.

Mica slashed overhead. Vader blocked the blow. Their weapons met in a buzz and they stepped apart.

Mica chewed on the inside of his cheek. He darted forward with a chop. Vader blocked it easily and tossed him to the ground.

Mica hit the ground. He eyed his opponent. “Stop doing *exactly* what *he* did. Change it up. Just got to change it up and things will go better. Right.”

Mica got to his feet and lunged at Vader. “Round two!”

Rake woke up with a headache. Darkness surrounded him. His skull felt full of cotton balls soaked in ether. His head throbbed; the buzzing and clicking in his ears didn't help that. He licked his dry lips and touched the sore spot on his head from when he'd banged it on something. His eyes adjusted to the dim red light, and he looked around the tiny compartment he sat in.

Rake rubbed his sore neck. “Where the hell am I?”

He looked up at the metal ceiling inches above his head. A message was inscribed in the surface. Rake read it aloud, “Trapdoors, simple yet effective. You owe me, Rake. Marx.”

Rake grinned and touched the message. A small vent opened to a crawlspace illuminated with a giant green arrow. Rake ducked inside the shaft and looked up. The vent lead up at an angle. Rungs stood out from the metal. Rake grabbed the first rung. “Up I go.”

A wrapped present fell from above and hit him in the face. Rake fumbled with it. “Fuck, what now?”

He held the package in the light and squinted at the tag. “From the best sister in the world. Rock on, bitchface.” Rake frowned. “Huh?”

He pulled wrapping paper and bubble wrap off the parcel. Silver reflected his face back at him. A giggle escaped his lips. “What have you done, Sammy?”

A thump and a cry overhead got his attention. A smile curved up his lips. The buzzing and snapping fit in place now. He knew where he was and what he had to do. Rake bit down on the lightsaber and climbed.

Katarina followed Tasanee. She tapped on her shoulders as they came to a stop. “So what now? What happens in your grand plan?”

Tasanee clenched her jaw. “Marx needs to get back to me. He has, *once again*, acted without informing me fully of what he’s doing.”

Ravil opened her mouth to snipe at Tasanee. She tasted food, dust, and smoke. Ravil held her throat and slumped against the extras behind her. Her vision flickered and the scene shifted. The walls flattened. The sound around her changed to scratches and whines. The light dimmed.

Ravil hit the floor. She touched the hard ground, but now it felt like paper, ready to break at any moment. She could sense the space around it, its lack of depth. Ravil crawled to a wall and placed her hands against it. The mass appeared solid, but something felt false.

“A set.” Ravil scratched at it. “It’s a prop. All of it is false. It’s an illusion.”

Ravil drew her hand back and punched. She ripped through the wall, and light poured through the hole. Ravil put her eye to it and saw grass beyond, a blue sky. Laughter rang through the air.

Ravil bit her lip as fear, sorrow, and pain hit her in the stomach. She doubled over and dug her nails into the ground. Screams reached her ears, and she added hers to the cacophony. The sound brought forth rage, anger towards what frightened her, disgust that she let anything get to her. She snarled and punched. “This stops!” She tore at the wall. “No more! This ends now! Let me out!”

Hands wrapped around her waist and lifted her away. The image shifted. A booming concussion blasted her ears, and Ravil fell back in Katarina’s arms. Her world became solid. Sound and senses rushed back. She looked up from the floor, gasping. “No, no! No!”

Katarina, Darq, and Tasanee looked down at her. Katarina pushed Ravil’s hair out of her face. “What happened?”

“I—” Ravil held her head. “Why did you stop me? I was going to see!”

“Going to see what?” Tasanee took Ravil’s right hand and held it in front of her eyes. “You were scratching your eyes out of your head, Ravil!”

Ravil touched her face. Bloody welts lined her cheek. She shook her head. “No, I was there! It’s all false! I have to get—”

“You were right here in front of us on the floor.”

“No! I was going to see, I was going to get through to it!” Ravil looked back at the wall. She jumped for it and punched the surface. Pain shot through her wrist. “I was so close! Now it’s gone! It’s gone! The knowledge is gone!”

“I thought you didn’t want to know?”

Ravil shook her head. “I have to, it’s fake. I have to make this stop.” She nodded frantically. “That will work! It will!” Ravil scratched at the wall. “I can get over this; I just

have to try again! I can do it!"

Katarina, Darq, and Tasanee shared a worried look. Tasanee drew Ravil away from the wall. "Hey, hey, we got to save Rake, right? We have to get going."

Frenzy pushed all other thoughts out. "No, I have to see it again! I will learn how!"

"You need to see Rake! Right?" Tasanee gave her a squeeze. "He can make you feel better!"

"Rake?" Ravil blinked and swayed.

"Yeah *Rake*." Tasanee caught her and shifted Ravil's weight in her arms. "Okay?"

"I...Rake?" Ravil convulsed and slipped into catatonia.

Tasanee threw Ravil over her shoulder, stumbled to the side, and looked to Katarina. "Save Mica and his hand. I have no idea if Marx is going to come through for us or not."

Katarina nodded and gazed at Ravil. "What are you going to do with her?"

"Get her to the ship. There's no reason for us to chase down the bounty hunter. We both know we don't make that and she needs somewhere to rest."

Katarina nodded. "Good luck."

"You'll need it more than me." Tasanee snapped her fingers. "Activate tracking, send me to the ship." A map appeared in front of her face.

Katarina stared at the modification. "How did you get that?"

"Marx gave me a few of his points for an emergency! See ya!" Tasanee jogged away.

"Huh. Sammy was right." Katarina hefted Darq like a backpack. "You ready back there?"

Darq smiled. "Sure."

"All right, this shouldn't take us long." Katarina ran back the way they'd come.

Sammy peeked around the corner and watched them go. She snickered. "Activate purchase three...containment trap."

"*You have learned much, young one.*" Vader crossed blades with Mica.

Mica grinned. "You'll find I'm full of surprises." He charged Vader and slammed into his chest, knocking him back.

Vader flicked his wrist and threw Mica down the stairs. Mica landed with a thud. His lightsaber hit the floor and bounced out of his fingers. Mica held his chest. "Shit. You're not supposed to do that kind of stuff yet!"

Vader leapt down the stairs.

Mica rolled to his feet. "Double shit!" He searched for his weapon. "Damn it!"

"*Your destiny lies with me, Skywalker. Obi-Wan knew this to be true.*"

Mica backed up. He looked over his shoulder, spotting the open carbon-freezing chamber. The place he was supposed to fall into if things went according to the movie. "No. I can totally jump that. Not going to trip, not going to trip."

Vader lunged.

Mica turned to jump. His foot caught in a crack. He slipped and fell down into the chamber. He landed at the bottom of the pit, knocking the wind out of his chest. Mica held his arm. "Fucking hell!"

The floor dropped out from under him. "*Shit!*"

The floor above him sealed closed. Mica caught his breath and read Marx's message. He frowned. "What the hell?"

Vader stood on the edge of the chamber and looked into the mist below. "*All too easy.*" He

flicked the lever to turn on the freezer. “*Perhaps you are not as—*”

Rake kicked Vader in the back, knocking him into the carbon-freezer. He grinned. A plume of mist shot up from the opening. Rake pointed. “Now, *you* see how it feels to freeze! *Bitch.*”

Mica crawled out of a vent in the floor. His lightsaber sat in front of his face. He grabbed it and rubbed his arm. “Where’d he go?”

Rake pounced on Mica and grinned. “*You are not a Jedi yet, motherfucker!*”

Mica gaped. “What the fuck are *you* doing here?”

Rake shrugged and sat on Mica’s chest. “When I got tossed in the fridge, the floor dropped out from under me.”

“You too?” Mica frowned. “But I saw your carbon frozen thing floating down the hall! Will you get off me?”

Rake let him up and offered him his hand. “Not sure what that was, prop I’d guess, but I’m here in the flesh.”

“Why?” Mica got to his feet.

“To save your hand.” Rake flipped his lightsaber on; he gaped at his blade. “Sammy, you *whore!*”

Mica burst out laughing. “Your lightsaber’s pink! Precious Rake!”

Rake scowled. “Pink was originally a boys’ color and it doesn’t matter anyways.” He put both hands on the hilt. “So shut your face.”

Vader appeared behind the pair. “*Impressive, most impressive.*”

Rake smiled. “Ready?”

Mica activated his lightsaber. “Just like we played it back home?”

“Fuck yes!” Rake rolled to the right.

Mica feinted left. He kicked and caught Vader at the ankles.

Rake swiped at Vader’s arm as the Dark Lord slashed towards Mica.

Vader jumped back, parrying his blow. “*Obi-Wan has taught you well.*” He thrust at Rake.

“Actually, Sammy did.” Rake jumped back and knocked Vader’s blade aside. “She was a maverick with the plastic ones!”

Mica swiped at Vader’s helmet. “She’d hate to miss this.”

Vader turned and charged Mica, slashing in a flurry of blows. “*You have controlled your fear, now release your anger.*” Their blades locked. Vader forced Mica back, his strength overwhelming.

Mica gasped. “Rake!”

Rake jabbed his lightsaber at Vader’s face. “Tag! Have you seen Ravil?”

Mica scored Vader’s armor with a hit. “Yeah, she’s with Rat and Kat. They’re doing their scenes.”

Rake chucked a piece of metal at Vader’s head. “They’re okay though? Ravil’s okay?”

Vader swung at Rake’s face. “*Only your hatred can destroy me.*”

“I know! What do you think I’m *trying* to do?” Rake blocked the blow. He snarled and swept at Vader’s feet. “So she’s okay?”

“She seemed all right. They yelled at me to get *you.*” Mica sliced at Vader’s arm and grinned. “I guess you need help.”

“I need help? I’m helping you!” Rake dodged a slice to the face and punched Vader’s arm. “Rage and hatred, buddy!”

Mica grinned. “You would have failed being Luke, Rake.”

“Why.” Slash. “Do you think?” Cut. “I wanted to be Han Solo?” Rake high kicked Vader’s helmet. “I’m way too pissed for that peace hippy shit.”

“No kidding.” Mica flipped over Vader.

“Do I hear a complaint in that tone?” Rake hurled his lightsaber at Vader’s face, causing him to duck.

“No.” Mica grabbed Vader by the cape and threw him off the platform to the level below.

Rake recovered his lightsaber and pointed off the platform. “Hah!”

Mica stood by his side and grinned. “So, time to go below?”

Rake smiled. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

They hopped over the side of the walkway together and a tunnel opened up in front of them. The lights came on white. Rake smirked. “Now shit gets *real*.”

Mica gestured. “After you.”

“Hey now.” Rake turned his lightsaber back on. “God, I love that sound. This is your fight. I’m like back up, man.”

“Worried about him?”

“I’m worried about my hands frankly.” Rake smiled. “Come on get going. Destiny awaits.”

Mica took the lead and rolled his eyes. “If you steal my kill I will hurt you.”

“I’m not going to ninja your kill.” Rake smiled behind him. “But—”

“No buts!” Mica turned around. “If we bring him down—”

“Then we both get to axe him.” Rake grinned. “Or would you prefer I hang out upstairs.”

“No.” Mica stepped into the dark reactor room. He dropped his voice to a whisper, “How do you want to play this?”

Rake gestured to the glass window. “You stand by that window and prepare to be pelted with crap; I’ll get the drop on him. It’ll be easy.”

“Right.” Mica darted across the room and stood on a glowing white panel. “Conspicuous enough?”

Rake slid against a wall, hiding in the shadows. “Glowing like a star, man.”

Vader’s overbearing breathing shut them up. Mica turned, looking over his right shoulder. “Hello bloke.” He held his blade out before him.

Vader walked slowly, his red saber at the ready.

Mica edged closer. He ducked as Vader ripped a chunk of pipe out of the wall and flung it at him. Mica flinched, feigning an injury.

Vader stepped in with his lightsaber out.

Rake slammed a metal bar into the back of Vader’s head. “Force that!”

Mica grinned and stabbed his lightsaber downwards towards Vader’s face.

Vader flipped his wrist and sent both Rake and Mica into a wall. The blow knocked the wind from their lungs and they saw stars. Rake dropped to his feet. “Ouch.”

Mica blinked. “Bloody hell, I’m seeing double. Where is he?”

Vader’s breaths filled the shadows with noise.

They backed against the wall. Rake held his lightsaber out. “I don’t see him.”

Vader force slammed them into the floor and back into the wall.

Mica held his stomach. “I think you ticked him right off, Rake!”

Rake covered his head as the next wave smashed them into the ceiling. “Oh, this is *my* fault?”

Vader appeared in the light and punched the air. They slammed into the floor and slid

across the ground into the middle of the room where they had no cover. Vader yanked the air and their lightsabers flew from their hands.

Mica coughed. "Shit, really?"

Rake pushed Mica back and moved in-between him and Vader. "I think we're going to lose more than our hands." He glared at Vader. "Run, Mica!"

"I can't see straight!" Mica held his head. "I think I have a bloody concussion."

"Just pick a direction and go!" Rake raised his fists and got to his knees. "Come on, then! Go!"

Mica plowed into his back. "Ah! Fuck!"

Rake face planted on the ground. He shouted into the floor, "Great choice of direction! Get off me!"

"That wasn't my fault!" Mica scrambled to get off Rake.

"Now." Vader stood above the pair. Rake and Mica looked up as Vader raised his lightsaber. They closed their eyes.

"Activate final purchase...body and major plot adjustment."

Vader hissed. "*You?!*"

Rake and Mica looked at each other. "Marx?"

Vader took a step back. "What is *this*?"

Marx grinned from behind Mica and Rake. "This? This is a duel." He leapt over Rake and Mica and met Vader's red blade with his blue one. Marx lashed out with a kick to Vader's chest, sending the Dark Lord back. The Hunter hissed. "Run, little boys, while your *master* takes care of this for you."

Rake helped Mica up. "Are you fucking serious?"

Marx wore Obi-Wan's robes and carried his lightsaber. He was solid flesh once more. "I must restore my honor...by taking his." He grinned and growled. "Go and play with your toys."

Mica scrambled across the floor and picked up his lightsaber. "Rake, let's go."

Rake watched Marx advance on Vader. "But this should be fun to watch!"

Mica shoved Rake's lightsaber into his hands. "Watch?" He flicked his on. "What about *our* game?"

Rake looked from his hands to Mica's. He grinned. "Really?"

Mica shrugged. "Why the hell not?"

"Upstairs?"

"Yeah."

"You're on!" The pair ran back through the tunnel, whooping like children.

Marx threw his long hair back and regarded his foe. "We meet again."

Vader moved into a fighting stance. "You have returned."

"I said I would be *more powerful than you could possibly imagine.*" Marx grinned. "And I always speak the truth."

The pair leapt towards each other. Their blades met in a flash of color.

Tasaneé huffed and shifted Ravil's dead weight in her arms. "Ravil, you don't seem like much, but you ain't a light thing." She checked her map. "Right. Round this corner and we are done for the day."

She pushed a key code and the platform doorway to the Millennium Falcon opened. Tasaneé grinned. "There she is." She darted out into open air.

Blaster fire sent her scrambling back. Tasaneé dove through the doorway and pulled out a

blaster. She set Ravil down in the hall and peeked round the corner. “Shit.”

Boba Fett stood between them and the ship. He hissed. “Han was not in the carbonite, Calrissian. Tell me what you have done with him.”

“Not in there?” Tasanee frowned and it shifted to a grin. “Marx, you fuck.” She tapped her wristwatch. “Marx! Where is Rake?”

His voice came back over her radio. “Alive and with Mica. I am busy now.”

Tasanee heard lightsabers through the static. “Marx...what are you doing?”

“Reclaiming my honor.”

Tasanee frowned. “You’re fighting *him* aren’t you?”

“I shall bring you his head and entrails.”

“Right.” Tasanee peered around the corner and yelled at the bounty hunter, “Uh, Han got detoured.”

Boba Fett leveled his rifle at the doorway. “Not good enough.”

“Shit.” Tasanee gazed down at Ravil. “Be right back, Rav. Gotta kick some ass.” She hopped to her feet and rushed the platform.

Katarina set Darq down and examined the closed doorway ahead of them. She looked over her shoulder and scowled. She tried the keypad again but nothing happened. “It just won’t open.”

Darq placed his legs on the floor. “Maybe we can go a different way? We passed a few places where the hall branched off, and maybe some of those rooms have doors out or a window?”

“Maybe.” Faint blaster fire echoed down the hallways behind them. She looked to Darq. “I’m going to go scout the rooms we passed, but I’ll be right back, okay?”

He nodded. “I’ll be fine. I think I will work on reattaching my legs.”

Katarina smiled. “Good, all right. I’ll be quick.” She darted back down the hallway to a spot where rooms appeared on her left and right. Katarina dashed into a room on the left. The door slid shut behind her. Katarina scowled, turned around, and pounded at it. “Damn it!”

Sammy beeped behind her. “Hi.”

Katarina sighed with relief and looked over her shoulder. “There you are! Get the door open, I left Darq alone.”

“No.” Sammy rolled forward a foot.

“No?” Katarina frowned and turned to lean on the door. “But—”

“He’s fine, sealed the entrances and exits, he’s peachy.”

“What? Why?” Katarina stared at Sammy. “We have to get going!”

“No, I’ve got other plans for you and me.” Sammy rolled around in a circle. “Activate final purchase.”

Katarina looked around. “What?”

Sammy’s robot disappeared.

“Sammy?” Katarina gaped and spun in a circle. “Sammy? Sammy? What is going on? Where did—*OhmyGod!*”

Sammy grinned, flashing white teeth. “Hello, my pussy Kat. Come ‘ere, I’m starvin’.”

Ravil heard the battle between Tasanee and Boba Fett, but ignored them. She stared at the walls. She touched the tile under her fingers. Her lips twitched. Everything was a construct in light. The space of this place mapped out in strings of information.

Ravil poked a hole in the floor, and light poured through. She ripped up a tile and tossed it away. She stared at the twinkling lights beyond the opening. Ravil put her hand to the floor, and the hallway dissolved. Her hand sank into the darkness and light. Illuminated webs rushed up to greet her.

Tears streamed down Ravil's face as pictures and sounds rushed through the strings. She caught brief glimpses of her time with Rake, with her guardians, her childhood. She felt it to be true. She watched it again, slowly and carefully.

She felt the gaps this time.

Ravil saw them, the spots that did not join up. Her mind skipped over them, forcing the timeline of her life to make sense, but now the gaps stared at her, null bands in her life, vacant spaces followed by a jumble, a rush of scenes and places. She was missing memories...Ipsos was right.

Ravil pushed her arms down to the elbows. Her fingers moved on instinct, calling forth lines and rearranging them.

Ravil cycled backwards through her life. She rewatched her meeting Rake, Sirana's death, Paulos' destruction, on the run on the new planet.

Arrival and touchdown. *Earth.*

She slowed her thoughts down to a stop and examined what she saw. It was fire, wreckage, and death. Ravil poured herself into the image, recalling the destruction and fear her mind had healed over by making the memory fuzzy.

People had died; there had been some kind of battle. Their ship had crashed, impacted with the planet. Paulos hauled Sirana and Calpsan from the burning ship. Others lay dead beside their prone bodies. *Many others...*

Ravil squinted through the smoke. An Ampyr ship rested on the earth sheared cleanly in half. The other half was missing, not even a scrap of wreckage. Her younger self looked up to the sky and saw stars, the place unfamiliar. Why had she brought them here?

In the hallway, Ravil touched her face. *She brought them?*

In the memory, Paulos picked her up. He forced a smile and hugged her. "It's all right, little one. You didn't do anything wrong, Ravil. You don't need to cry, it will be all right."

Calpsan clawed across the grass. "All right? All right? They'll follow us here! She pulled a fucking Ampyr vessel *with* us and their pilot got a message off I am positive!" Calpsan looked back at the burning vessels. "Our ship is ruined, we have no Jungay alive, and we have no way of contacting the Resistance! The Ampyr will descend upon this place like flies! Tell me how that *is all right!*"

Little Ravil burst into fresh tears. Paulos shouted at Calpsan, "Stop making her cry. It's not her fault!"

"Yes, it is! Now what are we supposed to do?"

Paulos helped Sirana to her feet. "We run because that is all we can do. The Resistance will find us and save us."

Sirana reached for her husband. "Come Calpsan, there is no point in this thinking. We must deal with things as they are now. We knew the risks when we took her there."

Calpsan rubbed his eyes. "Why couldn't she have at least finished the job? Made this worth it, made their deaths worth *something.*"

The tall Rexos snarled with his fangs out. "If you do not calm down, she might not either. Think of that! Do your *job, Feeler!*"

Calpsan froze and stared at Little Ravil. He nodded and took a deep breath. He put his

hands to her face and whispered, “You don’t need to be afraid. You want to sleep more than anything else. Sleep and this will be nothing more than a bad dream. None of it real, you fell asleep in your bed last night, and everything since has been just a nightmare.”

Little Ravil’s eyes slid closed.

In the hallway, Ravil pounded her fists against the wall. “Show me before! Show me the nightmare, show it!” The gap would not respond. She could not break through the noise he’d placed in her head. She skipped it and went backwards in her timeline. The next memory before crashing was of her on the run with her guardians, fleeing from her home world, the endless days and nights in space.

Then a second gap.

Beyond the dividing line of darkness, the cuts were fine, the pictures diced. Ravil held her head. “I...I was training.” She tried to recall what she knew. “I was *home*.”

But the images did not make sense. They were *not* home. She saw star charts, true, but suns and moons, flying ships. She saw pieces and fragments of men and women in uniforms. She saw war plans. She saw Paulos. She saw many things, but not another Navigator like her. The thoughts and sounds jittered and flexed, ramming in to one another to break apart and grow distant. The memories were madness in flux. Ravil scraped at her temples as a headache came on.

Voices drifted out of the walls. “Marvelous work.”

Ravil cringed at the strangely familiar voice. “Shut up!”

“I missed you, Ravilaea.”

The blissful silence of darkness came and Ravil gasped. The older area she found was beyond damaged; it was *gone*. The sights, sounds, and feelings expunged. The missing memory was a merciful blank amongst the chaos that followed it to her present.

Beyond it, a flicker remained into the past...a tether to pull her towards her earliest recollections. She recalled her childhood, her training, her sisters. The years of rote memorization, the tests. Ravil looked from those memories to the end, her current life. She had reality in the beginning and reality at the end, but there was a whole lot of *what the fuck* in the middle.

Ravil turned back to the earliest piece of darkness, the first gap that started her problems and set her on a course to crash land on Earth for reasons she could not comprehend. She floated in the blank space, knowing this puzzle piece would allow her to understand the others. Ravil wiped her eyes and shook, afraid of what she’d find in the darkness.

Ipsos appeared at her side. “I felt you accessing the memory. Would you like company?”

Ravil nodded. “I don’t want to do this alone.”

Ipsos took Ravil’s hand. “I won’t leave you, Ravilaea.” She pulled out her clipboard and tapped the surface of it. The mass shifted to a glowing pole-arm. “I won’t let anything get you either.”

Ravil eyed the long blade and smiled faintly. “Why?”

“You are our Princess.” Ipsos squeezed her hand. “And at one time, you were one of my very best friends.”

Kennedy shut out Lincoln’s incessant growl. She’d given up asking him to stop; he didn’t seem to be able to help it. Kennedy stretched her legs slowly, shifting in Reloy’s embrace.

She’d left Lincoln’s side when Reloy’s breathing had changed. She’d dressed Reloy and set him down under the covers, did everything so that when he woke he’d have no suspicion of what

had happened the night before.

She desired to go back to Lincoln, she wanted nothing else, but Reloy had pulled her into a cuddle while he dreamt and there she had stayed since.

Kennedy stared at the wall, wishing someone would call upon Reloy to wake him up, anything so that she could get back on her feet. She did not know what to do. Her tail swished back and forth, anxious.

Lincoln spoke in Hunter, "If you can move that much without waking him, leave his side."

Kennedy responded in kind, "And how would he take it if he found me in *your* arms when he wakes?"

"We can explain it away."

"I can, but you cannot, and he will ask you." Kennedy frowned. "What happened to your sense?"

Lincoln snapped his mouth shut. She made sense, but he did not care. When it came to this man, he lost his grip on thinking straight. He could think of nothing else but killing him.

Reloy snuggled up to Kennedy; he wrapped his arms around her. Kennedy had her back pressed up against his chest, the pair spooning. Reloy breathed softly into her neck. Kennedy trembled, but her emotions were tangled.

Anger was definitely there, fear as well, but mixed in was a longing for this affection, having someone to hold her. She would have done anything for Lincoln to do this. She could only think of a handful of times that he had...except for now, here apart from the others. She remembered his Instinct and shuddered; love was *always* tinged with danger.

Kennedy closed her eyes and imagined it was Lincoln that held her now. Her chest hurt she wanted it so much. She let out a keening sound.

Lincoln snarled. "What has he done?"

"Nothing." Kennedy stifled her voice. "He just holds me."

"But you are in pain?"

"No."

"You sound hurt, tell me what he does."

Kennedy touched Reloy's arms around her waist. She switched to speaking Hunter, "He holds me like you never could and it makes me sad that he can do what you cannot."

Lincoln went silent.

Kennedy broke out in goose bumps. She shouldn't have said that, but a part of her rejoiced that she had. She felt better. Kennedy swallowed. "I am seeing less of a difference, Lincoln, between him who holds me this way and desires sex, and you."

"I love you, he does not!"

"He has not hurt me." Kennedy stared at the wall. "He says he does not want to."

"I never will again, and you do not know what he will do later! We have only been around him for so little time! He is Ampyr!"

"I opened myself to you simply so that I could get brief moments of this. He gives it to me without a price." Kennedy shuddered, the realizations striking her fast and hard.

"I will hold you like that, every night, forever! I held you like this only hours before, I can do that again."

She nodded. "I know, but I wonder how long that will last."

"She will not come back, Kennedy." Lincoln attempted to move from his bed, but could not. "There is only you and I. What he gives you is false, it is one sided. You can hit me, spit in my face, reject me, accuse me and I will stand here and take it. I will still love you!"

Kennedy's heart pounded. "I love you, this does not change that. My feelings have never been smart, and nothing comes close. Reloy could hold me for days, and it would not be the same, it would not be from the one I want. Still..." Kennedy touched Reloy's arm. "It fulfills a need I have."

Lincoln dropped his head to his bed. "Kennedy, you cause me agony with your words." He closed his eyes. "But it is well deserved."

Reloy stirred and mumbled, "Breakfast, lovelies?" He came fully awake and opened his eyes. He blinked in the dim light of the room and noticed his location and pajamas. He smiled. "Little Blue, did you tuck me in?"

"I did." She stared at the wall.

"You're so good to me." Reloy nuzzled her neck. "Sorry about last night, I must have forgotten my limit on those sweets." He snapped his fingers in the air as if he just remembered an elusive thought. "*Breakfast*, Blue, prepare it please. I'd like something hot this morning, a good hearty meal for us three."

Lincoln stood and stared through the doorway. He glanced at the pair on the bed and stalked to the kitchen. "Yes, sir."

Reloy curled up against Kennedy and trailed his hand over her stomach. "Were you disappointed in me last night, Little Blue, be honest, please."

"I—" Kennedy blushed and once again found herself without a reason to lie to him. "I not know what to be disappointed about."

Reloy looked over her shoulder, gazing into her eyes. "Have you never experienced anything sweet?"

Kennedy couldn't hide her memories of last night with Lincoln. She blushed. "Only once or twice."

Reloy pulled her to her back and traced his hand lightly across her ribcage. "Hmm, do Hunters pleasure themselves?"

Kennedy twitched in his grip. "I not know."

"May I show you how?"

Kennedy gave a small shrug of her shoulders. "Okay."

"Excellent." He kissed her neck and slid his fingers into her underwear. A call lit up the dashboard fixed into the headboard. Reloy sighed. "*Answer*."

The pilot's voice filled the room. "Sir."

Reloy rubbed Kennedy. "Yes, Weslan?" He watched Kennedy's face; she closed her eyes and purred. Reloy smiled and kissed her shoulder.

"You didn't call in, sir...after the successful jump."

Reloy rested his cheek on Kennedy shoulder. "I've been busy."

"The station manager wishes to speak with you. We have not docked yet, due—"

"Due to me not giving the order, right. I understand, Weslan. Tell the station manager I will be ready in due time. Goodbye."

"Sir!"

"Yes?" Reloy's voice took on an edge. "What?"

"Sir, Duke Ethei is on the station."

Reloy hit the mute button. "Fuck!" He flipped the transmission back on. "Tell my cousin I'll be ready shortly." He ended the call. "Fuck!"

Kennedy looked up into his black eyes. "You are mad?"

"Not at you, Little Blue." He dropped his forehead to her shoulder. "Every time I try to

explore you I am delayed!” He kissed her cheek. “I have heard it is better when you wait.” He pulled his hands back and rested them on her hips. “But I want that to be nice too and if I have to wait too long I might be *hasty*. Damn it, you have no idea how much I fancy you, Little Blue.”

“Sorry.” She blushed and bit her lower lip.

“Oh, you have cute fangs.” Reloy eyed her lips. He pouted. “This is a poor situation.”

Kennedy turned in his embrace and faced him. “What can I do?” She knew Ampyr, knew people in power, if not placated they vented their aggression elsewhere and there was only one other in this apartment to be the target of that. Reloy would take his frustration out on Lincoln; she knew that without a doubt.

Reloy looked at his dashboard. “I don’t want to be selfish, not with you, that isn’t fair.” He sighed. “Your account from last night, it leaves me loathe to treat you in any iniquitous manner. It has similarities to...”

His voice trailed off as he stared at the wall. His face emptied of emotion, laying bare a hollow sorrow. It was a pain Kennedy recognized. An old wound had eaten him from the inside out and left him deadened. She reached out tentatively and touched his cheek to rouse him from his past. “Reloy?”

Reloy blinked, surprised. He looked from her hand to her eyes. “You offer me genuine affection?”

Kennedy stared at her hand and spoke the truth, “You need connection to someone. You are lonely and without love from any. I can see.”

Reloy gazed into her eyes. “You are the strangest Hunter, no *creature*, I have met by far. I am not old, but I have travelled much and not once has anyone done that, not subspecies or Ampyr.”

“I—” Kennedy trembled. “Sorry?”

“Sorry?” Reloy kissed her hand. “Sorry? I certainly am not.” He sat up, pulled her into his arms, and hugged her with need and tenderness.

Kennedy hugged him in return. “Then I am not either.”

Reloy pressed his cheek to hers. “I have changed my mind. I will wait for things to be perfect for you and I.” He bumped their noses as Hunters did. “I aspire for you to be my lover, my friend, my official mistress. I have no others and I wish for none but you. I will make my home yours.” He smiled. “And your cousin’s of course. For saving your life, I owe him so very much.”

Kennedy searched his eyes and realized his offer was genuine. She could stay here, she could be his, and he would treat her well. Kennedy knew she could grow to feel affinity for him, maybe even love. There was a companionship of spirit she could not deny it. He needed affection as much as she did and he was attractive in his own strange way. Kennedy ran her finger across his cheek; all she had wanted for so long was someone to want to hold her. She wanted someone to need her.

Reloy squeezed her fingers, seeing it in her eyes. “You will be happy with me I swear it above all else. I *promise* this to you.”

“Breakfast is ready, sir.” Lincoln stood in the doorway, rigid, staring at the pair.

Reloy hugged Kennedy and leapt off the bed. “Excellent, Blue! Little Blue, you’ll find new outfits in the dresser. We’re making official appearances today. We have that *nasty* execution business to get out of the way, you know.” He grabbed an armful of clothes. “Join me once you’re dressed please.” He darted from the room. “Oh, it smells *heavenly* out here, Blue! You

are both treasures! You spoil me so! This is almost like being back home!”

Lincoln stared at Kennedy. “Czar will move on them today.”

Kennedy nodded. “I know.” She focused on Oro and sensed his location. “We will be right there to act as well.”

Lincoln pulled out a set of clothes for her: a blouse and micro skirt in red. “Your *attire* for the day.”

Kennedy took them. “You are angry with me.”

“With *him*. He takes liberties with you.”

“So did you, but he does not leave me wounded.” Kennedy stripped down naked and slipped on her underwear. “You are upset because it someone else doing what you have done. Perhaps it reminds you of you?”

“It is not right and I know that.” Lincoln helped her into her blouse.

“You wish to touch me now, I can smell it.”

Lincoln gripped her round the waist. “Of course I do.”

“And I would let you, because you need it and I need it.”

“Will you let everyone who needs to have at you get the chance?” Lincoln growled. “Don’t you value yourself?”

Kennedy’s mixed feelings gave way to anger and disbelief. “Value? Myself? Since when I raised to do that?” She pulled up her skirt. “I *raised* by you to be object, to give up what I had for the gain of you, to be used, beaten, and abused by you. He needs comfort and so I give because I *know* what it is like to be in need of it. I give to him, to you and it comes naturally to me to do so.”

“I—”

She stared him down. “If you do not like what I am, you have no one to blame but yourself.” She stalked past him and left the room.

Lincoln whispered, “I know.”

Reloy saw her in her new outfit. “Little Blue, you are a darling! Sit by me! Sit by me!”

Lincoln stared at Reloy’s bed, his hands on her discarded clothing. He’d seen them hugging, and he’d heard their talk. Lincoln knew of her need.

He stepped into the hallway and watched Reloy eating beside her. Kennedy let Reloy feed her a treat. Jealousy replaced Lincoln’s rage, and sorrow soon followed. How much he had failed that she could find any happiness in a man treating her as his pet, and not from the one that loved her as an equal.

Lincoln stared at Reloy, hating the man that held her hand, but wishing he could be him. Lincoln wished he could lie beside Kennedy and feel no fear. He wished he could bathe her, groom her, shower her in affection without running the risk that in giving himself to her, his Instinct would slide in and take over.

Kennedy smiled as she ate. She glowed as Reloy patted her on the shoulder and complimented her outfit. Lincoln watched them and cold sorrow settled in his body. He stared at Reloy’s neck, at his ribcage; he clenched his hands and desired to rip him apart.

Kennedy kicked her heels on the chair and bounced, grinning.

Lincoln slumped against the wall. He dropped to his bed and watched them, knowing he was not good for her. Lincoln realized this, knew it intrinsically, but never had he come across someone that fit her better. Because of what he’d done to her as a child, and how that had changed her, the best mate for Kennedy sat next to her. It was not him; it was Reloy.

Evgeniy loaded station schematics into his codex. He slipped his hands into reinforced riot gloves and kissed Emmalethe on the cheek. "Remember, you do not leave their sides, understand?"

"Yes, Evgeniy." Emmalethe ducked and tightened his bootstraps for him. "I am ready, always ready. Stalker always prepared."

Evgeniy smiled tightly. "I know."

She stood up straight. "You are worried for me. Do not be, I am *strong*."

Evgeniy gazed at her naked body, but instead of lust, he felt stirrings of fear. "You go without armor or weapons."

She smiled. "No one attacks what they cannot see."

"Stray shots can occur, fire can go wild, I—"

"I am faster. I am the fading mist. A Stalker never there when a hit comes."

"I hit you."

"And I won that fight *clearly*." Emmalethe smiled. "I know you strong, you know me strong. Go and be man, while I go and be woman."

"Shifty, sneaky and deadly." Evgeniy smiled. "How appropriate."

"And you large, dumb, and easy to find." She grinned. "Very appropriate."

Evgeniy swatted her bottom. "Sexist."

"Sex, yes? Now?" Emmalethe wrapped her limbs around his body and rubbed her cheek against his. "I am ready for that too. Relent to me."

Evgeniy kissed her deeply and set her up against the wall. He grabbed her butt and squeezed. "As soon as we're done here."

Emmalethe grabbed him through his uniform. "If you not deliver when we done, I will take what I've earned. I keep a tally."

Evgeniy smirked into her hair, hoping she spoke the truth. "Yes, I know."

She eyed him. "You like punishment too much."

"No such thing." He kissed her cheek. "As too much." Evgeniy let her go. "I need to leave if I am going to meet up with the squad. Do you remember your way to the vessel?"

She nodded quickly. "Have memorized by smell traces."

"Smell traces?"

She touched her neck. "I rub against doorways I can find my way."

Evgeniy shook his head. "You've been marking me, haven't you?"

"Yes, you are my property. Stalkers mark what is theirs." She shooed him. "Go male."

"You're letting Kennedy and Lincoln know first?"

"Before I do anything else, yes." She leapt to the ceiling. "I go now, get out." Emmalethe threw open a hatch and scampered out. She climbed in a blur, having memorized her way through these tunnels and hatchways.

Emmalethe put her ear to a panel and lifted it, slipping into the room beyond. Masked, she glanced around the suite. Kennedy adjusted Reloy's collar for him.

Emmalethe padded towards Lincoln. The tall Hunter stood by the door waiting for the pair. She sidled up next to him and spoke softly, "Evgeniy goes to escort of Oro and others."

Lincoln jerked out of his trance of disappointment. "Oh?"

"We to take Navigator and pilot, steal small ship, all leave. Find others."

"When?"

"From station, you go there?"

"Yes, shortly, as soon as we leave here." He watched Reloy mimic someone and make

Kennedy laugh.

Emmalethe heard his growl. She touched his arm. "You jealous of that thin *boy*? Why?"

"No." Lincoln kept his eyes on Kennedy.

"You lie, you *jealous*."

Lincoln glared at the pair. "I cannot make her happy like *that*. I find it *irritating*."

"Then you also stupid, stupid male. All males stupid. She want what he give out, you give out too and no reason to be jealous. She clearly wants you more."

"I *can't*. It will get her." Lincoln sighed. "You don't have any awareness of the issues and history between us."

"That another reason why you stupid. You cannot overcome second self, not help first self." Emmalethe grinned. "You know what Stalker do to eliminate the creature inside if it plagues them?"

Lincoln started. "You have one as well?"

"Some in our line do, curse from the fabled, yes."

"The fabled?" Lincoln tossed the word around. "Our predecessors, the Rexos?"

Emmalethe shrugged and turned to go. "We go into the woods alone, we face it, and we join with it and win. *You* run from yours and so it strong as you are. You fight it and beat it back, you keep separate."

"I cannot join it, it will beat me."

"And that is why you *fail*." Emmalethe shook her head. "Be one and win, or forever be two and struggling. You cannot kill it. You cannot make it go away. You must join and control it. Only way, male, only way."

"You don't know what you are talking about," he grumbled. "There is another way."

"Females not wrong, males wrong. Only *unbreakable* if you are *one*. You cracked. You fucked right down the middle in halves." Emmalethe snorted. "You a broken male, broken and running from your second self. Just like Marx is." She slipped away silently.

Emmalethe slid into the crawlways and reset the panel. She oriented herself and moved, getting her next destination set. She grinned in the dim light, loving being able to do what she was built for.

Oro dreamt of a Viennese Ball. He wore a grey suit and a golden mask, while the ladies wore pink and blue dresses and feathered masks of their own. Oro led a masked woman around the room.

As they passed the orchestra, she leaned in. "They're coming for you."

Oro smiled. "No one will interrupt our dance."

She pushed back her mask and her burning blue eyes forced his attention on to her.

"They're coming for you now. Pay attention!" She grabbed hold of his hands and pulled him into the dance. "Be ready."

"Who are you?" Oro did not recognize her. Her face was fuzzy except for the eyes...eyes which glowed radiant blue.

She smiled and slipped her mask back on. "A dancer." Her eyes lost their spark and she whirled with him, a dreamer among the weaving pairs.

Oro followed with the music, confused. What was he doing in a ball anyways? Why was he dancing with a woman? What was going on?

A clock rang midnight. He turned to watch it as the dancers increased their tempo. The numbers on the clock fuzzed in and out. Oro looked at the others; their faces blurred if he looked

too close. He realized he was dreaming. He smiled. “Cool.”

The world snapped and came into focus. The dance ended and the couples laughed and clapped. Oro held on to the hand of his lady. “Who is coming?”

She giggled gaily and ran off. A hand came down and tapped Oro’s shoulder.

He turned and stood face to face with Lloyd. Oro smiled. “You’re the one?”

Lloyd shrugged. “Shall we dance?”

“You’re going to dance with me in front of all these people?” Oro took his hand. “If you say so.”

“I do.” Lloyd let Oro lead him.

Oro frowned, the expression hidden behind his mask.

Lloyd stepped in close. “Where are we?”

“A dance hall.” Oro’s eyes darted around the room. He searched the eyes of the other dancers, looking for a clue. A few looked his way, but they did nothing but stare at him.

“Where is that, Oro?” Lloyd prompted.

“I’m not sure where we are.”

Lloyd watched as they whirled past floor to ceiling windows. “May we go outside; I’d like to see the stars.”

Oro shook his head and moved them away from the glass. “It is so cold outside. I would like to stay inside where it is warm.”

“All right.” Lloyd went along with him. “Where shall we go after this? What is your favorite place? Let us go there.”

Oro clenched his teeth and searched for an exit from the room. “Tatooine.”

“Where is that, Oro? I have never heard of it.”

“It’s a desert planet.” Oro forced a smile.

“A desert?” Lloyd eyed him. “All over?”

“Yes, the entire place is one big desert. The largest you’d ever have seen. Why do you think I’m so dark skinned and weird looking for an Ampyr?”

“Yes.” Lloyd nodded, his eyes glinting. “Let us go there, show me at once where you are from.”

“I’m afraid you’re too pale, you’d burn your skin.” Oro bit down on his tongue, hoping the pain would wake him.

Lloyd stopped their dance. He put his hands to Oro’s mask and pushed it off his face.

“Show me a picture then, draw me a map. Please, Oro. I need you to.”

“I can’t draw very well.” Oro touched his pockets. “And I have no pictures.”

Lloyd pulled out a codex. “Show me here, find it and show me. Give me the coordinates, Oro.”

“Why?” Oro gulped.

“We can go there together in my ship.” Lloyd smiled. “We can be together.”

“You don’t have a ship, you cannot pilot, and I doubt our Langone Battle Navi-something or other would take you there.”

Lloyd jerked. “Did you say you have a Langone?”

Oro’s heart pounded. “No.”

“You’re lying to me, Oro.” Lloyd’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t like that. What is the name of your Langone?”

“You’re lying to me, you’re not Lloyd.” Oro took a step back from him. “I’m not going to tell you anything. Get the fuck out of my head, Jungay.”

Lloyd's lips slid into a grin, and his teeth sharpened to points. Lloyd leaned in. "I can be nice to you." He stepped in close and ran his hands across Oro's chest. "I can be very nice."

"I don't want *you*." Oro shoved him back.

"Yes, you do, we felt it."

"I don't want a fucking Jungay that looks like Lloyd. Is that clear enough for you, dipshit?"

Lloyd blurred and drove a knife into Oro's stomach. "Tell us where you and the other Resisters are from! Tell us of your Langone!"

Oro bent over from the pain. Blood soaked his clothes as he staggered backwards. "This isn't real!"

"It feels real though, doesn't it?" Lloyd followed him and twisted the blade. "There are many things we can do here, Oro. We are starting nice, but we won't stay that way for long."

"*We*?" Oro coughed up blood. "Who are you talking about?"

"Me." Theo stepped around from behind him. He threw his arm around Lloyd. "I don't know, Lloyd. I think I made a better boyfriend than you ever could."

Lloyd scoffed. "Please, I am far better bred. I am Ampyr, you are *nothing*."

Theo looked him over. "You *are* better looking than Oro. Strong, quick, maybe we should be together and leave him."

Lloyd smiled. "Oh, that does sound nice."

Oro clutched his bleeding stomach. "Oh original, what are you going to do now? Make out and hurt my feelings? Go right fucking ahead. I'll use it as jerk off material later." He fell to his knees as blood drenched his pants. "Insult me, stab me, run me through my bad memories. You're not going to get what you're looking for."

"But we have." Theo smiled. "This is just for fun."

Oro swallowed and pushed himself up against a marble pillar. "Bullshit, you'd be gone by now if you had what you wanted."

Theo squatted before him. "What language do you speak with the other old one?"

"*Klingon*." Oro gasped.

Lloyd joined Theo. He pressed his hands into Oro's wounds. "Where is your home?"

Theo pulled out his knife. "Where do you hail from?"

Oro bit his tongue. "Fu—fuck you guys." He glanced sideways, looking for someone. A few glimmering dancers hung around the corners of his vision, looking worried but doing nothing to aid him.

Lloyd hissed. "Where did you acquire a Langone?"

"Bite me." Oro took shallow breaths.

Lloyd sank his teeth into Oro's neck. He pulled back and licked blood from his lips.

"Where did you acquire your Langone?"

"A *mall*."

Theo growled. "Where is your home?"

"Up your asshole." Oro laughed. "Just give me a chance and I'll point it out for you with my dick."

Lloyd grabbed him by the neck and squeezed. "Did you kidnap your Langone? Are you part of a Resistance breeding program?"

Theo smirked at Lloyd. "He must be, he's a half-breed of some kind of Jungay. Not a Feeler, must be something new."

Oro closed his mouth and stared at the ceiling, watching the chandeliers sparkle and warp as light moved through them like glowing ribbons. He smiled despite the pain. "Pretty

decoration.”

Theo stabbed Oro in the thigh. “Why do you protect your crew and your home? They do not come for you and they will not rescue you. You have no escape, so give up and we will execute you quickly. We will do it now before they put you to death publicly. We will save you the embarrassment of having your last moments aired to all in the Empire. Don’t you want that?”

Oro struggled to breathe. “You can’t kill me.”

Lloyd smiled kindly. “We are in control of your room. All we need to do is take over one of the other two, or both, and we will have you strangled before you wake. It will be peaceful for you. We can leave you with a good final dream.”

Oro gasped. “Why aren’t you in their heads then pulling out data?”

“They are not sleeping.” Lloyd smiled slightly. “And the old one resists the impulse, unusually strong-willed. Jungay are weakest to Jungay, did you not know? You thought yourself clever, but *you* let us in.”

Theo smirked. “Not that it matters now. You won’t get to use that information against us.”

Lloyd grinned. “Now tell us, darling. Where’s your home?”

“Go to hell. My name is Oro, call-sign Vader, position Communications Officer. Number—”

“No...no...” Lloyd lit a match and set Oro’s pants on fire. “This will be unpleasant, honey.”

Oro felt the burning. He screamed and kicked. “Dad! Dad, help me! *Dad, I need help!*”

Theo sighed. “I think you—”

The lights flickered and the fire went out. The dancers disappeared in bursts of colored bubbles. The musicians faded away, and the temperature dropped to freezing. Oro, Theo, and Lloyd sat on the floor alone. Heavy footfalls made the three turn.

Danny plowed into the two Jungay, throwing them across the waxed floor. He came to a stop between them and Oro. “You get away from him!”

The Jungay hit the ground and rolled to their feet. The pair dusted themselves off. “Ah, he has learned how to call on aid. *Remarkable.*”

Lloyd grinned. “I am impressed. How *impressive*, Oro. *So fast.*”

Danny cracked his knuckles and rolled up his sleeves. “You get the fuck *out.*”

Theo slunk around to his side. “I’m afraid you aren’t in control here. This is *our* territory. We have power here, not you.”

Oro crawled backwards trailing blood. He curled to his side and called out to his father, “Were you asleep?”

“No.” Danny kept his eyes on the Jungay.

“Was Lloyd?”

“No.”

Oro took a breath and shouted, “*Lloyd, help me!*”

Lloyd dropped out of the air and landed beside him. He took one look at Oro and freaked out. “Oro! Wh—what’s going on? Oro!”

“I—” Oro’s vision doubled

“Oro!” Lloyd jerked and lifted Oro to his feet with one arm. His free hand fluttered around Oro’s face. “What is going on? Why are you hurt? Who hurt you? Where are we?”

“There.” Oro pointed in the general direction of the Jungay.

Lloyd looked up and saw himself with a bloodied knife. He took a step back. He spotted

the blood on his doppelganger's hands and the intent in his eyes. Lloyd's lips twitched as power raged in his gut and burned in his lungs. "Get out!"

Oro woke in his bed, gasping. He clawed at the air and realized where he was. He clutched at his chest. "Fucking hell!"

Danny rolled to his feet and leaned over him. "Are you okay?"

Oro blinked. "You were there, right? I wasn't just imagining that?"

"I was there." Danny looked to Lloyd. "Pretty sure he was too."

Oro turned.

Lloyd was staring at his hands in confusion.

Oro ducked his head. "Thanks."

Lloyd looked over. "What did I do?"

"You used your voice on those two." Danny gripped his shoulder. "Good work, boy."

"My voice?" Lloyd frowned.

Oro nodded. "Your voice talent."

Lloyd appeared mystified. "My *what*?"

Their cell door slid open. Guards with rifles and riot gear stood in the doorway. A small child darted in between them. The boy held out his hand. "Blackout."

A ripple distorted the air, and the lights shut off. Lethargy crept into their limbs, sapping their strength and will to fight.

The Warden spoke through a bullhorn from the hall. "All three of you will find you can no longer use any abilities. You will submit as we handcuff you. Any resistance will be met with violence."

"For fuck's sake," Danny growled. "What is it this time?"

The Warden's smile was evident with his tone. "We've arrived at our destination, gentlemen, and we are docking now. You'll feel a slight jolt as the station's gravity becomes active. I bet you would like to know that your execution is this afternoon, and it is proceeding on schedule. The boy we are passing off to the Duke."

Clanging and grinding filled the air as the vessel came into the station and locked in. The spinning station hooked them and gravity pressed everyone towards the floor. The guards rushed in and tackled the weakened trio, cuffing them easily.

Lloyd squirmed, but found he had no speed. Oro could not influence a thought or hear anyone else's. Danny, despite being raging mad, had no strength. All three glared at the little boy as they were marched out of the cell.

The Warden laughed at their expressions. "You're heading to new holding cells, separate, so say any goodbyes now because this is it for you three."

Danny spoke in English, "Evgeniy, you'd better be here. When are we breaking out?"

The guard that held Lloyd pushed him and responded in Ampyr, "No fighting. Go along and keep calm."

Danny kept his eyes on that guard. "Oro."

Oro responded in English, "I understood the Ruskie, sir. His accent is fucking *ridiculous*."

The guards escorted them to an outer exit. The door opened, but instead of opening to space, it opened to a docking tunnel. The corridor was dimly lit and well guarded. Hunters and Ampyr stood to either side.

The Hunters sniffed them, taking in their scent. Danny made a face. "Great, more of them."

The corridor ended with a thick metal door. A guard on the other side opened it and led the way to a row of small cells. Three had their doors open. Danny, Oro, and Lloyd each had their

own.

Oro's guard shoved him into the cell and locked the door behind him. The soldier turned and stood in front of the door and stared into the hallway. Oro had barely enough room to sit down. Blood and scratch marks marked the walls; the floor was sticky. Oro leaned against the wall instead of sitting. He kept his eyes on the tiny glass window that opened to the rest of the space station.

Cloud City erupted in displays of cunning, strength, stamina, and sex.

Marx flipped up and bounded across the ceiling of the reactor room. He dropped behind Vader and kicked, knocking the Dark Lord towards a window. Marx followed up with a force push that blew out the glass in the room.

Vader ripped pipes off the wall and launched them at Marx.

Marx swung his lightsaber and sliced through them. He dove for Vader's legs. The Hunter caught and grabbed his ankles, lifting him into the air. He tossed Vader out the broken window.

Vader scrambled to his feet and readied to parry Marx's blows, but the Hunter had disappeared. Vader backed up, keeping his lightsaber in front of him.

Marx materialized behind Vader and slammed his hand into Vader's neck, cracking through his armor. His claws caught on Vader's cape and tore it off. Marx bit Vader's helmet.

Vader slammed his fist into Marx's jaw, throwing him off. "How did you do that? Tell me!"

"I am a *god* as far as you're concerned." Marx grinned and rubbed his sore jaw. "I will eat your heart."

Vader snarled. "You are turning to the Dark Side, Obi-Wan."

Marx's tongue rolled out of his mouth as he grinned. "I am the Dark Side."

Rake and Mica crossed lightsabers. Rake pushed and Mica slid backwards. Rake grinned. "Face it. I am better at this than you are."

Mica grimaced. "You're not better at *everything*, Rake."

"Didn't say I was. You're better at being..." Rake mulled it over. "Hmm. Can't think of anything at the moment."

Mica swiped at him. "Dick."

Rake laughed and swung again. They'd had this battle countless times in their bunkrooms, in the lunch hall, in front of the TV in the common room of the base they'd lived on throughout their childhood. Rake pointed at Mica with his lightsaber. "Come on. Do your sister proud and tag me at least."

"I don't want to hurt you, Rake. We're just playing around."

"God Mica, you're no fun!" Rake lunged at him.

The pair met in a blur of blades and limbs. The cracking snap of saber against saber drowned out everything else.

Rake whooped and sliced Mica's sleeve at the elbow, shearing the fabric off. "Gotcha! Laser precision Rake!"

Mica kicked him in the shin. "You could have cut me!"

"*You could have cut me!*" Rake mimicked him. "Come on, Mica. Stop being the annoying little brother for once!"

Mica smiled and swung for Rake's head.

Rake leapt back and parried the blow. He darted backwards up the stairs. "Yes, *that* is what

I'm talking about!"

Mica ducked low and stabbed upwards. Rake jumped back, but Mica caught him on the foot, slicing through part of his shoe. Rake wiggled his toes from the hole. "Nice!" He grinned and slammed his blade against Mica's.

Mica staggered under the blow.

Rake raised his arms and put his whole body into the motion. He knocked Mica to the floor. "Woo! We know what happens now! Going to cry on cue?"

Mica threw his lightsaber and went for the takedown tackle.

Rake's lips made an O of surprise and then a smile as Mica knocked him off his feet. He hit the ground and his lightsaber bounced out of his grasp. Rake boxed Mica's ears in retaliation.

"Ow!" Mica drove his knee into Rake's thigh. "Jerk!"

Rake caught Mica's wrist and threw him off. He leapt on Mica's back, driving him to the floor. Rake wrapped an arm around Mica's neck and put him in a loose chokehold. "Look at wittle Mica all grown up into a fine, young man."

Mica threw his head back, slamming his skull into Rake's jaw. He reached over his head, grabbed Rake, and flipped him over his shoulder. He straddled Rake and punched him in the face. "I'm twenty-five, start treating me like it!"

Rake grinned as his split lip bled down his chin. "I don't care how old you are." He caught Mica's next punch. "You're still my little sidekick."

Mica reached for Rake's face with his free hand. "Asshole!"

"Whoa there, why is that so bad? I'm pretty awesome!" Rake stretched his head out of Mica's reach. He locked his legs around Mica's waist and squeezed. "I think it is saying something, don't you?"

Mica gasped for air. "Your ego is so huge I don't even understand how you function sometimes!"

Rake dodged a punch and held on to Mica's right hand, preventing him from striking. "I think I'm so badass, and who'd I choose to be my space buddy? You!"

"You didn't *choose* me!" Mica pulled on his trapped hand. "Danny stuck you and me together."

"I did too." Rake slammed his forehead into Mica's cheek. "Those of us with the youngins weren't supposed to say who we picked to mentor, so that there wouldn't be any favoritism or easy breaks. But I picked you, you shit."

"Yeah right!" Mica's nose bled onto Rake's face. "You're just trying to get me off my guard."

"Well sure." Rake grinned. "But that doesn't mean I'm lying." He rolled, getting Mica underneath him. Rake grabbed Mica's arms and pinned them over his head. "Dude, we used to be best friends, did you forget?"

Mica struggled but couldn't move. "Of course not, but that kind of went tits up a while ago."

"Yeah, I know. I'm tired of bickering like a married couple." Rake leaned in close and dripped blood on him. "Let's kiss and make up."

"You are *not* kissing me!"

Rake laughed at his expression. "Mica."

Mica grimaced and stopped fighting. "What?"

Rake's laughter died down. "I'm sorry."

Mica eyed him. "You're *what*?"

“Sorry. I’m sorry about how I’ve treated you since Lara’s death.” As Rake said it, he felt better. He smiled. “I should have said that a while ago.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry to me!” Mica bucked underneath him. “Damn it, Rake! I’m supposed to say that to you!”

Rake cocked his head. “What for?”

“What *for*?” Mica gaped. “I was an accomplished shit to you for years! The things I said to you, what I blamed you for; I was out of line! And your depression...I only made it worse, I know I did.” Mica swallowed. “*I’m* sorry, Rake. Don’t say you’re sorry to me.”

Rake let him up. He kicked his feet out and sat against a railing. He wiped his bloody lips on his arm. “You were grieving, and I didn’t hold that against you.” He smiled, showing blood-stained teeth. “What I held against you was the fact that you became such an anal twit! *God!* You think Lara wanted you to become such a dick!”

“Huh?” Mica stared at him.

“It ticked me off.” Rake spat blood off to the side. “I thought it’d go away after a while, but you *cultivated* being a douche bag. I thought you were doing that part to get on *my* case, and it certainly worked, but you really got in to it. You went to Bangkok and worked for Virote, man! It was a slap in the face. You were my responsibility.”

Mica looked away. “You did too for a while.”

“Until I found out the other shit he was involved in sure. Then I quit, but *you didn’t*. I wanted to throttle the shit out of you, when I was coherent enough to think.” Rake sighed. “All I could think of was how much she’d be disappointed in me for what I’d let you do.”

“Yeah, well you self-destructed through drugs,” Mica mumbled. “Do you think she wanted that? I just—”

“Killed your life while still living it. You associated yourself with what you were against; you lived a life against your values.” Rake shook his head. “You always had the faith, and you tossed that too. You tossed *everything* Lara loved about you.”

Mica paled. “I—”

“That’s what I couldn’t understand and what I couldn’t stomach, but for whatever reason you’re back to yourself and you found some faith. So...” Rake slapped him on the arm. “I see no reason to berate you anymore. You have fallen in line, cadet, good work.”

Mica eyed Rake. “Rake.”

“Yeah?”

Mica closed his eyes. “I put Jason’s team on your trail. *I* sent them to Bangkok in the first place.” He waited for a punch to connect with his jaw. When one didn’t, he opened his eyes.

Rake met Mica’s gaze. “Sorry, was that supposed to be a surprise?”

“You *knew*?” Mica choked. “This whole time?”

Rake shrugged. “Sure, I looked into it at the time...well *Sammy* looked into it for me. I don’t know computers. She told me, got me the video of your meeting with Jason actually.”

Mica cringed as he remembered the things he’d said. “You didn’t tell anyone else? Danny still let me come round. No one treated me any different.”

“Our problems are *our* problems, not anyone else’s.” Rake handed Mica his lightsaber. He rubbed blood off his chin. “And I know you just felt worse after you did it. Maybe not all of you, certainly not the smug douche part, but the old you felt like a tool.”

Mica looked at his feet and wiped his nose. “Yeah, I did.”

“So whatever, we’re fine.” Rake twirled his lightsaber. “If you stray from the path again though, I’m going to beat the ever living hell out of you.”

“Please do.” Mica fumbled with the silver cylinder. “I lost my path in an epic way.”

“Yeah, no kidding, not as good as I did, but you are still *just* my sidekick.”

The two sat side by side. Mica looked up at Rake. “You’ve matured years in a few weeks.”

“That’s all Ravil, I can’t help it.” Rake smiled and nudged Mica. “She’s forced me with her Navigator ways.”

“Did you two make up?”

Rake nodded and smiled. “Yeah, we’re together now. Or dating...something like that. We’re kissing at least...so whatever stage that is.”

“How did you do that?”

Rake smiled. “You’d be impressed. I got on my knees and *begged*.”

“I didn’t realize that was anything new for you.” Mica smirked.

“Uh, the begging part is new, *dick*.” Rake elbowed Mica. “Anyways, she forgave me.”

“Good.” Mica pinched his bloody nose shut.

Rake looked around the room and grinned. “So, we were doing the whole Han Solo gets frozen scene, and they dragged me over to that spot right there—”

Mica groaned. “Please don’t tell me you said *I know*, not after the stuff that went down earlier.”

Rake grinned. “*She* did. I told her I loved her, and she said *I know*.”

Mica’s face split into a grin. “That’s bloody awesome.”

“It was priceless! I could have been frozen and happy at that point.” Rake flopped back and stared at the ceiling. “She’s so amazing. What the hell did I do to get *her*?”

Mica leaned back and looked down at Rake. “Maybe when you blow enough businessmen in Bangkok you get a wish.”

“Ooh.” Rake tapped his lips. “Cock wishes, the best kind.” He looked over at Mica. His eyes narrowed.

Mica frowned. “What?”

Rake tackled Mica and sat on him. “You are going to tell me right now if you did anything inappropriate with a woman, man, or child in that city.”

“No! God, Rake, I picked up drug shipments for Virote! I tested his supplies is all! I swear!”

Rake let him up. “Good. I didn’t fail that badly then.”

“The only reason I was there in the whore markets that day was because your name came up.” Mica rubbed his neck. “I knew they’d be looking to kill you.”

“So you saved my life and Ravil’s.”

“Yeah, right, the helpless girl that can teleport anywhere.” Mica rolled his eyes. “I really saved her. *Right*.”

Rake snorted. “She’s such a coldhearted bitch sometimes, Mica, it is brilliant.”

Mica eyed him. “Not many people would say that’s a good quality in a girlfriend.”

Rake waved towards the ceiling. “In the middle of a war, it’s the *best* quality.” He sat up. “We’re going on a dinner date when we get back to Earth.”

“Yeah where? Are you looking for suggestions, because I know of a—”

“Okay, I’m *making* her dinner.”

Mica looked over. “What Rake’s *crepes*? I know that’s all you know how to make.”

“Yeah and crepes are delicious.” Rake kissed the air. “The chocolate ones are sure to get me completely back in the good with her.”

Mica laughed. “Are you going to wear an apron while you do it?”

Rake flipped on his lightsaber. “Break’s over, *Luke*.”

Tasaneer unleashed a barrage of blaster fire at Boba Fett, sending him away from the ship to seek cover. She darted across the platform as he ducked, looking for her own place to hide behind.

Boba Fett blasted off with his jet pack and fired from the air.

Tasaneer pulled her cape up as cover. The lasers hit the surface and bounced back. Tasaneer grinned beneath the cloth. “Thank you, Marx.”

“Yes?” His voice came over the radio.

Tasaneer flipped her cape back and fired at the bounty hunter. She hit him in the foot, sending him spinning. Tasaneer used the distraction to race for the ship. “Getting shot at.”

Marx snarled. “By whom!”

“The bounty hunter guy.” Tasaneer threw up her cape and it took the brunt of the firepower. Nausea swept over her and she staggered. “Oh, I’m going to throw up.”

“Why?” Marx’s voice took on a worried edge. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m pregnant, remember?” Tasaneer switched her blaster to shotgun bursts. “This guy is fast!”

“Get under cover, I am coming.”

“I’m fine.” Tasaneer hit his jetpack with a well-placed shot. “Keep playing.”

“This current fight can wait in light of this new one.”

“You killed him already?”

“No, but—”

“Right well, I wouldn’t mind the assistance, but I can handle myself. Play for a bit more.” She hit Boba Fett’s leg. “Hah! Score again!”

Katarina burst into tears. “Sammy!”

Sammy reclined on a white couch, her eyes focused on Katarina. Over six feet of lean muscle and dark skin, she wore a simple bikini made from her R2 unit’s pieces. Her green eyes flashed in the light. Sammy hopped off the couch, stretched, and flipped her dark ash-blonde hair over her shoulder. “Don’t cry, Beb. You should be happy right now, yeah?”

Katarina couldn’t move. She was in too much shock to feel anything but disbelief. “How?”

Sammy grinned and scratched her lime-green nails over her chest, stopping at her bikini top. “How? Who cares? Aren’t you going to help me out? This top is so ill-fitting; I just have to get it off. Ooh come help me.”

“But...but *how*?”

Sammy sighed at Katarina’s expression. “Kat, I want to play, come here already!”

Katarina dashed across the room and put her hands to Sammy’s face. She stared into her eyes. Katarina shuddered and tears ran down her cheeks. She wrapped Sammy in a hug. “How did you do this? Tell me!”

Sammy jumped up and wrapped her long arms and legs around Katarina. “If Darq gets to be a robot, then the robot gets to be a fleshy...just for a little while.” She kissed Katarina’s brow. “I paid for it with my points, silly pussy. I told you they were worth it.” She wiped Katarina’s tears away and kissed her on the lips. “Don’t cry, Kat. We don’t have all day to delay.”

“All day?”

Sammy grinned and hopped down. “It’s not like we’re just meeting for the first time in ten

years. We've gotten the catch up done, all the crying, and all the words and making up. That's behind us." Sammy tore Katarina's top off and groped her breasts. "All I want now is to eat you out."

Katarina gaped. "I—"

Sammy knocked her to the floor and ripped off the rest of Katarina's outfit. "Don't tell me you're not game? Because you're not getting a choice in this. I've waited a decade. I want to get my fuck on."

Katarina recovered from her shock. She looked Sammy up and down. "How...how long do we have?"

Sammy shrugged. "Who really knows?"

Katarina grabbed her hips. "Get naked!"

"Now *that* is more like it!" Sammy tossed her top and straddled Katarina.

Katarina flipped Sammy to her back and tore her bikini bottoms off. Their lips locked and hands roamed. The pair bumped into a table, knocking it over, but they didn't notice. Sammy bit Katarina's lower lip. "Lemme up, I'm getting at you first."

"No way, I'm getting you."

Sammy thumped Katarina on the arm. "I owe you a billion time's ten orgasms 'cause it's my fault I wasn't around to nosh on your snatch. So spread your legs!"

Katarina flipped Sammy over and smacked her bare ass. "You are still a brat."

Sammy rolled and tackled Katarina. "And you love it!" She grabbed Katarina's dreadlocks and pulled. "I don't want to get mean but I will."

Katarina smirked and grabbed Sammy, pulling her down. She wrapped a leg around Sammy and kissed her on the lips.

Sammy hooked her fingers between Katarina's legs. Katarina gasped and let her play. Sammy sucked on an earlobe. "I missed this."

Katarina looked up from enjoying Sammy's breasts. "I know."

"No talking unless it's *Oh God yes, Sammy, more! I love you!*"

Ravil dropped into the darkness with Ipsa at her side. Her hands moved in a blur; lights raced away from her towards the memory store. She did not know what she did, but the darkness stirred in response. Ravil swallowed. "What is this anyways?"

"Hmm?" Ipsa looked her over. "It's your recorded life line, and it is tracked by your engine. Don't you recognize it? You were accessing it on purpose *finally*."

"Yes, no." Ravil touched her forehead. "Not really, I just kind of did it."

"Don't worry about it; it'll all be clear when this is resolved. Let's just say it's a quirk I put in here just for you."

"Okay." Ravil smiled quickly. "I hope this is clear soon." She turned to Ipsa. "You know much, and have many skills I do not."

"You have them too. You just can't remember them because of your head issues. Clear those out and you'll be golden I'll bet. You'll put my tricks to shame."

Ravil turned to the darkness and reached out. "You said we were friends?"

"Yes." Ipsa thought of saying more, but held her tongue. "There's no point talking about it now. We have a task and this place has guards."

"How do you know?"

"I came here earlier and got attacked."

Ravil kept her hands out in front of her. "Jungay?"

“Oh yeah. How did they get a hold of you?”

“I’d like to say I’ve never met one, but I can’t can I, when so much is gone.” Ravil sent a pulse into the darkness. A wave of sound blasted them back, a klaxon from within the damage. Ravil covered her ears. “What is that?”

Ips0 moved in front of Ravil and cast her weapon out; her light cut through the waves of noise. “Can’t you override it?”

Ravil shook her head. “I don’t even know what that means, Ips0!”

Ips0 looked into the darkness. “Neither do I, really.”

“What?”

Ips0 smiled. “I have fragments, words, and methods, but I only half know what I am doing to be honest.”

Ravil grabbed at her. “Are you *serious*?”

Ips0 nodded. “We both have obliterated bits in our past.”

“And you’ve been berating *me* about *my* lack of memory! What about your memories?”

“I never said I was perfect.” Ips0 winced against the noise.

“Do yours haunt you too?”

Ips0 shook her head. “I wish they would. I might understand more.” She sent a blast back at the klaxon. The alarm shuddered and pain joined the noise, hitting them in the spine.

Ravil gasped. “What is *that*?”

“Don’t know!” Ips0 whirled and created a shield around them. “That’s temporary, won’t last long.”

Ravil floated beside her. “I can do that too.”

“Good, it’s exhausting.” Ips0 panted. “I’m not used to working without my engine.”

“You have an engine too like mine?”

Ips0 stared at Ravil and slowly shook her head. “I am no longer surprised at what you do not have in your head. Have you been acting solely from your power base?” She touched her sternum.

Ravil shrugged. “I guess.” She shored up the cracking shield. “It’s obvious I don’t know what to do. So can we see the actual thing blocking the memories? Maybe that’ll jog something for me.”

“There is no single spot.” Ips0 chewed on her lip. “Oh pooh.”

Ravil snorted despite the situation. “*Pooh*?”

Ips0 blushed. “I—”

Jungay guards descended and tore at the shield with bladed fingertips. Ravil brought her hands around. “Ips0, behind me!” Ravil called for her whips of light.

Ips0 stared at Ravil’s hands in horror. “No!” She grabbed Ravil’s wrist. “You cannot do that!”

Ravil looked between her and the Jungay that cracked at the shield. “They’re going to get in, let me go!”

“You are the Pure, you cannot attack!”

“*What*?” Ravil shook her off. “I have to. They’re attacking *us*.” She snapped the lines, readying them to slice and dice.

Ips0 blasted them back into Cloud City and closed the portal between the two places. She pounced on Ravil. “You must not do that! You are the Pure! You cannot connect with *them*...especially in that place! It would be disastrous.”

Ravil gaped at her. “I defend myself when attacked, Ips0.”

“Then no more!” Ips0 gripped her pole-arm. “I will protect you. You must not do that again! Do you understand me? Do you? No. More.”

Ravil saw that she was serious. “Okay, okay I won’t.” She tucked her knees to her chest. “What is the Pure?”

Ips0’s look of horror, if anything, got worse. “You.” She touched her chest. “Ips0 the Engineer.” She pointed at Ravil. “Ravilaea the Pure.” At Ravil’s confused look, she gaped. “Saroi the Teller, Faist the Dreamer, Cantu the Poet. You don’t recognize *any* of them? Not even your own?”

Ravil shook her head. “No, should I?”

Ips0’s already pale face grew paler; she used her pole-arm to stand. “What must have been done to you? I am frightened to think.”

Ravil drummed her fingers on the floor, thinking Ips0 was just as confused as she was. “So we cannot access the memory that way?”

“No, not if it means you must fight and put yourself at risk for that kind of exposure.”

“Then the engine or whatever.” Ravil touched the walls. “It will show me, it has shown glimpses already, correct? Those are not from my head, I do not recognize them. They’re this place.”

Ips0 nodded. “Your creation has memories it’s true, but it is not the same as knowing these things for yourself. Seeing the image will not be the same as having the knowledge in you.”

“*Something* is better than nothing.” Ravil tapped the walls. “Make it respond, Ips0.”

“I cannot, not in that way. You are the owner of this construct and I cannot override royal commands.”

Ravil sighed. “I think you have me confused with someone else. I am not a princess, all right. So stop with that.”

Ips0 frowned. “But—”

“*Ips0*, I remember my childhood. That isn’t what is blocked or gone. I was never a princess; I was just a kid with a bunch of other kids. Maybe my parents named me after someone you knew. All right?”

Ips0’s lips drew into a line. “We shall see once we review this recording. Perhaps it will at least lead us to the Jungay bastard who got into your head. We can find him and make him fix it.”

Ravil put her hands to the floor. “I wish to see.” Cracks raced along the floor and up the walls. The city rumbled. Ravil frowned. “Won’t the others notice?”

Ips0 flung out her hand. Five pictures appeared on the wall: Marx battling Vader and laughing; Mica and Rake playing with lightsabers; Darq was reassembling his legs; Rat was mid-shootout with Boba Fett; and Sammy and Katarina were getting X-Rated. Ips0 grinned. “All using their points to some degree. Look at their smiles. They won’t even notice.”

Ravil’s mouth dropped open. “The *points*.” She turned to Ips0. “You created them so that they would be distracted!”

“You need to be alone for this. You worried over them, so I brought them here. This lessened your worry, but made you distracted, emotional. I need you focused, Ravil. While they play, let *us* work.”

Ravil nodded. “As long as they’re safe. This will be safe right?”

Ips0 nodded with less than one hundred percent confidence. “Should be. I imagine things will destabilize a tad, but how big could this memory really be? It should only use a fraction of the data here to rebuild the scene.”

Ravil remembered the darkness in her memories. “That felt like a *large* space to me.”

“A lot of emotions or something.” Ipso leaned in, eager. “Come on, no time like the present! You should have your powers back now that we’re doing this, give it a look.”

Ravil put her hands to the floor. She sensed the network of lines and lights, each data stream carrying countless pieces of information, sights, sounds, smells, voices, emotions. Ravil immersed her hands in it, and the engine reacted to its owner. Ravil took a deep breath. “Reconstruct the scene of the last action involving me and this device, and start at beginning of activation.”

Cloud City groaned. Metal buckled and cracks raced along the walls. Ravil looked at Ipso. “They will be safe?”

“Yeah.” Ipso kept her eyes averted. “Sure of it.”

“Nothing here can truly hu—kill them?”

“Just images.” Ipso smiled. The floor beneath them disappeared. She grabbed Ravil’s hand and her pole-arm shifted back to her clipboard. Ipso pointed. “There!”

Far beneath them, a field formed with green grass and vibrant colors. Ravil could feel the heat of the sun reflected back at her. She reached for it, and the pair disappeared, landing on the grass.

Above them, wires snapped sending reverberations through the air like strings plucked on a guitar; the sound waves were bone shaking. Ravil and Ipso looked up. The pink sky lost chunks in squares and rectangles. Behind what dissolved was the darkness of space, *real* space. Cloud City trembled between the forces and tilted in the sky.

Ipso waved her hand. “Gravity’s different up there. They won’t be affected.”

“I don’t know—” The ground beneath them shifted and filled out. Ravil put her hands to the grass and felt the depth and mass. “Ipso, it’s making an entire planet!” She looked back up as the sky became invaded with blue and black. “*And* the atmosphere? Why?”

“Well, you asked it to recreate the last scene, and it’s taking you literally. If you wanted to stay in one city or a room, maybe you should have narrowed your request. It’s not as if it is going to create the rest of the universe. I think.”

“You *think*?”

“Look, they’ll be fine! I’m positive!”

Sammy scraped her nails into Katarina’s thighs, listening to her lover’s fading cries. The shaking had not disturbed them. The ambient noises had not disturbed them. When Cloud City tilted at a forty-five degree angle—they noticed.

Katarina and Sammy slid into a wall. Sammy steadied Katarina and hung on to a wall lamp. “What the fuck is going on?”

Katarina blinked, recovering from post-coital mindlessness. She yawned. “Why’s everything tipping? Or is that just me?”

Sammy snapped her fingers at a wall. “Create window!” The wall shifted to a view. Parts of the city drifted by and dissolved. The station tilted and dropped several meters.

Katarina gaped. “Whoa.”

The doorway above their heads cracked and dust rained down. Groaning from the strain of metal and materials became deafening as the suite next door collapsed and took down a chunk of the city’s plumbing with it.

Sammy wrapped her arms around Katarina. “Fucking balls, this place is getting spaced! We’re on full-retreat pronto express! I don’t care what the tiny tot says; I don’t want to be stuck

in this thing if it is falling to pieces.”

“Right.” Katarina nodded and pulled on her torn outfit. “How do we get out? Force the plot to move and reset everything?” She dodged a chair.

“Working on it!” Sammy threw out her hand. “Chart course ship!” An arrow appeared and passed through the outer wall.

“Wait, we have to get Darq!”

“Nope. We get to the ship, we shift the scene. He’ll be fine.”

“Sammy!”

“He’s a Rexos. He can heal...eventually.” Sammy touched her chest and camouflage fatigues covered her nakedness. She fired her fingers at the window and the glass shattered. The pressure difference sucked them straight out into the air.

Katarina looked back at the city as they fell. “It’s *all* crumbling!”

Sammy stared at the changing sky. “Everything is! I think something’s gone haywire in the program.” She twisted. “Arrow, activate rope!” Their course charter turned into a wire that reeled them in, attached to Sammy at the wrist.

Katarina held on to Sammy. “How are you doing all this?”

“We’re in the land of make-believe and wet dreams. We’ve flown to the second star to the right, and damn straight on till morning.” Sammy winked.

“What?”

Sammy grinned. “You get what you wish manifest, pussy darling. Who cares why, *it is!* Whoa fucktarts, it is raining men!” A slew of Storm Troopers plummeted in their direction.

Katarina grabbed her hip. “Shield!” A clear riot shield formed on her arm. She thrust it out and screaming Storm Troopers hit that and bounced off, free falling towards the clouds and planet.

“See, you got this.” Sammy wrapped her hands around the wire. “Double time, come on! Pull us in, baby!”

They whipped around the outside of Cloud City, drawn towards the Millennium Falcon. Katarina watched them near. “I thought we were going to *our* ship?”

“That *is* our ship.”

“No, it’s not.”

“I know my body when I see it, Beb.”

“Huh?”

“Just trust me.” Sammy kissed Katarina deeply and pressed her lips to her forehead. “This isn’t the end remember. We’ll do this again. I promise, Kitty.”

Katarina’s eyes widened as wind and debris whipped around them. “No! Don’t go!”

“I have to. I’m the ship, I got ’sponsibilities, Beb, and it’s time for us to wake up from this dreamland.” Sammy winked and dropped Katarina onto the platform. Sammy slammed into the hull and disappeared.

Katarina hit someone and rolled. She came to a stop, coughed, and stared at the sky. “Okay.”

Tasaneé darted to her side. “Thanks, that guy was getting on my nerves.” She helped Katarina to her feet.

“Huh?” Katarina looked down. Her shield had severed Boba Fett’s neck. She shook her arm out, dispersing the energy shield. “We have to get going.”

Tasaneé nodded. “I totally agree.”

“Where’s Ravil?”

Tasaneer pointed towards the distant growing ground. "She took off flying that way."
"Great." The pair ran on board the ship and went straight to the cockpit. Katarina tied herself in. "Sammy?"

The ship responded, "Present and accounted for."

"Do you work?"

"Righteously well." She flashed the lights. "Sort of."

"Sort of?!"

"I feel a little weird."

"Just get us off this platform please!"

"Zap me, electrotits. Your powers are a go as the outside universe has started making nice with this one."

"Does that mean the others are going to appear here?" Tasaneer stared at her hands and focused on making sparks.

"They should, but I think someone broke the game." The surface shuddered and their ship reformed around them. Sammy cackled. "One white vibrator ship to go please."

Tasaneer slapped the wall, sending a burst of electricity into the vessel. "Jumpstart!"

"Rockin'!" Sammy shot off the platform. "Katy-tat, you're driving me."

Tasaneer shivered and her outfit changed to her Fix-It garb. She gaped at her outfit. "Are we still in the program or not?"

"Who cares!" Katarina ran through the startup sequence.

Tasaneer hooked her belt to the wall, let out her line, and kicked towards the emergency exit in the cockpit. "Then we need to grab who we can."

"Darq!" Katarina flipped the ship over. "We need to get him!"

Tasaneer nodded. "What about Rake and Mica?"

Katarina looked over. "Them? Aren't you worried about Marx?"

Tasaneer laughed. "I don't want to insult him, Kat. He's a big cat."

Rake sliced a falling vent in two and kicked the pieces away. He called over his shoulder, "How's it going back there?"

Mica chopped at the walls, boring a hole through the city. "Just fucking peachy!"

Rake whirled and halved an incinerator that tumbled across the ceiling. "Why's everything falling at us!"

"I'm sure it's not all coming *right* at us."

"It sure as fuck feels like it! Goddamn it!"

"We are facing down." Mica stabbed and cut through a wall with his lightsaber. "We got light!"

Rake dropped down the hole after him. "Get us out!"

Mica kicked the floor, and both men were sucked outwards into the open air outside the city. They slipped past its outer surface as they dropped. Rake grabbed Mica's hand. He tossed his lightsaber and caught on to a metal bar, halting their fall. The lightsaber sliced past Mica's right forearm.

"Shit!" Mica screamed.

The lightsaber missed him and plummeted to the world below.

"Well." Rake grinned grimly as wind whipped around his face. "You still have that hand; this can't be all bad now can it."

Mica kicked at open air. "The city is falling on our heads!"

A piece of cloud smashed into Rake's face. He shook it off. "Correction, the sky is falling."

"What are we supposed to do?"

Rake grimaced against the pain in his arm. "I was thinking we'd hang out for a while and chill." He hauled Mica up. "Grab on to something! My limbs are going numb, you fat British bastard. I'm always carrying the weight in this partnership!"

Mica tucked his lightsaber into his belt and held on to the metal with both hands. Cloud City creaked and broke in half. Mica looked past Rake. "Oh God! Oh hell!"

Rake looked over his shoulder as their half of Cloud City sheared off and dropped to the planet below. "Well *that* sucks balls."

Marx slammed Vader into a dissolving wall.

Vader shrugged off the blow as if he had hit confetti. He rushed Marx with his lightsaber drawn.

Marx tossed his lightsaber and flicked out his claws. He hooked his feet to the shifting and cracking floor. He sliced at Vader's suit, ripping off chunks.

Tasane's voice came over his arm radio. "Hey, where you at?"

"Killing." Marx purred.

"Well, okay, go find Darq. Not asking by the way, telling. We're getting out of this place."

"The Rexos." Marx nodded and sniffed. "Our abilities are coming back."

"Yeah they are and we aren't sure how safe we are anymore, so hunt him down."

Marx ripped off Vader's right arm and flipped the Dark Lord away. "Are you safe?"

"On the ship with Kat."

Marx nodded. "Then I will find the Rexos."

"Be safe."

Marx grinned. "As to you." He snarled and pounced on Vader. Marx put his hands to Vader's helmet, savoring the seconds left. He twisted and ripped his head off. Marx swallowed a mouthful of his blood. He smashed the head into the floor.

Marx licked his lips and sniffed the air. He oriented on the only Rexos around. The room around him collapsed as the stress became too great. Marx had a moment to wish that he still had his tail, and then he was off. He ran and leapt across falling debris, his long legs and hooks allowing him to jump from falling piece to falling piece.

Marx scaled a crumbling wall and raced to a semi stable platform. He bellowed and cocked his ears, listening. He received a faint, "Oh, hello there."

Marx oriented on the sound and bolted up the side of the falling city. He bounded past screaming actors and ships cut in two. He ripped out a metal pole as he ran. Marx spotted a flash of gold and yellow. He cast his arm back and hurled the pole like a javelin.

Marx followed the metal, landing on Darq as the javelin impaled the boy in the chest midway down a wall.

Darq smiled. "Thank you, I was slipping. It's hard without legs, but I think I might be healing."

"I noticed. We're getting our abilities back and our regular bodies it seems." Marx ripped the javelin out and tossed it. "Hold on to me, your mom is coming with the ship."

Darq stretched and his spinal cord roped around Marx's waist. Marx spoke into his radio. "Darq acquired."

"Where are you?" Katarina sounded frantic.

“I do not know.” Marx climbed. “But I am going up.”

“I see them.” Sammy whistled. “Oooh! Darq’s looking like a boy-sized face hugger with that tail action.”

Darq smiled drowsily. “It is my spine, not a tail.”

“Your *spine!*” Katarina shouted into the headset. “You’re hurt!”

“I am regaining my flesh and the loss of my legs is taking its toll, but the weight is less on Marx.”

Marx smiled. “Do not worry about me. Grow your legs, I can carry that too.”

Darq’s head rolled back. “I think I’ll wait until I am sitting down, I’m tired.”

Marx looked down. Blood streamed out of Darq in a steady flow. “Cut your blood off, Darq.”

Darq yawned. “Wha...”

“Stop your bleeding, Rexos! You have lost your focus! Regain it.”

Darq snapped to attention and stopped his bleeding. He glanced down. “I must have lost more than I thought. My head is fuzzy.”

Marx saw the ship approach. “We need blood from the medical bay.”

Sammy whistled. “I’ll have my bot wheel that shit up, head for the cockpit.”

The ship hovered below them. Tasanee waved from an open door. “Jump!”

Marx gestured her back into the ship. He calculated the distance and leapt. Marx wrapped his arms around Darq and plummeted, dropping through the doorway of the ship and into the cockpit.

Tसानee slammed the door shut behind them and locked it. She slapped Marx on the back. “Good job. Now Rake and Mica.”

Katarina oriented the ship and pulled away from the city. She barrel rolled as pieces fell all around them. “Priority is on safe escape at the moment. Those two will have to cope. I don’t even know if I can get *us* out of this.”

Katarina shoved the controls forward, putting the ship into a dive. The passengers stared at the shifting mass of the planet beneath them. Katarina ground her teeth. “What is going on down there?”

Mica stared at the fast approaching planet as the pair dropped in free fall. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

“No!” Rake squeezed his eyes shut and held on to his friend. “Just make it work!”

Mica put both hands out in front of him. “At least if we fail I doubt we’ll know about it.”

“Not comforting!”

Mica took a deep breath. He recalled the force abilities Ipso had granted him. He pushed back against the earth as they raced towards it. The effect slowed their fall. Mica concentrated and did it again.

Rake opened an eye. “We’re not dead!”

“Not yet at least, but we still have a city behind us.”

Rake looked over his shoulder. “Oh yeah.”

Mica pushed again and the pair stopped several dozen meters above the grass. He pointed. “Ravil.”

Rake whipped his head around. “Go there! Go there!”

“I don’t really have any control over that.”

“Sure you do.” Rake jerked on Mica’s arm. “Push!”

They shot sideways. Mica windmilled his arms. “Stop it!”

They spiraled and rolled. They hit the ground and cart wheeled across the grass. Mica landed on his back, Rake on his stomach. Cloud City crashed in the air above them, but its mass dissolved a handful of meters away, feeding into the new planet creation.

Mica and Rake looked up. They’d come down behind Ravil and Ips0, but neither girl noticed their presence. The Langone pair stared at something out of view.

Rake pushed himself up. Around them, a city shot out of the grass. White marble and brown clay tile mixed with silver and steel. High soaring walls glowed white; large glass windows let light into the inner buildings. Flags sprouted out of turrets and flapped as a breeze formed in the new atmosphere. The city appeared built for an endless summer.

Mica sat back to back with Rake as people walked into existence. A market formed around them; Ampyr were happy and excited. Mica frowned. “Are we supposed to be on the First Planet?”

“With those around?” Rake pointed to a troupe of Pyros juggling fire. A Jungay couple and a Rexos family watched on, smiling. Ampyr stood beside them, no animosity between them. Everyone was happy.

Rake stood up and gazed at the city. Ravil and Ips0 stood in an adjacent courtyard full of a cheering mix of individuals. Rake pulled Mica along with him. “I want to see this.”

“What is it?”

“Ravil’s memory I think, or what her memory is *supposed* to be.”

Ravil stared at children as they ran past her with streamers in their hands.

Ips0 eyed the individuals and scooted over to Ravil. “Do you remember any of this?”

“No, do you see me?” Ravil looked around.

“Nope.”

An Ampyr male dressed in gold and black stood on a podium. He clapped his hands and silence descended in the courtyard. The man smiled. “We are here to celebrate our fifteenth year of existing on this colony. We have shown it a success.” The crowd all throughout the city cheered as his voice bounced across speakers.

The man called for silence. “Our sister cities across this planet are doing the same, so let us raise a glass in honor of our—”

The air before him buzzed, and the man stepped back, frowning. Shadows pooled and rippled out of the floor. A child stepped into the light...a girl with white hair and red round eyes, wearing a black bodysuit.

Ravil stared at her younger self. The little girl appeared not much more than five years old. Ravil gaped. “Is that...?”

“You.” Ips0 nodded.

The girl appeared emotionless. Little Ravil sniffed and listened to the ambient noise. She cocked her head, regarding those around her. Her head swiveled and she stared at the man who had spoken. “Prince Ker.”

The man nodded. “Yes?”

Little Ravil looked up to him. “Your warrant is served and sentence delivered by order of your father, Emperor Zoph.”

The blood drained out of his face. “*Wait.*”

She stepped back and held out her hand. “Sentence to commence.”

“No! *Wait!*”

The girl opened her palm.

Prince Ker turned to his family. "Evacuate *now!*"

Little Ravil looked up. "You cannot escape your sentence."

Prince Ker ignored her. "Go! Get out!" He lunged for Little Ravil. "Stop this!"

The girl darted out of reach, her form shifting, immaterial. She clapped her palms and a black diamond appeared. Little Ravil set it in the air. "Focus point one delivered."

Prince Ker dropped to his knees. "Why are they doing this to us?"

The girl touched her diamond and it pulsed. "Message involves disobedience, a third warning delivered, final notice already given."

Prince Ker begged for time. "We have done nothing wrong! Stop this! You are just a child! Please understand what it is they ask you to do!"

"Irrelevant."

"You will destroy our city!"

Little Ravil stepped back, and the shadows pooled around her feet. She travelled and the four that watched travelled with her. The girl jumped into a much smaller city, a quaint town.

Ravil grew lightheaded. Couples danced. Players strummed out a melody, and the twisting notes haunted her with familiarity. Trees shed their flower petals as a breeze carried their scent on the wind. Pain settled in her chest, a mix of sorrow and dread. Ravil stared at the town and whispered, "No."

Little Ravil appeared amidst Ampyr and Jungay children; they played a game with colored ribbons. The children saw her, a girl their size, someone new, a friend. They ran up to her. "Who are you?"

Another smiled. "Where did you come from?"

A little boy grabbed Ravil's hand. "Do you want to play with us?"

Little Ravil stared at her limb. "Interference with method detected. Removing unclean threat." Her arm grew dark and she blasted a ray of darkness into the town, obliterating it and the children in an instant.

Behind Little Ravil, Ravil dropped to her knees in horror.

Little Ravil continued unperturbed as those left alive wailed as half of everyone they knew had died. Little Ravil clapped her hands, and a diamond formed in the air. "Focus point two delivered."

Ravil got to her feet and lunged at her smaller self. "Stop!" She fell through the image and turned to leap again. "Stop it, damn it!"

Little Ravil travelled to a third town. The capitol city had warned this one. Soldiers opened fire as she appeared on a rooftop. Little Ravil threw up her hand and a shield of white light encircled her; the blasts had no effect.

Little Ravil clapped her hands, forming a third diamond. "Focus point three delivered." She stared blankly ahead. Seconds ticked by and she appeared soulless and dead. Her head snapped up. "Time given has passed, no recalls present. Commencing."

Ravil lunged for her figure. "Stop this now! *Please!*"

Little Ravil placed her hands together as if praying. She touched her fingertips to her forehead. "Activating engine, Ravilaea. Royal override confirmed."

The diamond's darkness pierced the planet and met the beams of the other two. From it, she called her engine forth. Shadows swept around Little Ravil. She tapped and twisted, manipulating the energy, gauging her strength.

Little Ravil flicked her wrists.

Ravil pulled her hair and cried.

The black hole roared to life. The planet tore itself to pieces in a matter of seconds.

For Little Ravil and Ravil...time halted. Little Ravil held the core of the engine to her chest. Her eyes opened wide. Her lips twitched in surprise, confusion, and finally agony.

Every sensation and memory, every tiny fraction of life, each thought and every dream of those that had lived seconds before, poured through the engine and from the engine into the girl. Little Ravil threw her head back and screamed with the voice of millions.

The sound and the knowledge ate at her mind like acid. Her nose, ears, and eyes bled. Little Ravil stiffened as her body went into shock. She stilled, blank with a whitewash of sensation. The girl floated amongst the embers and remnants; the planet reduced to ash. Its existence and sum total burnt in to the mind of a child.

She hung for time without end, floating in space; her body flickered with light half in this place, half in-between. She gazed sightlessly and lived lives. Before this, she had no soul of her own, now she had millions.

Her engine died slow, its movements stilled, and as it wound down, the space of the memory shrunk. The world grew smaller. The lights dimmed.

Blood dribbled out of her mouth as energy escaped her lips. Her fingers curled in claws. Her muscles twitched in agony. She died countless times over and she knew each one, she could say each name, recite their history, and recount their final seconds as she had obliterated their home.

A ship flashed into being and the memory shrank to a smaller place. She shrieked, purging the souls, throwing them into the engine and out of her. She stared, numb once more, empty again.

The girl was collected and brought inside. Soldiers placed her in the cockpit and men, with faces obscured by her height, congratulated her. They patted her on the head like a pet.

“It worked!”

“It really is her then.”

“It’s astounding. Has he seen her?”

“No, he is coming.”

A man walked in wearing red and black. His features were fuzzy as Ravil had paid him no attention at the time. His hands were ice white, pale as death. He stood before her and placed his hand upon her scalp. The image flickered as her engine twitched and stalled.

The man rubbed her cheek. “Ravilaea, I’m sorry.”

Ipsos jerked in confusion at hearing his voice.

Little Ravil blinked and looked up at him in recognition. She took his hand and got to her feet. Her breath came out sounding like a gag. She spat blood and crumpled over.

The memory went out like a candle.

Only the stars remained.

Ravil rocked on her bottom.

Ipsos burst into tears.

Mica held his head.

Rake reached for Ravil, but could not make his feet work.

Grass appeared in the darkness as a field formed. City walls rose up unevenly from the earth. They reformed to replay the memory.

Ravil slammed her hand down onto the grass. “Stop! Stop! *Stop!*” The engine listened and obeyed, leaving them standing on chunks of floating debris.

Ravil threw up over the edge of the platform she sat on. She heaved until nothing more would come up and still she gagged. Ravil clawed at the grass and screamed into it.

Ipsos came to. She looked around and back to Ravil. Ipsos leapt from stone to stone. She stood at Ravil's side and shook her head. "I do not need to see what else is gone. This life you lead is not worth remembering."

Ravil turned and reached for Ipsos. "Ipsos, help me."

Ipsos pulled her into a hug. "Someone has done something terrible to you, but I won't let it define you and neither should you." She pulled a string from the air and spoke softly, "I send you to sleep." Ipsos brushed back Ravil's hair. "My friend, I will see you again among the stars and you shall be at peace. May light guide you to the nursery."

Ravil went silent as the phrase calmed her. She closed her eyes.

Ipsos wrapped the light around both wrists and stepped behind Ravil. She slipped her hands over Ravil's head and took a deep breath. "Sleep until the Teller wakes you." She pulled.

Rake slammed into Ipsos. "No!" The white thread sliced through his right hand, severing two of his fingers. Rake blocked out the pain and kept his footing between Ravil and Ipsos. "What are you doing to her?"

Ipsos stared at him in shock. "I am saving her from this."

"You're *killing* her!"

Ipsos pointed at Ravil. "She cannot continue. You saw, you all saw what she did! She must go back *now!*"

Rake's chest heaved. "You try it and I will *kill* you!"

Ipsos set her jaw. "This is not your affair. This is Langone business, and I have a duty to restore her."

"By killing her!"

"She is Ravilaea the Pure, but after that she is pure no longer! She cannot go on like this! She cannot be! She must be ended to be pure once more!"

"Fuck all of that shit whatever it means!" Rake snarled. "I don't care what she did! No one is touching her!"

"You have no choice in the matter!" Ipsos recreated her pole-arm. "She has a duty to our people, a role to fulfill! She is not the Devourer; death dealing and soul eating are *not* her role. She remains free of all things and so it has *always* been! She must forget this!" Ipsos shook her head. "I do not wish to kill you, but between your death and the death of my people, I must choose my people."

"Bring it!" Rake rolled up his sleeves.

"Rake," Ipsos pleaded. "I do not want to hurt you or her. Understand, I am trying to save her essence!"

"And I am saving her body, her mind, her heart!"

"Those are meaningless things to a Langone!"

"They are not! She is my friend and I am not going to let you hurt her!"

Ravil regained her footing. Her features lost their spark. She darted away from the pair and stood on a small rock, her eyes fixed to where the center of the planet had been.

Ipsos set her jaw. "Do not interfere again, or I will take more than your hand as payment." She jumped to Ravil's side and ducked her head. "Princess, let me—"

Ravil backhanded Ipsos, tossing her away. When she looked up, something else stared back at them. Darkness burned around her, and her eyes glowed molten. "I am no princess. I am not pure, I am not innocent, and I am not good! I am evil!" Ravil screeched as pain melded with

madness. “I am a monster!”

Ipsos ran back. “Let me release you! You can be re—”

“No!” The force of Ravil’s scream sent Ipsos back. “I do not wish that! I wish an end now! Forever!”

Ipsos touched her pole-arm and sharpened the point. “I am sorry, but this must happen.”

Rake caught Ipsos; he picked up the pole-arm and tossed it away. “Ravil, run!”

Ravil stared at him blankly. “I must make right what I’ve done.” She weaved her hands in the air. Darkness and light flickered around her fingers.

Ipsos watched her move and she recognized the patterns. She shouted, “Stop her! Stop! Stop it, Ravilaea!” She jumped to Ravil’s side and grabbed her wrists. “No!”

Ravil closed her eyes, ignoring Ipsos’s attacks. “Engine, begin detach—”

“No! Ipsos *override!* Stop detach on *my* command!”

A third female voice joined theirs. *Override dismissed. Proper authority absent.*

Rake and Mica looked up towards the sky, searching for the source of the voice.

Ipsos pulled on Ravil’s hands. “Do not let it go! You don’t understand what that will do! Listen to me. I am the Engineer. Don’t you remember? Ravil, you think you’re getting rid of it, but you’re not! Let me take it over. I’ll fix this! Please Ravil, listen to me! Transfer your engine to my care; do *not* let it go uncontrolled!”

Ravil kept her eyes on the center of the engine. “No, it is my engine.”

“Hey!” Rake grabbed Ipsos by the arm and lifted her away. “What the fuck are you doing now?”

“She is going to release the engine!” Ipsos was frantic, her movements fast and uncoordinated. “She is going to break the bond she has to it!”

“Good!” Rake smiled at Ravil. “Good riddance!”

“No! It will rage uncontrolled! It is her engine, she *must not* do this! It will kill us!”

“Then we’ll show up in a new scene or something. Just let her do it.”

“No, you idiot! This isn’t just the game anymore. What she’s doing, it’s bigger than that!”

Ravil sighed and touched her chest. “This burden I release. This evil I cease. Detach and commence self-destruct.”

“No, Ravil!” Ipsos shrieked in horror. “You cannot do this to us!”

Ravil sagged as the connection between her and the device severed. With it, the last of her fight seeped out. She fell back and the darkness passed from her features. The center of the anomaly bucked and writhed. Unconstrained with no focal point it moved like a snake.

Ipsos blasted Rake into Mica with a burst of light. “Ravil, stop it!”

Ravil slipped into catatonia and dropped to her knees, waiting for death to come find her.

Ipsos slapped Ravil across the face. “Wake up! Please! You are not just killing yourself!”

Rake shoved Mica into Ipsos and picked Ravil up. “Come on we’re getting out of here. Where is the ship? Our real ship.”

Ravil rolled from his grip and dove for the churning lights below.

“Hey!” Rake bounded after her. “Ravil stop! Wait! What are you doing?”

Ipsos turned in Mica’s grip and grabbed his shoulders. “Get out of here!”

Mica shook his head. “I am not leaving my friends!”

“They are as good as dead.” She gestured towards space and their ship. “Flee! I will make you a way through.”

“No.” Mica grabbed her hand. “Come with me.”

“I cannot! I must fix this!” She disappeared from his grip and floated above him. Ipsos

recovered her pole-arm. She twirled it in the air and as it moved, lights and patterns grew in the space around her.

Mica stepped back as the air caught fire around the tiny girl.

Ips0 did not remember her home, her tools, or her last thoughts before disappearing, but she did remember the dread of emergency and her body acted on instinct. Ips0 stabbed the sky. “Summon Council!”

Five translucent rings of neon blue formed in the burning air between her and Ravil’s engine. She pressed her hands to the light. She took a deep breath and yelled, “Ips0!”

The rings expanded, dwarfing her in size. They spun in a blur and stopped in the air. A symbol appeared above her head and matched the symbol on the third, middle ring. Ips0’s hands fluttered frantically. “Council, *respond.*”

The female voice they’d heard earlier replied: *Identity verified, Ips0 the Engineer. The Science ring is now active.*

The active ring flipped and turned level, at ninety degrees from the other four rings. Its color shifted to green. The Science ring took on mass and lines formed in the light, appearing like luminous spider webs bound in glass. Ips0’s name materialized above her head. Dozens of names appeared around the ring, to her right, Nox, to her left, Viro.

Ips0 stared as rows of keys inscribed in light appeared before her eyes. Her eyes moved frantically taking it all in. She stood at her station and hissed. “What do I do now?”

Council responded: *Command not understood.*

Ravil’s engine churned to life and bursts of darkness destroyed chunks of rock. Ips0 panicked. “Emergency override! Shut that down!”

I am sorry, Ips0. You lack proper authority.

“Fuck!”

Command not understood.

“Help me!” Ips0 smashed her hands against her controls.

Command not understood.

Ips0 wrung her hands. “Council, su... summon help! Summon *Saroi!*”

Saroi is not available.

“Summon Mure!”

Mure is not available.

“Summon *anyone!*”

There is no one within range.

Ips0 scratched at the light. “How can *no one* be in range?”

Ips0, the current location of this instance of Council is within Ravil's engine.

Ips0 glared at the deteriorating heart of the construct. The area twisted, in flux as rifts opened between space and the in between. “I’m aware of that!”

Communications to and from this anomaly are not functioning.

“Fuck!”

Command not understood. Ips0, I must warn you, with the current rate of destabilization, the tear between spaces will begin to expand exponentially. I suggest you evacuate the area immediately.

Ips0 nodded, in tears. “I know!”

Mica put his arms around her. “If we can go then we’re leaving now!” He waved the ship closer.

“No, I can’t.” Ips0 elbowed him and keyed into her controls. “I *can’t*, Mica.”

“I heard what this...” Mica stared at the light. “*Computer* said. We need to go!”

“We can’t!” Ipsos looked up at him. “It won’t stop here, the rifts are ever-expanding.” She wiped her eyes and threw herself back at the light. “Council, engage emergency engine containment measures.”

The ring responded: *Ipsos, that will not be successful for long.*

“But it will give me time! Do it!”

Understood. The rings spun and a burst of light encased the center of the engine and shot outwards.

Mica’s eyes followed the light. “What are you doing?”

Katarina held on to her controls as their ship rocked in the wave of light. She looked at what Ipsos worked on, the image displayed on their monitors. “What the fucking fuck is *that!*”

Sammy beeped. “Little tyke has done some Navi stuff. She’s roping it around the black hole weapon thing.”

Darq put his hands to his legs as they finished growing. “Did that have to do with the pretend planet blowing up?”

Marx held Tasanee as they slammed into a wall. “Can you not calm this ship at all?”

“I am trying! Nothing is working right. The computers don’t make sense!” Katarina fought with the controls. “Sammy, what is our status?”

“We’re still inside this crazy place. I’m seeing some holes open out to space, but they’re too small for my fat butt to get through.”

“I thought this was just a game.” Tasanee held her bruised ribs.

The ship groaned as a force pulled it towards the engine. Katarina engaged the fuel cells for an extra boost. “What is going on?”

“We’re getting sucked into the center.” Sammy sighed. “Mica and the rest better do something, or this is going to get unpleasant.”

Marx pulled Tasanee into a chair and strapped her in. “Where are Rake and Ravil? Why are they not aiding us?”

“They dropped off my scanners.” Sammy growled. “As far as the ship’s concerned, they don’t exist here anymore.”

Rake hung from a floating piece of turf the size of a car. He fixed his grip on Ravil’s hand despite being down two digits. “You stop this right now!”

Ravil hung from his bleeding hand and stared into the churning depths of what she’d made. There was nothing between her and oblivion. “Rake, let me go,” she whispered.

“No! Now come on!”

Ravil tried to pull her hand from his. “I have to go.”

“I may not be a freaking genius, but if you go in that you will *die!*”

“I know.” Ravil stared at it. “That’s the point.”

Rake gnashed his teeth. “You promised me you wouldn’t do this suicide shit anymore!” He wrapped his legs around her and got his grip back around her wrist. “You promised!”

“Rake, what’s the point.” She looked up at him and her cheeks were wet with tears. “I *murdered a planet!*”

“I don’t care!” Desperation made his voice crack. “I don’t! You were a child following orders! Some sick bastard made you do that!”

“There was no one there but me!”

“That we could see. How do we even know you knew what you were doing? Maybe you thought it was a game!”

“I obliterated children!” Ravil stared at her free hand. “I killed them, and they just wanted to play with me.” She broke down into sobs. “Let me die, Rake. I don’t want to live with it!”

“No fucking way! We’re going to live and we’re going to find out who made you do that and then we’re going to kill *them*.” He hauled on her hand. “Come on let’s get back to the ship!”

Ravil shook her head. “Please let me go, Rake. Ipso is right, I shouldn’t exist anymore.”

“She is a goddamn child.” Rake’s eyes flashed. “She doesn’t get to make decisions about who lives or who dies!”

“But I did!” Ravil threw her hand out. “I killed *millions* of people, Rake. Millions!”

Rake closed his eyes and pulled. “Just shut up about that!”

“No! You look me in the eyes!”

Rake looked down. “Fine!”

“I killed people!”

“So have I!” Rake pulled her up another inch. “Big deal!”

“I killed innocents!”

“Yeah, well, I probably have too!”

“I doubt that!” Ravil punched at his leg. “Let me go!”

“Fuck no!” Rake got his hand under her armpit and pulled her into his arms. He ignored her hits and crawled on top of the grass and dirt. He pinned her to the ground. Rake breathed hard. “You are not going anywhere! Got it!”

Ravil turned her head away and refused to look at him.

Rake grabbed her chin and forced her face to his. With the touch, he cemented their connection between pilot and Navigator and feelings flooded between them. His voice came out a growl. “We’re in a war, shit happens. Terrible things get done to innocent people, but if you think for a second that you were not used by someone you are dead fucking wrong. I *know* that Calpsan wanted you to do the same fucking thing to the First Planet he said so! Both sides want to use you as a weapon; well guess what, one of them did already. And you know what, *that’s* what’s evil! Making a child kill people is fucked! But you can’t blame yourself! You can’t or you’ll never get past it.”

“I don’t want to get past it, Rake. I *shouldn’t* be able to get past it. I should suffer lifetimes for what I’ve done.”

Rake shook her. “Stop it! Stop it! Stop this now!”

“Kill me.”

“Ravil!” Tears filled his eyes. “Please!”

“Let me go!”

Rake hugged her. “I can’t lose you! Live for me at least, please! I love you!”

Ravil swallowed hard and closed her eyes. He did not say these things to make her feel better. He said what he felt to be the truth. Rake didn’t blame her for what had happened. He didn’t think she was a monster or a terrible person.

Ravil breathed him in and his presence joined the block of pain that sat in her chest. She spoke softly, “I don’t want to hurt you too.”

Rake hugged her. “Then please come back to the ship with me. We can leave this place and I promise you...I’ll find whoever did this and I’ll chop him into pieces! I’ll obliterate *his* fucking planet and see how he likes that!” He kissed her cheeks. “I promise.”

Tears seeped out from under her eyelids. “I feel this, I know, but how can you bear to kiss me? To touch me, to look upon me. I am not pure.”

“Fuck that purity shit. Our entire crew is a mix of sick, twisted, perverts. I can’t think of a single person on board who has his or her hands clean of deaths, except Darq and he just hasn’t been alive long enough to give it a good go. Look at Evgeniy! And Marx, Marx has probably *eaten* children and we all love him, Tasanee fucks him!”

Ravil sobbed into Rake’s shirt. “I—”

Rake kissed her hair and rocked her. “Just, just don’t think about it. You don’t need to think about it right now, Beb. All we need to do is go back to the ship and leave this place. You can help us save Oro and Danny; you can *save* people! You’ve been saving people for as long as I’ve known you. You are a *good* person.”

Ravil went limp beneath him. “No one will want to be around me after this. They will kill me themselves.”

“Only Mica and I were there and between you and I, play on his Catholic leanings and he’ll forgive you in an instant. Make him give you confession or something, that’ll wipe the slate clean as far as he’s concerned.” Rake pulled her into his lap. “Now let’s go.”

“You’re not going to tell anyone about what I did?”

“Why should I?” Rake wrapped his arms around her. “None of their business. Now, where is the ship?”

The engine far beneath them pulsed red and white, then sank back into darkness. The shockwave rocked the tiny pieces of stone. Rake looked over the edge. “That don’t look good.”

Ravil convulsed and her eyes dulled as the energy soared through her. The stored memories and feelings washed over her senses and pulled her down into them. Her head rolled limply to the side.

Rake picked her up. “Ravil? Ravil!” He jumped to his feet and glared at the sky. “Come on, Sammy! Where the fuck are you?”

Marx sank his claws into the cockpit floor and held on as the ship vibrated between competing forces. “What now?”

“I don’t know!” Katarina fought with the controls. “I can’t do anything!”

Sammy hissed. “We’re getting smacked around like a housewife. I don’t think the ship can take much more of this shit.”

Tसानее leaned over the monitors. “Baby Navi is doing something again!”

An expanded shield raced up from Ipso’s controls.

Katarina angled the ship and the light sheared through the metal and plastic. Half the ship dissolved lengthwise, opening the cockpit into the air. Katarina froze in shock.

Sammy swore. “Holy Moley! Good-bye laws of physics. We are still flying!”

“Shit!” Tasanee grabbed on to her disintegrating controls. “Shit!”

Katarina spared a glance for Tasanee, beyond her there was nothing but air. Katarina threw out her arm. “Grab on!”

“I’m trying!” Tasanee’s chair broke and the straps snapped. She dropped towards the planet.

Marx grabbed her wrist and dug his heel hooks into the ship. They came to a halt at the lip of the opening; the pair hung upside down. Marx locked his claws around her and pulled her up hand by hand. The ship rocked and one of his heel hooks snapped off.

Marx hissed, but ignored the pain. “Climb up me!” He roped his hair and dangled it by her

fingers. “Climb.”

Tasanee stared at his hair. “It will hurt you—”

“*Climb!*”

Tasanee grabbed the locks. The velvety material snaked around her wrists. Marx put his hands to her feet and shoved her towards the ship, the pain blinding him and driving him onwards.

Forces hit the disabled vessel, and Tasanee scraped at Marx’s legs. “Crap!”

A whip of bone wrapped around her wrist and snaked down to hold on to Marx. Darq fused his arms into the ship. His rebuilt legs ended in bone spurs, which he dug into the floor. The pieces pierced the ship hull and one broke out to wrap up the pair.

Darq clenched his teeth, his fangs lengthening. “Just stay calm, no yelling right now please.” He reeled them one link at a time. “Everything will be fine. Flowers, flowers, flowers.”

Katarina reached for her seat belt. “Darq!”

“Do not help me, Mom!” Darq snarled. “You’ll endanger yourself and I cannot handle the stress right now!”

Katarina turned her gaze elsewhere. She stared out the gap. Below them, Mica gestured frantically at Ipsos. Katarina glared. “Whatever Mica is doing down there, he’d better hurry!”

Sweat poured down Ipsos’s face. She had her hands imbedded in the panels before her. Light leeches from her body into the Science ring. “I don’t have strength for this. Leave, Mica, and run!”

“You said it doesn’t matter where I go!” Mica helped her stand.

“You’ll have a chance.” Ipsos sent off another burst of emergency shielding.

“Can’t you do anything else?”

“I don’t remember how!” Ipsos clenched her teeth. “I don’t remember what I am supposed to do! I have no one to help me, and Council cannot think for itself. Leave!”

Mica put his hands on her shoulders. “I know it isn’t much, but I’m staying and I’ll help you however I can.”

Ipsos felt bolstered and nodded, selfishly thankful she wasn’t alone.

Mica closed his eyes and prayed aloud, “*Who knows us to be set in the midst of such great perils, that, by reason of the weakness of our nature, we cannot stand upright—*”

“Stand? Stand...support!” Ipsos’s eyes shot open. “Highways! Thank you, Mica!”

Mica opened his eyes. “What did I do?”

Ipsos chewed on her tongue. “Council! Activate outpost highways. Center on—”

Council replied: *Unable to process command.*

“What?” Ipsos flinched. “Why not?”

All highways except emergency routes have been shut down.

“On whose command!”

Ipsos the Engineer.

“What?” Ipsos twitched and stared at her hands. “No, I didn’t! That’s not true.”

Ipsos shut down all highways.

“Open them, Council!”

Ipsos ordered me not to.

“I am Ipsos. I am saying open them!”

Ipsos ordered me to disregard all future requests regarding activation of highways.

Ips0 slammed her hands on her console. "Council, do what I say!"

I cannot understand the command.

Ips0 raised her arm to punch her console.

Mica grabbed her wrist. "Anger will get you nothing."

Ips0 calmed and her thoughts moved rapidly. "Council, how many emergency highways are still operational?"

Ten.

"Can I influence those?"

Yes.

Ips0 grinned. "Reroute the closest two."

Engaging locks.

"Move them here. Connect both and give me a ring."

Understood.

Ips0 blasted the engine with another wave of light from Council. The engine pulsed and expanded, breaking through the shields she'd thrown up. She eyed the writhing mass of darkness and light as glowing rifts opened and closed into space, and passageways looped and doubled over into each other. "We do not have much time, and thank you for the inspiration."

Mica shrugged. "You're welcome I guess." He looked beyond her. "Where did Rake and Ravil go?"

"I don't know. I don't have time to think about it." Ips0 lifted her hands into the air. "That ship of yours is in the way." She flicked her wrist and pushed the ship back from them.

Mica did a double take and pointed. "The ship is *half gone!* What's happened to them?"

"They shouldn't have gotten this close!"

"It not their fault! This is supposed to be a game!"

"Well, it's not anymore and that doesn't matter!" Light filled the air. Mica shielded his eyes. Ips0 grinned. "Thank you!" Two golden streams of energy circled above, dwarfing them many times over. Ips0 put her hands to her dashboard. "Council, link highways."

Council burned blue and sent a pulse to the glowing currents. They melded, forming one massive golden ring of light.

Mica gaped. "What is *that?*"

"A Langone highway." Ips0 kept her eyes on the engine. "Fall and decrease size, increase density."

The golden mass descended and shrank, pulling the light tighter, forming solid bands of radiation. The highway shuddered and the noise of its changes deafened. Mica cupped his hands around Ips0's ear and shouted, "Rake and Ravil are down there!"

Ips0 strained. "I can't stop it now it's already in the pull!"

Rake carried Ravil in his arms. He hopped between floating rock chunks. "You know it'd help if you zipped us around."

Ravil stared blankly.

Rake ran and leapt. "Yeah, I know. I'm totally a whiny bitch. I should be happy about using my legs, I need the exercise."

Rake slipped on a patch of grass. He wobbled on the sheer edge of a rock and regained his balance. "King of close calls, dominator of death is I!"

A band of darkness ripped up from the engine below and obliterated the platform to his left. Rake backed up as a spike of light followed it and took out another rock. Rake held Ravil

tighter. “Things are going from bad to worse, Beb. Ha! Story of our lives right!”

Ravil remained in catatonia, her body limp and non-responsive.

Light as bright as a sun cast their shadows onto the rocks at their feet. Rake looked up. “What is *that*?”

The highway groaned as it bent to wrap around the engine’s core and seal it. As the surface of the space road touched rocks, they dissolved. Rake gulped. “Great, now *we’re* the cream filling in this shit cookie. Goddamn it, I don’t want to be crushed! Or dissolved!” He looked to Ravil. “I don’t want *you* to be crushed either, what is wrong with you! Wake up!”

A thread of light pierced the stone at his feet. Rake danced away. “Crap in a sack this sucks!”

A whir buzzed by. Rake looked up. Half the ship flew by high above him. He waved. “Hey we’re down here! Hey!”

The ship passed on, unable to hear or see him. Rake cradled Ravil. “Beb, I don’t think I can get us out of this.”

A blast of dark from below destroyed another tier of rocks. The light from above encroached on their position, consuming whatever it touched. Rake looked between their options for death. “This is by far the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

Rake leapt off the stone and plummeted towards the engine’s core. He kept his eyes open, wanting to see what would be the death of him. Ribbons of blue lit up the air around him; they were the same lines Ravil used to travel. As he fell, he had nothing to do but think. He remembered Katarina berating him, Darq’s accusations, the fact that even now Ravil glowed in the dark. Rake looked from her to his hands. “Well what the fuck. Why not?”

Rake grabbed on to a glowing strand. The pair dropped into the blue light of the in-between. He took a deep breath. “I’d like to leave—*ohshitohfuck! Goddamn it all to hell!*”

The pair rocketed out of the anomaly. Rake held on to the light and kept his arm around Ravil. They flew without control, with no sense of distance. Stars zipped past in an instant, solar systems and asteroid fields only blurs in his vision. They passed into the cold dark expanse between this galaxy and the next.

Rake shouted, “Stop! For the love of God *stop!*”

They halted. Rake’s heart beat rapidly. He struggled to breathe. All around him, strings ran in crisscrossing patterns, level lines that connected everything to everywhere else. He gulped. “I think we went too far.” As the words left his mouth, the light ripped them back the way they’d come. Their line intersected others, and they flew down a branch, passing through planets.

Rake kept his grip on Ravil. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Ravil, save me! I’m not cut out for this shit!”

Ravil blinked awake and took in their surroundings. She had barely enough strength to raise her hand to his face, but she did. “Calm down.” Their travel slowed. Ravil eyed his hand on the line. “You’ve adapted?”

Rake grinned in hysteria. “Look at me! Isn’t it neat? Can you take over please? I want to throw up and crawl under a bed.”

“I have nothing in me.” She pressed her hand to his chest. “You can do this.”

“No, I can’t! I have no idea what I’m doing! I’m an idiot!”

“Rake.” Her voice was scratchy. “Shut up and focus on where we are heading.”

“The ship?” They blasted off in another direction. Rake held on. “See what I mean? It’s crazy! I have no idea what I’m doing!”

Ravil closed her eyes. "Focus on one destination."

"The ship?"

"If that is where we head then yes, the ship. You will think of nothing else."

Rake's thoughts narrowed as Ravil clamped down on his thoughts and feelings. He focused on his sister the ship and one line out of the rest glimmered white. "That one's brighter."

Ravil spoke as if through a dream, "Take it and keep your attention on *my* intentions. I will give you what you need."

"Aye-Aye, captain pilot." Rake reached out and put his hand on the light. The pair shot into the distance.

Katarina braced her feet against the monitors as the ship rolled. "I can't take anymore of this!"

Sammy sounded woozy. "*You* can't! I have half my body missing!"

Tasane spoke from between Marx's arms, "I think I'm going to puke."

Marx nuzzled her back. "I am trying to lessen the rolling for you."

"I'm pregnant, it doesn't matter."

Marx snapped for Darq. "Come here and check on her now."

Darq shook out his foot, creating bone and flesh. "All right." He crawled on bony knuckles. The ship flipped and he hung from the ceiling. "I find this situation less than adequate for a checkup."

"Checkup?" Katarina spied him crawling on the ceiling. "Darq! You get down and focus on healing yourself!"

"But Rat—"

"Has a little morning sickness, it'll pass!"

Marx growled at her.

Katarina snapped her fingers in his direction. "Don't you talk back to me, Hunter!"

Tasane put her hands on Marx. "It is okay, Marx, I'd probably be heaving even if I weren't pregnant." She clutched her stomach. "Oof, I think I'm getting kicked."

Marx frowned. "I am not kicking you."

Tasane grabbed his hand and put it on her abdomen. "The little shits are kicking."

Marx's features softened, and he broke into a purr. "A good sign, a healthy Hunter."

Darq landed on Marx's head. "Sorry." He reached over Marx and touched Tasane's neck. "When was the last time you ate anything?"

Tasane frowned. "I don't know, how long have we been here?"

Sammy hummed. "Several days, by the ship's reckoning."

"Days! How many days?" Tasane frowned.

"Uh three to five, I think? Computers are still funky."

"What?" Katarina snarled. "Danny and Oro could be dead by now!" She looked over her shoulder. "Darq! *What did I say?*"

"Mom, I'm fine!" Darq's fangs slid out over his teeth. "I can make my own decisions!"

"Don't snap those fangs at me! Put them away now or I am coming over there!"

"Go ahead and try!" Darq held on to Marx and touched Tasane's stomach. "The twins are acting up, but I think they're reacting to your stress."

Tasane covered her mouth. "I really am going to throw up."

Marx nuzzled her. "Twins, how perfect."

Rake and Ravil appeared in the chaos. Rake grabbed on to the Navigators' chair and

dumped Ravil into it. He slipped on the floor. “I feel like dying.”

“Where the hell have you been?” Katarina caught Rake by the arm before he fell out the hole in their side.

“I learned how to fly.” Rake slumped into his chair and gave no indication he even noticed the hole. “Where’s Mica?”

“Down there with Ipso.” Darq pointed. “We can’t get any closer to pick them up.”

“They already sheared me in half.” Sammy pouted.

Ravil passed out in her seat. Her head hit the controls. Katarina blinked back tears. “Oh, come on! We need you to get us out of here!”

Rake sat in her chair and put Ravil in his lap. He touched her controls. “I don’t think we need to worry about that, just get Mica’s attention so we can jet.”

Mica ducked as gold bands spiraled around them. He put his arm around Ipso’s waist. “I think we need to retreat!”

Ipso squirmed. “We can’t!”

“If we stay here, we’re going to get hit! You can do this from further away!”

“You don’t know that!”

Mica glared at the blue rings of the Council. “Can we do this from out there?”

Affirmative.

“Thank you.” Mica threw Ipso over his shoulder. “We’re falling back and moving a safe distance away and then you’re fixing our ship.”

Ipso’s hands moved in a flurry, roping the highway through and around the rifts in space that the deteriorating engine created. “Don’t bump me around! I have more important things to do!”

Mica saw the ship go by. “Fix our ship *now*, Ipso!”

Ipso snarled. “Council, repair their archaic sky boat!”

Yes, Ipso.

Light washed the ship and restored it. Mica breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Ipso.”

“Council did it.” She focused on the highway.

Mica waved the ship away. “Now open them a way out.”

“I am trying to save the universe, Mica!”

“Do it!”

Ipso illuminated a door in the sky. “There!”

The ship zipped out in to space. Mica smiled. “Good.”

Ipso thumped him on the back. “Why didn’t you go with them?”

“Someone needs to watch you.”

She kicked at him. “You’re giving yourself a death sentence!”

Mica shrugged. “Come on.”

“You are an idiot head!”

Mica leapt to remnants of city flagstones and put distance between them and the growing anomaly. Council followed them, shrinking in size until the rings knit close together.

He set Ipso on her feet. “Do what you need to.”

Ipso stared at him, her expression unreadable. She turned back to the light and made fists. The highway she’d built formed a near circle; it forced the two ends of the engine inwards.

Ipso clenched her jaw and screamed through her teeth. Her body trembled as she struggled to connect the ends.

Mica put his hands on hers and pushed, but the space between them was as hard as a wall. Ipsos cried tears of frustration. "I have no strength left!"

Council chimed in: *Highway will lose mass and deconstruct if not reconnected shortly.*

"I know!" Ipsos strained. "I need help!"

Only one Langone is within range.

"Yeah, Ravil!" Ipsos snarled. "She is not coming here! She started this!"

Mica braced his feet on the ground. "Ravil did not know this would happen."

"Right, like she didn't know she blew up a planet, like she didn't know that she murdered children! She just does things in her current incarnation and people *die!*"

Council spoke: *Deconstruction of highway thirty percent complete.*

"Fuck!" Ipsos stared at Council. She closed her eyes, trying to remember something, anything that could help her. Ipsos shouted, "Engines...the engines where are they? Where is my engine?"

All engines are deactivated or missing, besides this one.

"Missing?" Ipsos's nose bled in a steady stream. "Someone has some explaining to do. What happened to them?"

Engines were deactivated by Ipsos the Engineer.

"I did *not* do that, Council!"

Deconstruction of highway forty percent complete.

Mica shifted between Luke's clothing and his ship gear. His headset buzzed. Mica called from his end, "Rake!"

Rake's voice cut in and out. "Ye—wher—you?"

"I'm still inside! We need Ravil!"

Ipsos shrieked. "No, we don't! She stays out of here!"

"She is a good person!" Mica pressed against Ipsos's hands with all that he had. "Rake, we need her!"

"I—sh—w? Th—no, g—"

"Rake! Ravil, in here! Now! Or everybody dies!"

Deconstruction of highway fifty percent complete. Warning, incoming burst.

Ipsos frowned. "Incoming burst? What does that mean?"

Sound blasted their ears and shook the space, making the air blurry. Mica covered Ipsos with his body. Council vibrated. Four other rings spun, moving independently of one another. The second outermost ring glowed brighter than the others did; it detached from the rest. A name lit up on the cycle.

Ipsos tracked it. "Faist! Faist! Thank you! Faist, help me!"

A ghostly image of a man appeared near the new ring. The space flickered around him. Council responded: *Identity verified, Faist the Dreamer. The Court ring is now active.*

The ring flipped and turned yellow, stopping before the man and solidifying as it had done with Ipsos. Faist tapped his hands in a blur and stared at his controls with a frown on his face.

Ipsos reached for him. "Faist! Hello! Shit, he's asleep. Faist!"

Mica watched the Langone work; he was tall and slender with long, white hair pulled back into a low ponytail. He wore slippers, a robe, and a stocking cap. He yawned and appeared only mildly interested in what was going on.

Deconstruction of highway sixty percent complete.

"Faist, you dreamy bastard, *help me!*"

Faist blinked and looked over at them. He noticed Ipsos. "Oh, Ipsos, hello."

“Faist! Look at that!”

Faist turned and saw the engine for the first time. “Oh my goodness.” He faded in and out of view. “What a start that gives my heart.”

“*Faist*, do something *before* you wake up!”

“My dear, what can I do?” He touched his chest.

“You’re asleep!”

“Yes.” He nodded and yawned.

“Then fucking dream something into existence!”

He scratched his chin. “My dear, whose engine is this?”

“Ravilaea’s!”

He nodded, unsurprised. “Then Ravil should appear and help us. Yes, that would be best, they think.”

Ipsos shook her head. “No Faist! No! *Take it back!* Not her!”

Ravil appeared beside Ipsos with Rake at her side. Despite being conscious, Rake held her up with his arm around her waist. He glared at Mica. “Update me.”

Mica nodded. “Ravil’s engine thing, out of control, going to obliterate everything. We can’t turn it off.”

Ravil cocked her head. She touched Ipsos’s ring and Council shuddered to a stop.

Council spoke: *welcome Ravilaea. You are active in the Science ring. May I activate—*

“No,” Ravil spoke as if asleep. “Not necessary.” She examined the commands Ipsos had keyed into her station. Ravil flicked her fingers. “Turn it off.”

Yes.

The core of the engine rippled and shrank to a glowing scepter. The object flashed and vanished.

Faist smiled warmly. “What a first-rate outcome. This was a pleasant dream. I have not had one of these in years. Good night, ladies.”

“Wait, Faist!” Ipsos sprinted for his fading image. “Wait!” The man disappeared. She fell to her knees and slammed her fists into the ground. “Don’t leave me with these *people!*”

Council hummed. *Emergency measures are over, shutting down to conserve energy.* The rings flickered out.

Ipsos shook her head. “No, Council, come back! Summon Council! Summon Council!” Nothing happened. Ipsos burst into tears. “No!”

Mica knelt by her side. “Shouldn’t you be happy?”

“Happy? Happy that I had to witness this! That I had to see my Princess commit acts so reprehensible as to forever tarnish her name!” Ipsos spun and pointed at Ravil. “She should have vanished herself and saved us the effort!”

Ravil slipped back and forth between trance and consciousness. Her expression gave no indication that she heard or cared what Ipsos said.

Rake stepped in front of Ravil. “Now look here! Ravil isn’t to blame for all this. She was just a child, so you just need to calm down, kid!”

“Kid? I am not a *kid!*” Ipsos craned her neck to look into his eyes. “Besides, that does not excuse a Langone even if they were young; we have responsibilities. She *needs* to die!”

“Whoa!” Mica stepped up to Rake’s side. “No one’s dying today.”

“You are already dead!” Ipsos refused to look at Mica. “Step aside, and let me do my duty. It is only right that I do this, being the witness I am also the judge. This is a mercy for her.”

Rake cracked his knuckles. “So you’re not a kid?”

“Yes, you idiot! I’m not a kid, and—”

Rake punched her in the jaw. Ipso stumbled and hit the ground unconscious. He pointed to her. “Grab her, Mica. We’re leaving.”

Mica picked Ipso up. “How are we getting out of here?” He eyed Ravil; she was just as out of it as Ipso. “We have two Navigators that aren’t working.”

Rake grabbed Mica’s wrist. “Watch and learn, sidekick.”

Reloy twirled his fingers around Kennedy’s leash as they rode up an elevator. “Now repeat what I said.”

Kennedy and Lincoln spoke together, “Seen but not heard, defer to the Duke.”

“Excellent.” Reloy straightened his burgundy uniform. He fiddled with the officer bars and bits of regalia he’d tacked on before leaving his suite. “All appropriate in wear, demeanor, and standing. We’re ready to go into battle, darlings.” He flashed them a nervous smile. “I can’t think of two here that I’d rather go with when facing one’s enemy.”

Kennedy played with her leash. “I thought going to see family now?”

“I’m happy that you can see a difference, Little Blue. Personally, I’d rather go into Cagatown naked and gagged.” Reloy touched his lips and giggled. “But that’s just me.”

Lincoln growled. “You are nervous about this man.”

Reloy shrugged a bit. “We do not see eye to eye on anything. He’s a *dreadful* proponent of...*conservation*.”

Lincoln frowned at the word. Kennedy looked perplexed. Reloy laughed lightly. “I won’t bore you with Ampyr politics. He is, shall we say, one who disregards the means, as long he gets the ends...and then he hoards the ends like the selfish bastard that he is. It’s a popular force, which has made him a powerful man. He gets his way. I mean after all we have wards for a reason, but I digress.”

A bell signaled their stop. Reloy took hold of Kennedy’s leash and wound it around his wrist. He stepped from the elevator into the space station and made eye contact with no one. Kennedy followed carrying his codex. Lincoln walked on his left, his eyes scanning the way for threats.

Reloy waved his hand to the station manager. “To the Duke?”

The man ducked his head. “Yes, Commodore. Right this way. We do not have far to go. His suite is one of our closest; he chose it to be near the execution.”

Reloy tightened his grip on Kennedy’s leash as they passed by a dozen of the Duke’s elite guard. The Ampyr in maroon uniforms stared straight ahead, unmoving.

Beyond the soldiers, a door slid open and yellow light spilled out in to the hall. The station manager stepped inside and bowed low. “Duke Ethei, Commodore Reloy.”

Reloy followed the man inside; he ducked his head. “Duke.” Kennedy and Lincoln bowed with him.

Duke Ethei regarded the foursome as they stayed with heads bent. Sturdily built for an Ampyr, he was broad shouldered and barrel-chested. He wore clothing of Court Imperial, far different from the jumpsuits and riot gear that the soldiers wore. Epaulets of gold matched the buttons on his jacket, both indications of his rank amongst royalty. He waved his hand. “Leave us.”

The man backed out. “Yes, sir.” The door slid shut behind him.

Ethei let a smile curve up his lips. “*Reeloy*.” His eyes flicked over Lincoln and Kennedy. “It’s so good to see you.”

Reloy nodded his head once. “The transfer of the prisoner is—”

“Oh, this talk about business. I’ve heard nothing else. *Sit down, cousin.* It’s been too long.”

Reloy dropped into a plush chair, his face blank. Lincoln moved to stand behind him, and Kennedy took a seat on the armrest.

Ethei sat across from Reloy; his eyes lingered on Kennedy’s thighs. He sighed and shook his head. “You are constantly followed by a zoo, or perhaps circus would be a better name for it. Do these ones do any tricks?”

“This one.” Reloy looked up to Lincoln. “Is a strong fighter and she.” He gestured to Kennedy. “Is an individual tracker. I do not take up with the useless. Conservative or not, surely you can see their—”

“A change. And no talk of politics, not now.” Ethei picked up a fluted glass and sipped wine. “Tell me how this ship life treats you.”

“Life?” Reloy’s words were clipped. “Adequate, a different pace from the breeding and bloodline programs and labs.”

“You miss that work. *Tell me the truth.*”

“Yes, I do.” Reloy allowed himself a hint of a smile. “It was intellectually stimulating in a way managing others is not.”

Ethei eyed Kennedy. “I’m sure you keep stimulated somehow.” He rolled his shoulders. “You have received praise back home, in capturing the prisoners.”

Reloy inclined his head. “I see.”

“They are, however, disappointed you let the rest of the Resistance members from the space station attack flee.”

Reloy stiffened. “Their strengths were greater than told to me originally.”

“Reloy, *really.*” Ethei drained his glass. He snapped at Kennedy. “Wine.”

Reloy let her go, never taking his eyes off Ethei. “I am sorry I have disappointed the Court, my sincerest apologies go to all—”

“The Court? You should be worried about Zoph and Threnas.”

The blood drained from Reloy’s face. “I did not realize the Emperor took a personal interest in the matter.”

“What does it matter what *you* realize?” Ethei held up his glass as Kennedy poured him wine. “He is very displeased you see.” Ethei set his glass down and snaked his hand around Kennedy’s leash. He kept his eyes on Reloy. “And Threnas asked me to inform you of this personally, Reloy.”

“Message received.”

“Is it? I don’t feel that you mean it. Mean it, Reloy.”

Reloy swallowed. “I do.”

“*Get on your knees and say that.*”

Reloy slipped out of his chair and dropped to one knee. “I understand the meaning behind what you imply, and I will do better in the future to satisfy the Emperor and the Court.”

“Hmm.” Ethei stood in a blur and forced Kennedy to her knees before Reloy. “You see he believes you do not take your responsibilities seriously.” He grabbed Kennedy by the hair and dug his fingers into her scalp. Ethei twisted, making her cry out in pain.

“I mean it, Ethei!” Reloy jerked as panic washed over his features. “I am not lying to you!”

Ethei smiled at Reloy. “He thinks you spend too much time with your collections. Too much time on your games and these pets.” Ethei let go of Kennedy’s hair. He grabbed the open

wine bottle and overturned it on her head. “Such worthless wastes of time. We are at *war*, Reloy. We are not playing games!”

Reloy forced his gaze to meet Ethei’s. “Then I will be—”

“*Stop speaking for a moment*, cousin.” Ethei smiled as Reloy shut his mouth. He put his knee on Kennedy’s back and pressed down. He sipped from his wine glass with his free hand. “I personally cannot comprehend why you were given a ship. I know our resources are spread thin, but I had not thought *that* thin. To use one barely a man for a task that requires strength and purity of spirit. You are pathetic, and so it leeches into everything around you. Your soldiers, your ship, your *pets*. The entire *Warden* movement is a *weakness* among us. We must *conserve* our strengths—”

“They are staff—”

“Reloy.” Ethei smiled at Reloy’s discomfort. “So many excuses...”

“Not excuses!” Reloy gulped. “Zoph and Dainea are both supporters of the Wardens.”

“For now...that movement only stands by the strengths of the House of Birds and the House of Song.”

“That is not true. The House of Bells—”

“Has been reduced to *you*, one so weak as to not even attempt to fight for the throne, a task that might come around once in a lifetime if you are lucky and you did not even show up to fight in the preliminaries. How I would have loved to duel you, cousin, but you did not even watch the fights. Too frightened perhaps of a little blood?” Ethei laughed. “You did always seem rather squeamish about certain...tasks.”

Reloy clenched his jaw.

“I do not understand you, Reloy. Your father was a fighter and a great man, your mother a beauty, vicious in her own right. You come from generals, from leaders, dignitaries...people with conviction and the iron will to do what is necessary, to not bend to protect a few over the whole.” Ethei set his glass down. He interlaced Kennedy’s fingers with his own and bent her arm back until she hissed in pain. “You are soaking in needless emotions. There are no innocents in a war, Reloy, only soldiers, resources. You need to see that, Reloy, you need to learn it because we ask, how do you contribute to us, Reloy, in these dark days? That is what Threnas and I discuss.” He twisted Kennedy’s arm. “What does this one do for us now when so much is slipping away beneath our feet?”

Reloy scraped his fingers along the ground.

Ethei watched Reloy’s face. “I thought your father had taught you better.” He sighed and let off Kennedy. He threw her back to Reloy.

Reloy caught Kennedy and wrapped his arms around her.

“You have no wife, no heirs, and no accolades to your name. Content with working with the scientists, and content to associate with other races.” He eyed Lincoln. “With dogs.”

Ethei shook his head. “I think perhaps you have forgotten your father’s lessons, perhaps they need to be relearned? What do you think? Should we start with these two? Appropriate that they are Hunters don’t you think? *You may speak freely.*”

“No.” Reloy set Kennedy aside. “I remember, Ethei. There is no need for that.”

Ethei smiled at Kennedy. “Charming then that you have it so dressed, that it appears so young, that you treat it with any regard besides a resource. It reminds me of Scolli.” Ethei pulled on Kennedy’s leash and looked into her yellow eyes. “Very much like Scolli.” He pushed her face from side to side. “Yes, Reloy? *Say her name.*”

“Scolli.” Reloy ground his teeth; his fingers twitched.

“Maybe this Hunter doesn’t look the same to you, but then, I think they all look the same.” Ethei smirked. He sat down, pulled Kennedy into his lap, and kept his eyes on Reloy. “I wish you had dueled me, Reloy, I really do. I had looked forward to it.”

Reloy inclined his head. “It would not have been fair.”

“Oh, that I realize. I never doubted I would win, *cousin*.” Ethei flashed his straight white teeth. “But I missed the opportunity to show the rest of the court just what you are, how *spineless* you are.” Ethei sniffed along Kennedy’s wine soaked hair. “Let us do this now then? Take it from me, Reloy. Try it. If you can break my control and get up, you can keep it, and I will tell everyone you have beaten me.”

Reloy spoke softly, “You are stronger than I am, Ethei. I am aware of this. You have always been stronger than me.”

“The weakest minded Ampyr strive to prove their worth even if it kills them, yet you struggle so hard to prove the opposite.” He sighed. “So you will not even try to contest my power?”

“Again, I see no point. I concede you are the winner.”

Ethei played with Kennedy’s hair. “Then you shouldn’t complain when what is yours is taken.”

“I have never complained.” Reloy’s eyes flashed. “Not once.”

“And that’s why I *adore* you, Reloy.” Ethei stood and tossed Kennedy to the floor. “Threnas and Zoph will let you keep your station, *for now*. But as to what *I* need to let you keep—”

A knock on the door interrupted them. A soldier ducked in. “The prisoner is ready.”

Ethei looked to the man. “Thank you. *Remain a minute longer.*”

Ethei stepped over Kennedy. “Reloy, I will do you a favor because I am a caring cousin. Your father tried to break you of your habits, and they still bleed through—”

“That is not true!”

“*Do not speak in my presence.*” Ethei looked from Reloy to the soldier. “Reloy, *you will give your pets to my soldiers*. I think they’ll find them just as stimulating as you do.” He gestured to the door. “Officer, *escort Reloy to his suite and divest him of his Hunters.*”

Ethei smiled at Lincoln as the officer walked out. “*To your feet, Reloy.*”

Reloy stood, his eyes blazing, his body rigid with rage.

Ethei handed Kennedy’s leash to Reloy. “Here let me show you out.” Ethei opened the door and waved to his soldiers. “A present.” He slammed the door behind the trio.

Reloy reeled Kennedy’s leash in. He walked stiffly as Ethei’s soldiers surrounded them on their walk. The escort left Ethei’s suite behind.

Kennedy stared straight ahead in shock. Lincoln trembled from a growing growl in his chest. Reloy’s expression shifted from anger, to nausea, to cold acceptance as they walked through the corridors that led to his guest suite on the station.

Ethei’s guards keyed in the door lock to Reloy’s guest suite and moved out of the way. The officer in charge held out his hand. “We shall take them now. Enjoy your accommodations, Commodore.”

“Enjoy my accommodations?” Reloy unwound Kennedy’s leash. He kept his eyes on his feet. “How thoughtful of you to say to me.” Reloy handed Kennedy’s leash to Lincoln. “Hold this for one moment please, gently now, that is expensive, Blue. War rationing you know. Thank you.”

The officer in charge flexed his fingers. “We shall take them now.”

“Yes, I am aware, I just—” Reloy dusted off his hands. He disappeared into a blur of motion.

Soldiers clutched their necks, gagging. The others gaped, confused. One by one, they dropped to their knees as their faces turned purple. The hallway filled with coughing.

Reloy appeared by Lincoln’s side. A long needle glinted between his fingertips. He wiped the needle off on his jacket and slipped it inside his sleeve. “What an unfortunate necessity that was.” Reloy reclaimed Kennedy’s leash from Lincoln. He gestured to him. “Please dispose of these if you would be so kind.”

Lincoln eyed the soldiers. “Kill them?”

“Oh, they’ll be lifeless within seconds I am positive.” As the words left his mouth, the first of the soldiers died. “See? There.”

Lincoln picked up two. “You broke voice command. You *resisted*.”

“Broke? Resisted?” Reloy unclipped Kennedy’s leash and tossed it to the floor. “Only if he had control in the first place, and he didn’t.”

“But in the room, you were under his power.”

Reloy clicked his heels together. “No, he is less powerful than I, but I am a superlative artiste of the stage and this *proves* it. You know, I have a theater.” He stepped over a corpse. “It is my own, no one else comes there you see, but I write and put on plays with my household staff. They can be quite droll. There was this one...oh, you’d just have to see it, Blue.”

Lincoln’s eye ticked. “If you are stronger, why did you not fight him in the room when he dishonored you? Why did you put on an act? Why did you not contest for your—”

“Because I didn’t want to.” Reloy looped an arm around Kennedy’s waist. “I dislike politics, which is reason enough not to act. I would have to be *political*, that would just be *so* awful.” He shooed Lincoln. “Remove the bodies now, return here when you are done. I need to get this wine off Little Blue, it is sticky and a terrible selection. Did you see the vintage, Blue? Dreadful. Go now please.”

Lincoln grabbed two more corpses. “Yes, sir.”

Reloy walked Kennedy into his room. He drew her to the kitchen half of the suite and wetted down a soft towel. Kennedy licked wine from her hand. Reloy batted at her fingers. “No, it’s alcohol; your tummy will be upset.” Reloy wiped off her cheeks. “I am sorry for that treatment. If he had tried to take his threats further within the actual room, I would have intervened. Believe me?”

“Yes.” Kennedy looked away. “I do not like that man.”

“Neither do I. He’s a bastard, not literally though.” Reloy checked the water temperature in the sink. “Dunk your head, darling. We do not have a shower in this suite, to which I must apologize. I *detest* space stations. Barbaric.”

Kennedy dunked her head. Warm water ran through her hair until it was clear of wine.

Reloy turned the water off and wrapped her head in a towel. He massaged her scalp. “Feel better?”

“Yes, thank you.” She smiled a little and stood up straight.

“Nothing permanently damaged?” He looked into her eyes.

“No.”

“Good.” Reloy sighed. “Good.”

“Why did you act in hall, but not in room?” She eyed him. “What difference?”

“I can hide their bodies and replace them, but I can’t hide the Duke’s. Well, I *can*, but you know, people would notice he was missing, dear. And once that got out, things would really get

messy for the lot of us.”

Kennedy put her hands to the towel. “He will hurt you for this.”

“Yes, I suspect he will. Oh well, it will be worth it, no matter what happens as a result.”
Reloy smiled.

Kennedy sniffled. “Why do if bad results come?”

Reloy leaned against the counter and looked towards a wall of monitors in the living room.
“I can’t stand him.”

“You could be killed.”

“No.” Reloy shook his head. “I am the last of my house. They cannot kill me until I have an heir, otherwise the house of my ancestors will fall to ruin, and they cannot allow that to happen, even if all my family is, is a relic to a different time. Instead, I suspect I will be demoted, shipped to a colony, something unpleasant no doubt. Can you imagine me as a miner?”

She gaped. “Uh, no. I—”

“Me neither, I doubt I have the stamina for it. That would cripple me. I am far better at detailed tasks.” He cleaned off his hands.

“It is not fair.”

Reloy smiled. “I suppose.” He unbuckled her collar and set the collar on the counter. “No more of this either. I tire of those games.”

She touched her neck. “But—”

“I don’t want to talk about politics, dear. You care, that is more engaging.” He smiled and his eyes twinkled. “Let us talk about that. Why do *you* care about *me*?”

Kennedy chewed on the end of her tail. “You are strange, but not bad person.”

Reloy pulled her tail from her mouth and patted her on the hand absentmindedly. “Really? I don’t think so.” His shaky smile twitched into a frown. “No, I am not good, not at all. I’m terrible truly. *Evil* and damned, I honestly believe.”

“Not what I think.”

He met her gaze. “You don’t know me very well at all, darling.”

“I can tell.” She poked at his chest. “You have good heart.”

“Oh? Do I, sweetheart?” Reloy smiled sadly at her words. “What else do you think?”

She frowned and her tail swished through the air. “I think you strange for being the stronger, for not showing it and winning. Not what Ampyr do ever.”

Reloy walked to the couch in front of the monitors and sat on the edge of the cushions. He stared ahead and his hands trembled. “I do not like to play their games of intrigue and politics. They call me an underachiever, lazy and weak. But what is wrong with wanting to pursue history and raw *knowledge* over glory and brute force? What does glory afford you? I eat as well as them, I enjoy the same luxuries, but without the violence and physical force. I consider my pursuits a sign of intelligence, though I do recognize I am nearly alone in that way of thinking.”

“I understand.” Kennedy unwound the towel on her head and stared at him.

“Yes, I do not find that surprising. You are as strange a Hunter as I am an Ampyr.” Reloy reached blindly for a glass bowl of candy. It slipped from his hands and shattered. Reloy stared at it sadly and picked up pieces of glass. He cut himself and his fingers bled. He stared at the red liquid and twitched. “A pity, I’m bleeding. I hope I don’t stain something.”

Kennedy sat beside him and took his hand. She put his bleeding thumb in her mouth, clotting the wound. Kennedy moved to his pointer finger and did the same.

Reloy kept his eyes on her lips. “You are ever so sweet to me, Little Blue.”

Kennedy looked away. “No, I am not.”

“Oh, you kid with me.” Reloy pulled her into a hug. He kissed the crown of her head and noticed her scar for the first time. Reloy ran his finger along it. “I have not seen such a thing before. How did you get this?”

Kennedy purred against him. “I...hmm...Stalker.”

Reloy raised an eyebrow and examined her face. He twirled his fingers through her hair, and she relaxed against him. Reloy wrapped his arms around her and ran a hand through her tresses. “Interesting.”

Kennedy moaned and put her teeth on his jacket. Her incisors pierced the fabric.

Reloy tilted her chin up. “You have very large canines for a fourteen-year-old.”

“I seventeen.” Kennedy wrapped her legs around him and rested her head on his chest. “Not fourteen.”

“Hmm.” Reloy braided her hair. “Normally, I’m spot on. You look young for your age.” He spoke into her hair, “What is your name?”

“You gave me name.”

Reloy closed his eyes. “I gave you a moniker. What is *your* name?”

Kennedy didn’t understand the word. “Kennedy.”

Reloy’s lips twitched into a smile. “What a strange thing to be called.” He massaged her back and leaned his head on hers.

“You stranger than me.”

“This is true, but I can’t help that.” He hummed and she purred. Reloy stared at the wall as the monitors showed random images from around the station. “What do you want, Kennedy?”

“I want?”

“Yes.” Reloy enveloped her in a hug. “What do *you* desire?”

Kennedy rested her chin on his shoulder and looked out to the rest of the room. “My wish? I—,” She frowned, suspicious. “Why ask me?”

“Curiosity, a desire to give you what you want, boredom...take your pick.” He smiled.

“You will hurt me if not want what you want.”

Reloy started. “Why would you think that?”

“You shot Jungay, I saw. Right in head. You try this with her too?” Kennedy looked down her nose at him. “You do this? She not want? You shoot since she not want you?”

“No!” Reloy gripped her arms. “She was pretty, yes, but no we were not together like *that!* She’s a Jungay! She was my cook for a time, and I thought...I thought she *liked* living with me, we played games, all of those board games, and puzzles, and she liked puzzles so much. I thought I could get through to her. I had to try. I always have to try with them...”

Reloy stared at the monitors. “But she wouldn’t keep out of my head, or my daydreams. She wouldn’t leave it alone; she made me see it. I had to get her away. I threw her away, but she just showed up again accusing and taunting! I gave her a chance to go!”

“You ask her to stop?”

“Of course I did.” Reloy shook his head. “You see only partial things and judge me, which is not fair to me, Kennedy.”

Kennedy trembled. “Then why don’t you order me to shut up, Reloy?”

“That is...no.” Reloy rested his hands on her hips. “Using voice control like that, it isn’t nice. I tried to go without it around her, but she just wouldn’t get out of my head. So I made her go away instead.”

“You use on Blue.”

“Blue wants to kill me.” Reloy blushed and whispered, “I realize I shouldn’t have shot him in the back. That was rude of me, but I thought he was dying already, and I was trying to make it quick for him. But it was rude.”

“Yes.”

“I was having a bad day for other reasons.” Reloy drummed his fingers along Kennedy’s spine. “I should give him a treat to apologize. I will find out what he likes and give him that. What a great idea!”

Kennedy held her tongue, doubting that would work.

Reloy touched her blouse, running a finger across her breasts. “Ethei *ruined* your shirt.” He stood and crossed the room with Kennedy in his arms. He set her down before a panel and tapped the walls. “One of these must be it. Ah! Here they are!”

Reloy looked through his options for clothing. “I only have clothing for me.” He gave her a once over. “But you are slim. I think we can make it work, what do you think?”

“Sure.”

Reloy unbuttoned his wine stained shirt. “Toss your clothes in—” he frowned. “Hmm, well this isn’t my suite, toss them anywhere.” He kicked off his pants and stood naked; his white limbs nearly glowed in the light of the room. “Blue, red, or black, darling?”

Kennedy pulled off her blouse. “What?”

“Colors for clothes. What would you prefer?”

“Black?”

“Okay.” Reloy checked the tag sizes. “Blue, red, blue, ah black!”

Kennedy tossed her shirt. “I must take off everything?”

Reloy stepped into a new jumpsuit and left it rolled down at the waist. Kennedy swished her tail back and forth. He frowned. “Oh, that’s right. The *tail*.”

Kennedy grabbed her tail and grinned. “I *like* tail!”

“Me too.” Reloy smiled and looked at the black jumpsuit. “There’s a blanket on the couch. I can wash your blouse.”

“It not that dirty.”

“Just let me clean it, please.” Reloy picked up her dirty shirt and padded to the sink. “This won’t be too long. I just need to let it soak.”

Kennedy wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. “I fine with wait.”

Reloy poured soap on her shirt and flicked on the hot water. “When are you not fine?”

Kennedy grinned. “Never! I always fine! I strong and best at everything always!”

“Really?” He smirked. “At everything?”

“Yes, all things!”

“Do you wrestle?” Reloy appeared before her; he tossed her blanket. “Give me a tumble?”

Kennedy stuck out her tongue and tackled him. Reloy dodged and tripped her up. “Not fast enough.”

“I just test you.” Kennedy went for his ankles.

Reloy hopped and darted to her side. He flipped her onto the couch with one hand. “Was that a test too?”

She smiled. “Yes, I not want to hurt you.”

“Come on give it your best shot.”

Kennedy pouted. “I not want to play this game anymore.”

Reloy sat by her side. “Why not, I won’t—”

Kennedy pounced, shoving him into the cushions of the couch. She sat on his stomach and cackled. "I get! I get! I win!"

Reloy rolled, knocking her to the ground. He pinned her by her wrists. "I get. I win."

Kennedy rolled her eyes. "You just *copy* me."

Reloy leaned down. "Do I?" He put his knees on her wrists and sat up. "I am fairly original for the most part." Something passed over his features and he smiled.

Kennedy glowered. "You fat and heavy, off me."

Reloy touched his flat, heavily scarred stomach. "I am not fat, I have never been fat. Take it back."

"I not do that." She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Yes."

"No. You fatty fat fat!"

Reloy's eyes narrowed. He put his lips to her stomach, making her freeze. Reloy sighed into her skin. "Better take it back."

Kennedy eyed him. She licked her lips. "Not want to."

"I warned you." Reloy puffed his cheeks and blew into her stomach.

Kennedy shrieked and laughed. "Stop it, Reloy! That tickles!"

Lincoln stepped through the door and stared at the laughing, topless duo. He dug his claws into his palms. "I am done."

Reloy glanced up. "I hope you had no trouble disposing of the bodies?"

Lincoln spoke through clenched teeth. "None, sir."

Kennedy looked between the two. "We didn't have sex."

Reloy made a face. "As if I would be that fast, at least I hope." He whispered, "I have not... *never mind*." He jumped to his feet and gestured to the couch. "Take a seat, Blue. We are stuck here until this execution business is over."

"Yes, sir." Lincoln took a seat, his eyes on Reloy's ribcage.

Kennedy sat by Lincoln and rubbed the palm of his hand. "We do not go to see live?"

"No." Reloy darted to the kitchen. "I have no desire to do that. Therefore, I won't. Here!" He used her shirt like a slingshot, launching her damp blouse across the room. "Better?"

Kennedy sniffed it. "No wine smell."

"Excellent, the fabric should dry quickly." Reloy hopped past the pair and rolled up his jumpsuit, buttoning it up to the neck. He gave them a spin. "Good, bad?"

Lincoln spat out. "Good."

Kennedy nodded. "Looks good."

"Splendid!" Reloy looked at the two on the couch. "Blue!"

Lincoln's head cocked. "Yes, sir?"

"Ooh, call me Reloy already." Reloy stepped up in front of the pair. "Let's play a game to occupy our time!"

"What kind, *Reloy*?"

Reloy clapped his hands. "A guessing game! We'll all take turns guessing things! Guess my age."

Kennedy pointed. "One hundred!"

"No."

Kennedy bounced. "Seventy!"

"No, I am not that old." Reloy touched his chest. "Do I look that old, *Kennedy*?"

Kennedy leaned away from Lincoln as his growl dropped an octave. "Uhm, no."

Lincoln glared at Kennedy and turned to Reloy. “You are thirty-eight years, three months, five days, and twelve hours old.”

Reloy gaped. “How spot on! You *win*, Blue!”

“*Fabulous.*” Lincoln folded his arms.

Kennedy rocked on her butt and threw up her hand. “I want to ask next question, me! Me! Pick me!”

Evgeniy leaned against Lloyd’s cell door and napped. The speaker in his ear buzzed, waking him. Evgeniy touched the headset and received a summons. “Bring our prisoner to the Duke’s suite.”

“Understood.” Evgeniy turned, put his hand to the lock, and the door slid back.

Lloyd jerked awake and shied away as much as he could in the tiny cell. “What now?”

“Coming with me.” He grabbed Lloyd’s wrist.

Lloyd recognized Evgeniy’s voice. He went along without protest. Lloyd looked over his shoulder for Oro and Danny, but there were only guards and him in the hall. “What about them?”

Evgeniy squeezed his wrist. “No questions.”

Lloyd ignored him. “Where am I going?”

“No questions.”

“Where’s Oro? Where’s Danny?”

A guard in front of them turned and punched Lloyd in the stomach. “Be silent.”

Evgeniy held on tight to keep Lloyd from falling. He gave him a light shove. “Move.”

The procession headed into the bowels of the space station. Evgeniy flicked his eyes to his wrist. He’d set the suit to record his steps, charting a course in and hopefully a course out. He hadn’t planned to leave Oro and Danny, but they could probably handle themselves for the moment.

The guard in front broke off and stopped at a door, knocking. He stepped inside. “Duke, the prisoner is here.”

“Bring him in.”

Evgeniy put his hand to Lloyd’s shoulder and walked the boy into the room.

Duke Ethei stood by a sink; he gave them a once over. His eyes stopped on Lloyd and his features flashed fear, anger, and then smug superiority. He waved to Evgeniy. “My guards are indisposed with trash. *You will remain.*”

Lloyd glared at the man. “Who are you?”

Ethei set down his wine glass. He smiled. “Who am I? I should think that obvious, I am your Duke.” He waved his hands to the guards. “*You will remember none of this conversation.*”

The guards around Evgeniy settled in and stood by the closed door. Evgeniy resisted the command and turned the volume on his helmet up. Nothing perked his interest like someone telling him he couldn’t do something.

Ethei gestured to a chair. “*Sit boy.*”

“I have a name!” Lloyd folded his arms, mustering up as much anger and bravado as he could.

“So, it’s true.” Ethei regarded him. “You can resist. Well, *please sit.*”

Lloyd took a deep breath. “Fuck you.”

Ethei smiled. “Strong willed, *good.* Fast as well?”

Lloyd spat in his direction.

Ethei crossed the distance in a blink and backhanded Lloyd.

Lloyd hit the wall and jumped. He threw a punch.

Ethei caught his hand and clocked him across the head. Lloyd stumbled, dazed. Ethei pushed him into a chair. "There, now be civil. No need to behave like a parentless wild child."

Lloyd held his head. "I am not a wild child."

"A difference of opinion." The Duke paced. "You have caught up with bad company as of late."

"Stop speaking to me with familiarity into my life." Lloyd tucked his legs to his chest. "You don't know a thing about me!"

"I know more about you than you do." Ethei smiled and gave him a once over. "But there are a few things I must have from your lips."

"Like what?" Lloyd willed himself to be like Oro. "A kiss? Are all of you in charge into boys? I don't go that way, sorry."

Ethei's eyes went wide. "Bad company indeed. No, I want you to tell me about gold."

"Gold?" Lloyd frowned.

"Yes, gold. Tell me all about it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're lying." Ethei shook his head. "You have her."

Lloyd blinked. "Have who?"

"The Gold Queen and I want her, Lloyd. You *must* give her to me."

Lloyd thought fast. "Too bad, you cannot have her."

Ethei leaned towards him. "You know you must give her to someone. You will not be left to have her, and I can help you. I am willing to negotiate nicely, others will not be nice."

"She's mine, I want to keep her." Lloyd gulped.

"You can't!"

"We'll see." Lloyd's voice cracked.

"If you keep her, we are going to crumble, Lloyd. The Ampyr will fall. Do you see? But if you give her to me, we will be strong, stronger than you can imagine." Ethei's eyes lit up. "I can restore you to your rightful place. We can work together. You owe Zoph no loyalty."

Lloyd tried to hide his utter confusion at the way the conversation was going. "I don't owe *anyone* loyalties, so why should I give you mine?"

"This is true. You don't owe any of us loyalty nor should you. I can give you an offer in good faith; I can show you that you should trust me."

Lloyd leaned forward. "What could you possibly offer me that would prove that?"

"These prisoners, they are your friends?" Ethei smiled.

Lloyd hid his interest and spoke calmly, "We have travelled together for a short time."

"I will commute their public torture in favor of a fast execution."

Lloyd went rigid. "Deal *not* accepted. Free them, then we can talk."

"I cannot free them, Lloyd."

"Then what is this? You offer me *nothing*."

"The Emperor has decreed their execution. I cannot disobey that order; neither can any on this station. I can only offer them mercy in death."

Lloyd stared at the wall. "Deal *not* accepted."

"So you don't care for them, the reports I read, strange things." Ethei glanced at Lloyd, but his face remained blank. "What are they, Lloyd? Where are they from?"

"You ask for gold, now you ask for information?" He stared at Ethei. "Yet nothing given to

me? I think you a fool.”

Ethei grimaced. “Do not insult me.”

“Then do not insult my intelligence or attempt to play on my fears or desires.” Lloyd turned to him. “You have played your hand and I am aware of what you seek. You have no bargaining power here. I request leave to return to my cell.”

“Request denied.” Ethei stood up. “I can increase their pain; I can make it last for some time. As long as death is the outcome, I can do what I please to their bodies. I will enjoy watching them suffer!”

Lloyd shrugged. “If that satisfies you then your purity is in doubt, and I will speak of your corruption to whomever I am passed to next.”

“I will cut out your tongue!”

“And then you will have no ability to find the information you seek.”

“I will send a Jungay to you!”

Lloyd shrugged. “Go ahead and try it. I will show them exactly what you tried to do to me while we were alone here. No one will know but you and I, as you have ordered our guards not to remember. Your reputation, I am afraid, will be ruined.”

“*Shut up!*”

Lloyd smiled as the command rolled off him. “I’m sorry, but I don’t want to.”

Ethei stomped to the kitchen and retrieved his wine glass; he drained it. “Why must you be difficult when I offer you power and position?”

“I have not had either and do not seek it.”

“You are a *prince!* How can you not seek out your birthright?”

Lloyd turned a jerk of surprise into a roll of his shoulders. “I find this conversation so tedious.”

“What is happening to this family? To our bloodline? Princes like you will be our downfall! This is why I must be in charge. I will consolidate and restore our strength!”

“You are so dramatic.” Lloyd forced a yawn.

Ethei was on Lloyd before he registered the movement. Ethei throttled him and pressed him to the floor. “*Blood traitor!* All of you, choosing others over your own kind! Impure in spirit! Reloy, with his perversion of *love!* Prince Ker, with his weak nature and idealism, but you, you are the worst! You betray us in *apathy!* You will be our collapse! Don’t you understand? It’s *you!*”

Lloyd clawed at Ethei’s hands.

Ethei smiled. “I could end you now, here, and then none of it will happen. None of it will come to pass.” He nodded. “Yes, I’d rather a future of uncertainties than of doom!”

Lloyd kicked Ethei in the groin. He threw off his hands and scrambled backwards.

Ethei leapt for him.

Lloyd held up his hands. “You kill me and she will reign! I swear it!” He lied frantically, saying the first things that popped into his head. “The Gold Queen will come in to power and throw your souls into the void! She will topple the old order and deconstruct the very foundation of our universe! She will overthrow it all and a new child will sit on the throne!”

Ethei stopped in his tracks. “Your grandparents told you all of it then.”

Lloyd sneered. “Of course! I have waited for the day when I can rub this in your faces. Ha-ha! Your end is near!”

“You’re not apathetic, you’re as *mad* as Reloy.” Ethei stepped towards the door. “Utterly insane. *Our* end is *your* end, *Prince.*” He composed his features. “Think on *that.* If you marry

her as they say, you doom yourself to an eternity without an afterlife.” He gestured to the guards. “*Keep him here, I will return.*”

Ethei looked back to Lloyd. “Your friends are going to die. Consider them the first in the wave of death you shall bring down on our heads.” He stormed out.

Lloyd crawled under a table and hyperventilated.

Evgeniy broke the neck of the guard to his left and shot the one on his right. He crossed the room and helped Lloyd up. He took his helmet off and tossed it. “What is he speaking of?”

“I have *no idea!* I don’t even know who he is!” Lloyd burst into tears. “Am I a prince? Is that true?”

Evgeniy shrugged. “Marx thought yes, but I personally have no idea. Not my concern. We go save friends, yes?”

Lloyd wiped his eyes and nodded. “We have to!”

Evgeniy handed him a gun. “Know how to shoot?”

Lloyd took the gun. “No, but I’ll learn.”

“That spirit I like.” Evgeniy thumped him on the back. “Do not point gun at Oro or Danny, or my lady.” Evgeniy looked him over. “Or me.”

Lloyd nodded. “Right.”

Evgeniy keyed open the door. “Come.”

The medical ship sat in dead space amongst the ruins of hundreds of other warships. Rake turned in his chair. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Katarina glared at him. “Yeah, finally.”

He scowled. “I had to get what I was going to say straight in my head.”

“I don’t want you to get it straight in your head!” Katarina stood up. “I want you to tell me the truth, and Mica, you fall under this order as well!”

Mica looked at his hands. “Rake told me not to say—”

“I don’t care what *he* said! We have two injured Navigators in the medical hall, we almost lost our ship, we are dead in the water, and we saw a planet dissolve. I expect answers *now!*”

Rake jumped up. His boots clicked, locking him to the floor. “If I tell you, it goes no further.”

“Rake—”

“No, Kat! This isn’t your decision! You *promise* me!”

Katarina folded her arms. “Fine, I promise.”

Rake nodded and looked to Marx and Tasanee. “You too.”

Marx shrugged. “Everyone has secrets that they are entitled to.”

Tसानee looked up at Marx and sighed. “Yeah, don’t worry, Rake.”

Rake nodded. “As a child, Ravil was forced to blow up a planet. That’s the memory that was blocked.” He glared towards the hallway. “With good reason until Ipso tooled around and made her see it. Ravil is in shock, and I knocked out Ipso because she was trying to kill Ravil. Okay? That’s what happened.”

Katarina blinked. “Ravil destroyed a *planet*? She can do that?”

“Yes.”

“And everyone on it? Kids?”

“Yeah,” Rake spoke softly. “Hold it against her or make any remarks to her face and I’ll kill you.” He looked up. “I *mean* it.”

Katarina frowned. “No, you don’t.”

Marx sniffed the air and hissed. “*Yes, he does.*”

Katarina went white. “Okay, Rake.”

Marx gestured to Rake. “You need not fear anything from little rat or myself. I can only appreciate such a kill count and due to her being a child, it wasn’t her fault.”

Katarina nodded slowly, agreeing with Marx. “Why did it happen?”

Rake shook his head. “We didn’t see that part, and I don’t think she knows either. The before and after are still missing.” He rubbed his neck. “She destroyed or stopped the engine though, so it’s not a threat anymore to anyone.”

Tasanee piped up. “So, that’s fucked up and interesting and all, but what was all the awesome lightshow stuff that tiny tot was doing?”

Rake looked to Mica. “Well?”

Mica shrugged from his spot against the wall. “She called forth a computer, or at least that thing works like one. It’s a Langone creation I think.” He looked up. “She was trying to shut the black hole down with it, but couldn’t.”

Rake grimaced. “So *Ravil* stepped in and turned it off. Then Ipso tried to kill her, *again*. No thank you for that either.”

“She’s really upset.” Mica sighed. “I’m getting the impression Ipso is also suffering from a severe memory lapse as bad as, if not worse, than Ravil’s. I think.”

“Great.” Katarina gestured to Rake. “Do we need to worry about either of them going psycho?”

Rake took a step towards her. “Ravil is *not* a psycho! Ipso’s the crazy one!”

“Ipso is not crazy!” Mica glared at Rake. “She’s just confused!”

“Confused and crazy murderous! She tried to cut Ravil’s head off!” Rake gestured with his healed hand. “She took two of my fingers!”

“Speaking of.” Darq hopped into the cockpit. “Ravil remains catatonic. I sedated Ipso and put her in gold restraints.”

“Good.” Rake nodded. “She ain’t getting out of that until she calms the fuck down.”

Mica didn’t look happy. “I’m going to go sit with her.”

“No, you’re not, Darq can.” Katarina waved the Rexos out and took a seat. “We have a rescue mission to perform. We need to figure out where Oro and Danny are, if they’re still *alive*, and how we’re going to save them. Rake?”

“Yeah, I know.” Rake flopped back in his chair. “Sammy, show me where they’re at.” He looked to the monitors but nothing changed. “Sammy? Hello, Sammy? Sammy, what’s up? Where’s Sammy?”

Katarina thumped the wall. “Sammy, you lazy bitch, answer us.”

A crash rocked the hallway. Darq’s voice floated in from outside. “Oh my goodness. Mom! *Mom!*”

Katarina got to her feet. “Are you hurt?”

Darq jumped down the stairs. “Mom, look!”

Sammy pushed away from Darq. Her ash blonde hair was tangled; her sweat had frozen to ice crystals. “Kat—” she went to her knees, smiling feebly. “Get on my dick and ride me like a pony.”

Katarina, Rake, and Mica stared in shock. Sammy threw her fist into the air. “Power to the pussy.”

“Be silent.” Darq waved her hands aside. He plunged his fingers into her neck. “You are unwell, stop moving.”

“I know I’m unwell. I’m a sick b—”

“Sammy!” Rake lunged for the pair. He tried to hug her, but Darq pushed him off. Rake dropped to Sammy’s side and took her hand. “How did you get here? What is going on? Are you okay? How do you feel?”

Katarina knelt on Sammy’s other side. “I thought you gave your body back when you went into the ship?”

Sammy smiled at Rake and slapped his face softly. She turned to Katarina. “I thought I did too, but my senses were all whacked when the ship got cut in two and when Ipso reformed it, I found my consciousness half in and half out. I just fell out of the fridge. By the way, tiny tot totally repaired us. We’re brand new.”

Darq clicked his teeth together. “Her body temperature is dangerously low, and her pulse is weak.”

Rake looked between Katarina and Sammy. “Why are you two acting like this is no big deal! She has a fucking body!”

Katarina blushed. “Sammy used her points to reconstruct her body when we were in Cloud City.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?” Rake kissed Sammy’s hand and tears filled his eyes. “Mica and I had a lightsaber battle; you would have loved to play too.”

“You know what I loved more?” Sammy coughed weakly.

Rake nodded. “What?”

“Licking Kat into a puddle of ecstasy.”

Rake gaped. “But—”

“We can do twin stuff another time, I had to get my sex on.” Sammy gave the air a weak pelvic thrust. “Know what I mean, Johnny Bean?”

Rake’s eyes narrowed. “I see how it is.”

“Good.” Sammy smiled at Katarina. “I guess you and I will get another chance to fuck, pussy sweetheart.”

Marx loomed over the group. “Sammy, are you still connected with the ship?”

Sammy closed her eyes and her voice filled the speakers, “Oh, you can believe that shit.”

Marx eyed the walls with curiosity. “Interesting.”

Katarina focused on Darq. “Is she getting any better? She doesn’t look well.”

Darq closed his eyes. “I need to get her to the medical hall. I can’t concentrate here.”

Katarina snapped at Mica. “Help him out.”

Mica picked Sammy up.

Sammy bit him in the chest. “Mmm British, one of my favorite flavors. Say something upper crust for me. Say *crumpet*.”

Mica smiled. “Hello, Sammy.”

Rake watched them go. “I can’t even think right now, Kat. I’m going with them.”

Katarina looked pained. “No.”

“Kat!”

“No! We have other priorities!” Kat watched them go. “How do you think *I* feel?”

“She’s my sister!”

Sammy whistled over the speakers. “Yo, I’ve been in a hard drive for a decade. I’m fine, just not used to the whole flesh thing. Listen, I got a message on record from Charlie, and I think y’all should listen.”

Charlie’s voice filled the cockpit. “Rogue Squadron and the Millennium Falcon, this is Jed

and the Wolverines, you know the drill. I have no idea whether you're getting these messages, but I've been doing some research and got news from the Empire. Vader and Wedge's faces are plastered everywhere, scheduled for execution. Now I know Han, Luke, and Chewie aren't going to let them die. What I don't know is whether you even know the shit they're in. So consider this a gift."

Coordinates flashed on their screen. "That's the space station they were supposed to be brought to. Since I know you're dying to find out how I got that, well, we have some Rebel Alliance allies now."

In the background of the call, a kid shouted, "Ally!"

Charlie laughed. "Okay, we have *one* ally, but he's damn useful and he's promised more help. Well, I have to end the call, can't be too careful about giving out the location of the Rebel Base. We hope to hear from you soon, give Chewie my love, and let her know that all the sibs are doing fine. Oh, and if you do see Wedge and Vader, tell them they'd better prepare to apologize to Jabba. She's real fucking pissed. Jed out."

Katarina grinned. "Sammy, coordinates?"

"Yeah, yeah, Ow Darq!" Her voice carried over the speakers. "Uh, yeah coordinates, uhm what good is that going to do us?"

Rake slipped into Ravil's chair. "I found *this* ship, I can find that one. I'll just focus on Oro or Danny or something." Rake touched the Navigator panels in front of him.

Katarina grabbed his wrist. "Wait!"

"I thought we had to get going?"

She gestured toward the monitors. "We need to have a plan! You're just going to take us there, then what?"

"Then we...then we attack?" Rake looked up at her.

"A space station?"

Rake frowned. "Well—"

"Might I interject?" Marx leaned over Rake's seat. "We are in an Empire ship, with legitimate Empire security codes. Would it not make more sense to dock ourselves with their ship and rescue by subterfuge? We have the uniforms here to blend in; we can get information on the exact location and rescue them with barely a fuss."

Katarina frowned. "That didn't help us in the last firefight."

"True." Marx flicked out his claws. "But they tracked us using Lloyd and we were the only ship around *and* we appeared strange. Ipso remade the ship. We no longer have non-regulation guns strapped to our hull."

"Our guns are gone? Fucking stupid..." Rake strapped himself in. "So we go in disguised, infiltrate, get the goods, escape." He nodded. "That sounds like a plan to me, everyone get buckled!"

Katarina slipped into the pilot's chair and eyed Rake's Navigator controls. "Do you really know what you're doing?"

Rake grinned. "More or less."

Tasaneé looked over from her chair. "Don't you need a pilot?"

"Eh, details." Rake shoved his hand into the Navigator panels. "Let's go!"

Oro gnashed his teeth and kicked on his cell door. He'd heard Lloyd leave and there had been some kind of struggle with Danny, but since then only silence. Oro slammed his foot down. "Someone let me out!"

The door opened and a Jungay leveled a gun in his face. “Don’t try anything. Be good.”

Oro spat in his face. “Fuck off, mind leech.”

The Jungay grinned. “We don’t have Blackouts anymore.”

“So?”

Pain enveloped Oro’s body. His eyes felt as if they were going to explode. Oro grabbed his head and dropped to his knees. He fought against the intrusion. *Dad!*

A meaty fist slammed into the Jungay, throwing him to the side. Danny tripped and fell on his face. His pupils were huge, and he foamed at the mouth. He pawed for Oro. “Ru—run.”

Oro gasped as pain fled. He grabbed Danny’s hand. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“He’s drugged.” A man stepped past Danny. “Completely harmless now I think.” He dismissed the Jungay’s bleeding lip. “No more misbehavior. We have an appointment to keep.”

Ampyr darted in like black shadows. Soldiers cuffed his hands behind his back and fastened chains between his legs. They put a collar on Danny and attached a pole to it, keeping him at a distance.

Danny grabbed on to his collar and slumped in to the wall. “I think I’m going to vomit.”

Oro focused on Danny, trying to get through to him. His father’s head was white noise and slush. “What have you drugged him with?”

The station manager led the way. “We have him on double the dose for a Rexos, but as you can see, he is still on his feet. The geneticists will love to get their hands on his corpse when we’re done with this. He represents a medical oddity, as do you. Come now.”

They were pushed past Ampyr soldiers standing at attention, waiting for orders. Oro scanned them, trying to discern which one was Evgeniy.

The Jungay behind Oro hissed. “We have an infiltrator.”

Oro blanked his mind. He thought about gumdrops and teddy bears.

The station manager turned. “What? Where?”

The Jungay frowned. “I do not know, someone called Ev—”

Oro slammed his head backwards, breaking the Jungay’s nose. He tripped on his chains and plowed into the Jungay. “Oops.”

Ampyr hauled him to his feet and pushed him towards the station manager. The man grabbed Oro’s chin. “*Tell me who is also on board.*”

“Go fish.”

“*Who is Go Fish?*”

Oro snorted. “I’m a Resister.”

The station manager let go as if burned. “All the more reason to get this over with quickly.” He gestured to his soldiers. “Get them to the auditorium *now.*”

Oro followed along with the pushes. He kept his eyes on Danny, but thought about something engaging, something to keep his mind off anyone else. He thought about Lloyd doing a striptease.

Oro walked down twisting corridors and with each turn or pass of a doorway, his worry increased. No, worry was too light of a word. Mind-numbing terror sounded more accurate. This was it, his last walk...his last few minutes to think about life, but his brain could only focus on fear if he tried to think about anything rational like escape.

Oro swallowed and his mind slipped back to a nearly naked Lloyd. He regretted the fact that he’d never gotten the chance to show the guy a good time, but he didn’t regret the time they’d spent together. Oro smiled with his eyes closed, remembering washing his hair and dancing in a daydream.

Oro scuffed his feet, hoping Lloyd was okay.

A screech of metal on metal made his eyes snap open.

The station manager stepped out into a lit auditorium. The guards stopped Danny and Oro from stepping through, but Oro caught glimpses of a crowd. His heart flip-flopped. He took a deep breath, but the air didn't help him.

His hands trembled and his mind glossed over whatever words the station manager said to the crowd. It didn't matter anyways. Fingers slipped in around his. Oro looked back.

Danny gave him a tired smile and a stay-strong look.

Oro couldn't mirror it. Maybe Danny believed they had a rescue on the way, but how often did life really turn out the way you planned? For Oro, the answer was never. His life was a series of bad luck events and painful learning moments with some happy bits in-between. Even his life started out as a tragedy. He smiled weakly at Danny. "Thanks for making things better while you could."

Danny frowned and tried to speak, but he just drooled on himself.

A push in the back got them moving into the auditorium. Lights made Oro wince and drop his gaze to the crowd. Soldiers ringed the half-moon stage that made up his death theater. Mixed in with the Ampyr were a few Jungay, there no doubt to counter anything he could do. Behind them, dignitaries and officers sat in plush seats, leaning forward in anticipation as if this were a show.

But this was a show, wasn't it? Oro brought his head up to view the crowd. This was *his* show, his moment in front of the universe. His eyes caught on a raised platform; he gave it a once over and hissed. "Hanged? I'm going to be hanged?"

Danny mumbled behind him, drooling out of the corner of his mouth.

Oro glared at the station manager. "Gallows?"

The station manager sent two soldiers to set it up. "You recognize it?"

Oro trembled. "Ye—yeah."

The station manager nodded. "Good, then we don't need to explain how it will work."

"I thought you liked slow and painful for deaths? A neck break is quick."

"Breaking your neck?" The station manager smiled. "No, that would be far too fast."

Oro dug his feet into the ground. "I'm going to strangle to death! Fuck this!" He twisted and rammed into a soldier. Ampyr were on him before he took two steps. They slammed his head into the floor and hauled him to the raised platform.

Danny went weak-kneed and keeled over. His eyes fluttered shut, and he passed out from a drug overdose.

A hand clapped over Oro's mouth, followed by a gag. He kicked backwards, but a new soldier replaced the one he'd attacked. Soldiers grabbed his braid, forcing his head to stay still. Oro thought pain. He thought fear; he thought disaster, alarm, alert, *attack*.

The soldiers at his sides whipped out their weapons and looked for a threat.

Oro dove to his right.

You only entertain them.

Oro ignored the intrusive thought and dashed for Danny.

They like it when a prisoner thinks he can get out.

Oro's eyes flashed up. Amused faces oriented his way, and beyond them, Jungay worked to counter the impulse he'd sent.

Soldiers tackled him to the floor.

What trick will you try next? We are curious what a new mind can do, what one can do

when not trained, when not affected by the madness yet.

Other voices joined the first.

He is without the madness?

Do you move and sleep without the visions?

How?

Oro ground his teeth. *Shut up!*

He can see but not go blind?

How?

He is not part of the all.

Not possible!

Not tempted at all?

Not harassed to join them?

The eight.

They come for us always, but not for you?

How do you avoid their call?

Oro glared at the Jungay, wishing they'd shut the fuck up. He didn't want to share their headspace when he died.

We all share, so it is to be Jungay.

We all share.

In the all are the all.

Oro chewed on his gag and thrashed as soldiers threw him up on the platform. *I am not a Jungay!*

What are you then, head speaker?

Not a Jungay yet a Jungay.

What are you?

What are you?

What are you?

A Jedi. Oro looked to the ceiling. He threw up a mental wall and blocked their nagging questions. A noose went over his neck.

A speech of some kind carried on around him, but Oro's ears were full of the sound of rushing blood. He scraped at his handcuffs, making his fingers bleed. Behind him, Danny got to his feet and stumbled into someone before taking a syringe in the neck and dropping to the floor once more.

Oro wondered if he should close his eyes.

The door opened beneath his feet. He dropped and expected a snap, but the cord plunged too and his toes touched the ground for an instant. Oro briefly thought himself saved.

The cord tightened and pulled him back up. The biting material cut his oxygen and panic followed. Oro kicked on impulse, desperate to get purchase to relieve the pressure, but there was nothing under his feet. Black spots appeared in his vision. His face darkened and his twitches became frantic. His thoughts came in bursts of random information, memories in fragments, colors, lights...faces. Pretty faces and the cool glow of moonlight.

The door slid shut and his feet found ground. The platform pushed him back up.

Oro sucked in air as the noose loosened. He looked up, searching for what had given him reprieve, but the sea of faces only looked interested.

His heart sank. His show wasn't going to be over just like that.

The door opened. Oro sucked in air. The noose tightened.

Pain spread from his spine to his limbs, followed by tingling numbness. His thoughts grew heavy, lethargic. Darkness spread through his vision.

The door closed. He breathed. Oro gasped, coughed, and swallowed air. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His thoughts were just coherent enough to know that this would start again, that it wasn't done.

Lights flickered in his narrowing field of vision. Oro wondered if people took pictures of him. The Ampyr had said something about this being shown live. Oro hoped it wasn't.

The door opened.

Oro didn't drop.

The noose stayed slack, something went wrong. He began to hyperventilate, knowing the error in the machinery would be fixed shortly, and down he'd go with no air, but how much time did he have? Oro chanced a look up; the audience stared at him in confusion.

He looked down. His feet hung over the opening, but he stayed in place. For a split second, he wondered if levitating was a Jungay talent, but by the looks on their faces, they were shocked too.

Oro wriggled a foot experimentally. He definitely stood on something.

The invisible something pinched his thigh.

Oro wanted to hop in joy, but thought better of it. Evgeniy had to be near. Oro strained to feel or hear the Russian, but nothing came in over the cacophony of an angering, confused crowd. They began to pay attention to each other, searching for what went wrong.

His gag was torn away from his mouth. Oro coughed and drew the crowd's attention back to him. "Lord Vader is displeased with his level of treatment! Now you shall all suffer my wrath!"

The Ampyr politicians took a step back. Soldiers pushed through the crowd and leveled their weapons at his face.

Oro whispered, "Shit."

The Ampyr fired. Oro flinched.

Clicking filled the auditorium. The Ampyr fired their useless guns. Some shook the weapons, others checked the rounds, a few reloaded and tried again.

The lights went out.

Emmalethe dropped her camouflage. She ripped the noose off from around Oro's neck and broke his handcuffs. She pulled him down into the hole. "Shh."

"Danny—"

"Shh, take breath and rest." She patted him on the shoulder. "I be back."

"Where are you going?" He rubbed his throat.

"Cause pirate *mayhem*." Emmalethe flipped back on stage as Pyros created emergency lights in red and yellow fire. She came down amongst soldiers. They stopped and stared.

Emmalethe flashed her tits and her colors. She cupped her hands around her lips and shouted, "Kennedy, pirate time! Come out and play with me!" She dove and disappeared as Ampyr leapt for her and hit into one another. The soldiers saw her appear in flashes as she jumped from the stage into the crowd. They dispersed, splitting to search for the enemy.

Oro held his throat and listened to screams, confusion, and havoc. He pulled his hand away from his neck; his fingers were free of blood. Oro took a deep breath and hacked; his body spasmed.

An invisible hand grabbed Oro by his braid and pulled him out of the hole. Emmalethe hissed in his ear. "Can run?"

“Yeah.” Oro nodded. “Maybe.” The lights flashed above them. He looked up. “What is that?”

“Signal, Evgeniy near for us!” Emmalethe punched him in the arm. “Get up, bounce back, and be like woman! You have long hair!”

Oro grabbed his braid. “So?”

“Be strong or I cut it off! Men not wear sign of honor unless *strong*.”

Reloy clapped his hands. “Okay! Now you, Blue, ask a question! You haven’t done one yet!” Reloy moved in front of the monitors excitedly. Behind him, the televised execution went as scheduled and Oro dropped for the first time.

“I can’t.” Lincoln hissed.

Reloy stopped in his paces. “Why?”

Lincoln repressed a growl and pointed at the screens. “I find that distracting.”

Reloy cocked his head and spun on his heels. His mouth opened in an O of surprise. He turned the volume up so that they could hear the station manager and crowd. Reloy took a seat on the floor. “Oh, I *hate* the gallows. I wish they didn’t have to have it on.”

Kennedy whined. “Can make stop?”

Reloy picked up the remote. “I can turn it off.”

“No, make stop altogether, make stop!” She put her hand over her heart.

Reloy gave her a confused look. “Why would I get involved in that barbaric business? Let me turn it off. You shouldn’t have to see it. They’ll start the fires soon.”

“No!” Lincoln lowered his voice, “No need.”

The lights flickered on the screen. Lincoln and Kennedy leaned forward with their ears cocked. Reloy turned and watched. “The machine must be broken. Ethei will hate that.” He grinned.

Kennedy flashed her eyes between Lincoln and Reloy. Lincoln jerked his head at Reloy. He growled too low for Reloy to hear. “Kill him quickly and we can leave. I will keep my eyes closed so as not to know.”

Kennedy whimpered. “No want to.”

“You don’t have a choice, *kill him* or our friends *die*.”

Kennedy shook her head. “I don’t want to kill him. He is nice to me.”

Emmalethe appeared on the screen, and Reloy pointed at her. “What is *that*?” He pressed his hands on the image. “*What is that?* It is so strange! Where did it come from? I want one to study! Kennedy, she looks your age. She could be your playmate. What do you think?”

Emmalethe shouted, “Kennedy, pirate time! Come out and play with me!”

“Kennedy?” Reloy frowned and turned to look at Kennedy. “How strange.”

Kennedy covered her mouth. “Uh-oh.”

Lincoln snarled. “Kill him, Kennedy!”

Reloy jumped back from the pair. “*Blue, restrain her!*”

Lincoln grabbed Kennedy by the arms and lifted her off her feet. “Kennedy, fight me!”

“No!” She squirmed in his grip.

Reloy vanished. He slammed the locks on the door to the suite. He stared at the pair and pointed an accusatory finger at them. “Explain!” Neither Hunter spoke. Reloy hissed.

“*Kennedy, explain yourself to me now!*”

Kennedy shook her head.

Reloy’s jaw dropped open and his eyes glinted with recognition. “You’re *Resister*. You’re

Resister, oh my!” He appeared before her, but just out of reach. “But you’re not black spotted. Why is that?”

Kennedy gulped. “Camouflage.”

Reloy nodded. “Ah, smart. Clever girl!” He snapped at Lincoln. “Blue, *your name now.*”

“Lincoln.” Lincoln growled at Reloy. “Are you going to kill us quickly or—”

“You’re not a Resister then. *Tell me the truth, are you Resister? Are either of you under the influence?*”

“No, I am not.” Lincoln hissed. “And no, we’re not.”

“So interesting.” Reloy examined the pair; his eyes came back to Kennedy. “You don’t have to obey me.”

Kennedy looked away. “Not has to, never had to.”

Reloy’s lips twitched into a smile. “You can fight and beat me. You can overpower me and can resist my orders. *Anyone’s* orders.”

Kennedy nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Reloy clapped his hands together. “How superb!” He pointed towards the screen. “You’re with them? Those to be executed? The *so-called* Resistance force?”

Lincoln hissed. “Say *nothing*, Kennedy.”

Reloy eyed Lincoln. “I’m just asking a question. You don’t need to get so defensive—”

“Yes,” Kennedy interrupted. “We are with them.”

Reloy nodded and paced. “What a strange place this puts me. What to do now, how curious a thing, how strange! It’s marvelous in a way, a unique encounter! I’ve never met a living Resister before!”

Lincoln snarled. “Kill us or turn us in!”

“Why?” Reloy shook his head at Lincoln. “You and the *violence*. Don’t think I can’t hear you growling around me! I don’t appreciate it at all!”

“You shot me in the back!” Lincoln growled.

“Yes, well, *that* was rude. I am ever so sorry, truly I am.” Reloy bowed.

“Apology not accepted, *never* accepted! You tried to rape my Kennedy!”

“*Your* Kennedy?” Reloy stared at Kennedy. “*Rape?* What a *terrible* thing to say!” He looked ill and covered his mouth. “I would never hurt her that way! *Never!*”

“No, you would *order* her to enjoy it! You would drug her into being aroused!”

“But I *can’t* order her to enjoy it, and I didn’t even try to.” Reloy glared at Lincoln. “If I had wanted to drug her I could have given her wine and had my way with her unconscious body! Those treats were for the *both* of us, and if anyone got drugged it was *me* and that was my own fault.”

Lincoln bared his fangs. “Regardless of how it might seem in your *twisted* mind, she wasn’t willing. She doesn’t want to be with you! She only acted along to keep our cover safe! If you had succeeded it would have been rape!”

“Not rape.” Kennedy elbowed Lincoln in the chest. “And I not yours either! I am my own! No one owns me! Kennedy is Kennedy’s!” She craned her neck to meet Lincoln’s eyes. “He would have been nice to me in sex, nicer than *ones in my past!*”

Lincoln jerked in pain.

Kennedy looked to Reloy. “I not virgin like you think, but I not had sex in nice way. *You* were first to think of *me*. Not use me, but be *with me*. I could have enjoyed it, maybe, I don’t know. I don’t assume all bad like Lincoln.”

Reloy’s eyes blurred with tears.

Lincoln hissed. “Ah, see, Kennedy, how he reacts?” He sneered at Reloy. “Now Little Blue is ruined for you. No longer young, sweet and virginal for you to take. Now the pretense will drop, Kennedy, and you’ll see what he really wants from you, a sexual bed slave.”

“Kennedy.” Reloy rolled up his sleeves. “Duck.”

She dropped her head. “Wha—”

Reloy punched Lincoln in the face, knocking the Hunter back. He shook out his hand. “It is not fair, punching you when you cannot strike back. But it is so very *satisfying*.”

Lincoln spat blood and growled incomprehensible things back at Reloy.

Reloy ignored him and took Kennedy’s hand. “I sh—should have inferred such things about your history from your story.” He gazed at her, his eyes haunted. “I truly apologize for my actions. I would not have touched you at—at all if I h—had known th—that.”

Kennedy nodded. “Apology accepted.”

“Why?” Lincoln growled and squeezed her. “Stop believing him, Kennedy! He lies!”

“Don’t tell me what to think, Lincoln!” She barked back at him.

Lincoln snapped his teeth near her ear. “You are naïve and stupid beyond belief at times!”

Reloy cleared his throat. “*Lincoln, release her and remain still.*”

Lincoln dropped Kennedy.

She hissed at both men. Kennedy pointed to Lincoln. “Reloy is *nice*, not liar, I *know* liars.” She rounded on Reloy. “I like Lincoln too, both need to deal with it! I leave now!” Kennedy stomped to the door, stopped, and turned around. “Thank you for the tail! I like that too! I *keep* it!”

Reloy jumped over the couch and darted after her. “Wait please!”

Kennedy flicked out her claws. “Not stop me, Reloy! I have *job* to do!”

“Where are you going?” He took and petted her hand. “Please tell me.”

Kennedy looked between the pair. “I—”

Lincoln growled. “Kennedy, incapacitate him and leave! Save yourself!”

“You stop telling me what to do, Lincoln!” Kennedy snarled. “I think for myself as well!”

Reloy glared at Lincoln. “Yes, *stop telling her what to do!*”

Kennedy hissed at Reloy. “Don’t use mean voice on him! Not nice! I want all to be friends! You be friends together!”

Reloy clenched his jaw and spat out. “*Last order rescinded.*”

“Thank you.” Kennedy grinned, throwing Reloy off guard. “Now we go?”

Reloy clutched Kennedy and kept her still. “Dearest sweetheart, you complicate things for me. I hate having to think about things like this.”

She spoke softly, “Then don’t think, just sit and we go leaving you here.”

“But I’ll—” Reloy looked at his feet. “I like you. We were having so much fun.”

“We did have fun.” Kennedy hugged him. “But we die if we stay.”

“I know, and worse I’m sure once they realize you’re connected to that other group.” Reloy ran his fingers through his black hair, his face wavering between devastation and acceptance.

“Fine. Go, both of you. Get out.”

Kennedy bounced on her tail. “Lincoln, hear that!”

Lincoln’s eyes narrowed. “It’s a trap!”

Reloy blurred and threw a pillow at Lincoln’s head. “Stop thinking everything I do is bad and evil! You don’t know me!”

“You are Ampyr!”

“So *what?*” Reloy’s cheeks flushed. “I’m *sick* of people telling me what I can and can’t do,

what I am or should be because of what I was born! Ampyr are not the only ones with racial prejudices!”

Lincoln snapped his mouth shut.

Kennedy hugged Reloy. “Really let us go? You do this for us?”

“Yes, for *you*.” Reloy embraced her and glared at Lincoln over her shoulder. “I can’t keep you with me if you’re Resister. Imports and Exports check my staff when they come in and out of First Planet, you’d be found and executed. I’d rather you stayed alive than in my company for a few days longer.”

“You care about my life?”

Reloy kissed her cheek. “Yes, darling, I do.”

Kennedy grinned, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him on the lips. Reloy blinked in surprise. He smiled and returned her kiss. Kennedy hit him with pheromones and Reloy went weak at the knees. He broke the kiss and whispered in to her neck, “With a kiss like that why would anyone wonder why a man would want to court a Hunter?”

Lincoln shouted, “The better question, *Reloy*, is why a Hunter would want to mate with an Ampyr, when you clearly offer her *nothing*! Kennedy, stop playing with your food!”

Kennedy ignored Lincoln and licked Reloy’s cheek. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He held her hand. “I’ll miss you, my Little Blue.”

Lincoln hissed. “She won’t miss you!”

Kennedy’s lips drew into a line. She kissed Reloy. “I will miss you too. I won’t forget what you’ve done for us.”

“That is sweet, love.” Reloy gave her a lopsided smile. “You’re so sweet to me when you don’t have to be.”

“You’re *delusional*, Reloy!” Lincoln growled. “No one is sweet to you! Everyone *hates* you! Even your own kind despises you!”

Reloy nodded. “I’m sure all of those are true of me at one time or another, more often than not all together at once.”

Kennedy flashed Lincoln an evil look. She patted Reloy’s hand. “I not fake affection. I not say that now because I think you will hurt us, I mean it. You my friend, Reloy.”

“Truly?” Reloy choked up. “You want to be friends with *me*?”

“Yes much, my friend.” Kennedy kissed both of his cheeks. “Good friend.”

“Yes, you are a dear.” Reloy looked in her eyes with longing and resignation. “I suggest you leave now and go help your friends. The longer you’re here the more danger you will be in.” Reloy pointed to Lincoln. “But *you stay for a minute*.”

Kennedy looked nervously between the pair. “What this?”

Reloy folded his arms. “Gentlemanly business man to man. Don’t worry, neither of us will die.”

Lincoln growled. “Go, Kennedy. I will follow behind.” He watched Kennedy leave and eyed Reloy. “What now? What *business* do we have?”

Reloy hopped over the couch and examined Lincoln’s blue spots. “Being under my command, and me being the most powerful Ampyr here, *you may not accept orders from any other Ampyr in this place*. You will not be able to be controlled. Understood? No one will be able to stop you.”

Lincoln strained against his order not to kill Reloy. “You lie to get my guard down. You will kill me now and reclaim her.”

Reloy stepped up on a low table to see him eye-to-eye. “I don’t appreciate your bad

attitude. Are you gruff with her?”

“She is my mate, what place is it—”

“That is a lie, *tell me the truth.*”

Lincoln hissed. “I raised her. We are not mates, but we will be shortly. I love her.”

“I know the feeling.”

Lincoln hissed. “You don’t know anything about her! You love something she represents. You treat her as a pet! It humiliates her! She *hates* you!”

“She did not seem to hate me.”

“You are a fool! You know nothing about Hunters!”

Reloy frowned. “Now, that is also not true. Once again, you are making assumptions about my character and my past. I think—”

“I don’t *care* what you think!”

Reloy made a face. “Fine.”

Lincoln leaned towards him. “What now then? Will you prevent me from being with her? A last order just out of spite?”

Reloy looked away. “No, I will not do that. That would be wildly unfair to the both of you. *I rescind my order about mating with Kennedy.*”

Lincoln shivered as the compulsion was removed. “Then why do you keep me here?”

“I can’t simply let you two disappear without some appearance of being overtaken.” Reloy smiled at the chaos on the screen. “Ethei will have the Emperor come down on his head for this, even if all of you are recaptured and killed. That idea amuses me to no end. However, I have no wish for Zoph or Threnas to come down on my head too.”

“What are you requesting?”

“A fight.” Reloy rolled up his cuffs past his elbow and buttoned them in place. “Not to the death, but something to destroy the room certainly.”

“How would anyone believe I could break your commands?”

“Ah.” Reloy held up a finger. “As far as our intelligence is aware, you are *all* Resisters. Why would *you* be any different? Let us say...you saw your moment, nearly killed me, and thought you had, but in that you failed and I manage to survive your attack. You escape and I am left to be the laughing stock of Court Imperial, my comfortable station as the lowest of the high families.” He smiled sadly. “I will lose my current position, and perhaps can shake off this terrible ship so that I may go home to my gardens, lab, and theater. What say you to this arrangement?”

“A fight I would welcome.” Lincoln flicked out his claws. “I am not the most precise slicer. I may cut you too deep.”

Reloy cracked his knuckles. “I’ve been known to accidentally break necks.” He took a deep breath. “*Your order to do me no harm is rescinded.*”

Kennedy paced in the hallway outside Reloy’s suite. She focused on Oro’s smell, getting him in her blood. He’d act like a beacon, directing them to his aid.

Thumps and breaking glass emanated from Reloy’s room. Kennedy kept her back to the door. This behavior between males and females vying for the same mate was something she’d seen often enough. Regardless, she still found it confusing and didn’t know what to think or do about it.

Lincoln threw open the door and landed by her side. “You have Oro’s mark?”

Kennedy eyed the blood and bruises on his hands, face, and feet. “I do, he lives.” She

looked behind him, but the door had closed on its own. “Did you kill him?”

“That depends on whether a Rexos comes along shortly.” Lincoln grinned.

Kennedy frowned. “He was a friend to me, Lincoln.”

“No, he wasn’t. He was Ampyr royalty.” Lincoln pressed Kennedy to the wall. He licked her neck. “He was insane, broken, an outcast even amongst his own. He was *nothing* for one like you.” Lincoln kissed her roughly, flooding the air with his pheromones.

Kennedy swooned. She tasted Reloy’s blood and her stomach churned. She shoved Lincoln away. “Not time for right now.” She wiped Reloy’s blood off her mouth. “I find Oro, Evgeniy. We go now.”

Lincoln licked Reloy’s blood from his lips. “Lead the way.”

Evgeniy pointed Lloyd at a crowd of disoriented soldiers. “Shoot!”

Lloyd closed his eyes and fired, his bullets hitting feet, hands, and shoulders. He opened his eyes and saw men and women on the ground. Lloyd smiled faintly. “I hit something this time.”

Evgeniy grabbed Lloyd by his wrist and pulled him down an aisle towards the stage. Both of them looked like soldiers, and they weren’t the only soldiers firing into the crowd in confusion. An unanticipated boon. Evgeniy avoided screaming dignitaries, his eyes on Danny and the stage.

Emmalethe kicked the station manager into a group of Jungay, knocking them over. She flipped and vanished. Oro hovered over Danny, working at his bonds.

Lloyd pointed. “There they are! There they are!”

Evgeniy had taken this in, but his concern was elsewhere. The Jungay had reclaimed their feet, and by the direction they looked, they planned to interfere with his lady.

Evgeniy sprinted towards them and focused on damping the area. The Jungay lost control; they stared at their hands, at each other. Evgeniy slammed his rifle into the head of the first. He swung his gun around to fire.

Bullets hit the Jungay in the legs; they screamed in agony and passed out. Lloyd skidded to a stop at Evgeniy’s side. “I’m getting better!”

Evgeniy nodded and gave him a grunt. “Good, but aim still poor.”

“I *meant* to hit their knees!”

Evgeniy shook his head. “Shoot to kill.”

Lloyd balked. “But Jungay have a low pain tolerance. All you have to do is—”

Evgeniy put his hand over Lloyd’s mouth. “Talk less also. It—”

Evgeniy took a fist to the chest. The blow knocked him back, but not off his feet. He dodged as a blur moved in his vision.

The blur resolved into Ethei. The Duke did a double take at seeing Lloyd. “You traitor!”

Evgeniy swept Ethei’s feet out from under him. He grabbed the Duke by his epaulets and drove his knee into the man’s stomach.

Ethei slammed his head into Evgeniy’s face. “*What are you?*”

Evgeniy punched him in the chin in response. Ethei’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he hit the floor unconscious. Evgeniy tossed his near empty gun in favor of a fresh one. He pointed towards the stage. “Move, Lloyd.”

Lloyd no longer saw Oro. “Where’d they go?”

“Emma took them out back way.” Evgeniy leapt up on stage and focused on the lights. The bulbs burst sporadically, casting large portions of the room into darkness. Under his damping, the fires of the Pyros went out. He fired randomly into the crowd, creating a new wave of panic.

Evgeniy tapped his headset. “Where are you?”

Emmalethe breathed heavily into her headset. “Back way we came. I follow scent towards prison, many come. Can’t carry Danny much longer.”

“We are short behind.” Evgeniy pointed to the door Oro had come through to get on the stage. “They are through there!”

Lloyd darted past Evgeniy. He kicked the door in and raised his gun. Evgeniy turned and swept the stage, but no one followed. He spun on his heels and ran after Lloyd. Evgeniy’s codex activated his map.

Gunfire and screams bounced down the narrow halls. Lloyd dashed down a side passage. “There’s fighting down here!”

Evgeniy resisted the impulse to gag Lloyd; silence was a virtue he’d have to show the boy another time. Evgeniy caught Lloyd by the shoulder and held him still. “Emma, status?”

Only static came as a response.

Evgeniy dropped into a crouch. “We go in cautious, they might have been overrun.”

“Overrun?” Lloyd broke into a sprint.

“Idiot!” Evgeniy hissed.

Lloyd turned a corner.

Evgeniy grabbed him by the waist and pulled him down as random gunfire left pockmarks in the wall above their heads. He kept motionless, but no one had spotted the pair.

Down the hallway, soldiers trained guns on Oro and Danny. Emmalethe was nowhere in sight. Evgeniy whispered, “I will damp abilities. *Wait* this time, Lloyd.”

A soldier punched Oro in the face and grabbed his braid, slamming his head into the wall. Oro staggered and took a hit to the stomach.

Lloyd saw the blood and the bruises on Oro’s throat and face. Anger and panic burned at him like acid. He twitched and jumped to his feet. Rage escaped through his lips. “*Die! All of you die!*”

The Ampyr convulsed. They ripped their helmets off, gagging and choking. Blood spewed from their lips, nose, and eyes, as each became a hemorrhaging fountain. Wet pops filled the air as their hearts burst and bones cracked. Every soldier in hearing range hit the floor dead in under ten seconds.

Lloyd gaped, shocked.

Evgeniy shoved Lloyd aside and shouted, “Emma! Emma! Are you okay? *Emma!*”

Emmalethe faded into view and pulled out her earplug headphones. “Why are you wigwag like that?” She made fun of his arm motions. “You think funny dance!” She pointed to Lloyd. “Impressive, loud baby!” She shoved her earplugs back in and put an arm around Danny, getting him to his feet.

Evgeniy grabbed Lloyd by his collar and slammed him in to a wall. “Do not do again! You can kill her!”

Lloyd’s eyes were wide. “I didn’t mean to I swear! I...I didn’t know I could do that!”

Evgeniy let him go and stalked to Emmalethe’s side. He slapped her on the butt and looked into Danny’s eyes. He tapped his headset so that she could hear his voice. “Emma, what is wrong with Danny?”

“Poison. But I not do it, Nee.”

“I know.” Evgeniy nodded. “I carry. You stealth out front and scout. Do not take earplugs out.”

“I fine.” Emmalethe nodded. “I go—”

“*Pirates!*” Kennedy came round a corner, slipped in blood, and slammed into a wall. “I find you! I find all!”

Lincoln stopped just behind her and grinned at Evgeniy. “You have a plan?”

Evgeniy pointed down the hall. “Emmalethe has secured us a ship and a Navigator.”

Emmalethe grinned, only her face visible as she changed her colors. “I kidnap, drug, and put in small vessel. No one notice me. It enough room for us all.”

Kennedy bounded to her side. “Good pirate!”

Evgeniy walked over to the Hunter. “Lincoln, go with Emmalethe in front. If Lloyd decides to make voice again, you two cannot be round.”

Lincoln eyed the bodies. “This was him?”

Evgeniy glared at the back of Lloyd’s head. “Yes, impressive but executed thoughtlessly.”

Lincoln flicked his claws at Emmalethe. “After you, Stalker.”

Lloyd ignored them; he held Oro and put their foreheads together. “Are you okay?”

Oro looked up, able to see out of one eye, the other was swollen shut. He spoke with a raspy voice, “My hero.”

Lloyd gulped. “Let me help you up.” He cradled Oro. “I won’t let you go, so you can relax.”

“Good.” Oro closed his eyes. “I don’t want you to.”

Evgeniy gestured. “We go now.”

American rock music blasted through the corridor.

Evgeniy pulled his headset away from his ear. He stared at the ceiling. “Where is that coming from?”

Lincoln turned from the end of the hall. “The auditorium.”

“Back from where we came? Why?”

Danny drooled. “I’m guessing Rake and Sammy have arrived.”

Kennedy closed her eyes. A smile lit up her features. “I feel them! I feel Mica! Rake! Little Rat too! But two different places?”

“Where?” Evgeniy threw Danny over his shoulder.

Kennedy pointed back the way they had come. “Rake and Mica there. Little Rat is...” she gestured towards Reloy’s warship. “They docked there in big ship?”

Evgeniy fiddled with his suit’s frequencies. “This is Czar, what is happening? This is Czar, come in. Anyone?”

Sammy responded weakly, “Hey Czar, fancy meeting you here.”

“What is plan? We have one, but will adjust to your *late* arrival.”

“I hacked into the station’s network and saw that you’d started a ruckus. Rake and Mica are taking over where you left off and are covering your escape route. I have you tracked; I can give you a course out on your suit.”

Evgeniy smiled. “Do Rake and Mica need help?”

“No, I think they have this spiffy.”

Danny groped at Evgeniy. “What took them so long?”

Sammy laughed. “Way too long a story. Let’s get going, guys. Marx and Rat will be your greeting crew in docking bay twenty on level nineteen.”

Evgeniy smiled. “I know that place.”

“Good, make my job easy for me. Double time, retreat!”

Rake cocked his hips. “Run, you pansy ass bitches! Run!” He hooted and fired randomly

into the auditorium.

Sammy laughed over the speakers and shut the fanfare off. “Okay, I found them. They heard the music and called in.”

Rake saluted the cameras. “Good! Now get outta here and focus on healing yourself.”

A wall of plants rose up between Rake and the stage. Rake gave Mica a thumbs up. “That was quick.”

Mica’s neon green eyes flashed in the semi-darkness. “My plants missed me.”

Fire and electricity snapped through the air beyond the vegetation. Ampyr soldiers leapt the barrier and came down on the stage with weapons in hand.

Rake put his hands up. “We surrender.”

The soldiers advanced on him slowly.

Rake disappeared and reappeared directly behind them. He grabbed two and vanished.

Mica threw out his hands, and vines snagged the remaining soldiers and threw them out into the auditorium.

Marx adjusted his Empire uniform as he stepped off the medical ship ahead of Tasanee. Around them, soldiers listened overhead as the speakers blasted news of the attack from the space station. Panic had not set in yet. No one knew that the Commodore, pilot, and Navigator of their ship were missing.

Marx glanced down at Tasanee. A glass vial flashed at her neck. He sniffed her hair. “Why did you wear that here?”

“You told me not to take it off ever.” Tasanee elbowed him. “Come on, where’s this control station?”

Marx pointed. “It will be towards the entrance, next to the doors to the rest of ship. We barricade those first, *then* take the control room.”

An alarm sounded over their heads. Tasanee winced. “What now?”

The speaker announced, “*All non-essential personnel return to quarters and lock your doors. All docking bays to be sealed. Escapees have been seen on level twelve; direction indicates a course to the docking bays.*”

Tasanee sighed. “Well, that speeds things up a tad.”

Marx flicked out his claws. “Stay behind me.”

“Behind *you*? I’m the ranged attacker here, Marx.” She adjusted her Fix-It trident. “You stick behind *me*. You’ve got *my* back, remember.”

Marx stepped to the side and let her take the lead. “I shall take down those that you do not.”

“Good.” Tasanee pointed her trident at soldiers that ran past. Her skin flickered with electricity as she charged her weapon. Tasanee aimed. “Bang!” Lightning blasted across the bay, chaining from one soldier to the next, leaving scorch marks across the floor. Tasanee whirled and aimed to her left. “*Shebang!*”

Marx pounced on a half-dead soldier and ripped her throat out. “So much for subtlety.”

Katarina held Sammy’s clammy hand and kept her eyes on her girlfriend’s face. She blotted her forehead with a towel and spoke softly, “Samantha?”

Sammy coughed and opened her eyes. “Kat? You should be in the cockpit by now. What are you still doing in the medical hall?”

Katarina squeezed her hand. “I’m staying with you.”

“I’m the whole ship, Kat.” Sammy cringed and broke into body-shaking coughs.

Katarina cringed. “Darq!”

Darq leapt over Ravil’s bed and dropped down by her side. He pressed his fingers into Sammy’s ribcage and neck. “This is getting worse.”

Katarina focused on his face. “But you can fix this.”

“I *did* fix this.” Darq closed his eyes. “Her body is breaking down rapidly regardless.”

To their left, Ravil’s heart monitor went off. Darq spared the Langone a glance; her eyes were open, but staring at nothing. “Mom, I need you to keep calm and keep your eyes on Ravil’s status for me.”

“But—”

“That will tell us how Rake is. If he gets pumped enough, she may wake up. I need to know that.” Darq took in Katarina’s expression and his chin trembled. “You don’t need to leave Sammy’s side, just watch it. *Please don’t cry*. I can’t handle all of this!” Bones shifted in his skull.

Katarina grabbed his wrist. “I’m okay, I’m okay! I’ll do it!”

Sammy wheezed. “I think I should leave this fleshsickle and go back into the ship. I hate drama, especially if I’m the cause of it.”

Katarina shook her head. “No! Sammy, no!”

Sammy winced. “I’m in pain, Kat. Dying like this sucks.”

“No, you’re not dying!” Katarina looked to Darq. “No, she’s not!”

Darq closed his eyes. “I can only sustain her through constant contact. The cancer has been removed, but it will come again, soon.”

“Why? Make it stop.” Katarina struggled to control the volume of her voice. “*Please*, Darq.”

Sammy pushed Darq away. “Go over there for a second.”

“No! Darq—”

“Go, Darq.” Sammy grabbed Katarina’s chin. She rolled onto one arm. The white’s of Sammy’s eyes were yellowed, and her skin was cool to the touch. Sammy frowned. “Kat, don’t do this to him. Don’t place this on him.”

Katarina pressed her face to Sammy’s chest. She wrapped her arms around her. “I don’t want to lose you again! I can’t!”

“And you won’t. I’ll still be the ship. My real body is still intact on Earth. I’m still around, Kat.” Sammy turned and hacked. She spoke weakly, “The time we had was a gift, but it’s not the last one. You and I, we aren’t through yet and it’ll take more than a few deaths to dissuade me.”

Katarina burst into tears.

Darq cringed, but kept his concentration on the two Langone girls.

Sammy played with Katarina’s dreadlocks. “Please, please don’t be sad. I didn’t come to the flesh to make you cry. I wanted you to take hope from it, Beb. To go away feeling better, not this. Not worse.”

“I...I don’t regret it.” Katarina squeezed her. “Never, it was a dream.”

“A damn good dream.” Sammy smiled and flopped back on the bed. “A real good dream for me too, but I should really go now I think and wake up.”

“No!”

Sammy trembled, working to keep tears from flowing down her cheeks. Her voice was choked, “I don’t want you to watch me die. I don’t want you seeing that, Beb. I don’t want you remembering that out of the fun we had in Cloud City. *Please*.”

“I know.” Katarina kissed her on the cheek. “I know, but I can’t change the way this feels for me. I have to help you or at least be here for you.”

“You can’t do anything, Kat.” Sammy brushed her hand across Katarina’s cheek. “Sometimes you need to accept that and stop blaming yourself for the things you can’t change.”

Katarina sank to the floor and rested her chin on the mattress. “Nothing is insurmountable.” “That’s right, it ain’t. That’s why once we get through this, we can go to Earth, you can fix my body right up, and we’ll be able to romp around again. Focus on that, this is just a little hiccup.”

“Just a little hiccup?”

Sammy pointed to the ceiling. “That is my body now, this metal and plastic space bus. That’s the body you need to keep your attention on. This fleshy thing might be damn attractive and sinfully delicious, but the real shit is what you’re standing in. Okay? You need to focus on keeping *that* part of me intact...not this remnant of that game.”

Katarina nodded without conviction. “I know that, rationally I know. I do.”

“So what I want you to do now then is go to that cockpit and sit in that pilot’s chair.”

“Sammy—”

She squeezed Katarina’s hand. “And you’re going to plug in and get ready to get us out of here, because that is the smart thing to do, and you’re smart, you’re logical. You’re going to protect me and Darq, and everyone else. I’ll be up there with you.”

“I can’t leave you!”

The cutting sound of her voice drove Darq to his knees. Fangs slid out over his teeth. He closed his eyes and said nothing.

Sammy rubbed her thumb across Katarina’s hand. “Don’t make me die in front of you, Kat. Don’t do that to me. The guilt I have, it’s—” tears spilled down her cheeks. “I don’t want to hurt you like that again. *Please go.*”

Katarina kissed her on the lips lightly. She nodded, struggling to keep it together. Katarina gave Sammy one last glance, and Sammy grinned for her. Katarina smiled in return and ran as her lips turned into a frown and sobs choked her. She fled for the cockpit.

Darq scrambled across the floor and sealed the door. He heaved, scraping claws across the metal. Darq snarled as horns threatened to push through his scalp. “Sammy, tell her to evacuate!”

Sammy pushed a button that tilted her mattress up. She pointed to Darq. “Chill out, boy.”

Darq scratched his face. “I’m going to turn—”

“No *you will not!*” Sammy put one shaking foot to the floor. “You will listen to me and do your job and work on these girls! Get to your *feet*, Darq!”

“I can’t control it!”

Sammy stumbled to the next mattress. “You listen to, Kat.”

“She’s not here!”

“I am! I’m mom number two and I am not here for hugs and kisses, that’s *her* job. I’m here for spankings and tough love. So, get off your fucking ass, and calm the *fuck* down!” She held her side and cringed. Blood stained her lips. “Do it *now!*”

Darq pressed his fingers to his fangs, shoving them back into his gums. His skull and bones ripped, deformed, reformed. He jerked upright and stomped to Ravil’s side, his eyes wild. Darq panted. “I...I need a focus, Sammy, a calming thing.”

Sammy coughed and wheezed. “Let’s turn your smooth jazz hits back on. I know you like that.” She closed her eyes and Kenny G filled the room.

Darq sagged with relief. “Oh, that’s so nice.”

Sammy patted Darq on the head. “Good a time for me to go as any then, I hate this *music*.” She squeezed his hand. “You did the best you could for me, kiddo. So no bad feelings allowed. Now take care of Kat and the rest.”

Darq smiled a little. “Let me put you back into a bed.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. I can see myself out—” Sammy stumbled and her body flickered into thin air, vanishing in front of him.

Darq gaped at where she had been. “Sammy?”

Sammy whistled over the speakers. “Pain free is the way to be. According to my readings, Ipsy’s due for another shot of sleepy medicine. Don’t forget that.”

Darq nodded, focusing on the task. “Thank you, Sammy.”

“No problemo, little man.”

Lincoln and Kennedy darted around a corner and slid to a stop in front of a squad of waiting Ampyr.

The soldiers waved Lincoln and Kennedy aside. “*Fall in line, Hunters, and prepare to attack!* The Resistance members are coming this way.”

Lincoln and Kennedy dove over the officers and settled down behind them. The pair shrugged and jumped onto the back row of Ampyr, teeth and claws sinking into exposed flesh.

Emmalethe dropped from the ceiling, whipping her hair into the faces of the shooters in front.

Evgeniy looked around the corner, saw the activity, and ducked back around the corner. He waited.

Lincoln whistled. “Taken care of.”

Evgeniy lifted Danny and waved Lloyd forward.

Lloyd darted over corpses, Oro firmly in his grip. He avoided pools of blood, managing to keep them both free of mess.

“Stop!” Oro convulsed in Lloyd’s arms. He touched his temples. “They’re tracking us!”

Evgeniy frowned. “Who?”

“Jungay.” Oro winced. “They’re sending squads to the next five junctions. Lincoln, they’re aware of the both of you now, but they don’t know what to make of Emmalethe.” He concentrated. “Her head doesn’t make sense to them; they think she’s a trained animal.”

Emmalethe cackled from her invisible spot. “No wonder, I think of sex and apples whole time! I go scout now.” She slipped through a ceiling panel and crawled away through the ducts.

Evgeniy stepped up to Lloyd’s side. “Can we avoid them?”

Oro shook his head. “We have to push through. They’re working towards the docking bay.” He sensed the thoughts of soldiers. “Marx and Tasanee have the bay secured, but they’re under heavy siege at the barricade they’ve built.”

Kennedy bounced on her tail. “Have to help them! Have to go now!”

Evgeniy gestured them on. “Lloyd, can use voice control?”

Lloyd looked away from Oro’s face. “I don’t know how to, it just happens when I’m angry.”

“You are now not angry?”

Lloyd shook his head. “No...I...I’m terrified.”

Danny rolled out of Evgeniy’s arms and slumped against the wall. His eyes reflected deep purple in the light. He stared at Lloyd. “I can make him angry.”

Evgeniy eyed the pair. “I do not think wise. Lloyd, out of my range. Lincoln and Kennedy, go as well.” Evgeniy pressed Danny to the wall, and the lights dimmed around him. “Not time to adapt.”

“But I can be strong, I can heal.” Danny pushed at Evgeniy weakly.

Evgeniy put Danny back over his shoulder. “Also go mad and rage like little Rexos. Not smart in ship.”

“I’m in charge.” Danny slurred.

“You are high as a kite.”

Danny snorted. “*Kite Czar, its kite.*”

“Eh, I am right.”

“No, you’re not. It’s kite! Everyone knows its kite.”

Evgeniy checked his ammunition and followed Lloyd. “High as Rake then.”

“I’m a television star, Mica!” Rake twirled on his tiptoes. “Look at me!” His image showed up on the monitors imbedded in the wall.

“Great.” Mica eyed the cameras that ran despite their operators having fled. He lobbed cherries at the soldiers that poured in from stage left. The cherries hit the ground and needle legs sprouted from each one. The fruit spiders swarmed over soldiers, going for their eyes and mouths.

Rake clapped his hands. “Stellar work.”

Mica rolled his eyes. “Why am I the only one working?”

“I’m the escape vehicle. Besides, *I* wouldn’t want me doing crazy Navigator stuff on my first go while we’re in a space station.”

“Good point.” Mica concentrated and his cherry spiders doubled in mass, then tripled until they reached the size of pit bulls. Mica directed them towards an open doorway that soldiers sporadically spilled through. Their fruity bodies smashed into the opening, clogging it with fruit. Their spindly legs and extra sticky fruit juice bound the mess together, effectively sealing the way.

Mica turned and bolstered their wall of stabbing trees, each one hard at work smashing anything that came near the outside of the barrier around the stage. Mica snapped at the vines that blocked the other doorway onto the stage. Those pulsed with life and wove tighter, repairing the damage the Ampyr leveled at it from the other side.

A blur came to a rest beside him. Mica jerked back, but Ethei shoved him to the floor and straddled him. “A Terraformer? The Emperor could use you!”

Rake kicked Ethei in the ribs, knocking him off Mica. He leapt over his friend and threw a punch at Ethei’s face. “Keep up the plants. I got this guy.”

The Duke brushed off his uniform. He smirked at Rake. “What are you but some Ampyr with no talents? *Stand down and obey me!*”

Rake dropped to his knees before the Duke.

Ethei grinned and grabbed Rake by his hair.

Rake punched him in the dick. Ethei stumbled backwards, his eyes watering. Rake hopped to his feet. “Sorry, thought you said ‘go down and fellate me’. My bad!”

Ethei cursed and dove for him.

Rake hopped backwards and put his shoulders to the clubbing trees. He ducked a punch that broke bark above his head. He lashed out, but his kick missed its mark as Ethei moved faster.

Ethei vanished and a blur dashed for Mica. Rake jumped, intercepting the Duke in a tackle

that sent both of them sliding into cherry goo. Rake shoved Ethei's face into the mashed fruit and jumped back as a spider leapt on Ethei's head.

Ethei threw the cherry spider at Rake, but the thrashing fruit dropped dead before it touched his chest.

"Thanks, Luke!"

Mica smiled. "No problem, Solo."

Rake licked cherry syrup from his lips. "Delicious, don't you think?"

Ethei flung fruit from his brow. "A Resister Ampyr."

"Like prince Lloyd." Rake grinned as he spoke in broken Ampyr, "Sorry, that fact not to go on the monitor?"

Ethei sneered. "The cameras have not been transmitting outside the station since things went wrong."

Rake frowned and spoke in English. "Well okay, I thought *this* was my fifteen minutes."

Ethei panted, his eyes flicking between Mica and Rake. "You travel with Lloyd. You know what he wants and desires. Tell me and I will pardon you. Give me the keys to his weaknesses."

Rake smiled and switched back to Ampyr. "Lloyd enjoys walks on beach and spaghetti with meatballs."

Ethei gaped. "What is *spaghetti with meatballs*? What are these? Tell me!"

"You don't know what meatballs are?" Rake appeared behind Ethei and kicked him in the back. "How about...*On top of spaghetti*," Rake sung in English and slapped him. "*All covered with cheese*." He vanished and stood by Mica. "*I lost my poor meatball. When somebody sneezed. It rolled off the table and onto the floor.*"

Mica tossed an apple at Ethei's feet. The apple exploded into an apple tree. Bladed branches snaked after Ethei, stabbing at his feet.

"*And then my poor meatball. Rolled out of the door!*" Rake grinned as Ethei bounded off the stage and into the seats. He shouted after the Duke, "Bye! It was fun! We'll do it again sometime! Kisses!"

Tasanee pushed a charred corpse off a control board. The control room was little more than a small gray box with banks of computers that lined the walls. She took the sole chair in the room and set her burnt out trident to the side. Tasanee keyed into the controls and plugged her codex in to the terminal. "Okay Sammy, I'm in the booth."

"Roger roger, how's the fire coming?" Sammy asked over the radios they carried.

"Heavy." Tasanee looked out the doorway and watched Marx slice two men that tried to fight through the small corridor that led to the control room. "But I think we have it handled. The barricade between the docking bay and the rest of the ship is in place. Marx is just cleaning up the stragglers."

"Good. I've sent the escapees your way. They know about the press of bodies and the barricade. They're under some intense barrages, but I think they'll be all right."

"Right." Tasanee took over the docking bay controls, preventing the warship from air locking their entire level into space. She shouted, "Marx! Kennedy, Czar, and company are headed our way! But they're eating shit right now."

Marx ripped through a soldier. "Do they need us to work a path to them?"

"They probably wouldn't mind it."

He ducked in. "Is the room secure?"

Tasanee checked over the consoles. "Yeah." The lights flickered and alarms went off

overhead. Tasanee hissed and tapped at buttons. “Okay, *no*.”

Sammy beeped on the radio. “We’re getting massive interference. The hacking kind and the shut off kind.”

Tasanee grimaced. “Blackouts or Fix-Its?”

“Both.”

“*Shit*.” Tasanee touched the panels and sent a charge to keep them powered. The lights in the hall went out. “Shit shit.”

Marx looked to the control panel. “Sammy, where are they attacking from?”

“Floors above you and the floor below you.”

Marx hissed and jumped to the ceiling. “I will take the Fix-Its first and stop the takeover, and then get the ones in the floor.”

Tasanee frowned. “Marx, *don’t*. I can keep it powered from here! Stay here!”

“Fix-Its cannot hurt me as badly as they think. I will be fine.” He ripped open a ceiling panel and climbed into a vent.

Tasanee ground her teeth together and focused on her station. “Well they can’t turn me off at least. Sammy, have you let the ship know?”

“Katarina is aware of the situation.”

She nodded to herself. “Can you keep track of Marx too?”

“Sort of, not between the floors though. He just reached the one above you and he’s killing Fix-Its.”

“Great for him.” Tasanee chewed on her lip. The babies kicked. Tasanee made a face. “Not now, you little assholes. Calm down.” The sensation in her abdomen turned to sharp pain. Tasanee gasped. “Ow!”

“What?” Sammy beeped on. “What?”

“I don’t know, something’s wrong!” Tasanee clutched her stomach. “It hurts! I’m not due yet am I?”

“I’ll ask Darq!”

The sharp pain moved. “Quickly!” Tasanee threw up over her the side of her chair. She sent a bolt of electricity through her body. The pain stopped. Tasanee sagged. “I think it’s—”

The lights in the room flickered and the pain returned. Tasanee screamed, “Fucking fuck!”

Darq’s voice reached her ears through the radio. “You are not due yet, Tasanee. Describe the feeling to me.”

“Knives in my gut!” She dug her fingers into her skin.

Three children popped open the floor vent near the door and climbed into the room.

Tasanee jerked back at seeing them. She kicked off the floor and rolled her chair to the wall. She faced them. “There are kids in here with me?”

The lights dimmed, and Tasanee’s thoughts went fuzzy. “Kids, get...get out of here! There’s a fight going on.” She stared at their blank expressions and frowned. “Creepy little bastards look like zombies.”

“Those aren’t kids, they’re *Blackouts!*” Darq’s voice came over the radio. “Do you understand? They’re *not* kids!”

“But they look like kids.” Tasanee had a hard time focusing on his voice. Her vision blurred.

“I don’t care what they look like, they’re not children! They can attack bodily functions, Tasanee. They can make you miscarry. They can stop your heart. *Kill* them!”

Pain lanced through Tasanee’s body, and the babies twitched. Uncontrolled electricity

struck the Blackout closest to her, sending it flying into the darkness. The light illuminated the hall. Others crawled out of the floor, their large eyes boring into her.

“There’s so many of them. Too many…” Tasanee shot another bolt, but it was weaker and fizzled out. She took a breath. “Marx, come back! Marx!”

The Blackouts pressed into the room. They carried small silver knives and wore expressionless faces.

Tasanee climbed up and stood on the chair. She pressed her hands to her womb sending the babies energy even as she began to see spots. Tasanee wheezed, unable to muster the strength to scream. “I need help, somebody. Somebody help me…”

Katarina shouted over the radio, “Tasanee, I am coming for you, hold on!”

Her voice sounded tinny in Tasanee’s ears. The headset died, then the power died. Sparks along her arms reflected off the dark eyes of the Blackouts. She felt her heart flip-flop and her limbs grew numb.

The first dagger impaled her foot, trapping it against the chair, but she could barely feel it. She couldn’t think or sense anything. Electrical impulses to and from her brain misfired. She sent a last desperate burst of energy to her babies. Tasanee fell headfirst to the waiting hands and knives of the Blackouts below.

Katarina ran with an American-made shotgun and a handful of glow sticks. She passed by Marx and Tasanee’s barricade and took the side door to the control room hallway. She chucked glow sticks down the length of the hall. Katarina sprinted into the corridor.

Dozens of Blackouts turned towards her. They concentrated on her. Lights dimmed.

Katarina flinched, but she felt nothing. She didn’t bother to take aim; she fired blindly. Three Blackouts took the blast to their chests and their dismembered limbs smacked into those behind them. Katarina pumped, fired. She grabbed shells and slammed them into the gun to reload.

Blackouts raced for her.

“Get the fuck out my way!” Katarina fingered the trigger.

A Blackout leapt onto her chest, driving a small blade into her ample breasts. Katarina slammed the butt of the shotgun into the girl’s face, turned the gun, and fired. She pulled the trigger again, unthinking.

Blackouts scattered for vents in the floor, leaving the way empty.

Katarina raced into the control room as the lights were restored. Blood covered the floor. Tasanee lay on her side, puncture wounds covering her from head to toe, her clothes shredded, hands sliced to bits, and hair missing in patches. Tasanee’s chest did not rise or fall; her eyes stared sightlessly for the door.

Katarina dropped to her knees and scooped Tasanee up. She shouted into her headset as she lunged for the doorway, “Darq, she’s hurt bad! I need you ready and outside the ship!”

Katarina ran back the way she’d come, crushing skulls and bones beneath her boots. She sprinted to the medical ship. “Darq!”

Darq jumped out the half open docking bay door and landed by her side. He ripped Tasanee from Katarina’s grip and pressed her to the ground. He felt for her pulse and checked her womb. Darq paled.

Katarina reloaded her shotgun and eyed the passage. “Come on! How bad is she?”

Darq shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Come on, Darq. I have to get—” Katarina examined Tasanee and looked to his face.

“Darq.”

“She—”

“No, Darq!”

“She’s—”

“Don’t tell me she’s dead!” Katarina balled her hands into fists. “Don’t say it! Fix her!”

“What am I supposed to say then?” Darq touched Tasanee’s face. “*I can’t fix this!*”

Katarina’s eyes clouded with tears. “The babies too?”

He nodded.

“But you can fix anything!”

“It’s stopped, Katarina, her heart, her brain. I’m not good enough for this! Only a Rexos with *supreme* skill and energy can restore dead organs without the patient suffering severe trauma upon a restart. She’s suffering oxygen deprivation already, the damage that brings, and the blood loss and dying cells, it requires far more training than I have.”

“You *are* skilled!”

“Not enough for this!” He burst into tears. “The energy alone, this takes more than one Rexos to feed her life. There’s nothing we can do, Mom!”

Katarina put her hands to his face. “Don’t tell me that! I can’t hear that again! *You can do something!*” The space around them bloomed with white light. The ground lit on fire and went out in a flash.

Darq pulled his melted headset off and gaped at his glowing skin. He turned to Katarina and stared at her in awe. “*Oh my.*”

Katarina looked around in a daze. Her body was luminous. She shook her head. “What was that?”

Marx raced to the control room in agony, his body contorting in pain. He felt a sense of wrong in his blood, a disconnection from Tasanee, but he didn’t want to believe she could be hurt, he couldn’t. There had to be something else. He was wrong...she was fine.

Marx dropped from the ceiling and landed in her hot, congealing blood. He staggered under the weight of reality and hit the floor with a thud. Marx pressed his palms into the floor and brought them to his face. His pupils shrank to slits.

Marx knew her smell, recognized the tufts of hair, her fingers. His chest heaved in pain. He ground his teeth together.

Tasanee’s discarded headset chirped with the voices of Katarina and Darq and he strained to listen, to hope. Katarina screamed, “*Don’t tell me she’s dead! Don’t say it! Fix her!*”

“*What am I supposed to say then? I can’t fix this!*”

“*The babies too?*”

Marx crushed the headset between his fingers as tears streamed down his cheeks. He unhinged his jaw and wailed. The sound echoed down the corridor and bounced back to him, erupting into stranger sounds.

His blood pumped in fury and confused anguish, but more than anything else, *guilt*. Marx snapped his jaws shut, letting the sound permeate his bones. He’d let her down. He’d caused this; he hadn’t listened to her orders. He never should have left her. He’d failed.

Marx’s eyes settled on the floor. A vial glinted in the light, Tasanee’s necklace. Marx reached down and picked it up, bringing it to eye level. He shook the silver fluid inside. His eyes lost their spark.

Marx ignored the sound of soldiers pounding at the barricaded door that led to the docking

bay. He thought of Tasanee, of everything she meant, of the children, his new life. Taken, ruined by the Empire. His family destroyed by Ampyr. This had happened before, now it happened again.

He had nothing left. Nothing but vengeance and penance and rage.

His hair snaked and coiled, roping into rows that braided and reached for the crown of his head.

Marx stared at the vial as his hair fanned above his head and down his back in a mohawk. He sliced into his chest, seeking blood and pain. Liquid metal spilled across his hands and around his fingers. Beads of quicksilver seeped out of his pores and dripped from his skin, all of it heading towards the floor.

An object formed from the pooled fluid. It rose before him, standing on its own. The spear stood in two pieces, a crack in the middle; it missed only a sliver to make it whole once more.

Marx took both pieces and stalked out of the room. He walked down the corridor with no thoughts, no desires other than death.

Marx stopped in front of the barricade he had constructed with Tasanee only minutes earlier. He put away the memory of her laughter, the sensations of sex and desire. He buried love until the only thing left was pain.

Marx put the vial in his mouth, holding it with his tongue. He gave himself one chance to stop, one moment to think his decision through. He could turn back, but he had nothing left to exist for, no reason to remain. With Tasanee dead, Marx died too.

Marx bit down on the vial. Silver ran down his throat. Metal burned through his blood, reigniting pain, lust, and Instinct, whole once more. He gripped either end of the spear. The liquid metal fused into one weapon.

The spear tipped forward and sliced through the barricade as if it were paper. Ampyr soldiers spilled through. They stared in shock and confusion. Their heads carried the same expressions when they sailed away from their bodies. Those behind saw their foe and some ran blindly, others dropped to their knees to beg for mercy.

The Quicksilver Spear knew no mercy.

Grazen the Butcher did not either.

She whipped around and the spear sailed with her, stabbing as she ripped and rent flesh in a blur. Soldiers, sensing no other option, leapt for her, using their speed, thinking it an advantage.

The spear sliced through the air like a propeller, razor sharp, it moved through her flesh and into theirs, cutting them to pieces with neat precision. Body parts hit the floor and the familiar stench of death made Grazen's mouth water.

When bodies ceased to pile up, and the only sound was her purr, Grazen walked past the barricade, uncaring of who or what came for her. She would take this ship to bloody pieces.

Terrified officers ordered Pyros, Ampyr, and Hunters to attack as they fled. Grazen slaughtered without a care for what type they were. She sought only flesh to rip and rend...a requirement all living things met.

The Quicksilver Spear sliced through the walls and punched through doors to find soldiers on the other side. Nothing got beyond her reach. Grazen moved like a ghost, never there the second an opponent attacked, always there to pounce when they faltered.

Ampyr spilled from a room behind her. They leveled their weapons and lost their hands. The spear bent and deformed as liquid metal burst out of her arms and chest. Muscle and metal fused in harmony. The weapon and wielder two beings in communion.

Grazen unhinged her jaw and bellowed, beckoning for more.

Lincoln heard a faint roar and grabbed Kennedy by the tail. “Stop!”

Kennedy heard the call as well. She smiled. “Marx! Marx!”

Lincoln stepped in front of her. “Get back! Get behind me! Stalker, *where* are you?”

Emmalethe popped her head down from the ceiling above. “What you want?”

He gestured. “Find out what roars beyond.”

Kennedy jumped in place. “It Marx, he comes!”

“That is *not*, Marx!” Lincoln shook his head. “Do *not* let him see you, Stalker.”

“None see me.” Emmalethe rolled up into the ceiling. She dashed through vents, drawing nearer to the sound. Emmalethe slid through a duct and peeked through the slits. She gazed into the orange eyes of Instinct. She hissed in surprise.

Grazen smiled.

Emmalethe jumped backwards as the spear sliced up through the vent. Emmalethe tapped her headset. “Danger!” The spear sliced across her thigh. Emmalethe muffled her cry and crawled away in desperation.

Evgeniy shouted on the other end, “What is going on?”

“Second self, Marx other, it has come out!” Emmalethe dove down a separate vent as the spear cut upwards, slicing the length of the duct in that hallway.

Evgeniy and Lloyd joined Lincoln in the corridor. Evgeniy set Danny down. “What is she talking about Marx’s second self? What is that?”

Lincoln swallowed hard. “*Some* Hunters have Instincts, a second half, creatures that rage inside. Marx is raging now.”

Evgeniy frowned. “Like Darq?”

Lincoln nodded sharply. “A good enough likening.”

Emmalethe dropped from the ceiling, bleeding. She panted. “It not Marx anymore.” She looked to Lincoln. “I *told* you he was this way, *split* inside! I said this was so to you!”

Evgeniy wrapped his arms around her. “How badly are you hurt?”

She shook him off. “Not too bad, just minor cut.”

“I fix.” Kennedy put her mouth to Emmalethe’s wound.

Lincoln looked from Kennedy towards the oncoming roars. “Czar, alert our ship. They need to prep to leave and tell them to *stay away from Marx*.”

“Where do you go?” Evgeniy frowned.

“I am Hunter. *I* will fight him.”

“Her.” Emmalethe leaned against Kennedy. “*She* now. His Instinct a she.”

“Wait a minute!” Danny stood on his own. “Where is Tasanee? Why can’t she calm him down?”

“For him to do this, I would reason Tasanee is dead.” Lincoln could not meet Danny’s gaze. “Find an alternate route to the ship. Do *not* follow me.”

Lincoln passed into the next hallway and locked the door behind him. Soldiers ducked into rooms to his left and right, fleeing from the passageway before him.

Lincoln concentrated. His Instinct appeared at his side. He gestured to her. “Any insight into this?”

She appeared pale. “None.”

A silver shaft shredded the door before them. Grazen kicked the remains of the door in and stepped into the corridor. Her eyes settled on Lincoln, then to his blue spots. She gripped her spear and twirled it, cutting through the walls around her. “One of the true family. A welcome

sight in any battle.”

Lincoln took in her mohawk, the spear, and the realization of who and what she was sank in along with ice-cold dread. “*Grazen*.”

“You know of me,” her voice was soft and smooth.

“You are legend.” Lincoln sniffed the air. “Do you not remember me?”

“I remember battle.” Fires raged behind her orange eyes. “I remember blood and sorrow. These things are all that matter.”

“You are on an Ampyr warship.”

Grazen grinned coldly. “Then lead me to the bridge. I shall add this to my fleet, cousin.”

“You have no fleet. It has been some time since your reign.” Lincoln let his hair slide around his shoulders, a sign of peace. “We are here to escape.”

“Escape?” She sneered. “No such thing is needed.”

“You have a mate and children behind you.”

“I have no family. I saw my mate murdered and my children with him. My brother’s fleet is destroyed. I have nothing left but death.”

“That is false.”

Lincoln’s Instinct shivered. “She will attack you.”

Lincoln nodded, realizing this.

Grazen’s eyes flicked up and down. “You carry on the dual soul, the Instinct. Join me and I shall give you the gift of a quicksilver weapon. I will make you a blade bearer, a true warrior. Take me to the bridge.”

Lincoln held his hands up. “No, you must turn around and go back the way you came.”

Grazen purred. “You will move or I will destroy you, cousin.”

He gulped. “I will not move.”

She grinned. “Then you will *die* where you stand.”

In the medical lab, Ravil’s heart monitor went off in warning. She spasmed, and her arms flailed. Ravil knocked into the IV that fed drugs into Ipso’s body. She hit the floor and stared at her feet.

She blinked once.

Darq drove his hands into Tasanee’s body. Light flooded his limbs and passed into hers. Tasanee’s wounds closed under his touch.

Katarina gaped. “I thought you couldn’t do anything for her!”

“Not without help.” He examined his work, as in shock at his new abilities as she was.

Katarina stared at her glowing hands. “What happened to us?”

“You gave me a boost.” Darq closed his eyes. A halo of light rushed from the crown of his head to his toes. Tasanee’s body bucked. He smiled. “I can act as ten Rexos. I have the strength of a peak performer, the concentration of the best! Things I did not know...they are obvious now!” Darq laughed. “This is truly amazing!”

“I did this?” Katarina gaped at the light on her body.

Darq restored Tasanee’s heart and jolted her organs to life. Tasanee’s chest rose and fell, flooding her blood with oxygen. He concentrated and repaired the damage oxygen deprivation had done to her brain. Darq sped up the production of blood cells, restoring her lost blood. He stitched together her womb and the two fragile twins near to term. Darq gasped and let her go. He hit the floor with a thud. “She will live.”

Tasanee coughed and reached for the air. “Marx!” Electricity shot past Darq and hit the ceiling.

Katarina dove on Tasanee and Darq. “*You’re all right! You’re alive! You’re all better!*” Light hit enveloped all three. Katarina passed out and slumped backwards.

Darq looked between the two women. He crawled towards Katarina. “Rat, do you feel healthy?”

“Uh...I guess. What happened?” She looked around.

“You died.” Darq cradled Katarina. “Kat overextended herself to give me temporary energy to restore you.”

Tasanee felt her stomach. “And the babies?”

“They’re okay.”

She smiled and then it faded. “Marx?”

Darq shook his head. “We got you out of there before he returned.”

“Shit.” Tasanee stood up. Her clothes hung from her in bloody tatters. “I have to go find him. He’ll think I’m dead!”

“You just died.” He gave her hand a gentle tug. “You need to rest.”

“Rest? I feel fantastic!” Bolts of electricity struck around her and stayed lit, chaining from the ceiling to the floor so that a column of lightning surrounded her.

Darq gawked. “You got a boost too. No wonder Mom passed out.”

A crash and a roar rocked the walls. Lincoln tumbled across the docking bay and smashed into a black Wasp. He slid down to his feet, leaving a trail of blood along the hull of the ship. Wide strips of his skin were missing in places the spear had flayed him. His eyes were bloody pits. Lincoln sniffed and Darq’s scent flooded his nose. He hissed. “Get in the ship and *hide!*”

Darq picked Katarina up. “What *happened* to you?”

“Just go!”

Grazen stepped into sight and smiled. “You are resilient and fast, cousin. You would be a remarkable warrior!” She spotted Darq shoving Katarina onto the docking bay ramp into their ship. She purred. “A Rexos?”

“Marx! I—” Tasanee stared and took a few steps towards her. “Marx? Why’re you female *now?*”

Grazen’s eyes caught on Tasanee and the electricity that surrounded her. “Fix-It.” She growled. “I *hate* Fix-Its.”

Lincoln waved in Tasanee’s direction. “This is *not* Marx! Get back, Tasanee!”

“Don’t tell me what to do around my mate, you sick child molesting freak!” Tasanee turned to him. The rest of her words died on her lips as she took in Lincoln’s wounds. She went rigid. “What the hell...”

“I mean it, Tasanee!” Lincoln coughed up blood. “This isn’t Marx anymore!”

Grazen moved on Tasanee.

Lincoln leapt for the noise.

Grazen stopped in her tracks and smirked. Her spear clipped him in the shoulder, throwing him to the side with bone shattering force. “*Feeble.*”

Darq darted to Lincoln’s side, repairing the Hunter’s body with the strength he had left.

Grazen flicked her hands out and the spear returned to her fingers, the metal coating her hands like gloves. She spun the spear in a slow rotation. “Come, little Fix-It, dance with me.”

Tasanee gave Grazen a once over. “You’re my mate. Stand down and obey me!”

“You? *My mate?*” Grazen laughed and doubled over. “What a strange plea for mercy.

That is amusing.” She wiped her eyes. “For that perhaps I will make this last longer so that we can play. Like I played with my cousin.”

“That isn’t a joke.” Tasanee touched her chest. “I’m pregnant with your children!”

“I would not do such a thing to debase myself.” Grazen curled a lip. “You are a *half-breed*, worthy of *nothing*. There is no truth to this.”

“Use your nose! Feel it in your blood! *Deny* that they’re yours!”

Grazen advanced on her and inhaled. She showed no surprise and shrugged. “Did I shift male and rape you then? Do you think that will stay my hand because you carry unwanted bastard children? I will eat you *and* them; this fighting has made me hungry. Tell me, are they nearly born? They’re better that way, *succulent*.”

“You motherfucker!” Tasanee’s eyes filled with angry tears. “Marx, I know you’re in there! Come out!”

“Who is Marx?” She grinned.

“The *real* you!”

Grazen cocked her head. “Ah, the one in the place before. No, he cannot come out. He has given control back to me.” She flicked through the fragments of Marx’s memory. “Quaint, what a weak thing he was when the spear was broken.”

“Marx is not weak!” Tasanee snarled. “Marx is better than you!”

“Marx *is* me!” Grazen smiled, showing curving fangs. “What I do to you, he does to you, for I am dominant.”

“No! You’ve done something to him!”

“We have become one once more, as it should be. He has realized his mistakes and has come home to me. Ah, no matter with this explanation, your eyes are ablaze with a desire to fight me.” Grazen smiled. “How amusing you are. I will enjoy eating you; I will cut out the children first so you can watch.”

Tasanee hit Grazen with a bolt of electricity. Her hands curved into claws. She snarled and blasted Grazen into a ship. “Enjoy eating that, bitch!”

Grazen roared and threw the spear.

Tasanee sprinted away and threw up sparks where her feet touched the ground. She ducked as the spear sailed over her head. Tasanee twisted around and scratched the air; a wall of electricity blasted Grazen back as she dove at Tasanee.

Grazen shook off the blow and laughed. “No wonder he took you to breed you, your children would be powerful indeed!” She recalled her spear. “Stand down and I will let you live until the children are born.”

Tasanee edged away from the Hunter. “Yeah and what will come of them?”

“They will become lieutenants in my pack with control of electricity and…” she saw Tasanee’s spots through her torn clothing. “Resister? You are *Resister!*”

“Yeah.” Tasanee peered around the room, looking for something to help her.

“You foolish little girl!” Grazen threw back her head and laughed. “Did you think he *loved* you? You think us that stupid?”

Tasanee’s blood pulsed with anger. “Shut your fucking mouth!”

“He wanted your children, you stupid runt.” Grazen snapped her teeth. “Your children have the potential to be warriors without compare! They could turn the tide in the war for our homeland! *My* strength, without a vulnerability to electricity *or* the Ampyr! We would be unstoppable!”

“He wanted a family! Not soldiers!”

“At least I have the intelligence to counter your *sheer* stupidity.” Grazen gazed at Tasanee in possession. “I have decided, bitch. I will not kill you. You will be mine, and you will carry my children until *that* kills you. With you, I will create a new race. This is an honor. Submit to me and I will cause you no further pain.”

Tasanee held back tears. “Marx loved me, and he loved children!”

“Marx *murdered* children!” Grazen hissed in laughter. Her spear flowed across her body in a current of metal. “We killed. We ate from the living, and we *enjoyed* it. I fucked the mate I loved on the corpses of our victims. We took pleasure from those as we saw fit. *You are nothing* like us! He used you, as I have used the bodies of victims for food, for pleasure, for *sport*.”

“Marx is a good person!” Metal sheets ripped out of the floor and hovered around Tasanee. She wiped her eyes. “He doesn’t do that anymore!”

“Is that true?” Grazen eyed the sharp metal that hovered around Tasanee. “Before he met you, right before...he and the ones called Lincoln and Kennedy. They murdered dozens, they fed from them, and they tortured them for information.”

Metal bolts tore from the walls and hovered in the electric current Tasanee surrounded her body with. She hissed. “I inferred all that on my own, *bitch*. So if you’re trying to shock me...” She smiled grimly. “It won’t work.”

“Then I’ll *show* you.” Grazen raced across the floor. Her claws left gouge marks as she ran.

Tasanee spun and directed electricity into a funnel, blasting out towards Grazen. The metal followed, creating giant blades of steel.

Grazen ducked and rolled. She twisted, batting Tasanee in the ribcage with her spear.

Tasanee went flying. She put her hands out in front of her and hovered over the metal, slowing her fall. Tasanee opened her eyes. Metal floated around her head. She marveled at the sensation. “Magnet.”

Grazen slashed her across the face, sending her tumbling.

Tasanee shot bolts and nuts, pushing Grazen back under a hail of shrapnel. She turned to run. Claws sank in to the flesh on her back.

“No, little thing.” Grazen caught her and cupped Tasanee’s stomach. “Mine now.” She purred and ran her fingers across Tasanee’s breasts. “Do not worry, I see from his memories that you prefer females. Then you will prefer *me*. I can please you as well as he could...*if* you behave.” Grazen licked Tasanee’s bloody face and moaned in her ear. “You do have a pleasing taste. I am glad he found you for me. We shall fuck on the corpses of your friends.”

Darq came down on Grazen’s head, knocking Tasanee from her grip. “Run!” He punched Grazen, but weakened, he only fractured the bones in her face.

Grazen snarled and drove her spear up through Darq’s throat, spearing him like prey. She slammed him into the ground head first. “*Rexos!* Finally a foe *worth* a battle!”

Darq grabbed hold of the metal. He tore his throat out, leaving a gaping hole behind. The flesh knit together, and Darq spat blood as he regained his feet. “Stop this. I am un-medicated! I am five years and three quarters old. We are on a ship in space! I cannot take stress right now!”

Grazen grinned. “How fun this will be then. Rage, rage little Rexos! *Rage!*”

Darq gaped. “You are mad!”

Lincoln helped Tasanee up and shouted, “Those of the Instinct are *always* mad!”

Grazen laughed at Darq. “I have killed your kind before, it is simple really.” She lunged and smashed the spear into his eye socket.

Tasanee shot them both with electricity, blasting Grazen and Darq apart. Grazen landed on

her back. Tasanee wiped blood out of her eyes and shouted, “Darq, get out of there!”

Lincoln bolted by Tasanee. He caught Darq by the ankle and threw him towards the medical ship. “Call the others in and leave!” Lincoln looked to Tasanee. “They are coming straight here and will run into this.”

“Understood.” Tasanee gestured to Grazen. “Come on then, I heard you were legendary and you can’t take out a half-breed?”

The Hunter flipped to her feet. “I have been playing, little thing. Should I teach you the difference?” Grazen dove for Tasanee. The spear whipped around and slashed at Lincoln as Grazen bit Tasanee’s arm open.

Tसानee used her boosted abilities to slide a metal packing crate in between them, hitting Grazen in the side with enough force to send her flying back. She cupped her bite and limped backwards.

Lincoln used the distraction to slice Grazen’s back. He jumped away as the spear cut at his face.

Grazen ignored the new wound and cleared the crate. She roared at Tasanee. “I will make you suffer for years, Fix-It! Behave or all of my army will have you at their disposal!”

A panel fell out from the wall to Tasanee’s right. Kennedy poked her head through the door and called to those trailing behind her, “We made it! We made it!” She caught sight of Tasanee and stepped into the room. “What happen to face, to arm, to clothes?”

Grazen sniffed. She growled in pleasure. “A tail, *Resister*, like you. Another to breed.”

“She is your *daughter!*” Tasanee moved in-between the pair.

Grazen shrugged. “What does that mean to one like me? She can be bred all the same. If my brother lives, he would desire her.” Grazen leapt over Tasanee’s head and came down in front of Kennedy. “Yes, peak age.”

Kennedy froze in fear and confusion. “Ma—Marx?”

Grazen touched Kennedy’s cheek. “I sense the power there as well. Submit to me, little one, and no pain will come to you.”

Tसानee leapt up on Grazen’s shoulders. “Bitch!” She glowed blue and electricity struck them both, throwing the pair apart.

Emmalethe leapt out of the wall, grabbed Kennedy, and ran with a limp. Evgeniy hauled Danny through and spared the fight no glances, his sights set on the ship. Lloyd followed with Oro in his arms.

Grazen regained her footing. She spotted Lloyd and roared. “*You*, I recognize! Prince Lloyd, son of Zoph, son of Marjames! Your family has wounded mine!” Grazen foamed at the mouth and landed before the pair. “I will eat you *slowly*, prince of the Ampyr!”

Oro looked at Grazen with blurry eyes. He waved his hand and concentrated. *Nope.*

Grazen frowned and turned away. She regained her focus on Tasanee. “Stand down, little Fix-It!”

Lloyd recovered from his fright and sprinted. He hissed. “Oro! Don’t do stuff like that! You’re hurt!”

Oro moaned at the movement, “Would you rather be Hunter food?”

“Be quiet, do not draw her attention!” Darq grabbed the pair and hoisted them into the medical ship. “Sammy, close the door and prepare to leave!”

“Right, I’ve let Rake and Mica know about this. They’re on their way!”

Emmalethe jumped out of the medical ship as the door slid closed. She limped past Darq. Darq reached for her. “What are you doing?”

Emmalethe gestured at the fighting trio. “They all three have lost at this already. Know nothing! Fools!”

Darq let her go. “You know what to do?”

“Of course I do. I am Stalker!” Emmalethe flipped her hair over one shoulder. “We deal with this shit all time.”

Lincoln slammed into the ground next to them, his ribs shattered. Darq touched his side and shouted at Emmalethe, “She will kill you!”

“She not catches me!” Emmalethe grinned. “I is ready this time.”

Tasanee tumbled end over end, her arms broken. Emmalethe caught her.

“Fuck!” Tasanee screamed. Tears streamed down her face and mixed with her blood. “Darq, don’t let her get my babies, kill me first!”

“Okay!” Darq’s heart raced and he dashed to her side. “This is too stressful for me!”

Emmalethe slapped Darq across the face. “You heal Fix-It and calm down, little boy.”

“Oh...okay.” He sniffled and worked on healing Tasanee.

Emmalethe pushed Lincoln to his feet and pointed at Grazen as the Hunter had stopped to size up the Stalker. Emmalethe pinched Lincoln. “I told you! Instinct and you separate, it as strong as you! Marx and the other Marx, two need to be one!”

Tasanee shook her head as her bones healed. “She said they were one and that she was dominant.”

Emmalethe sneered at Grazen and shouted, “You still in two, I can see! Can’t hide from one like me!”

Lincoln grabbed her arm. “Do not tease her! Grazen will kill you! She has mastered her Instinct and put it back in the blade.”

“Is that what you think?” Emmalethe gestured to the spear. “That *Marx* is the Instinct? Marx the *beast* that arose from pain and suffering, *Marx* the one that protects *her*? Marx is first, Marx original. *She* took over him, but they are still divided. *She* is Instinct, not him!”

Grazen shrugged. “You are wrong in one thing. *We are* one, but I am the stronger of us. It is only right that I wield both blade and body.”

Emmalethe hissed in laughter. “You *stupid* female! You believe your own lies and make Marx stronger. Male stronger than female, how pathetic you are! How useless! How weak! How vulnerable!”

“You will suffer!” Grazen roared and went for Emmalethe.

Emmalethe shifted invisible. She clipped her nails on Grazen’s shoulder and danced away. “Stupid! I show you how much so!”

Grazen stumbled and blinked. Her eyes shifted between yellow and orange. “What is this? What have you done to me?”

Emmalethe waggled her poisoned talons. “I teach you lesson even our *babies* learn.” She pounced on Lincoln. “We withdraw and leave little *baby* to poison dreams. Weak baby you are! Nee! Nee!”

“We can’t leave Tasanee!” Lincoln struggled against her. “I must help!”

Tasanee got to her feet and eyed Grazen. “It’s my job to take him out. Not yours.”

Emmalethe pulled on Lincoln. “Your mate won’t kill you, Tasanee! He cannot give a killing blow to you. They are not one! They are two! Do not believe what she says about their unity, their feelings in sync. It is not true!” Emmalethe slammed her claws into Darq’s back and grabbed his ribs through his flesh. “Come now too, small boy.” Emmalethe padded back to the ship with Darq in tow.

Lincoln could not leave. “Tasanee—”

“My fight!” She shouted back at him. “But if I fall, it becomes yours.”

Lincoln ducked his head. “I understand.” He eyed Grazen as the Hunter struggled to stand. “If she remains in control, then he remains in the weapon. If the Stalker is right, they are not one and they are divided between spear and person.”

Tasanee took a deep breath. “Right. Bitch, what are you waiting for?”

Grazen’s eyes blazed orange as she shook off her daze. “Nothing! I will have you and your children!”

“Over my dead body!”

“I can *make* that happen!” Grazen gripped the spear with two hands and leapt. She drove it down.

Tasanee braced herself. The point hit her in the sternum and slammed her to the floor.

Grazen smiled and blood dribbled from her lips. She looked down in shock. The spear jabbed into her shoulder.

Tasanee stared at the metal that soaked over her skin without piercing her flesh. Grazen’s blood ran down the shaft. Tasanee gripped the spear. She pushed to her feet and ripped the weapon from Grazen.

Metal coiled and flowed around Tasanee’s wrists, binding to her arms. Two blades covered her fingers and spiked off the end of each hand. Tasanee expected the weapons to be heavy, but the metal had all the weight of tinfoil.

Grazen clutched her wound and roared. “Marx, *traitor!* I will take back what is mine and kill you, Fix-It! His personality will be gone entirely!”

Tasanee gulped. “Marx, what the fuck do I do now?”

Grazen slammed into her. The metal shifted to a shield and blocked Grazen’s attacks. She drove Tasanee to the ground. “As I said, he cannot speak! I am in control even separated.”

Tasanee gasped. “Marx, this idea is great, but what now?”

Lincoln paced outside their fight. “He must face her and dominate!”

Tasanee hissed at him from beneath the battered shield. “Marx is a goddamn metal fucking soul, Lincoln! How is that supposed to work?”

“He must join her!” Lincoln nodded to himself. “The weapon resides within, it has all this time. It isn’t separate, Tasanee. They’re supposed to work as one thing.”

Tasanee’s head smacked the ground as Grazen clawed and bit at every piece of the shield. “It’s metal! This shit doesn’t make any sense! Metal can’t go in your body like that!”

“Yes, it can!”

“No, it can’t!”

“It can in ours!”

A piece of the shield stabbed into Tasanee’s hand and dissolved into her bloodstream. Tasanee’s head rolled to the side. Above her, the shield held.

He’s right.

Tasanee blinked and focused her thoughts. *Marx? Marx! You fucker, what have you done! I thought you dead. I did not want to live without you.*

So you unleashed this psychopath on the rest of the group. Nice! Nice, Marx!

Are you actually pleased?

No, I’m not pleased! This is the absolute worst possible thing you could have ever done!

I must admit I did not foresee her turning on the group. It has been a long time since her, and I have tried to forget her in the decades since. If she had behaved, she would have been a

good addition to the crew.

A good addition to the crew!? She's insane!

Yes...I remember that better now. I apologize, Tasanee.

You lied to me about your age!

That is what you focus on now? That is what is at the forefront of your thoughts? And I did not lie, and I do not appreciate the accusation. Marx is one hundred and twenty-two. Grazen is ninety, I do not include her years in my lifespan, that was not me.

Tasanee did the math. You're two hundred and twelve years old?

If you add both lifetimes together, then yes. However, I hold to my viewpoint that I am one hundred and twenty-two. In addition, I have never had sex on fresh corpses. That was her only.

What about babies?

We have both eaten children, but I have not for some time, and mine were dead first from other battles. It was a necessity to stave off starvation.

A comfort!

Tasanee—

Will you get the fuck out of me and fight her please?

I have severe doubts that I will win this. I only returned to myself when the spear broke. It shattered the duality, locking her in the metal; I came out as a comfort to her loss.

Right, whatever, we'll break the spear again.

That does not mean I will appear dominant. She allowed me last time, the death of her family too much for even her to bear. You could break the spear and leave her entirely in charge, with me locked away in the metal.

Fuck, Marx! Stop talking. Just get it done!

Yes, Tasanee. I love you. He purred. And our babies. I want to have a family, not a series of new warriors to carry on a lost cause. I love you for you, not your talents and furthermore her threats of—

Marx, shut up! I love you too. Now get going.

The metal shield shattered in two.

Grazen howled, triumphant. "Mine!"

Tasanee drove twin blades into Grazen's stomach, piercing her straight through. The metal detached from Tasanee, and she rolled out from under Grazen. Lincoln looped his arms around her waist and pulled her safely away, but Tasanee could not take her eyes from her lover.

The Hunter bucked, her features shifting between male and female. The metal dissolved to liquid; it stained her teeth and filled her hollow talons. The Hunter hit the floor and writhed, screaming in agony.

Rake and Mica appeared beside Lincoln and Tasanee. They took one look and backed away. They ran for the ship.

Tasanee tore away from Lincoln's embrace and ran for Marx. She sat on the Hunter's chest. She thumped on him as tears poured down her cheeks. "Marx! Marx!"

The Hunter gripped her hips, fingers pressing into her skin. Her eyes opened silver, her tongue painted in metal. He kicked at the ground. The two inside shouted at one another.

Grazen snarled. "I am stronger. I have *always* saved us! I made us into who we were!"

Marx snapped his teeth. "And I reclaimed what I want to be! We wanted a family! Remember what we fought for, a home! A place to raise children!"

"We can never have a home without a free home world. The Ampyr need to die! My goal is still the stronger drive!"

“I have found my home with my mate and our children! There is no reason for you anymore, Grazen! I fight on my own! I am strong on my own!”

Tasanee ground her teeth. “I am in charge here!” She shocked them with a lightning bolt. “Me! Over *both* of you! Both of you are *mine!*”

Lincoln twitched, watching the battle and seeing his own mirrored there. “I do not think you can get involved, Tasanee!”

Grazen snapped her teeth at Tasanee. “*You* are a sign of our weakness!”

Marx fought back. “She is a sign of everything worth living for! You had that feeling once! You had a mate, you know what I feel!”

Soldiers stormed into the docking bay, and the engines to the medical ship fired up. Lincoln hissed. “We must go or we die here!”

Marx snarled. “We continue this elsewhere, Grazen!”

Grazen hissed. “Agreed.”

Marx flipped to his feet, grabbed Tasanee, and bolted.

Lincoln followed them. “Is it over?”

Marx looked to Lincoln with a yellow and an orange eye. “No, we are in truce for survival while it is necessary.”

A side door opened and Mica lassoed them with plants, dragging all three into the cockpit. Marx fell to the floor and twitched, semi-conscious as his fight continued internally. Tasanee dropped to Marx’s side and held his hand. Lincoln embraced Kennedy, the pair saying nothing.

The cockpit neared full, minus the Navigators, Darq, Lloyd, and Oro. Emmalethe eyed Marx and whispered to Evgeniy as he strapped them in.

Mica took a seat next to Danny and nudged Rake. “We’re ready.”

“Yeah.” Rake looked over his shoulder. “Whatever is going on back there, you fucking stop it for a minute.” He concentrated and closed his eyes. “Jumping!” The ship crossed into the blue in-between. Rake opened his eyes and chewed on his lips. “Are you sure, Kat?”

Katarina nodded from the pilot’s chair. “Going home is our *only* option.”

Rake nodded. “Aye-aye.”

Darq stumbled into the cockpit. “We have a *serious* problem!”

Rake frowned. “Another one?”

Ipsa appeared in the air over the front consoles and kicked Rake in the chest, launching him out of his seat. The ship dropped into regular empty space, light-years from the space station. Ipsa snarled. “We are *done* with this game!”

Danny frowned. “Who the *hell* is *that?*”

Mica held his hands up and approached her. “Ipsa, calm down.”

Ipsa stifled her surprise that he still lived. Her face appeared stony. “I am taking control of this vessel.”

Rake shook off his daze and leapt to his feet. “Darq, what happened to the gold?”

Darq stared at Ipsa. “She got out of it.”

“How? It keeps them from doing anything!”

“You know *nothing!*” Ipsa sneered at him. “None of you know anything about Langone! You are clueless!”

“Oh yeah!” Rake shouted. “Because *we’re* the ones with giant holes in our memories!”

“Even with that I *still* know more!” Ipsa scoffed. “You are the children in this universe, not me!”

“Oh really?” Rake edged closer. “That’s rich coming from an eight-year-old!”

“Eight?!” Ips0 glared at Rake.

Mica frowned. “Maybe stop taunting her—”

“My age does not matter!” Ips0 shouted at Rake. “My knowledge vastly outweighs anything that any of you know! You think only in terms of your home, your planet, not the greater good!”

“You don’t know how long we’ve been out here, brat!” Rake gestured to space.

Ips0 smiled. “Ship, when was their planet reclaimed? Recent I bet! No understanding of anything! You have been out of the histories!”

Sammy sighed. “Uh, I guess that counts as this year, which is...hold on converting...uh Empire Year twenty-six thousand, five hundred twenty-one and three days.”

Ips0 went still; her jaw worked. “Please repeat, I did not understand.”

“Empire Year twenty-six thousand, five hundred twenty-one, and three days.”

Ips0 trembled. “No, no, that’s not right.” She forced a smile. “That’s not right, no. Tell me the truth, ship.”

Sammy sighed. “I’m not lying. That’s what my data says.”

“It must be corrupted.” Ips0 took deep breaths.

“It’s not.”

Lincoln hissed. “That is the correct year.”

Ips0 twitched uncontrollably. “No, no, no. *No! No!*” She burst into tears. “That can’t be right! That’s wrong! This is a trick! You are tricking me! Tell me the truth!”

Mica reached for her. “Ips0, what’s wrong!”

Ips0 couldn’t hear him over her panic. “I...I need to go home! I need to go home! Home! That can fix this, they will know.” She pulled their ship into the blue and threw up an energetic barrier around her. “It is time to go home!”

Mica ran, slammed into the barrier, and flew back. “Ips0, you can’t remember where it is!”

“I’ll find it! I’ll travel until I see it!” Stars blurred past. Ips0 cried, pulling them randomly through space. “I have to get home! I have to go home! Leth will help me! *Leth!*”

“Ips0!” Rake clawed at the barrier, unable to get through. “Look, Ips0, I’m sorry I yelled and hit you, but you’re not the only one in a bind here. We have to get home too! We’ve been away for a while.”

Ips0 heard him and snarled over her shoulder. “Really!”

“Yeah, we’ve been away a month or so, and we have—”

“A month? *A month!*” She shrieked. “I’ve been gone for over *fourteen thousand years!*”

The crew went silent.

“*Why? Why?*” She looked back at the monitors. Tears streamed down her face. “No one found me! No one looked for me! In all that time, I’ve been alone!” Her wailing made them cringe. “No one cared. Leth, Leth, why didn’t you find me? Why didn’t anyone find me? I’ve been *alone!* *Why Leth?* How could you do that to me?!”

Rake held his head as a headache spiked behind his eyes. “Ips0, you need to calm down!”

Mica pressed his hands to the energy barrier. “Maybe...maybe you got the calculation wrong?”

“Empire Year eleven thousand nine hundred twenty-four. That’s the last firm date I have.” Ips0 took them on a new course. “All that time alone.”

Sammy beeped. “We’re going *way* fast! Tater tot, you’re going to kill us and *you* if you don’t pay attention!”

Gold bloomed on the horizon. Ips0 cleared her eyes. “Highways! Home Highways!”

Sammy flashed the internal warning lights as the ship bounced. “Shit, we’re nearing all the first colony planets! This place will be swarming with Ampyr no matter where we come out! Come on, kid, you don’t want to go there!”

“I don’t care what’s going on, I have to find out!” Ipso gaped wild-eyed. “I have to know!”

“We don’t! You go by yourself!” Rake pointed towards the back. “Take our spare piece of crap ship. Don’t get us into your shit!”

“Your wants are *irrelevant*.” Ipso swallowed her tears. “I am Langone!”

Ravil appeared at the front, caught Ipso by the hair, and destroyed her barrier. “As am I, Ipso. This is *my* ship!” She threw Ipso towards Mica, and the ship halted in the in-between. Ravil pointed at her. “Stand down or disembark, Ipso.”

Ipso trembled. “But we are Langone. You *must* help me!”

“You have endangered my crew! My *family*!” Ravil’s eyes flickered with light.

Ipso gaped. “These are *not* your family!”

“They are all I have left!” Ravil snarled. “Take the trawler and go off on your quest, but know that if you go there.” Ravil looked to the gold light and her expression softened. “You will be reclaimed and enslaved!”

“No one enslaves a Langone!” Ipso trembled. “No one would dare!”

“I was!”

“You are fucked up!” Ipso ground her teeth. “And you are no longer my princess!”

“Good! I don’t want to be anyone’s goddamn fucking princess!” Ravil burned with light. “Take the other ship and go!”

“I will tell the rings and Court of what you’ve become! Of your betrayal!” Ipso ran out of the cockpit.

“I don’t even know who they are, but they’ve never done *me* any good! So go ahead!” Ravil shouted after her.

“Shit.” Mica left the cockpit and ran after Ipso. “Ipso! Calm down! Obviously you need to consider that things have changed in all the time that has gone by, *listen!*” He followed her into the bathrooms, through the hatch, and towards the trawler. “Ipso, stop this!”

Ipso threw empty pop cans at his head. “Leave me alone, Mica!”

“No!” Mica entered the trawler and screwed the airlock hatch shut behind him. “You don’t know what you’re doing! You don’t know how to operate this ship. This is reckless! Why don’t we just hang out here and talk for a minute, okay?”

“I am *leaving*.” Ipso clenched her jaw. “I am sorry to do this to you, but if you stay you are coming with me.”

Mica folded his arms. “I cannot let a person...adult or child, go off on their own when they are in emotional distress.”

Ipso sighed. “Well, I am leaving, so detach this ship from theirs, or I will rip a hole in theirs to get free.”

Mica tapped his headset. “Guys, we’re detaching.”

Danny’s drug-slurred voice responded, “What? No, you get back on board and let whoever that strange girl is, go!”

“I can’t do that, sir.” Mica keyed into the trawler’s control panel. “Someone needs to help her.”

Danny’s irritation came through his voice. “Mica! You are one of our strongest weapons right now! We need you when we get to Earth!”

“I don’t want to be a weapon, sir. I want to do some good.” Mica entered the sequence to

uncouple the ships. He glanced over at Ipsos and frowned. "I have to do this. I don't know why, I just do."

"Mica!"

He smiled a little. "We'll get everything squared away and then I'll see you all again on Earth."

Rake got on the headset. "Mica, that girl is straight up *crazy!* You *know* that!"

"Yeah well, you have your crazy Navigator to follow, and I have mine." Mica backed the trawler away from medical ship. "Just have a *little* faith for once. This feels right." As Mica said it, he realized he meant it. Peace washed over him. "This is what I have to do now. Just like you guys have to go to Earth."

Ipsos got on the radio. She was calmer with Mica by her side. "I'll bring him back to you once I find my home." She looked at his green hair and smiled faintly. "There's nothing the Langone need with a Terraformer besides landscaping help."

Rake sighed. "Mica."

Mica chewed on his lip. "Yeah, Rake?"

"You *really* have to do this?"

"It's the right thing to do." Mica nodded to himself.

"Then don't get killed."

"Okay." Mica smiled. "Same to you. I'll see you at the house by the time winter's over back home."

"It's a promise." Rake spoke, his smile and sadness evident in his voice. "*May the force be with you, sidekick.*"

Mica grinned and looked at Sammy's ship through the trawler's busted up monitors. The medical ship changed course and disappeared in a blink.

Ipsos's calm mask crumbled into tears of agony. She dropped to her knees and sobbed quietly. "*Fourteen thousand years.*"

Mica turned his chair and drew her into a hug. "Now, now, we're on the right track. We'll get you home."

"What if it doesn't exist anymore? It's been so long!"

"Maybe part of the memory you lost is time since then, maybe you haven't been gone that long, you've just forgotten it. That could be it, right?"

Ipsos nodded, wanting to believe him. "I suppose."

"Then don't cry yet." Mica wiped away her tears. "Not until you actually know there's something to cry over." He helped her into a seat and strapped her in. Mica snatched up a stray chocolate bar. "Eat this, you'll feel better instantly I bet."

She nibbled on the chocolate and her tears stopped. She sniffled. "Why are you doing this all for me? You don't know me, Mica."

Mica stretched. "Up until recently I did things that didn't feel right, that were against my beliefs, my faith." He glanced over at her. "I've decided to turn that around for good, and if I hadn't done this, I would have been going against what I felt was the right thing to do, and I could not have forgiven myself. Maybe not smart or wise, but this is *right.*"

She watched him. "You sound a lot like an old friend of mine."

"Bet he was a good friend."

Ipsos smiled shyly. "He was. He did stupid things for me too, so stupid." She touched her cheeks. "A big dummy."

"Big dummies are the best." He ruffled her hair. "Was that this Leth person?"

“Ugh, no, Leth’s my older brother.” She made a face. “He’s a jerk sometimes. Cantu was nice.”

Mica punched her on the shoulder lightly. “Okay Ipso, this is *your* expedition.” He tapped the steering wheel and let go. “You’re in control.”

Ipso nodded and spread her fingers. She looped lines of light around her wrist like reins on a horse. She stared at the gold horizon and allowed a little hope in. “Thank you, Mica.”

The ship rocketed away, leaving their patch of space empty and alone.

END

The story continues in *Wastes Management*

Sammy: Well...goodbye Mica!

Emmalethe: Go find him! I want apple! Want apple now! The Ravil one, go get Mica!

Ravil:...

Emmalethe: Go get Mica from tiny girl! You do this now!

Danny: Czar, make her shut up.

Emmalethe: I no shut up, stupid male! I a pirate!

Darq: This is *really* stressful! Stress! Stress!

Katarina: Everyone *calm down!* Darq’s *freaking* out.

Everyone:...

Rake: Hey, so Earth? Yeah? We going home finally?

Tasane: Uhm, I think we need to deal with Grazen/Marx first.

Lincoln: Agreed, unless you want her unleashed on Earth.

Danny: Hell no. How do we fix him?

Lincoln: I can research ways—

Rake: Boring! Peace. Going to go hangout with Ravil. Have fun dealing with that. Come on, Beb.

Sammy: Ooh! You two *finally* going to shag? It’s about fucking time.

Rake: Shut *up*, Sammy! Stay out of it.

Sammy: Fine, I’m going to watch the twink homo channel in Lloyd’s room. Oro will put out I bet. A little bit of *thanks for saving me* sex is on the menu tonight. *Oh yeah.*

Danny/Katarina: *Sammy!*

Kennedy: Hey...Marx is waking up...