

# STEAL THE STARS



NYT and USA Today Bestselling Author

**ANN AGUIRRE  
AND P.T. MAYLEE**

**He's heroic. He's selfless. He's trying to save everyone.**

E'nosience has spent a lifetime trying (and failing) to please his progenitor, who is a high-ranking admiral in the Coalition. When they made contact on a planet called Earth, he didn't expect to fall for the ambassador assigned to his delegation. And he never expected to lose her, either. But thanks to a rag-tag group of humans who can play the long odds, he has a second chance with Maddy. And to break free from the admiral's influence.

**She's smart. She's loyal. She's trying not to lose everything.**

Maddy has forgotten more about xeno-studies than others will ever know. She loved being an ambassador, but the diplomatic corp crashed and burned, leaving her jobless. When E'no vowed eternal devotion, then disappeared, she cursed his name. She can fire a weapon or pilot a shuttle, at least in theory, but suddenly, her life is a lot more edge-of-your-seat action than theoretical knowledge.

But maybe there's more to the story. There's certainly a whole lot of danger in the form of the flagship in low orbit.

*When very civilized aliens try to enlist a crew of con artists to destroy the world, it's bound to be a stellar adventure...*

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# STEAL THE STARS

ANN AGUIRRE  
AND P.T. MAYLEE

Ann's dedication:

*To Andi and Sergei, who prove what it means to be family.*

P.T.'s dedication:

*To Marie, Tam, and Deb. You know why.*

Copyright Information

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Ann Aguirre

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P.T. Maylee

To two Johns because I'm a hard friend to have.

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# [ 1 ]

ON THE FLAGSHIP OF THE Ancient Civil Galactic Coalition, High Admiral E'maleese waited in his office.

The antechamber was sleek, all gleaming metal and white alloy, with industrious citizens devoted to keeping it that way. Captain E'nosience paced, fraught with nervous energy. He understood his progenitor's goal with the delay. It was an intimidation tactic, a slow and silent scaling of dread. Only when the admiral felt satisfied that his anger was palpable would he summon the captain and end this insidious mental war.

As the captain framed that thought, his comm flashed. One word. *Enter*. He tried to calm himself, but the sickly hue of his fronds gave him away as he entered.

"Captain E'nosience, do you recall our last conversation?" the admiral inquired.

E'no barely produced an answer. "No, Admiral."

He didn't dare address the admiral with greater informality, despite their biological ties. His progenitor was small for an E-designate, and he never allowed anyone to gaze down at him, instead choosing vantage points that allowed him to tower over his audience. Eno's nervous energy heightened to near physical illness, as the admiral's wrath became a tangible force, crackling around the room.

"No? What do you mean, 'no'?" demanded High Admiral E'maleese, his display fronds glowing red.

E'no summoned a thread of resistance, careful to frame it in a way that wouldn't end in repurposing. He produced a whisper, shifting to a submissive shade of blue. "I remember you yelling at me and giving orders, Admiral. I don't believe we've ever had a conversation."

"Quite right!" E'maleese relaxed his pods, seeming appeased by the compliant posture. "Perhaps my orders were

ambiguous?”

“I don’t believe so, Admiral. ‘Kill the humans’ is a clear directive.” The captain’s zard stones ground together at the stress of contradicting his progenitor.

“Perhaps you thought I meant ‘kill *a* human?’” E’maleese softened his modulation in a deceptive feint, the promise of understanding that would be withdrawn the moment the captain fell for the ruse and the trap snapped closed.

He braced himself. “No, Admiral.”

“Or kill *some* humans?” The High Admiral’s pods extended with curiosity.

It was never good when the Admiral was intrigued.

“No, Admiral.” He wondered if he’d survive long enough to find an anti-anxiety pool.

“To the best of your recollection, I *did* explain that humans are a threat to all Galactic civilization?”

His fronds turned green in relief with the chance to agree. “At length, Admiral. You impressed upon me that the destruction of all humans was the only way to ensure the continuation of the Galactic Coalition.”

“Then why....” The admiral’s sensing pods again focused as he gestured to a display module. “Is there a human on my ship?”

E’no stared at the image of the human in the hold, face and head covered in hair. Casualty clawing, ineffectively at the back of his rumpled uniform. *He’s early. This could ruin everything.*

He hadn’t counted on this occurring before he had a chance to explain. “You see, Admiral. The Ancient Civil Galactic Coalition is *very* ancient. And very civilized. Finding a soldier willing to kill even a single sentient being, much less destroy an entire species, is impossible. Getting a human to do it will be much easier.”

The admiral’s display fronds faded to orange as he appeared to consider the proposition. “An interesting idea,

Captain. I shall consider it. You're dismissed." At first, E'no experienced a dizzying deluge of relief. Then the admiral spoke again. "Report to the repurposing center before the end of this cycle."

Outside the office, he paused, dread washing over him. This felt like a death sentence, but refusing an order would draw more suspicion. So far from Coalition space, the admiral embodied all the collective might the Galactic Coalition could bring to bear.

Though the sound was muffled, he heard when the admiral activated the comm and spoke without his usual pomp, a tone of rare conciliation. "E'matroon, my broodmate. I'm sorry to inform you that E'nosience had to be repurposed again. Worry not, I'll make a soldier of our offspring. No matter how many times I must break him first."

He froze. *Again?* That meant this had happened before. *How many times have I lost myself?* E'no refused to accept this fate. He wouldn't be erased and recreated, again. He strode through the corridors of the Vigilant, *his* ship, plans brewing in his head. He had to think fast and act faster.

Then he entered the security center, seeking the hungriest of his subordinates.

"I salute you, Captain!" D'orf's spines stood erect as he snapped to attention.

The lieutenant's ambition had always grated but this officer would follow orders. D'orf was also the most dangerous fighter in his crew, which made timing critical. "I've been ordered to the repurposing facility. You will accompany me."

The lieutenant saluted with his head fin. "I'm sorry, sir! Of course, sir! But...why?"

E'no's fronds displayed command violet. "The admiral should know everything is being done by the book. You'll witness the procedure."

The captain led the way without looking back. Urgency superseded his usual commitment to logical discourse. His

progenitor had forced E'no to this extreme. It truly was life or death, as this version of him would perish if the admiral had his way. He mustered his resolve, and as they entered the repurposing facility, E'no smashed the lieutenant on his head fin, stunning him. Next, he snatched the lieutenant's emitter and fired—two shots, two unconscious employees. Then the facility was his.

He muscled D'orf into a repurposing chamber and tapped the controls to manufacture new memories for the lieutenant. The repurposing pod was capable of drastic changes, but he wouldn't do that, even to D'orf. Swiftly, E'no drafted the official log to reflect that he'd been in the pod while the lieutenant witnessed the event.

Once the cycle finished, he pulled D'orf out of the pod and settled him near the exit. Then he roused the staff with a sharp question. "Sleeping on the job?"

The technicians appeared to fumble for a response.

He fixed his sensing pods upon them, feigning vague confusion. "I don't know why I'm here, but I expect you to follow protocol, or I'll take disciplinary measures."

D'orf snapped to attention, and E'no studied him for signs that the lieutenant suspected mental tampering. When he found only blank compliance, the captain shifted his fronds to welcoming orange. "Ready to go, Lieutenant."

In the corridor, E'no asked to be escorted to his quarters. Since the request conformed to D'orf's expectations, the captain was soon alone in his room.

His improvised plan had sufficed, supplying time for him to consider his next move.

+ + +

High Admiral E'maleese entered the hold with his emitter set on maximum.

The hold was perfectly organized per the admiral's expectations. Even the storage containers were aligned and labeled regarding their contents. He had reservations about entering alone but his progeny—and most trusted officer—had

already botched the mission. It fell to E'maleese to set things right.

“Human? Where are you?”

“Hayden!” The human's too loud voice echoed; he was leaning against a supply crate.

“What does that mean?” E'maleese asked.

“It's my name. Not just 'human'. My full name is Hayden Flynn Wilder.” The beast bared its horrible teeth. “Mom was gonna name me after my old man, but she wasn't exactly sure who that was. Call me Hayden.”

“Very well.” The admiral's frond cape displayed a soft blue as he angled his weapon.

The being hadn't proved aggressive, but its inclinations might be unpredictable. Scans indicated that humans were akin to primates found on multiple planets, none of which possessed technology sufficient to reach the stars on their own.

“You're an ape, Hayden.”

It was a test of sorts, evaluating the human's response to provocation. On some worlds, a verbal riposte would be enough to incite wrath and violence. But the human didn't respond as expected.

“Soon to be the last if you have your way.” The ape trembled in a staccato expression of mirth. His face seemed to be primarily hair and multiple frightening bone shards.

“You know?” E'maleese's fronds glowed yellow in surprise.

“Your captain explained the plan,” Human Hayden Flynn Wilder said, appraising E'maleese with pale eyes. “You need my people gone, but you don't have the heart, guts, or stones. Whatever you're lacking to do it.”

“And?” asked the admiral, displaying the shade of orange that denoted curiosity.

“I push the button and you see that I live a long, drunken life with pretty, alien gold diggers tending to my every need.

Hayden slapped his paws together. “What are we waiting for? Let’s do this!”

“It’s not a matter of pushing a button.” The admiral maintained a defensive stance. “The Galactic Coalition is far too civilized to equip ships with weapons of such mass destruction. The ship’s computers would prevent the creation of such a device.”

Hayden’s facial features scrunched together beneath his hairy visage. “We need a weapons designer then?”

The admiral suspected that might pose a problem and contemplated what incentive he should offer this traitorous wretch. A person prepared to betray his own people clearly could not be trusted. But E’maleese intended to make use of the pawn his progeny had procured. After all, the admiral never wasted resources. That was why he chose to repurpose his offspring instead of starting over with better base materials.

But before he could make a counteroffer, the human spoke again. “No problem, I know just the woman for the job. The captain can give me a lift, we’ll be back in a jiffy.”

“I will find a suitable pilot.” The admiral’s fronds eased to a conciliatory green as he added, “Captain E’nosience is... occupied.”

The human ape was difficult to predict, and the admiral needed him. He wouldn’t tolerate failure here. It would help if he could read this human’s colors, but the signals the creature provided offered no useful data.

“Negatory. I don’t need a random pilot, I need an alien I trust. I *like* Captain E’no.”

That was unsurprising. E’nosience collected unsuitable connections, endearing himself to the powerless and the incompetent. If the admiral had anything to say about it, those traits would be eradicated. Most unfortunate, his progeny was...soft, even after multiple repurposing events, and he had little sense of duty or appropriate behavior. There was probably some unsavory tale as to how E’no had met Human

Hayden Flynn Wilder in the first place, but he didn't care what it was.

Time was of the essence.

“I am pleased...” He wasn't. “To hear of your regard, but —”

“No buts. Un-occupy him or find another dangerous ape to do your bidding.”

The admiral restrained the urge to teach this human a lesson.

Arguing would only waste time and resources. Acquiescence scraped against his every inclination, as he gave orders; he never took them. But this opportunity might not come again. If everything unfolded as it should, it would add prestige for his progeny as well. E'maleese could frame the deed as he liked, as victors penned the postscripts for all encounters. At least his offspring was fresh from repurposing and unlikely to be tainted by a short mission in conjunction with humans.

“Very well.” With great reluctance, E'maleese activated the comm. “Captain E'nosience, report to the secondary docking bay immediately.”

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Maddy tracked the shuttle's approach.

The silver gleamed in the sunlight, a sleek shape that broadened on the sides to catch thermal updrafts. Elegant lines gave it a marine life aspect; she could envision it cutting through the ocean, and for all she knew, these vessels could stand up to deep sea pressures. It came from the flagship in orbit, the same signature as the one Hayden had taken hours before. She wondered if Hayden was on this one. And if so, why?

The plan didn't change regardless. She tightened her ponytail to make sure it wouldn't get in the way, grabbed her rifle, and climbed the metal ladder to the observation post. The shuttle landed in the middle of the field, below her hiding spot

atop the silo, in easy range of her rifle. Either she was lucky, or Hayden was on that shuttle.

*I've never been lucky.*

Sure enough, Hayden emerged from the hatch with his hands up. He waved to her. That *wasn't* part of the plan.

“Come on down, Maddy!” Hayden called. “I brought a friend.”

Another figure glided from the hatch. From this distance, she recognized an E-designate Coalition alien. They were tall and graceful with delicate, angular features that fell somewhere between avian and plant with a triangular frond over the nose and mouth area like a mask. This feature didn't change like the frond cape; instead, the hue matched their social rank, and this alien's 'mask' was silver. Taller than humans and slimmer too, they moved with preternatural grace.

Maddy trained her scope to get a better read on the situation. A whisper escaped before she could stop it. “E'no?” The ache that accompanied that name made her want to rub her chest, but she didn't pull her hands from the weapon. She almost pulled the trigger.

That would spark a flashfire of complications, and they couldn't afford the scrutiny. Not when their operation was shoestring planning and trifling budget. Saving the world should be easier than this, but it was amazing how people only saw what they wanted, until it was damn near too late to change the trajectory.

She sighed.

Hayden continued to wave, and Maddy relented. She climbed down and jumped to the ground. Hayden caught her. He smelled better than he looked, a clean laundry scent that hinted he wasn't exactly as he let on. But she'd known that from the beginning.

“That's not your E'no,” he whispered. “All these aliens look the same, and they're all named E'no or E'ma something, right? I'm the only human this one has ever met.”

“You sure?” she asked.



“I am. I’m sorry, Maddy. I know—” She bristled, and Hayden seemed to think better of whatever he was about to say.

She stared at the alien. He was taller than the average E-designate with pointed features, and three gold eyes a little higher on his face than a human’s would be. Colorful fronds flowed behind him like a cape. It was beautiful and strange, and the feelings came back so hard she had to step back. *Heartbreaker. I must be the only woman in the world who’s been loved and left by an alien.* She wanted to beat this one with her rifle, then shoot.

But it wasn’t this alien’s fault. Promises had been made and not kept before. She took a breath, another. Until the sting faded some.

*I hate that I still miss him.*

She’d had security clearance before, handpicked for first contact. Had a fancy ambassador title then too. Spending time with the extraterrestrial delegate, Captain E’nosience had been a huge honor, and then...it was more. *A lot more.*

Then the UN couldn’t agree what to do about the Coalition’s offer to embrace Earth as a core world, people started protesting, and her agency got disbanded. Now she was a volunteer in an op that might, no, probably, would go horribly sideways. On good days, she believed in Hayden. On bad ones...well. Sometimes, as the story went, when Pandora opened that box and everything flew out, hope was what was left, hiding at the bottom.

Hayden had no time for her woolgathering. “Keys in the truck? I got to talk to Pierce. Keep this guy busy ’til I get back.”

“I can’t,” she growled.

“Course you can. You’ve done it before.” Hayden said quietly before raising his voice. “E’no, this is Madison. Madison, E’no.” He smiled his winning smile. “I gotta go to town real quick. You two make friends while I’m gone.”

Hayden was in the truck and driving away before Maddy could react. She swore mentally. Really, with her history, this qualified as cruel and unusual. Recalling her training, she didn't smile. Keeping her face neutral would hide her reluctance to make nice while also avoiding potential misunderstandings. The training she had undergone when the Vigilant first appeared on the horizon came back in a hurry.

"How well do you know Hayden?" she asked, lowering her rifle.

She didn't put it down. Not yet. The answer to that question might change her attitude. Might not, too. The captain glided beside her, not quite seeming to touch the ground even though she knew the aliens couldn't levitate. But something about their gait didn't vibe like they were walking either.

"Are you asking how we met or how long we have been associated?"

"Both. Or whichever. It's up to you."

Yeah, this awkwardness underscored the fact that they were strangers. From the first, conversation with her E'no had just *flowed*. Without either of them even trying. Maybe E'nosience was an alien name like 'John', so it wouldn't be odd to meet more than one. Hell, there had been two in her second-grade class alone. Some of her tension eased.

*Hayden is right. I can do this.*

"I met him during a covert mission. I can't discuss the details."

*Covert mission...* That didn't sound good. Fortunately, their people were alert to the fact that diplomacy efforts hadn't gone as well as the official line alleged. And they had a plan, just not a perfect one.

But it was workable; it *had* to be, because otherwise, the consequences would be unthinkable.

THIS KANSAS FARM WAS MORE than the place Hayden had grown up.

The place was also his base of operations. Only his most trusted personnel could be found on site. Though he had fond memories of his grandfather teaching him how to grow sorghum, he hadn't set up here to relive old memories. There were plenty, but most of them were painful to revisit because he'd lost so much along the way. For a moment, he let himself recall running with his sister through a field of wildflowers, watching the wind sweep through the tall prairie grass.

Then he sealed the treasure box of his memory with a ping of pain that never went away. Hannah had been more than his sister; she was his best friend, too. People said time healed all wounds, but that wasn't true. Some damage you just learned to work around, like stepping lightly over a hole in the floor.

No, he'd chosen this locale because of its isolation. Rural Kansas had been losing population for years, and some counties had less than ten people per square mile. Bad for the state, but fewer folks to ask questions or meddle.

He glanced in the rearview mirror, hoping Maddy would be okay. She wasn't the type he usually recruited, but she had firsthand experience with extraterrestrials, and that didn't grow on trees. He scrubbed a hand over his overgrown beard. The damn thing was hot and itchy, but it worked a treat for convincing aliens he had no higher thought. They seemed to think that a lot of hair impaired human intellect.

He drove to his destination, what looked like a biker bar partway between the farm and town, a hamlet struggling to keep a few hundred people housed and fed. The truck bounced into the lot and Hayden parked in two spaces in front of Kelly's. It was all warped wood and occasional neon, but the jukebox worked. He'd organized a fair amount of resistance, right here on this sticky floor.

Kelly was a grizzled man with a salt and pepper ponytail, prone to wearing band t-shirts and leather necklaces. And he had his fingers in a lot of pies. Hayden was counting on that. He strolled through the door and called, “I need to talk to Pierce.”

Kelly looked at Hayden as if Jesus had just returned. He overfilled the mug he was pouring. “You can’t. Feds picked her up the day before yesterday, Colonel.”

The barfly who was expecting that draft started to complain as the sticky mug slid down the counter toward him, but he shut up when Hayden shot him a narrow-eyed look. *I don’t have time for people getting in my way.* If his instincts were accurate—and they rarely steered him wrong, then that admiral would escalate the situation sooner rather than later. That asshole stank of hostility and bad intentions.

Hayden’s smile widened, and he knew it didn’t reach his eyes. “Fine, tell her that her ride is here.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Kelly protested. “Told you she’s in federal custody.”

Hayden’s smile turned to menace in an instant. “Don’t bullshit me. I invented shit. Tell her I’m here to pick her up and I can’t wait forever!”

The man’s eyes dropped in acknowledgment.

Out of habit, Hayden clocked the people in the bar. He recognized every face except the guy in uniform. A badge was a lousy disguise, and Hayden felt reassured. The feds would know he was here soon if they didn’t already. If they knew, Pierce would too. All he had to do now was get back safely. He hadn’t noticed anyone on his six driving out from the farm, but it wouldn’t be paranoia if people were after you. His whole life had been a rehearsal for this op, and he’d be damned if anything got between him and his goal.

“Give me a six pack of something good and a bottle of something bad.”

+ + +

Thankfully, Maddy wasn’t left with the alien for too long.

Hayden returned within an hour and stole the focus with his usual bluster. “All set. Let’s get ready.”

“Pierce is on her way?”

The colonel laughed. “We’re talking about Pierce. She’s probably calculating how to minimize casualties when she blows the roof off.”

“Kelly give you any trouble?”

Hayden shrugged. “He treats Pierce like his little girl, but she always gets her way.” He smiled in a way that gave Maddy chills. “And he knows better than to cross me.”

The colonel seemed satisfied and confident but then he always did. Maddy followed him to the shuttle.

“We need to update this thing. And fast. What are the chances the alien will help with it?” he asked.

Maddy couldn’t answer that, so she merely shrugged. “You can try to explain the urgency. Couldn’t hurt.”

“I’m not sure how he’ll feel about participating in a jailbreak.”

She smirked. “Maybe don’t tell him that part. We could frame it as a rescue.”

“Well, let’s go try to sell ice in the Yukon then. You do the talking. Maybe aliens like getting information from a pretty woman as much as I do.”

Maddy eyed Hayden, then shook her head. “What did I say about flirting with me?”

“That I should do it all the time? Even more if possible.”

She laughed. Even when Hayden got on her nerves, his brashness was funny.

“You laughed, I’m off the hook!”

“Are you seriously misquoting Homer Simpson right now? Let’s go find E’no.”

As expected, E’no was hunkered near the shuttle, not quite patrolling but he was maintaining a real air of vigilance. She

guessed he might be held responsible if the tech got damaged.  
*Wonder how the Coalition feels about unregulated mods.*

“Our weapons expert needs help,” she said without preamble.

“What’s the issue?” E’no asked.

“She’s been locked up on a false charge.” That might even be true. More importantly, it made Pierce look like a victim. “I suspect it’s because she participated in some pro-Coalition rallies.”

E’no was studying her intently, a focus that felt familiar. A frisson ran down her spine, but she forced herself to ignore it. *Like Hayden said, the aliens resemble one another.* There were minute differences from being to being, but she’d need to spend a lot of time with one in particular before she’d pick up on the pattern variances.

“Can you elaborate? I believe I understand the problem, but confirmation is critical.”

It was better to keep deception simple. Hayden stood nearby with his arms crossed, letting her do the talking. And if she stepped on something like a mound of shit or a landmine, that would be her problem to sort out too.

“There’s xenophobic sentiment growing,” she explained.

It had the benefit of being a factual statement, but not necessarily applicable in this case. Maddy didn’t know if that had anything to do with Pierce’s situation. But eliciting sympathy was the first step to securing cooperation.

“After attending a pro-Coalition rally, she was targeted by the authorities for holding unpopular political views?” E’no asked.

Hayden inclined his head, which meant he liked this angle. Maddy went with it. “I think that’s the case, yes. People get called collaborators.”

Since they were allegedly plotting the downfall of the human race—at least that was the bill of goods they were offering the admiral—it lent credence to her claims. E’no

shifted his fronds to a pensive lavender, and she wished she didn't recall the colors so well.

"Then we have two reasons to assist. We need her skills, and we cannot allow her to be persecuted." His grave concern felt familiar too.

"Exactly how I see it," Hayden said then. "Look alive, spaceman. We got work to do."

+ + +

*Ballistic weapons on a simple skiff?*

E'no didn't look forward to justifying this decision to the admiral. But it all sounded reasonable when Maddy explained that the government wouldn't release Pierce voluntarily. This might spark hostilities on an incredible scale, but he'd already committed resources to this extraction.

He'd never been good at injuring one to save many, much to his progenitor's chagrin. *You don't have the zard stones to make tough decisions*, Admiral E'maleese had said more than once. And it was true. But E'no didn't *want* to be that callous, either.

"The retrofit won't impact the shielding," Maddy was saying to Hayden.

The colonel checked the seal. "Shouldn't. But we'll want to..."

The two moved off, allowing E'no to inspect the modifications.

Humans were unbelievably fast learners. In particular, Maddy seemed qualified to train cadets on shuttle operation. They had added power sources, increased the shielding, and mounted weapons that turned this little craft into a sleek, light attack vector.

He found himself watching her move. Each step she took in the opposite direction filled him with a baffling melancholy. There was something about her. The way she said his name lifted his stones, and he didn't understand it. But he couldn't afford distractions, so he put the matter from his mind.

“What are we waiting for?” he asked, shifting his fronds to a hopeful shade of blue.

The admiral wouldn't wait forever. He probably had doubts about the viability of this plan. If he sent a retrieval squad, it wouldn't end well for any of them. E'no had dodged being repurposed once recently; humans wouldn't be treated as well.

“The signal,” Hayden snapped. “We'll know it when we see it. It won't be long.”

“And we'll definitely need these changes you made to the shuttle?”

Maddy gave him a look. Was it sympathy, concern, or pity? E'no couldn't decipher her features but he was willing to study them further.

Hayden scoffed. “You better hope not.”

The sky darkened as the sun dropped below the horizon and stars dotted the sky. E'no couldn't remember if he had seen this before, but nightfall was beautiful on this planet. He had seen a lot of skies while on Coalition missions, but this one had its own magic. And it was quiet, only night singing insects calling to one another.

A red streak of light pierced the darkness and Hayden yelled, “That's the signal.”

There had been no chance to test the upgrades, as everything was happening so fast, but E'no vaulted into action with the humans close behind him. He sent the shuttle zooming towards the explosion and Maddy activated the enhanced shields.

She scanned the area as they passed through the boom. “There!” she called, putting the figure of a running woman on the display. “They're shooting at her!”

He tracked the woman on the ground, silently marveling at her agility. A less athletic person would've dropped already. There was an upended land vehicle and multiple humans chasing her. E'no did some fancy flying, trying to dodge some



of the artillery, but the shuttle shook as projectiles exploded against the shields.

Hayden laughed. “They’re shooting at us too!”

E’no didn’t have time to guess what Hayden found amusing. By his estimate, Pierce didn’t have long. Multiple enemies were closing in on her position.

“Can you pilot?” he asked Maddy.

“The basics. Why—”

He didn’t wait for her reply. “Brace yourselves.”

E’no popped the floor hatch and dove, then he was falling fast. He spread his cape to slow his descent. Some of his fronds fried in the friction of the rushing air but he stayed on target, still locked onto Pierce’s last location. She had done well getting this far, but she was only human.

And *he* wasn’t.

Steering toward her, he landed hard and grabbed the weapons specialist, covering her with his body as the barrage hit.

+ + +

Maddy reacted a split second before they got sucked out after E’no, slamming the hatch closed.

The roar of the wind died out as she steered the shuttle out of the spin. “Make yourself useful, Hayden! Have that retrieval system ready.”

Explosions knocked the shuttle back.

The colonel smirked. “They knew we were coming.”

“Well, you were expecting an ambush. They can’t penetrate our shields, but they can push us around!”

She pulled the shuttle about and willed it through the bombardment, diving to rescue Pierce and that ridiculously brave alien. “Activate on my signal.” The lightning-fast plummet had them within range in seconds; she could see them in clear detail on the display. E’no was trying to protect

Pierce, bullets impacting his frond shield, it was nearly bare. “Aaaaand now!”

*Not fighting. We can't shoot our own, even if they're misguided. The guns are for something else entirely.* But damn, she wanted to.

“Got 'em!” Hayden said.

Maddy recited every curse word she knew as she got the shuttle out of the atmosphere. The moment she cleared the range of surface-to-air missile fire, Maddy activated the autopilot, grabbed a med kit, and rushed to E'no.

“Sure, the alien,” Pierce called, sarcasm sharpening her tone. “Don't worry about me.”

She ignored the complaint, as Hayden was already tending to Pierce's wounds.

E'no's eyes fluttered, showing that he was semiconscious. A surprising amount of worry coiled in the pit of Maddy's stomach like a snake. When he spoke, his voice was slurred. “You can operate the medpack. I'm not surprised.”

“They really shot the hell out of you,” she whispered, working as fast as she could to stabilize him.

Thank goodness for Coalition tech. She bit back the reproach in her head: *you could have died, lunkhead.*

Instead, she only allowed herself one question. “What were you thinking?”

“Couldn't let your friend get hurt. She's part of Hayden's plan.”

Hayden interjected, “Is he going to make it?”

She didn't pull her eyes off E'no, not for a second. “Vitals are good.” She glanced at the monitor, a grim feeling sinking into her bones. “He's hurt badly, though.” Maddy raised E'no's chin and checked his eyes, though his spectrum of vision was different, and he didn't have a pupil response as humans recognized it. “On a scale of one to five, how much pain are you experiencing?”

“One is having my fronds shot off and five is when you look at me?”

She took a deep breath to bank her instinctive amusement at the playful response. *I can't get distracted by some sweet talk. Fool me once...*

Anger offered a safe refuge. “That was a reckless stunt you just pulled!”

“A calculated risk. Coalition medicine is advanced, but we don't know much about human physiology and Pierce had no cover. Simply put, it was better for me to get shot.”

“I think she meant flirting with your nurse,” Hayden put in.

Pierce hunched over, shaking with barely concealed laughter. “I wouldn't risk it. She might put a thumb in one of those bullet wounds.”

Maddy ignored those two and opted not to be drawn further. Maybe it had been a necessary gamble, but she didn't like it when people's blood ended up on the outside. Even an alien who reminded her of a foolish mistake that was better left unexamined.

“Maybe it was,” she muttered. “Some people *do* need to be shot.”

+ + +

According to the mechanical watch his grandfather had left him, twenty-two minutes had passed since Maddy accompanied E'no to medical.

Grandpa Wilder had admired the skill of watchmakers and took incredible pride at owning such a fine timepiece. BWC Swiss had been making watches since 1924, and this one was a beauty with stainless steel accents and elegant numbers on the face. The old man used to try and get Hayden interested, rambling on about how wind-up watches worked. Most of that went in one ear and out the other but one phrase stayed with him: escapement mechanism. It didn't mean what it sounded like it did, but it served as a reminder that he should always

have a plan B, and sitting around waiting for E'maleese didn't rank high on Hayden's to-do list.

The admiral was taking his time, a power play designed to unsettle everyone else. Too bad it was only working on Pierce. She tended to be high-strung, someone who was always jogging a knee if she had to sit still more than four consecutive minutes. Soon she was pacing.

The shuttle bay was made of dark metal, filled with tech that he'd love to examine closer. That was part of why he'd finagled access to this ship. The Coalition had gear it would take ten lifetimes to develop, and he'd never minded snatching an edge anyway he could. Playing fair was for people who didn't know how the world worked.

From his vantage, propped against the wall, Hayden watched Pierce search the area with her eyes. He'd adopted a deceptively casual pose. From here, he had a clear view of all exits; the aliens wouldn't be able to sneak up on him. He wouldn't lose track of why they were here, even if the admiral came in hostile. Hayden could defuse the situation by acting like the degenerate E'maleese had decided he was. Even if that bastard had doubts, he'd think twice about discarding an idiot he could use.

Finally, Pierce had enough of roaming around. "Where is she?"

"Izzy?" Hayden wasn't guessing with that answer.

Natalie Pierce and Isabella Montez had been a matched set for over five years, nearly as long as he'd known Pierce. It was sweet when they told their 'how we met story' with their words flowing seamlessly together, showing what real love looked like. Their relationship gave Hayden hope for humanity and sometimes it even made him imagine there was somebody out there for everyone.

Where Izzy was concerned, Pierce wore her heart on her sleeve and then some. They had been taken to separate facilities for questioning, due to their alleged Coalition sympathizer politics, and Hayden had extracted the most

mission-critical individual first. He didn't regret that choice, but he braced for the outburst.

“Fucking right! Izzy. Goddamn it, Wilder! I thought you were rescuing me. I'm not fucking rescued if Isabella isn't here!”

Pierce's fierce intelligence was fueled by her emotions. If he didn't calm the fire, she might take this ship apart before the admiral even arrived. He held up both hands in a placating gesture. “We'll get Izzy next. I already have a plan. Don't worry, I had to bring you first to show the admiral my weapons expert.”

That stopped Pierce in her tracks. She wheeled on him, a pause in her caged jungle cat movements. “What fucking admiral? Where the hell have you brought me?”

“The admiral of this ship,” Hayden said, watching for signs of imminent meltdown. “We work for him now. And he wants us to blow up the Earth.”

## [ 3 ]

HIGH ADMIRAL E'MALEESE HAD THE display module trained on the shuttle bay.

Two women. It was hard to tell one human from another. Humans were sexually dimorphous, certain physiological variances made it easier to distinguish the males from females. *Evolutionarily perverse.*

That was the first sign humans were unsuitable for the Coalition. As part of the assessment process, he'd watched a significant amount of footage featuring humans and other Earth fauna. The admiral approved of blue jays; what a sensible species. Their behavior made sense, and their reactions could be predicted with reasonable accuracy.

Probably Hayden had brought the females for mating purposes. Humans seemed to indulge in bodily contact for a baffling variety of reasons. He hoped that this version of his offspring wouldn't be infected by Earth ideas like the previous iteration. Each repurposing was essentially an admission of failure, and it galled him that his own progeny had proven so lacking in merit and resolve.

"Tell me, Lieutenant D'orf." E'maleese addressed the junior officer beside him. "What would you do if I ordered the forcible repurposing of Captain E'nosience?"

"I'd incapacitate the captain, then deliver him to the repurposing facility, Admiral."

That answer would do, as the Coalition was very civilized, sometimes to the point that it complicated his own aims. The admiral pressed on, focusing the module on the two female primates. "And if I ordered you to eliminate a human?"

This time, the lieutenant took longer to reply. "There's no protocol for repurposing humans. In fact, I'm not even sure how our technology would affect them. To remove one from proximity, I'd incapacitate them, stuff them in an emergency

escape capsule and eject them into space. Then I'd report myself for wasting the capsule."

"A tidy solution." At that moment, he almost liked Lieutenant D'orf. As a rule, the admiral didn't like anyone. "Be ready to carry out those orders, should I give them. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

E'maleese's fronds shone a satisfied yellow. "Lieutenant, you are dismissed. Don't worry about the capsule. I'll sanction any actions you take in carrying out my orders."

The news arrived soon after D'orf left, carried in by some null of a lieutenant who cowered in his presence. "Message for you, Admiral."

E'maleese's fronds bristled dark blue. "Not interested in orders from command."

"It's your broodmate."

He hesitated, then accepted the device. "Get out," he ordered.

The admiral waited until he had complete privacy before activating the display.

E'matroom appeared, her fronds pale blue with concern. "I don't like the way you repurpose E'no at the slightest misstep. At what point will you stop this and let him live? You haven't been home in so long. It is lonely here, as if I no longer have a partner *or* offspring. Both of you have forgotten me."

E'maleese's frond cape flowed through a number of shades, reacting to her chastening words. *More emotional demands.* Why couldn't E'matroom understand that he had a great calling? All he required from her was support and cooperation. Irritation rattled through him, and he took solace in the fact that the distance prohibited real-time communication. Even static messages took time to arrive, given how far they were from the edges of Coalition space. If she could use the comm to demand interaction, he would get no peace and she'd constantly be requesting feedback on the

most trivial matters, like what she should cultivate in her solarium.

He calmed himself to a conciliatory green before recording his reply. “Worry not, esteemed broodmate. Repurposing E’nosience was necessary to keep him safe. He remains devoted to you.” He flowed to an optimistic orange as he added, “I’m currently taking steps to eliminate the dangers of this planet, and success will bring untold glory to our line. I won’t be kept from a high council position much longer.”

Simpleminded as his broodmate could be, she *must* grasp the importance now.

+ + +

Maddy recognized High Admiral E’maleese immediately when they arrived in the planning room.

There was no mistaking those bottomless black eyes or E’maleese’s bad attitude as he stared at their group. She froze. If he recognized her, it could wreck everything before the plan got off the ground. But Hayden was banking on the light being darkest at the base of the lamppost—and that the admiral would never imagine she had the moxie to waltz right into his lair.

The aliens escorting them saluted sharply. They had to be D-designate, featuring head fins and dorsal spines. Courtesy of her extensive studies, she knew they were more prone to militancy than E-designates, but also more obedient and comfortable conforming to social hierarchy. That must be why the admiral had so many on his ship. And their prompt deference deflected his attention, allowing her to relax a fraction.

E’no would be in the medical chambers for the next quarter cycle; she wouldn’t see him for at least six hours. This would play out without his input, and that was for the best. Lying was sometimes necessary, but she’d prefer not to trick him too.

“Hayden. Congratulations on your successful mission.” Admiral E’maleese only greeted the man in charge.



Maddy recognized the cautious shade of blue, but she kept quiet.

The colonel had no such reticence. “Told you, I’m the man for the job. This is barely the beginning of what we’ll accomplish together.”

“You brought two more humans,” the admiral said with a flare of deep indigo that communicated profound distaste. “Are they both weapons experts?”

Maddy glanced at Hayden. *Time to test the waters.*

He was a fearless liar, but she preferred to establish her own cover story. “My name is Janelle. I’m an ordained minister and a trained psychologist. Hayden brought me to counsel the humans who will be isolated here in a strange environment. If they’re not mentally healthy, they can’t be productive.”

*That’s all true.* She’d gotten ordained online because she’d promised to officiate for Pierce and Izzy if they ever tied the knot. And she *did* have a degree in psychology, though she’d never worked in that field. Maddy gestured to Pierce, adding, “This is our weapons expert, Natalie Pierce.”

“Honored, High Admiral.” Pierce adopted her best formal military manner, complete with salute. Madison knew Pierce wasn’t fond of her first name, and she hated the nickname ‘Nat’. “Everyone calls me Pierce.”

“Then I shall as well.” E’maleese’s fronds faded to a hopeful blue. The admiral was making an effort to seem pleasant.

Maddy wondered if anyone was falling for it. Probably not. Hayden didn’t fall for bullshit, and he’d handpicked the people involved in this team. She did her best to keep a neutral expression, but her poker face could frankly use some improvement. Thankfully, she wasn’t the focus in this conversation.

“Good to be here,” Pierce said without relaxing her posture.

The admiral liked that, judging by the brightening of his fronds. According to the assessment materials he'd sent to the diplomatic corp before the hammer came down, he found humans woefully lacking in dignity, discipline, and self-restraint. And he'd called their tendency toward 'individualism' nothing short of a plague that would infect the Coalition and bring about its downfall. Depressing read, that damned dossier.

"Pierce, has Hayden explained the scope of the work? I'll need a list of supplies and I expect regular updates. Do not attempt to deceive me."

"Depends, do you want the planet blown to pieces or just rendered uninhabitable?" Pierce asked without missing a beat.

Maddy had never known Pierce to lie, but she was certainly a better actor than the admiral whose fronds flashed red with alarm. "Amazing how easy it is to forget I'm dealing with violent apes." The admiral tried to recover, belatedly seeming to recall he needed them. "Forgive me. I have no intention of destroying the Earth. That would be barbaric. I only intend the termination of the human species."

He didn't seem to see anything contradictory in that statement. With superhuman effort, she held her tongue.

Pierce responded in an even tone. "A biological weapon then. I can tailor a delivery system, but bio attacks aren't my specialty. I'm better at making things go boom."

Maddy suspected the others didn't notice the chromatic shift from alarm to anger in the admiral as he turned to Hayden. "This weapons expert is useless!"

"Not at all. You heard Pierce. She can design the delivery system. A missile is a missile after all. We can collaborate to engineer a virus or a germ to serve as the payload. We just might need a little more help."

Maddy suppressed a smile as E'maleese turned an exasperated blue. "Our computers have a wealth of medical information that the other expert can use."

“No problem then.” Hayden could smile at his firing squad.

“They will work remotely,” warned the admiral. “Humanity must be exterminated. I won’t have it migrated to this ship.”

“There are security concerns with that suggestion. And I’m sure you’re aware that we’re social animals,” Hayden said in a deceptively mild tone.

She’d heard him sound like that just before he punched somebody. Maddy didn’t have to interpret the look Hayden and Pierce shared.

Then Pierce added, “He’s right. A remote connection offers the opportunity for our transmissions to be intercepted by Earth authorities. Plus, we’ll function better as a team, and we’ll need a small squad to accomplish this mission.”

Maddy tensed. They were testing him, seeing if he’d give an inch so they could take a mile. The admiral might jump either way. It really depended on how much he believed this was a feasible plan.

E’maleese finally said, “A very small squad human, Hayden Flynn Wilder. And *if* I agree, Captain E’nosience will be in charge.”

Maddy savored the admiral’s defeat; Hayden definitely had his good points. He’d said they were about to sell ice in the Yukon. Now it was time to whittle away at the iceberg they’d managed to move for an incredibly low price.

To his credit, the colonel didn’t gloat. “I was just going to suggest that, Admiral.”

+ + +

E’no spent nearly half a cycle in the healing pool.

It might look like a simple vat of liquid to the untrained observer, but the technology that had gone into creating the curative gel had no peer anywhere in Coalition space. Wounds that might have ended his existence elsewhere had been

mitigated in such a short time that he felt grateful to have been born within the Coalition.

So many ailments remained untreated on Earth. If humanity could see the value of joining the Coalition instead of only fearing subjugation and loss of liberty, things would improve exponentially. But his progenitor took their fear and resistance as a negative sign, more proof that humans ascribed the conqueror's mentality to others that they had been perpetrating on each other for eons.

"You have completely recovered," the medical officer said. "I'm clearing you to return to duty at once."

"Thank you for your service," E'no said.

The officer paused, fronds flashing the clear green of gratitude. "I appreciate that you took the time to say so."

Others were always startled to learn E'no had sprung from the high admiral. More proof that they shared few traits in common. It would be within his rights to rest before immediately returning to active service, but he was experiencing an unusual urgency. He needed to make sure the humans hadn't come to harm in his absence.

Especially the one called Maddy. She tugged at his senses in a way he couldn't rationalize or explain. Instead of dallying, he collected the soldiers who had been assigned to the task force and led them to the docking bay where the humans had been quarantined. At a cursory glance, he could tell they'd been offered libation and a light meal, but they were sitting on tech casings, nothing remotely suitable or comfortable.

*That's entirely in character for the admiral.*

D'orf and D'aroi stood in rigid formation behind him. Humans might find them threatening or comical with their sharp spines and protruding head fins. D-designates came in varying hues and patterns, but their colors didn't shift or offer chromatic clues regarding their emotional states. Instead, one studied fin postures to understand their emotional reactions. Both seemed hesitant.

As commanding officer, it was up to E'no to ensure the best outcome for everyone. Hayden's goals weren't as he claimed to the admiral, but he had known that when he agreed to this ruse. E'no's fronds glowed with a regal purple hue as he waited for the group's attention. He saw them size up his escort; they must be curious. The Coalition had been annexing civilizations for a long time and its denizens were incredibly diverse—in appearance if not in culture. Repurposing ensured that *every* citizen conformed to the same beliefs and values.

“Lieutenant D'orf and Private D'aroi have been assigned to join our cohort. Together, we will complete the mission.”

“Hold on!” Hayden protested. “I don't remember agreeing to external personnel. How do I know they won't mess up our objectives?”

E'no was prepared to rebut such opposition. “I will *not* hold on and we will not delay. You understand the need for a coordinated squad to get this job done? You're prepared to enact our next step?”

Hayden nodded in reluctant agreement.

“We'll depart immediately,” E'no continued. “The ship's automated systems have disabled the weapons you installed on our shuttle. I expect you to have them restored and brief D'orf and D'aroi on their operation before we breach Earth's atmosphere.”

He entered the shuttle, knowing his new crew would follow.

The shuttle was a good size, suitable for a small allotment of personnel. Humans might find some of the installations and tech configurations confusing, but they'd soon adapt. That was one trait E'no admired. Humans found ways to live, even in geographic zones that seemed viciously hostile to their occupation.

“Maddy, will you do the honors?”

She glanced at him, but he couldn't read her reaction to the request. “Why me?”

E'no couldn't answer that question, so he deflected. "I'm asking. Will you comply?"

It felt like a much bigger query somehow, and he tensed. Until she strode over to the console and took the pilot's position. Her acquiescence pleased him in ways he couldn't articulate, and that should have worried him deeply.

Instead, he savored the thrum of pleasure as the engine fired.

HAYDEN HAD GROWN UP WATCHING science fiction shows.

When the universe dumped actual aliens on Earth, first it was an excuse to buy everybody a round even if the ‘truth is out there’ types spent *way* too much time saying *I told you so*. But then reality sank in. The world had been forever changed, the day the admiral made his fateful recon run twenty clicks from Sugar Loaf Lake in Arkansas and got his shit rocked by a bunch of rednecks.

Point was, the shuttle he was on was larger and a lot different than the set designers from Star Trek had envisioned. The tech also was significantly less intuitive. Maddy could read some of the Coalition symbols, but the woman was smart as hell. Hayden was relying on rote memory to be able to use the interface at all. He was just thinking about snooping when E’no spoke.

“Hayden, you’ve been in charge of planning this operation. What’s our next step?”

“On it, Captain.” Since he had an audience, he gave up the idea of digging into Coalition files. *Not the time. Yet.*

He turned his attention to spying on the government instead. And based on the confidential feeds he was scrolling, the aliens had completely penetrated Earth’s communications network. There was no such thing as privacy anymore. The Coalition had tech that could travel between star systems. It was a small matter for them to hack even the most secure databases. The feds would be horrified to realize how vulnerable to scrutiny their little dirtball had become.

Hayden looked up from the console, but he couldn’t guess Eno’s mood based on what color he was. That was Maddy’s forte.

“All good news. They’re moving our next recruit to a clandestine site in New Mexico. Once they get her there, we’ll

need an army to extract her. If we hurry, we'll catch them in transit." Hayden glanced at the data display and grinned. "Even better, our man is with her."

Darius 'Grim' Rivers wasn't the bioengineer the admiral needed to design an anti-human plague, but he'd been in Hayden's unit and Hayden trusted him. That information was on a need-to-know basis, and the admiral didn't need to know shit. They'd improvise when they got back to the Vigilant.

Thirty-seven minutes later, the shuttle landed behind an abandoned truck stop. It wouldn't be visible from the highway, and they needed all the lead time they could muster. He checked his gear and motioned for his team to roll out. Maddy and Pierce got moving, and E'no started to follow.

"Keep your boys back until we need them," Hayden requested. "These are anti-Coalition feds. We alarm them and there's no telling who they'll shoot."

E'no seemed to buy it. "I understand...but we're here to assist."

"You'll assist all right." The bared teeth of his smile threatened some aliens, not E'no. "Be ready to bail us out and scoop us up when things go runny."

Maddy might be more useful on the shuttle, but Hayden needed her with him.

This would be his one chance to brief his team without Coalition overwatch spying. At least, he hoped that would be possible, considering how closely the admiral appeared to be monitoring events on Earth. There had to be dead spots, though, and he'd find one.

"Walk where I walk, be quiet, and don't get yourself killed," he told Maddy.

"I'll be fine," she snapped.

"Pierce!" At his signal, the women fell in behind him and they disembarked.

Hayden didn't imagine that Pierce needed orders. She knew her job inside and out, part of why she was irreplaceable.



Without being told, Pierce set to laying the charges in strategic spots along the highway lane. He surveyed the landscape and found Maddy already looking in the same direction.

*Perfect vantage for a lookout post.*

She went up, likely prepared to signal if they got more trouble than he'd bargained. Hayden found his own hiding spot and smiled slightly. *I do enjoy a good ambush.*

Everything was ready when the scout helicopter approached. Four escort vehicles, at least one chopper, and the bus—that was what Hayden had expected. He checked Maddy's position; the woman wasn't combat trained, but she was razor sharp. *She has to be scared.* He was ready to strike if this went bad. Four black SUVs in front—that meant at least two more behind and another 'copter swooping around somewhere. The feds knew they had a valuable prisoner.

His squad wasn't even using shortwave to communicate. No chance of being rumbled by the feds or the admiral. *Fighting a war on two fronts is a shit situation, but it's the hand I'm holding.* This op would be executed in complete radio silence.

The first explosion hit the side of the bus knocking it over and off the road. More explosions followed, two of the lead escorts and both behind were flipped over. Pierce opened the bus door a second later.

Hayden raced toward the rolled vehicle, first up and through the doors to assess the damage. The driver lay unconscious, still strapped in his seatbelt. Izzy had on a charcoal jumpsuit with no number; her fate would have been worse than the penitentiary, some off-books detention center that made Guantanamo look like a safe haven. Her curly black hair was tied up, and her round face was smeared with dirt and blood.

*Already out of her cuffs. No wonder Pierce adores this woman.*

With a muttered curse, Grim accepted help from Pierce and Izzy. The gray garb could barely contain his massive

shoulders. His dark skin was glossy with pain sweat from the wound on his shoulder, blood slowly seeping through the fabric. Maddy appeared on the other side of the doorway, ready to help people out. Two guards were still breathing, banged up enough not to offer resistance.

Backup would be on scene in less than two minutes.

“I have one chance to tell you this, so pay attention. There was a plan, but the situation has changed. Our mission hasn’t. Take your cues from me and use your heads.” He gave them his most earnest look. “Izzy, Grim, things will get weird. Stay calm and play along. Pierce and Maddy know the tune, you’ll pick it up as we go.”

“Missed you,” Pierce said to Izzy, appearing to pay him no mind.

She stole a kiss with no regard for the situation. Hayden sighed and shook his head, knowing better than to say, ‘it’s not the time’. That would just start an argument that would slow them down even more.

“Getting out of here would be a good start,” Izzy said quickly.

She was clearly reading the room. Well, the rolled bus. Hayden approved of Pierce’s choice of partners, not that anyone had asked him.

Grim set his jaw, gritting his teeth through the pain. “Enough bullshit. I’m in the mood to shoot somebody.”

“Do the guards have anything we can use?” Maddy asked.

*Smart. Always looking for the next move.* Most of the world was playing checkers while Maddy played 3-D chess.

Pierce checked the bus from front to back and shook her head, biting off a curse. “Not enough for all of us.”

“Give me a fucking gun,” Grim demanded.

Pierce made the call, keeping one for herself and giving the other sidearm to Grim. Nobody was about to tell him the injury might impact his aim, least of all Hayden. When Grim wanted to shoot somebody, people got shot.

“Let’s try to buy some time first,” Hayden suggested. He went out with his hands in the air. “We surrender. Read me my rights. Get me a lawyer!”

“This is Agent Valenz. Put down your weapons and get on the ground!”

He tried to make it look like he was complying with all demands, but one of the grunts panicked and shot first. He dove behind the bus, rolling clear of the first barrage. *Good thing Grim and Pierce got the guns.* Hayden wasn’t in a good position to return fire.

These were straight-up Man in Black types, dark sunglasses and matching suits, flashing no badges and offering no warnings about what law enforcement agency they worked for. They shot out the windshield of the bus. Maddy landed beside Hayden, her face pallid with fear.

“We gonna make it out of here?”

“Have I ever failed before?” he asked, trying for a light tone.

“There’s always a first time,” she retorted. “And I’d prefer to avoid having certain firsts and lasts right here beside this bus.”

“E’no will come. I don’t need to call for backup for them to hear shots fired.”

From inside the wrecked bus, Grim and Pierce popped off a few rounds, but standard-issue firearms only had so many shots. It wasn’t like the movies where heroes could hole up for six hours and never run out of ammo. One of the MiBs dropped and Hayden heard Grim celebrate.

“Said I was gonna shoot somebody, didn’t I?”

“Fuck yeah, you did!” Pierce crowed.

Before the situation could escalate, the aliens hit hard.

D’orf and D’aroi bowled in, firing emitters on full power at the vehicles. SUVs went flying, and the bus tumbled upside down. Izzy and Grim staggered out. The alien cohort folded up their quills and charged the agents still standing, crashing them

to the ground. The shuttle flashed through the air, playing chicken with the helicopters, forcing them to dodge.

E'no must have activated the retrieval system because Hayden saw the collection tubes extend. He bid the feds farewell with both middle fingers. "On second thought, we *don't* surrender, you bastards!"

+ + +

E'no found Maddy immediately with his sensor pods.

He couldn't have said why, but tension unspooled within him. He hadn't liked letting her go and hadn't entirely understood the necessity. But Colonel Hayden Flynn Wilder could be intractable, and it seemed better not to provoke him over trivial matters. The admiral was watching, and he would seize on any excuse to take control. E'no had no intention of surrendering even an iota of the autonomy he had wrested.

"Well done," he said. "Maddy, will you take us back to the Vigilant?"

Again, she gave him an inscrutable look, and he fought the inexplicable urge to step closer. To sync his breath with hers, as if they'd done so before. *What's wrong with me?* There came an awful scratching at the back of his mind, the shrill feeling that he'd forgotten something. Something that left him with a hole inside, frayed and raw about the edges.

She didn't look at him as she maneuvered the shuttle. Not once. And that seemed strange as well. The urge to find answers to all the questions she created swelled within him, but official business first.

D'aroi handed a medpack to the wounded human but he regarded it like it might be a weapon of mass destruction. Angling her head fin in confusion, D'aroi activated it and pressed it to the man's shoulder. A hiss of relief escaped him and E'no faced the others.

"Introductions then?" E'no suggested.

Hayden indicated the tall man beside him. "This is Grim. He'll make the bioweapon warhead." Then he tilted his head at

the other female, round and brown with a crown of voluminous hair. “Izzy. She’ll assist our weapon designers.”

“A pleasure,” E’no said, hoping that was the correct verbiage. “I look forward to working with you both.”

The flight back was quick. Earth authorities couldn’t follow them past the stratosphere. Certain governments and a few billionaires were frantically trying to perfect launch-safe vessels, but it wouldn’t be soon enough to change the outcome. He waited until everyone disembarked in the Vigilant’s bay, then E’no addressed the unit.

He displayed a cheerful orange, hoping to bolster morale in those who understood. “I have no doubt that with practice we will be able to accomplish any task together.” His fronds shifted to violet as he ordered, “Lieutenant D’orf. Lead your colleagues to their quarters. We will begin training on the first cycle of the morrow.”

Hayden immediately protested, “Training? I need to talk to the admiral and my team can’t waste time with—”

“By the high admiral’s orders,” E’no cut in, knowing there could be no demurral. “Your team is now under my command.” His fronds held the deep purple. “I will report to Admiral E’maleese on our behalf. As for training...”

The other humans shifted, glancing at Hayden, but none of them spoke.

E’no continued, “Where will you report in the event of an alert order? Do any of you know how to fire or maintain an emitter? Can you all operate a medpack?”

“Fuck,” Pierce said.

Grim sighed. “He’s got a point.”

Izzy was nodding. “I’d rather be prepared.”

“Fine,” Hayden snapped.

Like the admiral, Hayden hated having his orders changed. But they had to find a way to work together.

“D’orf and D’aroi will find the instruction redundant but as we are now one unit, we’ll train together.”

“You’ll be there too?” Maddy blurted, then she pressed a hand to her mouth.

*She didn’t mean to say that.* A warmth trickled in, softness that could become something more if he let it.

*That can’t happen. There’s too much at stake.*

But he had the oddest sensation, like waking from a dream as it slipped away. And words echoed in his head, whispered in a low, intimate tone:

*We’ll find a way to be together. I’ll wait. No matter how long it takes.*

He addressed her query, ignoring the puzzling voice in his head. “Yes, even me. A refresher will sharpen my skills. You’re all dismissed.”

+ + +

Maddy inspected the crew quarters and wondered whose idea this was.

A large area with a divider down the middle. The wall on one side had an Earth male symbol the other a female symbol. There were Coalition cots on both sides of the divide that could be moved and adjusted according to need. Examining the controls, Maddy guessed it would be up to her to demonstrate their use to the rest of the team. Based on the sterile quality of the room, she suspected this was normally storage that had been hastily cleared out to accommodate unwelcome guests.

“They put us in steerage,” Pierce said from the doorway.

The room connected to the rest of the ship via an automatic aperture. The irises were extremely disturbing, two more connected their quarters presumably to the hygiene facilities and the meal area. Maddy had one word in her head when she looked at them, and it was ‘sphincter’. Pierce stepped in before the metal phalanges hit her.

“You okay, Mads?” Of course, it was Izzy.

Where Pierce went, Izzy followed. But she was more likely to check how Maddy was feeling. Pierce would ascertain the situation silently. Both women were like sisters, and she'd take a bullet for either of them. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that.

She shook her head. "Got the worst déjà vu. He reminds me..."

There was no finishing that sentence because her throat went thick, and her eyes burned. Izzy took two steps and opened her arms. "Hug?"

"Thanks." She buried her face in Izzy's shoulder, hiding her damned stinging eyes.

Pierce moved closer, awkwardly patting her back. "Tough it out. You're a bad bitch, and you got this."

"Your pep talks suck," Maddy mumbled.

After getting herself together, she showed them how to adjust their cots and the couple set up in a back corner. D'aroi came in with a groggy looking Grim, configured a cot for him on the other side of the divide. Maddy heard Grim's snores as D'aroi came to her side and set up her own sleep station, aligned more like a chair than a bed.

"He should be fine in the morning," the alien said.

That left Hayden unaccounted for, but Maddy was too tired to go looking for him. Things might seem less complicated in the morning.

Spoiler: they didn't.

She used the alien hygiene facility, ate a nutrition cube, and then reported for training as ordered. As the gods of bad luck would have it, she found E'no there early. But before he could speak, D'orf strutted in with the rest of the squad. There were aliens Maddy had never met, but that would soon change.

*A squad of ten. And only five of us know the real plan.*

E'no assumed command posture and his fronds flowed to purple. Really a gorgeous shade like the shimmer of a

peacock's feathers, and Maddy scowled at the unwelcome thought. She forced himself to focus on his message.

“Welcome to Task Force Vigilant. We're a unique unit, here to form a cohesive bond. Not to overstate, but we're the most important unit in Coalition history.”

Maddy tracked the reaction to those words. Head fins stood at proud attention, and one of the new recruits displayed hopeful green fronds. Grim wore a flat aspect, Pierce seemed thoughtful while Izzy appeared to be slightly confused. Hayden sported a frown that could rival a downcountry thunderstorm.

Nobody interrupted the new commander.

E'no went on, “Half of you have heard the standard speech about duty to the Coalition. I need you *all* to understand. We're here to protect the whole. We will serve the best interests of the Coalition *and* the Earth. We will be contributing assets to the Vigilant.”

“What does that mean?” Hayden demanded.

“Let me finish, colonel. To achieve these ends, for the foreseeable future you will spend half the day training with me. The latter half, you will carry out orders. They may come from High Admiral E'maleese or me.”

Maddy doubted Admiral Asshole would order anything she wanted to do. Pretty peacock purple shifted to the warm Titian of the soil on Mars. *Stop it. He's not beautiful. He's probably as bad as Admiral Asshole, too.*

The captain added, “Do any of you have questions?”

Finally, an E-alien spoke up, fronds a nervous dark blue. “Sir, I have one.”

“Name and rank, please.”

“Private E'milly, sir. It's rumored that this unit will lead an invasion of Earth.”

Maddy had been wondering about the rest of the team too. She needed to learn everything she could about their ‘allies’, the sooner the better.



It annoyed her how much she enjoyed the slow fade of E'no's fronds to reassuring blue. "When has the Coalition ever taken such an action anywhere? Would half the members of such an attack force be from Earth? Would you have joined us if you believed that to be true?"

It sounded so *sensible* when he framed it that way. The captain radiated sincerity, like an old-school hero in a cape. Disgusting when she knew what the admiral intended. E'no might be even more dangerous than the admiral because he used charisma and warmth to conceal his true colors.

Now he went purple again, back to being the alien in charge. "I answer your statement with rhetorical questions to remind you, every military is prone to rumor. I believe Hayden can confirm. We will serve the best interests of the Coalition and Earth. To do that, think for yourself and take orders from *me*, not the rumor mill. Understood?"

"Sir!" Private E'milly confirmed.

"We don't know these Coalition soldiers," Hayden said. "D'orf and D'aroi were handy in that fight, E'no, but—"

"Captain," E'no corrected. "We'll respect the hierarchy. You were a colonel before. You don't outrank me on this ship. And I won't indulge pointless protests."

Grim folded his arms, a sure sign that he was losing patience. "Then confer the new ranks and let's go about our business."

Maddy thought that might earn Grim a reprimand but E'no went with it. "As you wish. I'll send notifications regarding the command structure. Going forward, you'll share quarters, receive the same training, and when called upon, you will act in concert. That is an order for *all* of you."

HAYDEN LISTENED AS D'ORF WRAPPED up his lecture on emitter training.

It boiled down to setting the strength of blast impact, pointing, and firing. But despite the impressive damage it wrought on vehicles and the like, it was almost impossible to kill directly with one. He doubted his team would be issued Coalition weapons. The admiral wouldn't allow armed humans on his ship. Not by choice anyway.

Once D'orf dismissed the group, the aliens went to spend their downtime...doing whatever the hell aliens did. Hayden had to work on subversion before he dug deeper into their psyches, and he had to seize this time for his team to get a leg up.

Hayden paused to gather his thoughts and study the training area. There was room for a marching band to practice for a parade. The small strike force of ten had been gathered in a tiny fraction of available space. The light blue floor had the softness of a safety foam, and it wasn't tiring to walk on. From what he'd already observed of Coalition technology Hayden was sure this room had hidden features. Maybe it could simulate other environments or serve as an emergency shelter.

Instead of wasting time on further speculation, he headed to Grim's lab, passing the security station and irises to unknown rooms in clean hallways. That was one thing Star Trek had got spot on, or rather *spotless*. The Vigilant was a clean ship; varicolored walls kept it from feeling sterile and kept Hayden from getting lost in curved corridors that mitigated the vastness of the ship.

Since Hayden had been the last to leave the training area, the rest of the human squad were already waiting in the research room assigned to 'bioengineer Grim'. Grim had done well maintaining his poker face. It helped that he'd come in injured and then ended up drugged off his face, avoiding any

potential pitfalls. But he had to be wondering about the game they were playing.

“*Corporal* Wilder, sir.” Grim gave Hayden a mock salute as he entered, offering a mordant smile with a flash of teeth.

“Dusting off that sense of humor?” Hayden acknowledged the dig about his demotion with a wry smile before turning to Maddy. “What’s our situation?”

“The Coalition may be squeamish about killing humans.” Maddy looked troubled, a faint crease between her brows. “But they have a wealth of information on ways to do us in. We should have a list of options for the admiral in the morning.”

“Excellent.” Hayden checked his antique watch. “Pierce, you should be in your lab. Izzy, we have an hour before we report for patrol.”

“I’ll help in the lab until then,” Izzy said.

The lovebirds left together, making Hayden smile. He could set his watch by their devotion. Once they were gone, he turned to Maddy, “I didn’t see what your orders were.”

She shrugged. “I don’t have any. Maybe the captain doesn’t know what a chaplain does and he’s giving me free rein, or he forgot.”

“He didn’t forget.” Hayden thought the captain had seemed unsettled, but he couldn’t read aliens like he could a human expression. “Let’s get to work.”

The problem wasn’t in the lack of data. Rather it was the opposite. Grim sat at the console, scrolling the multiplicity of ways that the Coalition could control or destroy humanity. With their advanced tech, it wouldn’t even take a master virologist like they’d claimed Grim was. Hayden hadn’t seen the big man shaken often, but when Grim glanced up from the reading, he lived up to his name.

“I could use their facilities to make something truly terrible,” he said quietly. “And in a day probably, two at most.”

“Ask for more time.” Hayden hoped they could stall longer than that.

Grim sighed and got up from the console. “Bullshit is your game, not mine. You call the play. I’ll nod along.”

Maddy took his place, her fingers flying as she dug deeper than the aliens thought they could. “Whoa. My instincts tell me this is major. Four people were invited to ‘visit’ the ship. Unofficially of course. It was never reported in any Earth-side media, not even the Coalition conspiracy ones. But deep searching the data trail, I found the first mention of them two months later, relocated to a long-term care facility in Virginia.”

Grim swore. “What the hell did the Coalition *do* to those people?”

Taking a breath, Hayden forced himself to stay calm. Anger clouded the mind and made people dumber. “I’m not sure, but it’s what we’re trying to prevent. On a massive scale. We’re flying by the seat of our pants, but that’s how I earn my hazard pay. Right now, I can’t tell you how we win, but there is a path, I swear. And I’ll find it.”

“We’re with you,” Maddy said.

Grim nodded. They got back to work, searching for clues they could use.

E’milly joined them forty-three minutes later. “Here to assist but I don’t know what we’re assigned to do.”

“The admiral has tasked us with finding a way to eliminate the human threat to the Coalition.” Grim made a persuasive scientist.

“You mean like repurposing technology?” E’milly seemed ready to discuss the matter at length with Grim.

The words rang in Hayden’s head, burrowing with little barbed claws. It might have to do with the mysterious time loss Maddy had uncovered and explain why those unofficial visitors could no longer care for themselves. He checked to be sure Grim had E’milly fully distracted.

Then he whispered to Maddy, “Dig deeper. Find out more about those four visitors. Your instincts are gold, I’m sure it isn’t a useless rabbit hole.”

“I’ll get rabbiting,” Maddy murmured.

*Maybe this is exactly the angle we need.*

+ + +

Maddy pondered offering to help E’milly as she set up her cot.

When Hayden strode in, she offered a casual wave. He’d likely arrived last on purpose. She’d never known him to do anything by accident and he was carrying the six pack of beer and bottle of whiskey they’d brought from Earth. Suddenly she had a bad feeling about his intentions.

*Really, Hayden? Get them drunk and see what they say?* Still, she didn’t have any better ideas. Maybe the adage ‘in vino veritas’ had some merit, but it was a double-edged sword because if anyone in the human squad got loose, they might let something slip. *Hope he knows what he’s doing.*

Harden stared at the partition in the middle of the room and called out, “Can we do something about this?”

She joined him and studied the small control panel on the temporary wall. Since she was literate in Coalition symbology, she had no trouble with the interface. With a touch, the partition collapsed into a little column. It was impressive how many of the alien designs could reduce in size, becoming more compact to save space where it was limited.

Hayden pushed the column to the far wall, then addressed the room. “Somebody thought separating us was a good idea, but I disagree.” He faced the whole squad with a deceptively guileless smile. “Human sexuality has more nuance than the Coalition understands and we’re all more sophisticated than the admiral credits.”

D’orf and D’aroi exchanged looks. From the posture of their fins, they had some doubts. Then D’orf said, “Will you not be overcome with mating urges if you remain in close proximity?”

She stifled a laugh at Grim's expression as he said, "Can't speak for everyone, but you couldn't *pay* me to sleep with anyone in this room. Have you smelled Hayden's feet?"

The sound D'aroi made must denote amusement. "Is it disagreeable to you also?"

"To hell with all y'all," Hayden said affably. "Back to my original point. Anybody think we're better off separated like that?"

E'milly ventured, "It would be good to communicate freely."

Hayden lifted the six pack. "What say we have a little party to celebrate our first day as a unit? Izzy found some candy for our new friends." He gestured and Izzy offered what looked like brown cotton candy to each of the finned aliens.

"I haven't had this since I was a kid," D'aroi said with a laugh.

Maddy noticed that all three of them accepted the stuff. The third one hadn't spoken at the orientation and must have come in after Maddy was asleep the night before. Her first order of business had to be making their acquaintance.

"That's what a party is all about." Hayden had everyone's attention as he handed each human a beer. "To feel happy, joyful, and among friends like you were a kid again." He stopped when he came to E'milly. He handed her a beer, saying, "Sorry I don't have anything else for you. You're welcome to this but it's a mild poison to most life forms. Hell, it's bad for humans too, but I hear you're immune to most toxins."

"Our zard stones sir," E'milly explained. "They protect us from harmful chemicals."

"Any chance for some music?" Izzy asked.

Pierce hugged her with one arm. "Good call."

Grim added, "I'd like to hear something from the ship's library. Get a feel for how the Coalition grooves."

Comprehending a culture's music was the first step toward anthropological understanding. Maddy headed to the interface on the wall and put on some soft music her E'no had liked.

"That's the Home Calling!" E'milly said, her fronds a happy orange.

Hayden sipped from the bottle and passed it to Grim. "Excellent choice. We'll be calling this our home for a while so let's introduce ourselves."

At Izzy's suggestion, they arranged the cots in a circle, then set them in the upright position. D'aroi already had hers that way, as did the very silent other alien. But from the position of the head fins, only D'aroi was truly willing to open a conversation. The other D-alien perceived this as an order from a commanding officer. As for D'orf, he was at the party because he'd come to talk to D'aroi, but as an officer, he had quarters elsewhere.

"Let's go around the group and say our names and one interesting fact about us," Izzy suggested.

Grim groaned. Pierce shot him a look that threatened payback.

"Fine. I'll start. I'm Darius Rivers. Better known as Grim, so you can call me that. As for an interesting fact, I climbed Bonanza Peak solo over a long weekend."

That tracked with what Maddy knew of Grim. He was an athlete who thrived in a rugged environment and each time he pitted himself against nature and won, it verified his skills. But would the aliens think it was strange that a scientist was so outdoorsy?

As she framed the thought, D'orf asked, "Are all men of science also accomplished in field work?"

"Not all," Hayden said. "Our Grim is exceptional."

Izzy agreed. "Definitely. The admiral only recruited the best for this task force."

Both D'aroi and D'orf nodded, seeming to relax at hearing the admiral praised. There couldn't be anything illicit going on

with people name dropping Admiral Asshole, right? She mentally shook her head. They had a lot to learn about humans.

The third alien remained silent, so Maddy prodded a bit. “I’m sorry. I still don’t know your name.”

The final member of their squad seemed startled to suddenly receive everyone’s attention. “Apologies. I should have introduced myself earlier. I am D’etor. I’m uncertain if this qualifies as an interesting fact, but I am epicene. Refer to me with ‘they’ pronouns.”

Maddy tended to do that anyway when she wasn’t sure. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yes,” said D’etor.

Thankfully, D’aroi stepped into the awkward silence. “Most of you already know me but I’m D’aroi. And I can carry more than anyone in our training class.”

“Even more than D’orf?” Pierce asked, clearly instigating.

“I am an officer! I don’t need to be pointlessly strong,” D’orf snapped. “Everyone already knows who I am.”

“That just leaves your interesting fact,” Izzy put in. “I bet it will be tough to pick between all the fascinating details.”

Judging by the angle of his head fin, D’orf understood the compliment and replied without a hint of shame or irony. “True. I am *incredibly* interesting. I won a competition for my poetry once.”

*Don’t ask for a sample. Don’t—*

Hayden showed a toothy, evil grin. “You don’t say. Could you share some with us?”

That led to the worst hour Maddy had known since her E’no left and didn’t return. At the first opportunity, she mumbled an excuse and slipped away.

*I’m not coming back until the party’s over.*

\* \* \*



E'no lost his breath when he saw Maddy.

Though this part of the Vigilant wasn't expressly off-limits to humans, he was surprised that she'd found her way to the observation deck unguided. Then he recalled that she was fluent in Coalition writing; she must have read the signs on her own. Technology allowed the entire wall to be rendered transparent, offering an incredible view of the Earth. It was difficult to credit the turmoil and pollution and hardship humans experienced below. It looked so peaceful from orbit, deep patches of blue frosted white, gentle browns here and there.

She stood with her back to the rest of the ship, gazing down at her homeworld with an expression that...he pressed a hand to his torso, stunned by the yearning that rolled through him. He felt somehow convinced that he'd *seen* this look before. But...that was impossible. E'no shook his head and she turned then, drawn by the motion.

"Am I intruding?" he asked.

Maddy seemed as if she might flee, then she seemed to make up her mind. "If anything, I'm the intruder. I'll go."

"You were here first," he pointed out. "But isn't there a gathering right now?"

E'milly had told him about it but he'd thought his presence would inhibit the bonding he had ordered. Such a ridiculous thing to say. One couldn't enforce emotional connections; either they happened, or they didn't.

"I had to get away. D'orf was declaiming some original poetry. It didn't seem likely he'd wrap up anytime soon."

"I am *so* sorry," E'no said with complete sincerity.

For the first time, she smiled, and it added sparkle to her light green eyes. E'no *knew* what a smile was. Prior to taking command of the task force, he'd studied images of humans and memorized the corresponding expressions to the best of his ability, but he'd never felt anything in correlation to those facial shifts before. This was like the first step into zero gravity, all lightness and disorientation accompanied by

improbable euphoria. If he'd done anything to put that shine in her eyes, he wanted to keep doing it.

Her face stilled and he saw the inevitable moment of her departure echoed in her posture. E'no surprised himself by striking a pose. "I am as mighty as any emperor! The androids had no horns! They wax and wane, and the common folk lament. The subordinates of my subordinates understand nothing! They are soil beneath me and—"

"Stop," Maddy begged.

Her laughter was infectious. E'no took a step closer, well pleased with himself for inciting it. "It's dreadful, isn't it? D'orf's verses stay in the brain like a worm."

She wasn't thinking of leaving anymore. Her shoulder relaxed and the light stayed in her eyes. "Hayden is a monster. He *asked* D'orf to share some of his original work."

"Did you anger him in some way?"

Maddy shook her head, a negating gesture. "He's just a shit-stirrer."

That had to be a colloquialism, one he didn't entirely understand. But he surmised it involved being prone to creating undesirable outcomes, a metaphor for causing problems, perhaps? He didn't care to ruin their rapport with linguistic clarifications.

E'no moved closer on the pretext of getting a better view of Earth. But in truth, it came from a desire to take in the same air she was breathing and let her scent flow over him. His fronds shifted without his volition, echoing the peace and joy he experienced in her presence. Somehow, she felt like sunlight, bright and beautiful.

"It's lovely," he said in his softest tone, stealing a look at Maddy.

She didn't notice, gazing intently at the planet below. "From here it is. It's like a Monet painting."

"An artist you like?"

“I do like Impressionist works in general. But the thing about Monet is, his art is better viewed from far away. The closer you get, the worse it looks.” She sighed faintly. “That’s Earth in a nutshell.”

“We’ll do our best to help,” he promised.

She tensed. Her body broadcasted that it had been exactly the wrong thing to say, and he had no clue why.

“Help. *Right*. If you’ll excuse me, captain, I have to go.”

After she left, her absence pained him in ways he couldn’t explain.

+ + +

High Admiral E’maleese listened to the lieutenant’s oral report, wishing that it wasn’t necessary.

D’orf was a bore. If the admiral was an Earth leader, he’d have cameras and microphones everywhere with computers to sort through the data and give him the pertinent details. The Coalition knew where that sort of surveillance led. Manipulation and control, the sort of power he craved. At least the humans didn’t know about the Coalition’s strict privacy laws. That had to hamper their covert communications.

E’maleese was confident the human recruits were up to something, and while the admiral preferred direct observation, he’d settle for using D’orf as a spy. He had to make sure the humans held up their end of the bargain and gave him what he required. The admiral had no such intentions, of course. Promises to violent apes were no more binding than those to a fra’heg.

“Human Hayden Flynn Wilder took down the partition?” he asked for clarification.

“Yes, Admiral.” The lieutenant didn’t relax his posture even a fraction; D’orf probably slept at attention.

“Most likely so they could leer and ogle at each other.” The humans were single-minded, disgusting creatures.

“The candy was good,” D’orf admitted in a tone laced with faint self-reproach, echoed by the position of his head fin.

With effort, E'maleese cooled his red anger to a purple frond display of curiosity. It was amazing Hayden had procured that bribe, and he would investigate how he'd already infiltrated the Vigilant's supply chain, but the admiral had more pressing concerns.

"Repeat Captain E'nosience's orders," he demanded.

"He said we were to serve the best interests of the Coalition and Earth." D'orf's fin remained at rigid attention.

He seemed both elated and terrified by the admiral's scrutiny, as he should be. The destruction of humanity *was* in the Coalition's best interest and would doubtless be a boon to all the other denizens of Earth. E'maleese couldn't fault that statement, but unease nudged him.

"He didn't say the governments of Earth were hostile to the Coalition or that they're our enemies?"

"No, Admiral."

E'nosience had his own agenda, the wording of those orders was too careful, too calculated. The captain wanted his little strike force to be loyal to him and the ideals of the Coalition. The admiral would have none of that; he had to get his offspring under control and it was too soon for E'nosience's next inevitable repurposing.

He had been studying the methods humans used on each other and some of the ideas resonated. "Keep a close watch on the captain and when you get a chance, hurt one of the humans."

"Sir?" Even D'orf knew this wasn't a standard Coalition training method.

"They are primitive animals," he snapped. "You must establish dominance. Physically remind them who's in control. It's for their own good."

"Admiral, *you* are in command."

E'maleese's fronds reddened with the confirmation. "I trust that *you* will never need a similar reminder, lieutenant. Dismissed."

The admiral was troubled as he watched D'orf salute and turn. E'nosience had brought humans in to solve a problem. They were the killers Coalition soldiers were not. Humans would cause trouble. He had to keep them under control.

They also didn't solve his other problem, Vigilant's automated systems wouldn't allow lethal weapons to be stored on the ship.

He had to find another way.

FOR MADDY, THE NEXT DAY'S training was repetitive since she already knew how to operate a medpack.

Never once to waste time, she took the opportunity to get to know the rest of the task force. D'etor proved reluctant to chat while D'orf displayed open suspicion. Only D'aroi volunteered any information about herself. She'd grown up on a remote, agricultural planet and Maddy listened without needing to feign interest.

"I do miss my family," D'aroi confided. "But I wanted... more. When the Coalition said I had scored high enough on the training aptitude tests, I joined without hesitation."

The other two aliens eyed them while the others packed up their gear, and D'aroi took the hint. *Too much fraternization*. Hayden caught her eye and tilted his head at E'milly. Maddy made a subtle gesture with her hand that meant *I'm on it*. Since she was the only E-designated alien besides the captain, the private might make for an easier mark.

She disliked that word, but there was no point in sugarcoating her own intentions.

"May I walk with you, E'milly?"

Before resuming other duties, the aliens had a break after training. Private E'milly moved sluggishly, but she projected a happy yellow frond display atop her exhaustion. "I'm just going to quarters for the rest period. We can talk on the way if you like."

Maddy adapted a slower pace to stay beside E'milly. "I was wondering how you're getting along. Records show you're the youngest member of our task force and yesterday you were assigned to be the only Coalition citizen on duty with a pair of humans. Was that hard for you?"

"Not very," E'milly answered, her fronds a cautious turquoise. "To be honest, the briefings didn't explain how

complicated humans are. How you can be fun-loving and serious at the same time for example. I'm interested in how Grim will solve the problem the admiral has given us. I hope I can help."

Before Maddy could respond, their path on the curving corridor brought Grim into sight. He stood with his back to the wall while D'orf yelled at him. "You humans are as useless as you are ugly! Are the medpack drugs still affecting your brain or are you planning to do some work today?"

D'orf's head fin twitched with rage. He was clearly trying to provoke Grim but his bullshit was working better on Pierce, who clenched her fists and took a step closer. If Maddy didn't intervene, Pierce would escalate in a heartbeat.

Grim smiled at D'orf, showing plenty of teeth, and offered a mock salute, "Yes, sir. I have a plan. The admiral will be pleased."

"Don't lie to me!"

Apparently, Pierce was done letting the lieutenant hassle Grim. She got up in his grill, ready to throw down. "Hey, *poet warrior*! Back the fuck off and calm down."

The needle-like quills all over D'orf's body spiked with aggression. "I'm the officer here. You do *not* instruct me!"

Grim's training was in line with his temperament. First he sought to defuse a situation. "You're in charge, Lieutenant. Pierce tends to be high-strung, that's all."

Failing that, he'd end it quickly. Maddy wondered how the lieutenant would fare against Grim, should he progress to phase two.

D'orf attempted to be clever, proving he wasn't. "It's time to unstring her then!"

"How do you plan to do that?" If Maddy read Pierce right, she was ten seconds from proving that she'd fight anybody, anywhere, anytime.

Still trying to make peace, Grim said, "Settle down. This doesn't have to be a battle."

“It’s not,” D’orf snapped. “This is *discipline*, something you humans lack.”

The lieutenant lashed out at Pierce’s leg, but she dodged with lightning reflexes.

Pierce withdrew to a combat stance for a split second and then struck two quick blows to D’orf’s torso. Maddy winced. A human would be doubled over, wheezing, but D’orf didn’t seem to feel the strikes. And Pierce swore, staring at the blood welling from tiny perforations, pricked by those sharp little quills.

*They’re not venomous, right?*

Before Maddy could say a word, D’orf closed on Pierce, inhumanly swift. He grabbed Pierce in a bear hug. His quills punched through her uniform *and* flesh as he constricted her torso with an audible crunch. *Holy shit, that sounds like broken bones.*

“Cut it out!” Maddy tried to get between them, but Grim put a hand on her shoulder.

“You’ll get hurt. He was itching to make an example of somebody, and Pierce took the bait. He won’t kill her, and our girl might surprise you.”

It went against Maddy’s instincts not to step in, but Grim knew what he was doing. E’milly regarded the spectacle with shock and horror, one hand on her communicator. “Should I report this to the captain?”

D’orf released his grip and as soon as Pierce’s feet hit the floor, she delivered a snap kick to the alien’s stomach. That impact knocked the breath out of D’orf. He doubled over instantly, banging his head fin on Pierce’s face.

“Double KO,” said Grim as the two combatants hit the deck.

Maddy decided this constituted a draw. Pierce had gotten wrecked up worse in bar fights, and D’orf hadn’t dropped the decisive beatdown he was aiming for either. She sighed. As usual, it was up to her to clean up the mess left by more impulsive teammates.



“Let’s get them to medical,” she muttered.

+ + +

E’no had a slew of documents on the display, preparing his report for the admiral.

Though he couldn’t say the training was going well, given the interpersonal conflict, the task force had to be ready to build a station for the weapon’s construction in a few cycles. After that, humanity wouldn’t exist for much longer, if his progenitor got his way. The deluge of data might distract the admiral from the fact E’no had stretched the schedule as long as he could. Pierce’s injury might even provide a plausible excuse.

A tone sang out, indicating a visitor outside his office.

“Permit access,” Eno said.

The iris revealed Private E’milly, her fronds a worried blue. “Captain.” She greeted him, then hesitated. “Can you spare some time to speak with me?”

E’no’s own fronds went orange with curiosity. “Certainly. That’s one advantage of leading a small unit. I have time for every member of my team.” He gestured for her to enter. “Is this about the fight?”

“No, sir.” She came to attention and saluted. E’no could almost hear her stones grinding. “I have been misassigned to the task force, sir. I can’t help advance the mission.”

“What are you talking about, private?” Violet tinged the orange of E’no’s fronds. He didn’t care for the implication that he’d chosen his squad poorly.

E’milly’s fronds faded even more, yielding to the color of despair. “Captain, I believe the humans are designing a terrible weapon. No matter its purpose, as a citizen of the Coalition, I cannot participate in such a reprehensible action.”

Now he understood her reservations and panic, and he silently praised himself for his good judgment. The admiral wouldn’t find any traction for his demands here. But it didn’t hurt to articulate the issue.

“Are you a spy, private?”

“Sir?” Her fronds reddened with shock, as if she couldn’t credit that he’d asked such an unusual question.

With a show of command purple, E’no reiterated, “Private Emilly, I am asking if you are a spy.”

“No, sir!”

E’no knew she wasn’t. Only an incompetent clod would assign such a terrible liar a duplicitous task. Briefly, he considered how foolish he could dare to be. At the moment, options and resources were limited and he needed people who were loyal to him, not the admiral. Everything hinged on that necessity.

“You were born on this ship,” he said gently.

E’milly confirmed, “The Vigilant is the only home I’ve ever known.”

“And you lived your whole life under my command, so to speak.”

The private showed a hopeful but confused orange, “Yes. You were my childhood hero, captain.”

“At ease, private,” Eno allowed a trickle of hope to brighten his fronds, but he maintained his display of authority. “You know a lot about me?”

E’milly seemed to consider. “I don’t know if I do, sir. I’ve heard the stories, of course. Captain E’nosience is a legend on this ship. How much truth is in a legend? And...” She paused, as if weighting her words carefully.

“And?”

“I don’t wish to speak out of turn. There are things we’re told not to mention.”

“My repurposings.” He said what she apparently couldn’t. Or wouldn’t.

“Yes, sir.” E’milly’s fronds blushed to an embarrassed pink. “Even if the stories are true, how much of that Captain E’nosience remains?”

“I wonder that myself.” E’no gave a reassuring display, hiding his own worry. “There is no protocol for researching one’s self. Is there speculation among the crew about why I’ve been repurposed?”

“The admiral’s reputation is...unique. Every time you’re repurposed, we take it as a sign that the last you was *still* too much for the admiral. Rumors speculate how much of that Captain E’nosience remains. I didn’t know you before, so I can’t say. But I’m honored to be serving with you.”

“Thank you for your candor,” he said.

This was a gamble, and the only way to win was to go all-in. He wanted this earnest young private on his side. “I chose you for this squad personally. And I don’t think I was wrong to do so.” He intensified his command display. “In fact, I’m giving you additional responsibilities. You will report to me honestly about the status of the task force, rumors about me, and how well I live up to the legend of prior iterations of Captain E’nosience.”

“Sir?” E’milly sounded faintly breathless, as if she couldn’t believe her luck.

“You heard me right, private. I need your help.” She stood to attention and saluted. E’no continued, “To repay your bravery and candor, I’ll help you by sharing some critical intel. The admiral has instructed our humans to construct a bioweapon to use against humans of Earth.”

The horror and weight took a moment to sink in, then her fronds lost color at an alarming rate. “That is—”

“Hayden and the others don’t plan on following these orders,” he cut in, not letting her finish the shocked exclamation. “As I said before, my intention is to serve the best interests of the Coalition and of Earth. Now you understand my dilemma?”

“Yes, Captain,” E’milly said gravely.

“Good. Now it’s your dilemma too.” E’no dismissed her with a salute, certain that he’d cemented her loyalty and secured her aid.

+ + +

Hayden was already sick and damn tired of nutrition cubes.

They had no flavor and the mouth feel reminded him of Jell-o that had been in the fridge for a couple of weeks, long enough to get real rubbery. And drinks? He hadn't had anything decent unless you counted the whiskey he'd brought from Kelly's bar. Even the water had a slippery feel and a chemical tang. That was the kind of stuff they didn't mention in science fiction movies.

As he was about to go poking around the ship, his comm pinged with a message from Maddy. *Pierce got beat up. We're in medical. Thought you should know.*

He swore and found his way there with a few false starts. Time to memorize Coalition symbols. He'd need to know how to read them well, before too much longer. Hayden found Izzy pacing in the curved corridor outside the iris that presumably led to the treatment area.

"Pierce going to be okay?" he asked.

Izzy wheeled to face him. "They say she's going to be fine, and I should let her sleep. I wish Maddy hadn't brought her here. I've patched Pierce up plenty of times and she's gonna be grumpy if she wakes and I'm not there."

"Maddy did the right thing," he said confidently. "We need this incident on record. If we cover it up, it gains us no sympathy from those less inclined to violent measures."

For a moment, she stared, too deep in concern for Pierce to follow the thread. Then her dark eyes sharpened. "Oh. This is for the cause."

He put some empathy in his voice while fixing Izzy with a serious stare. "Exactly. I didn't want Pierce getting hurt, but since she did, let's put this time to good use. We need to do some exploring."

Izzy nodded. "And you want me for my people skills, I guess?"

“They’ll work on aliens just as well as they do humans,” Hayden said.

She shot him a grin. “I do love meeting people! Let me see if I can get ’em talking.”

Hayden spoke quietly as they moved through the spiraling hallways. “We’re not wandering randomly. I’m looking for something specific, and we’ll know it when we find it.”

Despite his claim, Hayden was hampered by an imperfect understanding of what various signs and symbols meant. So they wandered randomly for almost an hour, according to his heirloom watch. They opened unknown doors into a few Coalition members’ quarters, a dining hall, and what must have been an alien beauty salon.

“Enough already,” Izzy muttered. “Let’s go back. Pierce must be awake by now.”

He held up a hand. They’d passed this a few times because it looked like an alien elevator, but maybe—he snapped a photo and used an app to extract the symbols, then ran them through a simple translator that had been developed for UN usage. Not perfect for longer passages, but for this? Hayden pulled Izzy in after him.

*This is it.*

“Repurposing facility,” he said with a crackle of triumph.

A voice from the walls responded, “You are not scheduled for repurposing.”

“Orders from Captain E’nosience.” Hayden winked as the room started moving. They stepped into another hallway and walked past regular sized irises directly to the largest aperture.

“You’re not authorized to be here!” a voice rang out as they entered.

“Sorry.” Izzy apologized immediately in a timid voice.

Hayden sized up the room. The two aliens addressing them were new species to him. One was small and cute, almost like a pint-sized minotaur. This one would immediately get drawn for a webcomic, if he was any judge. The other was a bug-

eyed, reptilian sort with green and brown patterns that reminded him of a monitor lizard.

“You’re humans?” the horned one asked.

Izzy’s instinct was always to make friends, which was why Hayden had brought her along. “That’s right. My name is Izzy and this is Hayden. We work for Captain E’no.”

“Captain E’nosience,” Hayden clarified, looking around the room. “If you’re particular about the ranks, she’s Private Montez and I’m Corporal Wilder.”

Really, he was buying time, logging as much visual information as he could. The aliens sat behind a control console with sliding bars and gauges he couldn’t read. As for the decor, the walls were a pleasant cream color, soothing and bland as a bowl of unsalted oatmeal. Opposite the control console there were four chambers; each one looked like a standing stainless-steel coffin.

The lizard dude spoke. “Access to the repurposing facility is strictly controlled.”

“We’re not here to access anything.” Hayden tried for a hapless tone. “We were just taking a look-see about the ship and wound up here. We’ll get out of your way.”

While Izzy might be worrying herself sick about Pierce, she also couldn’t quell her gregarious nature. “What’s your name?” she asked the little minotaur.

“C’orham. Assistant Repurposing Technician C’orham is my full title.” He nodded his horns at the other alien. “That’s Chief Repurposing Tech S’ilog.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Izzy said. “You too, S’ilog.”

Hayden wondered if he could get anything out of them if he played dumb. “Repurposing tech? That sounds real important.”

“It *is*. There’s no crime in the Coalition because we reform all deviations and impose order on chaos,” S’ilog responded.

Hayden nodded. That sounded like the biggest bunch of bullshit he’d ever heard. No wonder the admiral hated humans

with their free thinking and self-determination. “Let’s leave them to their work.” He winked at Izzy, hoping she’d take the cue.

“But we’ve been walking so long.” Izzy could be dramatic, and she played it like she was about to swoon. She turned to the technicians with an imploring look. It would melt Pierce in a heartbeat, but who knew how the aliens would react? “Can we rest here for a few minutes before we head out?”

C’orham made a sympathetic sound and S’illog seemed to take that into consideration. “The Coalition is very civilized, so we’re rarely called upon to show additional kindness. I suppose it wouldn’t hurt for you to recover before you go. Just don’t touch anything.”

“As long as it’s safe.” Hayden had been born to sell ice in Iceland, and Izzy was a natural at winning hearts and minds. “We wouldn’t want to get accidentally repurposed.”

“No chance of that,” the little minotaur said. “You’d have to get in one of the pods.” He gestured to the row of upright coffins. “S’illog or I would have to operate the controls.”

“We wouldn’t do that without orders,” the lizard man added.

“Neither would we.” Hayden tried out his new, non-threatening to aliens, showing no teeth, smile. “Izzy and I are all about following orders. Then thank you kindly, good sirs. As long as we’re not in your way, we’ll stay until Izzy gets her breath back. You probably need to make a report about us stopping by?” That was a sideways query regarding how tight a watch the admiral had on the ship.

Chief S’illog examined his console. “Corporal Wilder and Private Montez,” he read. “C’orham has already entered it into the log.” He considered. “It’s only been a few cycles since Captain E’nosience’s surprise inspection. Everything should be fine.”

After loitering as long as he dared while making small talk, he eventually headed back the way they’d come. Izzy was itching to check on Pierce anyway, and Hayden was ready to

try creating a map of the layout of that room, including all equipment installations. They got back to medical just as Pierce strode out.

The woman had a bruise above her eye, but it already looked several days old, thanks to the Coalition's superior medical treatment. While the aliens hadn't known about humans for long their ability to learn and adapt worried Hayden some. Just a few days back, E'no had said he wasn't sure Pierce could get properly treated on the Vigilant. But now they'd updated their databases and were already making major leaps.

*They'd absorb us the same way.*

Izzy opened her arms and Pierce stepped into them with a contented sigh. "Better, mi amor?" Izzy asked softly.

"Mmm." The sound qualified as an affirmative, but it also came from Pierce holding Izzy tight and nuzzling into her neck.

Hayden's heart warmed at their devotion. Briefly, he wondered what it would be like to love someone so completely. He'd never been the type to fall that hard, though, for reasons he didn't care to examine too close.

"We should get someplace we can talk," he whispered.

"I learned something important," Izzy said, as soon as the iris closed behind them.

That must have been when he was memorizing details. Trust Izzy not to miss a trick, getting intel even when she was acting helpless. "Does it benefit us?"

Izzy nodded. "I think so. C'orham said they take privacy violations seriously in the Coalition. Which means—"

"We're probably not under direct surveillance," Pierce finished.

That was good news. Hayden had been doing regular sweeps with Earth tech, looking for bugs. But he wasn't confident that his gear would detect any gizmo the aliens could have installed. He gave Izzy a thumbs up.



“Great work. That mission wouldn’t have gone nearly as well without you.” Hayden’s perpetual grin didn’t disguise the seriousness he felt. “We had to use the automated elevator. I’m not even sure what level the repurposing facility is on.” Concentration made him wrinkle his brow. “We’ll have to get back there. We need to get our hands on a hunk of that repurposing tech.”

“You mean like this?” Izzy produced a small piece from the console, smiling.

E'NO HAD NO REASON TO ask for a status report.

And properly, he should inquire of Corporal Wilder, not the task force's chaplain. Yet he continued toward the media center where Maddy had set up her things. She didn't have an office, as the admiral had barely been persuaded to house the humans. He certainly wouldn't see the value of providing a better workspace.

This was a little used niche where data had been preserved in older or less viable formats. It was almost like a museum in one sense, and it meant that few crew members visited when the same information could be obtained through more accessible means. E'no steadied his breath, marveling at the peculiar blend of excitement and anticipation.

He couldn't wait to see her again.

His fronds fluttered, tinged with unmistakable excitement. The embarrassing part was, Maddy would realize his emotional state if he didn't get himself under control. With effort, the color subsided to a more manageable blue. Calm. Composed. In the strictest sense, he didn't need to signal his arrival before entering her domain. He did so anyway.

The iris swirled open, indicating her willingness to receive guests.

"Captain," she said coolly.

*Why does that greeting trouble me so much?* For no reason he could articulate, both the manner of address and her tone felt wrong. To the point that he wanted to protest.

*No. I'm not your captain. I'm—*

*What?* E'no had no answer, but dissatisfaction and bootless yearning trilled through him in little nibbling waves. He had to figure out why she affected him this way before he lost focus entirely. The mission would suffer, and the

consequences? Well, best not to entertain how bad it would be if his progenitor completed his aims.

“How is the squad coming along?” he asked, aware that the silence had lingered longer than was socially acceptable for either of their peoples.

“No complaints so far. I’m not sure that the bonding you ordered is possible, however. D’etor seems quite reticent. And D’orf absolutely hates us.”

“You’re getting on better with D’aroi and E’milly?”

Maddy surprised him with a smile. In others, it was a strange facial configuration with no equivalent among his own people. But the way it changed her expression made him quicken with a startling secondary pleasure.

“I rather enjoy D’aroi. She’s wholesome and uncomplicated. And E’milly is a sweetheart. I didn’t know there were people so innocent anywhere in the universe.”

“A pure soul,” he agreed.

What were they even talking about? He didn’t want to discuss D’aroi or E’milly. But there was no way to ask what he truly wished to know. *Why do I feel this way when I look at you? Aching for something that’s impossible.*

E’no had spent much of his life on board the Vigilant with High Admiral E’maleese, but there had been rare pockets of peace when he was permitted visits with his other parent, E’matroon. He recalled well that sense of awe he felt, staring up at the stars from the ground. The dizzying sense of brightness against the dark—that was how Maddy felt. Starlight of the spirit.

She was nodding, her smile even wider. “That’s exactly right. It gives me hope that we can put aside our differences.”

“And make each other better. We can lift each other up.”

For some reason, she leapt to her feet and backed away, hands up as if to ward off a blow. “What...*what* did you just say?”

“Maddy? Are you ill?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “You...said the same thing. As someone else. And it reminded me...” She trailed off with a muttered curse. “I might be losing my mind.”

He weighed his response carefully and then cast caution to the wind. “Me too. I can’t explain the way I feel when I look at you, but there’s no denying the pull.”

A reckless choice, but this felt like a moment that could change everything.

+ + +

In retrospect, running away hadn’t been the best move.

But for a smart woman, Maddy sometimes made ridiculous choices. And she didn’t care to tell *this* E’no about the one she’d loved and lost. That would be like scratching open a barely-healed wound just so someone else could see the color of her blood. So she’d bolted without giving him a reply.

Now she was hiding in quarters, hoping he didn’t seek her out before she sorted the jumbled mess of her unruly thoughts. *Maybe there’s something seriously wrong with me. Why is it always aliens?* A good psychiatrist would probably have a field day rooting around in her psyche. She’d dated before, but never felt tempted to put aside her work for the effort a permanent partnership entailed.

Meeting the delegate changed all that. For the first time, she didn’t give a damn about the outcome. She was in it with both feet, falling hard and not particularly worried about the landing. Except she’d hit the nadir faster than anyone should and Hayden had saved her from wallowing in that ravine forever.

She took an unsteady breath as the iris swooshed open. D’aroi bowled in, followed by E’milly, and soon Pierce and Izzy wandered in as well. Maddy worked to calm her expression, but it must not have worked since Izzy came over with a concerned frown.

“You okay?” she asked.

Maddy mustered a smile, not about to say she was starting to feel some kind of way about the good captain. “Just tired.”

“It must be very different here,” E’milly said in a kind tone.

“And the beds are murdering my back,” Pierce complained.

“I have a lot of accolades banked,” D’aroi added.

Izzy turned to face the hedgehog alien. Maddy suspected they wouldn’t enjoy that description but even the aggravating D’orf reminded her of a certain video game character, only considerably more belligerent. When the look didn’t do the job, Izzy said, “We don’t know what you mean by that.”

“Nobody told you?” D’aroi seemed nonplussed and she glanced at E’milly as if inviting her to clarify.

“Not a damn thing,” Pierce confirmed.

“Oh. Well, the Coalition doesn’t do commerce as you understand it. Everyone is entitled to shelter, nourishment, and hydration. We have no currency, but it’s possible to earn luxuries through exemplary service.” E’milly seemed to study everyone, as if wondering whether her explanation had been adequate.

“Kind of like merits?” Izzy asked.

E’milly’s fronds displayed turquoise relief. “Yes, near enough. And like D’aroi, I have some to use. Would you like to join us?”

Pierce grinned at Izzy and punched the air, then she chanted, “G-N-O! G-N-O!”

Her enthusiasm put a smile on Maddy’s face too. “I could go for that. That means we’re not inviting Grim and Hayden?”

“What is GNO?” D’aroi asked.

Izzy answered, “Stands for Girls’ Night Out.”

“I don’t wish to exclude anyone,” E’milly said.

This was where Maddy came in, looking out for the feelings of everyone in the unit. “We can send a message about where we’ll be. I doubt D’etor or D’orf will come. Hayden and

Grim might, but if they're on a roll in the lab, they might not see it until later."

"It's enough to send the communication," D'aroi said decisively. "We can't do more."

"And we're off duty. I want to show you some fun things on the ship," E'milly added.

Some of her fear and uncertainty faded. This was just the type of distraction Maddy needed. "I'm so in. Lead on!"

+ + +

High Admiral E'maleese inspected his inadequate tool. He intended to upgrade Lieutenant D'orf in due time.

"Your report is overdue." He kept his tone crisp, sharp enough to slice the insubordination from an unsatisfactory underling.

D-designate aliens possessed the rudimentary ability to read another's emotional state, but that ability could be confounded when the admiral concentrated on his display. He showed the lieutenant a cool, mysterious command purple.

"Admiral!" D'orf stood at full attention as he recounted his detailed and dull observations. No doubt he expected repurposing for his insufficiency, but the admiral believed this creature could still be useful.

For a short span, he mulled over what he'd heard. "They're learning to use our technology?" E'maleese displayed vivid orange curiosity. "Read Coalition glyphs?"

The lieutenant radiated fear in the angle of his head fin. "They've demonstrated proficiency with the emitters, medpacks, communicators, and the shuttle. But only Grim and the chaplain readily grasp Coalition symbols."

"Better at acting than thinking..." E'maleese mused. "Has Captain E'nosience tailored the training to their talents?"

D'orf's fin angled for a moment of consideration, then he offered specific information rather than his own opinion. "Today's lesson pertains to the varied citizens within the Coalition, specifically those serving on the Vigilant."

*A wise and measured response.* As usual, the admiral's judgment was excellent. While D'orf failed to live up to standards, he offered value. High Admiral E'maleese changed to an agreeable orange.

"It must be a limited overview," he said dismissively. "Humans couldn't possibly learn about one hundred and thirty-eight Coalition home worlds in the allotted time."

It was a dismissive response because he entertained some doubt regarding the lieutenant's true opinion on the interlopers from Earth. While E'matroon would doubtless say he was too suspicious, he had risen to his current position by foreseeing all outcomes and responding appropriately. There would be no tether on his ambition this time.

As expected, D'orf took the bait. "I wouldn't wish to speculate on human capabilities. Their primitive behavior makes them easy to underestimate."

"A lesson you learned the hard way, Lieutenant!" Back in command mode, the admiral launched a verbal salvo. "Anything you care to disclose regarding your failure with Private Pierce?"

Lieutenant D'orf's discomfort was palpable when he tilted his head downward. "You must have seen the report, Admiral."

"Indeed I did." Admiral E'maleese savored the chemical tang of that unease when it deepened to fear. "A female, not half your mass, put you in the medical facility."

Clarification, justification, and excuses bumbled out. "I was merely stunned, I didn't *need* medical attention. Pierce ambushed me. I didn't intend to provoke her. I'd picked a more suitable target, but humans have a proclivity for violence." In dwindling protest, D'orf added, "She was the one that was injured."

"But *you* are the one who learned a lesson." The admiral showed his sternest violet. "Have you learned it well?"

That fear was so profound that it qualified as terror. D'orf would promise his firstborn next. "I will best them in any

future conflict!”

“I’m relying on that. You will not return to Captain E’nosience’s task force. I’m giving you your own command.” Relief flowed over his subordinate and the admiral consoled himself with the thought of the punishment that he would inflict later.

“Sir?” If the former lieutenant couldn’t believe his luck, he was smarter than he looked.

“Captain D’orf, prepare a counterstrike force to seize everything belonging to the composite team. Afterward, you will eliminate the humans and repurpose his loyal Coalition members. Be ready as soon as possible.”

“I will not disappoint you, Admiral.”

“Not a second time,” E’maleese said in a deceptively calm tone. “You *dare* not.”

+ + +

*Damn, the Coalition is vast.*

If Hayden was the kind of man who panicked, he might be on the verge of it. He sat for a moment after training broke up, just reeling with the onslaught of information. There were a dozen different aliens on this ship alone. So much to learn, plus he was still struggling with Coalition glyphs.

But he didn’t let worry overwhelm him. *One job at a time, one step toward the goal.*

*Time to check on Pierce.* Judging from her elated expression when the ladies rolled in late last night, she was back in fighting form. That meant she should have some progress to report, but they were dancing on the razor’s edge. The work had to look convincing enough to fool the admiral but not work well enough to do real harm.

Hayden found Pierce’s lab without complications.

Then he paused just inside the aperture, wondering what the hell he was looking at. Izzy had on a contraption so huge that it was wearing *her*, wrapped around like a high-tech tuba.



She held a glowing wand-like thing while Pierce adjusted the complicated device.

“Hayden, you have to see this!” Izzy called. She pointed the wand at him. “Boom.”

*What am I doing again?*

His head hurt. Not like the worst hangover but like when he first arrived in the mountains and didn't drink enough water. That dull, cloudy ache, not a throbbing pain.

He remembered approaching the lab, but for some reason, he was standing in the middle of it while Pierce and Izzy laughed. The two women were absolutely busting a gut, a pile of jury-rigged alien junk at their feet. Apparently, they'd been chortling for some time since Izzy had to wipe away tears.

“What'd I miss?” Hayden affixed a good-natured smile, though he suspected the joke was on him.

Pierce suddenly sobered. “The last twenty to thirty seconds.”

“I don't understand,” Hayden said, trying to be patient. “Can we start over?”

Izzy's smile showed she still found the situation amusing. “You just did.”

Pierce approached Hayden and examined him, moving his head about and looking in his eyes, like she was checking him for a concussion. He batted her hands away and the scowl came on. This time he didn't try to stop it.

“Somebody explain before I get pissed.”

“Repurposing tech is beyond belief,” Pierce said in a pacifying tone. “You can't imagine all the things it can do.”

“Like?” Belatedly, Hayden realized his brain didn't feel fuzzy for no reason.

Pierce didn't answer directly. “I tinkered with the bauble Izzy got for us to see what I could learn. Didn't take much to weaponize it.” She shrugged. “I say ‘weaponize’ but this is the Coalition's definition of a safe alternative to violence.”

Though he was trying to stay cool, he clenched his fist and jaw, speaking through his teeth. “And you just used it on me?”

Pierce nodded. “Erased about thirty seconds of your most recent memory and kept you from forming new ones for a few seconds more. That’s just the tip of the iceberg. They can rewrite and rewire a whole person with those booths you described.”

Hayden was incredulous, so stunned that he had to ask the question again, this time with more emphasis. “And you *used* it on me?”

“They’ll never issue us emitters.” Pierce maintained her logical tone. “These will work like stun guns. A little brain zap to stop someone in their tracks.”

Hayden tried to think past his outrage. “Kind of big for a gun.”

“That’s the prototype. I’m working on the final design with auto-adjust, including sensors and power source. It’ll be about the size of a sawed-off shotgun.”

Hayden failed to suck it up, as Pierce would say. *Nope, I’m still mad. No point in trying to hide it.*

“I can’t get over being your guinea pig! This was non-con weapons testing.”

Izzy came to her woman’s defense. “We ran a gazillion simulations and tried it on each other first. We’re all test subjects, don’t be a baby. You’re fine, Corporal Wilder.”

Given the fact that they’d zapped each other too, he figured he had to let this go. But it did spark the recollection of something else—the humans who visited the Vigilant on the down low and wound up in a long-term care facility in Virginia. Now that he had a new lens through which to view that data, it seemed like the aliens had been playing with repurposing tech and testing it on humans.

And it didn’t end well.

“What if you’d just lobotomized your commanding officer?” he demanded.

“We wouldn’t do that.” Izzy contained a laugh, adding, “We like Captain E’no.”

Hayden kept quiet, cooling off while they put away their ‘brain zapper’. Eventually he trusted himself to speak again. “You’ll have something we can show the admiral?”

*Because this is not it. That asshole finds out we’re doing this, and he’ll come down on us like a hammer.*

“We will,” Pierce said dispassionately. “Grim plans to propose a virus that will wipe out most of humanity. It’ll probably do a number on chimps, bonobos, and the rest of the great apes as well.”

Hayden swore.

She went on, “A half dozen missiles would disperse it about the planet for total effectiveness. I have schematics drawn up.”

It was the worst ‘good’ news Hayden had ever heard.

LEAVING THAT CONVERSATION UNFINISHED HAD been nagging at Maddy like a sore spot.

The kind where it didn't bother you most of the time but if you pressed, it hurt more than you expected. Then you had to test it repeatedly to make sure, and it became a kind of minor obsession. That described her mental gymnastics perfectly.

What had E'no meant by 'pull' anyway?

Maybe she'd been asking herself the wrong questions. Because she'd been thinking that she had an alien fetish, but it might be that something in her body chemistry acted as an attractor. That would account for another alien taking a personal interest in her, but it didn't explain why she looked at the current captain and saw someone else.

Damn but it still hurt. That was another sore spot she couldn't help pressing.

Taking a deep breath, she rolled her neck side to side, hoping it would disperse some of the tension. Orders had come down from Admiral Asshole; they were supposed to build a temporary fabrication facility on the moon. The UN was scrambling to establish their own foothold, but they wouldn't be able to construct a lunar outpost before the admiral finished his grim work.

*No point in borrowing trouble.* It would show up on its own before long anyway.

Or that was what her father had said when she brought E'no home for a visit. "Nothing good will come of... fraternization," he'd snapped in his most disapproving tone.

Her mother had wrung her hands and wistfully asked, "Whatever happened to that nice boy you dated in college?"

That 'nice boy' borrowed two thousand dollars and ghosted, but Maddy didn't bring that up. Since that awful trip,

she hadn't spoken to her parents. They'd vehemently disapproved of her life choices for the last seven years anyway and they thought Hayden was a bad influence. Possibly they were correct, but he was also the only one moving forward with a plan to prevent humanity from being wiped from the map. The rest of the world was too busy bickering about who had the *right* to do something.

She waved to Grim in passing. Trust the taciturn soldier to have found the exercise room. When her head started feeling too full, she liked to get moving. Not in what Pierce would consider a workout, but a walk to help her get her thoughts in order. There was a moving walkway here, not exactly like a treadmill but close enough. Maddy programmed a series of vistas to fade in and out around her, scenes from Coalition home worlds.

Some people had dreamt of roving the stars since the first time they watched a science fiction movie. For Maddy, that movie had been *Enemy Mine*. Her aunt had put it on once when Maddy was visiting. When it ended, Maddy imagined how much more compelling that story would have been if there had been a forbidden romance between the two stranded—and forced to rely on each other—on a hostile planet.

The first world came to life around her, a profusion of blue foliage and a sky overhead that swirled like a purple ocean. *Who lives here anyway?* As she walked, she tried to fish the proper designation from her memory.

“We meet again,” a familiar voice said.

*How does he always find me?*

This time, she wouldn't run. Maddy raised a hand in polite greeting. “Captain.”

“I'm here to use the facilities. I won't disturb you.” His tone was every bit as courteous and formal as hers.

And that hurt too.

She didn't want them to act like strangers. Because her heart insisted that they weren't. “You're not bothering me. We can walk together.”

Maddy didn't expect him to take that so literally, but she didn't protest when he joined her and matched his pace to hers. That was what her E'no had done too, never moving so fast that she couldn't keep up. He had been like her shadow, until that last day.

The day he promised to come back soon. And never did.

"I'm sorry about before," she said then.

"For departing in the middle of our conversation?"

*Close enough.*

"Your question startled me."

"So much that your flight reflex kicked in?" he asked in a dry tone.

Maddy laughed. "You're not wrong. It's just..." There was no avoiding this topic. Otherwise, her behavior made no sense. "I need to level with you."

"You were previously on an incline?"

This was the exact, irreverent, and endearing silliness that charmed her in the first place. Her heart ached.

"You remind me of someone I loved," she said softly.

He paused infinitesimally before responding. "Loved. Did something happen?"

"I don't know. We made promises. And then he disappeared. I don't mean to be curt with you. It just surprised me a great deal when you said—"

"That I feel a pull."

*Completing each other's sentences. I'm here again, already.*

"Pretty much."

"Do you mind if I ask who it was?"

Maddy didn't know that she intended to answer until the words emerged. "The Coalition delegate. Coincidentally, his name was also Captain E'nosience. And..."

The possibility struck her like lightning. *Maybe it's him.* If the admiral had him repurposed, was it possible he didn't remember? In that case, it wasn't that he didn't come back; it was that he couldn't.

Her knees nearly buckled. E'no reached out, steadying her shoulders, and the heat of his familiar touch made her whole body tingle. *It is him. It has to be. There's never been anyone else who makes me feel that way.* He was still holding her, golden eyes fairly glowing with intensity.

"You," she whispered. "I think it was you."

+ + +

*I hope it's me.*

But E'no couldn't bring himself to admit that he didn't know who he had been—or who he had loved. The pull that kept bringing him back to her side, time and again; that made him suspect she could be right. Perhaps even repurposing couldn't destroy the love he had for her.

But futures couldn't be built on *perhaps*. And his progenitor was watching. If E'no made the wrong decision, Maddy might suffer for it. That was a risk he wouldn't—no, couldn't—take. Even now, the possibility of something happening to her dizzied him with fear. And fear was a weakness the admiral would exploit.

He had been silent for much too long. Finally, he said, "I... see. E'nosience is not a common name. I will...try to find him for you."

She seemed to read his conflict in the mixed hues he displayed, not an ordinary occurrence at all. "I was just explaining. Not...asking for anything."

Now she was reticent too. The rest of the walk passed in silence, and he excused himself at the first opportunity, better to tackle the easier task of saving the Coalition from his progenitor. It felt like his insides were on fire.

Was *this* what the admiral had stolen from him in that last repurposing? Externally, he controlled his rage because he couldn't show the color of wrath. Not without people

wondering what had angered him. High Admiral E'maleese had spies everywhere; sometimes it felt as if E'no had lived his entire life in enemy territory.

In a bleak mood, he reported to the docking bay to get on with his work, overseeing the squad as they loaded the shuttle. His mind was still in the exercise room with Maddy. *I wanted to stay longer.* But not until it was safer. When he had more options. He wouldn't ask her to stand beside him when he had his back against a wall.

Task Force Vigilant had requisitioned the constructors they'd use to build a base and allegedly produce the admiral's coveted weapon. Even off the ship, the units would need to be reprogrammed to permit manufacture that went against the Coalition's regulations. Depending on how fast Pierce and Grim learned, it might take up to two spans for them to start the task of modifying the constructors.

As far as E'no could tell, Hayden had everything well-organized and the crew moved with purpose. They had almost thirty devices to load for the construction and equipping of the base. D'aroi was hauling quite impressive loads, Pierce and Izzy helped each other with every item they carried, and E'milly seemed to fit in well with the humans. Grim must be in the lab, and he knew where Maddy was.

*Where I'd rather be too.*

The tug became a soft ache, one that made him turn toward the iris that led back into the ship. But he had a feeling he should stay. *I might be needed here.*

His concern was validated when Admiral E'maleese arrived.

E'no didn't immediately react. Instead, he maintained his command display and watched his team. Nothing irritated his progenitor more than being ignored. The high admiral swept through the bay, demanding salutes and a suspension of work, merely due to his illustrious presence.

Only when the admiral reached him did E'no speak. "Lieutenant D'orf did not report for discipline today. He



wasn't present for training either."

The admiral's calm blue was infuriating and worrying. "No, he reported to me. I reassigned him." E'maleese paused, appearing to savor his next words. "You will not punish *Captain D'orf*."

He weighed his response. On one hand, he was relieved to be rid of the admiral's pet. But it seemed like a poor precedent to accept this outcome without protest. "He was my second in command and he injured a colleague."

"A *human*," the admiral snarled.

That was as far as he dared push. "You will assign me a different second?"

E'maleese deepened his shade to indicate distaste. "I will not contaminate another officer with your brutish crew. You'll launch on the next cycle."

"That's not enough time," E'no said.

The admiral must know that too. Did he hate humans so much that he'd sabotage his own goal? Whatever the case, he ordered, "Make the timeframe work."

"They're not properly trained, and we have to uninstall the inhibitors to build the weapons." E'no hated verbal fencing with his progenitor.

The admiral clearly enjoyed it. "You should have anticipated the next step instead of wasting time teaching them to play nice with our citizens."

E'no knew what his progenitor expected to hear, so he played the role, hoping it would disguise his true intentions. "Once the mission ends, these humans will have no place to go. They must be integrated into the crew."

*But you won't succeed. I won't let you.*

E'maleese's response was exactly what E'no expected and dreaded if the worst came to pass. "The humans will be handled according to protocol. They're not Coalition citizens and never will be."

“They *are* Coalition soldiers.” E’no attempted a riposte. “When training is complete, I’ll award the appropriate accolades.”

The admiral’s fronds revealed his scorn in the brightest possible crimson. “They’re mercenaries. They’ll never complete training or earn accolades.”

But E’no was ready for that objection. He’d already investigated the laws that might apply in this situation. “There are no Coalition rules in regard to employing mercenaries.”

E’maleese could not contain his gleeful bright yellow. ”Correct. And so far from Coalition space, my authority is absolute.”

“What do you intend to do?” On some level, E’no knew. But the admiral wanted him to ask, and he must act as the dutiful offspring, until the trap snapped closed.

“The humans will be returned to their beloved Earth.”

+ + +

Hayden returned to the small staging area he’d first visited a few hours ago.

It was almost empty now; his crew had finished carrying away most of its contents. But his workday wasn’t done. He’d been observing the Coalition personnel, noticing which seemed most receptive to interacting with humans. And now it was time to spread some charm, grease the wheels if he could.

He approached the reptilian supervisor, using his safe-for-aliens smile even though Coalition aliens understood his tone of voice better than his expression. “Appropriations Administrator S’inoog, I just wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me for what? I merely did my job.”

“You can call me Hayden.” He tried to judge the proper distance for this conversation; he wanted to seem friendly, not aggressive. “You did it so professionally and politely that I wouldn’t have guessed you’d never met a human before. So I said to myself, ‘There’s an outstanding Coalition citizen, I could learn from him’.”

“You’re not assigned to me, human Hayden.” S’inoog’s confusion melted into suspicion. “It’s not my duty to train you.”

*I must be moving too fast.*

“Of course not. I’d never impose like that. But I’m new to the Vigilant and you seem extremely knowledgeable.”

That was the right note. Supervisor S’inoog preened a bit. “That is true.”

Hayden went on, “Those constructor units you gave us are fascinating. Are they used much on this ship?”

“Indeed they are. To furnish the rooms, clothe our citizens, create equipment, and even to make our meals.”

“Is there an expert I could ask?” Hayden guessed that would keep S’inoog talking. He seemed like the type who enjoyed showing off his knowledge.

“I suspect nobody on the Vigilant knows more about them than I do. I used a primary constructor to make the constructors issued to you.”

“Is that right?” Hayden had hit the jackpot on the first pull. “Primary constructor, huh? That must be quite a machine. And you’re in charge of it?”

Once S’inoog started talking, it was hard to get him to stop. This lizardman sure was proud of his work. According to S’inoog, Designer C’adora, Craftmaster D’arlo and Chef E’bara absolutely depended on him. Hayden took copious mental notes regarding the constructors, knowing his plan depended on turning them to his purpose behind the admiral’s back.

He went looking for Designer C’adora first.

Hayden examined the holo samples in the display area. There were a dozen different kinds of aliens on this ship alone, he recalled. Every type of Coalition citizen on the Vigilant cycled in a kaleidoscope of styles. He pretended to be immersed in the merchandise, making sure to seem oblivious to Designer C’adora’s approach. The C-designation meant she

was another little minotaur. They appeared more outgoing than other Coalition types.

“Hello. You are one of the humans I’ve been hearing about?” She sounded friendly but cautious.

*Not a terrible start.*

He nodded. “One of five on the Vigilant and you’ve heard of us? You must keep up on the news. I’m Corporal Wilder. Supervisor S’inoog was just singing your praises, Designer C’adora.”

“C’adora will do.” She paused. “You’re not the dangerous one, are you?”

Hayden did his best to sound innocent. “No, ma’am. We’re all under orders to benefit the Coalition. But I think I know who you mean and that was a misunderstanding. Anyways, I’m not her.”

C’adora seemed to accept that answer. “D’orf has always been prone to exaggeration.”

“And bad poetry,” Hayden agreed, trying to sound abashed. “Excuse me, I might not have the ear or education to appreciate it. It might be fine art.”

C’adora had an amusing laugh, like a cow sneeze. “It’s dreadful! If he inflicted it on one of your soldiers, then he deserved what he got.”

“I feel the exact same. No wonder Supervisor S’inoog thinks so highly of you. Clearly you have exceptional judgment.” Hayden was a natural gambler; he knew when he was on a lucky streak and he knew how to ride it. He’d let C’adora take the conversation where he wanted it to go.

She did. “You sought me out on S’inoog’s recommendation?”

“Humans don’t usually relax in uniform.” He phrased the statement like a request. “And Supervisor S’inoog said you were a wizard with a constructor.”

Designer C’adora took time to weigh her reply. “I can’t give you anything until you’ve earned an accolade.” Her horns

tilted. Maddy would already be figuring out what that meant. “But maybe I can give you some pointers on how to create your own clothes.”

“That would be amazing. If you can spare the time? I don’t want to impose.”

He spent a good hour learning from Designer C’adora and the time flew. She even let him take notes on his personal comm device.

“Thank you so much. Let me know if I can ever help you in return.”

The designer paused. “Right now, I can’t think how but it’s good for you to offer. And I’ll take you up on it, should the occasion arise.”

The admiral wouldn’t like Hayden gaining ground like this, making the crew see him as someone who was both friendly and willing to help. He smiled as he bade her farewell and went looking for Craftmaster D’arlo.

“Crafts?” The hedgehog alien was yelling as Hayden entered. “They want me to give them pigments and paper so they can make pictures!”

“That seems silly. Can’t you make pictures with the constructor?”

D’arlo’s head fin bobbed up and down. “A better picture than they could dream of!” Then he examined Hayden. “Who are you anyway?”

“Corporal Wilder.” Hayden thought it best to get the questions out of the way and return to D’arlo’s indignation. “I was passing by and thought you might need a hand. Wouldn’t making the items needed to create a painting be an expression of art in itself?”

“Hah!” The craftmaster snorted. “Child’s play, I don’t need any help. Here, let me show you.”

While he didn’t necessarily agree with D’arlo, Hayden thought it best to humor him. Privately he felt that making pictures with a machine took some of the soul out of it, the

spark of unique, individual creation. A Coalition device was an amalgam, a median of everyone who had ever input data. But this was the kind of thing that the admiral hated and was working to stamp out.

He learned a great deal in half an hour, more than D'arlo realized. "Thanks for your time. I'll let you get back to work."

From there, he headed to the mess hall. Hayden wondered how so many different aliens could eat in the same space. They must all have unique requirements and sensitivities. He walked through the crowded dining area and into the food prep section, using an ancient spy technique—act like no one will stop you and often no one does. Chef E'bara was easy to spot, she was the one making everyone else nervous as she inspected items, dispensing approval and disapproval.

Hayden had been lucky all day. He decided to bluff with no hand, "Chef E'bara, S'inoog sent me here to check on you."

E'bara fronds flashed red at the intrusion and then orange. If Maddy was here, Hayden might ask what that meant. "What? Why? Everything is working perfectly. Aren't you part of Captain E'nosience's strike force? A human."

"Indeed I am, chef." So many aliens knew about the humans. It occurred to Hayden for the first time, maybe it wasn't because they were interested in strange creatures; maybe it was because of E'no. "Will you be able to feed my people?"

E'bara's display did not change. "I've been thinking about that myself. I've looked at your physical data and of course, I can produce something nutritious from the constructor. The trick will be making it enjoyable for you to consume."

Based on what he knew of the admiral, Hayden suspected Chef E'bara might be punished if she made something delicious; it was Hayden's role to make her want to.

And he was up for the challenge.

FOR E'NO, ESCAPING THE VIGILANT couldn't come soon enough.

Though he'd protested the admiral's orders, privately he was eager for launch. A moon base offered the most autonomy and his best chance to thwart his progenitor's plans. The team was coming along in their training. This was the last session before departure, and he was counting down the spans.

Wrapping up his review, E'no shifted his display from peaceful blue to royal violet as he stood and stretched. "Corporal Wilder, I'd like a word before the rest period." Hayden gave a respectful salute, then said something quietly to the other humans.

Afterward, he joined E'no quickly. No time to waste, there was much to accomplish before they left the ship. Lowering his voice, he addressed his corporal. "I'm planning to award the entire strike force official military titles, and as my new second in command, you will receive a promotion, *sergeant*."

"Sir." Hayden saluted with a smile.

E'no continued, "These accolades will grant access to the vacuum environment suits we'll need. Equip our team and see that they're ready to go."

"Yes, sir."

"From this moment on, everything we have done or will do is our business. Pierce and Grim should wipe everything in the labs, including records of their research. The team will likewise leave nothing in their quarters except their cots."

As Hayden saluted again, E'no allowed his fronds turn to an inquiring orange. "Private Rivers is a good soldier. But can he be trusted?"

"Grim is a rock, Captain." Hayden seemed to be trying to read E'no's display. "The task force is committed to the goals you assigned us on our first day."

E'no returned to command colors. "That's good to hear. I'll confer with Grim in the lab after you brief the others. Tell him to expect me." He headed there immediately, allowing Hayden to speak with the team in his absence.

It wasn't long before Grim entered the lab wearing his new suit. The fact that human gear was being constructed meant that Hayden was making allies on the ship already. That would go a long way toward smoothing E'no's own aims.

"Captain, how may I be of service?"

"You have been searching Vigilant's database for a few days". E'no's fronds displayed the command shade he used so often. "Before we blank the system, I'd like you to perform a search. Everything we learn must remain confidential." E'no didn't think Grim would notice the difference between command and secret shades but he allowed his fronds to change. "Strictly between the two of us."

As much as E'no could read Grim's face, the man seemed to be intrigued. "Absolutely. I wouldn't tell the admiral shit, even if he begged."

Though E'no didn't understand the relevance of scatological data, he didn't pursue the matter. Best not to digress. "What do you know about repurposing technology?"

"Some," Grim answered. "The Coalition relies on repurposing instead of punishment or incarceration. It seems to modify behavior. Hayden thought we needed to learn what we could."

E'no felt Grim was saying the least he could while remaining honest. Still he had chosen this man to be his instrument. Grim must become his confidant as well.

"I have been repurposed. And I wish to learn about the man I was. It's not illegal, but it is taboo to research one's former self. There's a stigma in being repurposed. That's why I'm asking *you* to look into this."

Grim stood perfectly still. E'no was placing total trust in a human he didn't know well, solely based on Hayden's word.



He allowed his fronds to shift to imploring, lonely blue. “I’m asking, not ordering you to do this. Will you help me?”

After a short pause, Grim responded with action rather than words; he took position at his research station and went to work. His fingers flew across the display as he cursed and muttered about security protocols.

Then he stood to attention and spoke with a worried look. “This is some bad business. You’ve been repurposed five times, sir.”

Eno couldn’t hide his shock; his display went red. *I’m a habitual criminal?* He’d never *heard* of anyone being repurposed so many times and retaining citizenship.

He tried to regain some composure. “That is unprecedented.”

Grim returned his attention to the data feed and recited. “Esteemed Scientist E’nosience has been ordered repurposed by Admiral E’maleese. Scout E’nosience has been ordered repurposed by Admiral E’maleese. Researcher E’nosience has been ordered repurposed by Admiral E’maleese. Pilot Captain E’nosience has been ordered repurposed by Admiral E’maleese.”

“That’s four,” he said.

The man went on, “The most recent... Delegate and Captain of the Vigilant, repurposed by executive order. I see no record of you being found guilty of deviant behavior by a civil tribunal. These were all by order...”

“Of my progenitor!” E’no blurted, the midnight blue despair of his fronds likely evident even to Grim.

“That’s Admiral E’maleese?” Grim’s question made E’no regret his outburst.

E’no forced command purple to his display and captain tones to his voice. “What is recorded about my last iteration?”

It didn’t take long for Grim to find an answer. It took longer for him to frame a reply. “Captain, maybe I should just show you the picture?”

“Do it.”

There he stood, frond cape glowing in adoration beside a smiling Madison Janelle Stern. “Maddy.”

*I am your E’no after all.*

+ + +

Maddy was ‘counseling’ Izzy when E’no joined them in quarters.

She had to pretend she served another purpose on the crew since the admiral would probably eject her into the vacuum if he realized who he was harboring. Since the captain had never done that before, Izzy swapped a look with Pierce, and they suddenly decided they had somewhere else to be.

Based on the intensity he radiated, she understood the departure. She just didn’t know what was wrong. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. And no. I discovered the answer to your question.”

“And?”

“I was him. Or he was me. Whichever you prefer.”

The ache blossomed into a fire in her chest. “You couldn’t come back?”

His fronds glowed with the most conflicted hues she had ever seen: a veritable rainbow of regret, anguish, and sorrow. “I am only guessing at what transpired, as the official records were sealed and extremely abridged. I suspect I told him about...us. About our relationship and hoped for his approval.”

“Before, you said you’d never gotten it. Not once. I asked if you were sure honesty was the best policy after it went so badly with *my* parents.”

“What did I say?” he asked.

It felt so strange to be answering these questions, telling him things he should know if his memories—their precious memories—hadn’t been stolen. “That you didn’t wish to live as a liar.”

His golden eyes glowed with intensity. “That feels... familiar.”

“But you don’t recall saying it?”

This felt like losing him all over again. Standing with him, remembering everything, while he gazed at her like a bewildered stranger. She drew in a shaky breath and pulled herself off the cot with legs that would barely hold her. E’no moved a step closer as if he couldn’t help himself.

“No. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. At least now I understand what happened. And I know you didn’t choose to leave me.”

His fronds flared with the bitterest of hues. “Nothing is *ever* my choice. The admiral ensures that I follow his preferred path.”

“That’s a crime,” Maddy said sharply. “It’s violence. You said the Coalition was civilized, that these things don’t happen!”

She wasn’t even mad at E’no. Just the situation. And it wasn’t like she could find Admiral Asshole and scream at him. Not without endangering the mission—if she slipped up, it risked the entire world, far more damage than her own broken heart.

“I didn’t know they did. And it’s not the entire Coalition.”

*Just your progenitor. He’s the bad actor.*

That made things worse, actually. Not better. Probably for E’no too. She tried to gather herself; comforting him was the right thing to do. *But what am I supposed to say?*

“I’m sorry,” she managed to whisper.

“About what? You’ve done nothing wrong. And I hurt you.”

It cost so much to offer him absolution. “You didn’t mean to.”

“Intention doesn’t obviate the outcome,” he said in the fiercest tone she’d ever heard from him.

She sighed faintly. “That’s true as well.”

“Where do we go from here, Maddy?”

“To the moon.” The only answer was a literal one, as she had no clue what might become of them personally.

He made the sound she’d always loved, reluctant amusement. “Accurate, but that’s not precisely what I was asking.”

“You want to know...what, exactly? You’re not the person who loved me. The admiral made sure of that.”

She tightened a fist, hiding it against her thigh to conceal how difficult this conversation was. It felt like having blood drawn slowly by a technician who wasn’t very good at finding the vein, too much prodding entirely. But E’no didn’t seem to share her reluctance. His fronds glowed with impassioned ardor and vivacity.

“Do you still love me?” he asked.

The answer hadn’t changed. Possibly it never would. But she was afraid to speak the words, afraid to gamble everything again when she’d already bet and lost. Somehow Maddy hardened her heart.

Her tone became brisk. “Let’s focus on the mission.”

+ + +

Humans were insidious.

Worse than the virus High Admiral E’maleese planned to use to eradicate them. According to D’orf’s latest report, Human Hayden Flynn Wilder had been ingratiating himself with the Coalition crew. Public sentiment was beginning to turn, not good for the admiral’s position that humans couldn’t possibly conform to Coalition ideals.

He needed to create some resentment. Quickly.

Fortunately, the manipulation of other beings was one of his strengths. He sent for Chef E’bara, and within a span, she

presented herself with her fronds displaying dismay that warred with awareness of undeserving honor. Those colors pleased him well.

“I understand you’ve been inconvenienced by our temporary guests. It’s unjust that you’re receiving additional workload without any additional accolades.”

The chef didn’t seem to take his meaning, however. “I don’t mind. The challenge is interesting, and I’ve done the same for other citizens whose worlds have newly been ratified into the Coalition.”

“How generous. It’s a shame that those ungrateful cretins are boasting how they bested you and gamed the system. Humans do love getting something for nothing.”

“After I dedicated time helping him?” E’bara’s fronds went red with outrage. “I wish I could take it back. No wonder you’re against approving Earth if they’re all like that.”

“Some are even worse.” Seemingly at random, he accessed a newsfeed, pulled from Earth media. He made sure to pause long to allow E’bara to process the horrendous images, even if she couldn’t parse the text. With help from the translator, he read, “Florida man murders his three offspring and partner. Utah man opens fire in a crowded cinema. In Alabama, a place of worship is burned, killing—”

E’bara was crimson with horror. “They do these things to one another? Imagine what they would do to us!”

“They have already done it, Chef E’bara. I kept this quiet to prevent a panic, but we lost a valued colleague when we first arrived on their world. Humans greeted us with unspeakable violence.” He waited to ensure his words registered properly, before adding, “I see that you understand my position. They can seem harmless. Charming even. But we must never forget that they aren’t civilized.”

“I’m appalled that they’re even permitted on the ship,” the chef snapped.

*Exactly what I wished to hear.*

“They won’t be for long. I regret that I must employ them at all, even temporarily. But the humans will depart soon. You can assure the rest of your staff that they’re safe.”

*There. I might as well have ordered her to gossip.*

This would serve better. A sideways display to remind her of the danger and then the affirmation that the admiral would safeguard his people. Whispers would flood the Vigilant as fast as crewmates could speak. Humans would find it difficult for their remaining time aboard.

Well pleased with his efforts, the admiral discussed a few insignificant changes regarding mealtimes that could easily have been handled by a subordinate. Fortunately, E’bara didn’t seem to realize she was being used. He concluded the meeting by saying, “I wanted to take the time to thank you personally for your service.”

E’bara blushed pink with the commendation. “My pleasure, Admiral.”

When she left, he allowed himself to shift to triumphant hues. Nobody had more power on his ship.

*Nobody.*

+ + +

Task Force Vigilant finally looked like a single unit.

Hayden watched the team hurry about in the new blue and gold vacuum suits with their small storage packs. His people only had clothes to pack. Tossing a smirk in his direction, Pierce lifted Izzy to remove the male and female symbols from the wall.

“What are we doing with those?” Hayden wanted to know.

Izzy and Pierce shared a playful glance. “Your orders. We’re not leaving anything but the cots. Are we taking the divider too?”

Reluctantly amused, Hayden played along and pretended to consider it. “We could feed it to a constructor. But we’re not hauling it all the way to the docking bay, so leave it.” He

inspected the area with satisfaction. “If we’re all ready, line up. We’re moving out.”

“We’re launching now? Is that why we had to put on our space suits to pack?” D’aroi was curious, not insubordinate.

Hayden appreciated that she was comfortable enough with the team to speak. D’aroi was tough in a fight and easy going as a colleague, the kind of companion every soldier liked. The exact opposite of D’orf, in fact. He hadn’t been sorry to lose that one.

Still, he used his sergeant’s voice in reply. “We’re dressed for space deployment because the powers that be want us off this ship ASAP. We’ll head to the shuttle bay and be ready to go when we are ordered to vacate.”

Privately, he also thought the squad looked sharp as hell, but it didn’t seem politic to admit as much aloud. Hayden had selected the design for their suits, leaning into Air Force blue with a dash of superhero. C’adora had called it serviceable.

“Any more questions?” he added.

D’aroi didn’t answer but she did glance at the other hedgehog on the team. Hayden followed her gaze and spoke to D’etor. “You’ve done well in training, followed every order...” He hesitated, trying to read their posture and head fin. “I think you’re adapting well, but if you don’t want to go, I can get you out of this without repercussions.”

D’etor’s fin stood tall; they looked determined. “You will not deny me my first mission outside the ship. I will serve the best interests of the Coalition and of Earth.” Effortlessly, D’etor commanded attention from everyone in the room; they spoke so rarely that those calm statements had the effect of a shout.

“That’s just fine. What I was hoping to hear in fact.” He raised his voice to command the team. “Now let’s get the hell out of here.”

Hayden led the team to the bay, told them to stash their gear and line up outside the shuttle. He accessed a constructor while they did so. He noticed Izzy stuffing the male and

female symbols into another unit, and she winked when they made eye contact. *No idea what she's doing, but probably typical Izzy mischief.*

“Soldiers!” He addressed the seven in line. “We’re not stealing this shuttle but we *are* taking it. As of now, it’s the official transport of Task Force Vigilant.”

The captain arrived soon after. “Sergeant Wilder, we’re green for launch.”

Since the unit was small, boarding went fast. Hayden felt like they were escaping from the jaws of a shark when the shuttle bay doors opened and Maddy piloted them out. The guns wouldn’t fire near the larger Coalition ship, but Grim took a seat at the controls anyway. E’milly stood at the viewport, watching in wonder as the ship receded, and D’aroi joined her while D’etor analyzed data patterns on another display. The captain seemed preoccupied, more focused on Maddy than anything else. Pierce and Izzy came over to join Hayden, who was half expecting a rear attack.

“Did that seem too easy to anyone else?” Izzy whispered.

Pierce was already nodding. “I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Before Hayden could answer, Maddy said, “Captain, we should delay landing.” She punched up a view for the crew. “Our present course puts us just ahead of the meteor shower that’s about to hit.”

*So this is the trap Admiral Asshole set for us.*

D’etor studied the data and spoke in a deceptively mild tone. “That’s not a random meteor shower. It’s a debris field.”



FOR ONCE, E'NO WASN'T FOCUSED on personal matters when he leaned close to Maddy to examine the data.

“Maddy, is there a safe landing place in our intended launch area?”

“I'm not sure. Analyzing the data will take time.”

“Time we don't have,” he said.

“That is true,” D'aroi agreed.

Finding another build site was out of the question. Now that he was free from the Vigilant, he had to establish his own foothold. And fast. E'no pressed Hayden. “If we land immediately, will the team be able to construct cover in time?”

The sergeant seemed doubtful, and he tended to favor risks. “We'll have to hustle but we could make it. It'll be tight.”

*Time for my first command decision.*

E'no displayed the deepest purple he could to assert his authority. “Get us on the surface. Be ready to deploy. We'll give the admiral no excuse to commandeer our forces or abandon the operation.”

He had gone planetside on other missions and had stepped out onto strange satellites before, but it had never been so critical. Then he'd still hoped that it was possible to win his progenitor's approval. Now he understood that nothing would ever be good enough. And unless he fought, he would be repurposed until every last bit of self was erased, leaving only the monster the admiral was determined to make of him.

As the shuttle zipped closer to the surface, questions circled in his mind. The debris field could signify nothing good, but he had to deal with this situation before analyzing the available data. The moon's surface was monochrome,

pocked gray stone with old scars from prior landings. There was also detritus, things humans had left behind.

“Be cautious. Until the seals are locked and the shields are in place, your suit is your lifeline. Even a slight perforation could mean your life.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” Pierce said.

Maddy set the small ship down with remarkable adroitness. While she might not be Coalition certified, she'd polished her basic skills in the simulator until E'no couldn't tell the difference. The team piled out with their equipment, rushing because they had no choice. E'no helped E'milly get her constructor clear, and they immediately started shoveling rock into its input port. She paused to glance up, the potential danger clearly worried her; her blue fronds trembled but she powered it on anyway. The constructor started pumping out their first portion of roof.

Hayden's voice rang through the comms. “Less than twenty minutes before impact! It'll get heavy in thirty. If we're not under cover by then...” He didn't finish the warning.

He didn't need to.

Maddy responded, “I'll try to buy you some time.”

The shuttle took to the sky.

Fear for her nearly incapacitated him, but he didn't countermand her decision. Bravery like hers might allow for impossible outcomes. With all others working flat out to funnel rock into the four constructors as fast as possible, it still felt excruciatingly slow. The units could only produce the sections of roof so fast, and the team could only assemble them so quickly. He pitched in as the shuttle swooped overhead.

Maddy was using the shielded shuttle to nudge the largest pieces into different trajectories. *She's so smart. And so brave.* His stones ground, churning his insides. *Don't get hurt. I want to earn the chance to get to know you again. Like we were before.*

Metallic brightness flashed around them as the impacts started, dust kicking up to reduce visibility. He worked faster, trying not to think about Maddy alone up there. And soon, they had enough roof to provide cover. Grim, D'aroi, and D'etor hoisted the pieces to test their resilience.

Then Grim nodded with satisfaction. "It'll hold."

"Build the columns next," E'no said.

"The bigger concern is the Kessler Effect." Pierce spoke with her usual coolness, but Izzy flinched.

He couldn't dismiss her concerns without investigating the issue. "Elaborate? I may be familiar with the problem but not the name."

Izzy provided the answer without pausing. "It's the risk that sufficient debris has a cascade effect, causing multiple collisions."

"An ablation cascade?" he asked.

"Exactly," Pierce said.

"We're already in the middle of it," E'no answered. "At this point, mitigation is our best strategy."

Grim took a column from D'etor, joining the discussion. "We probably won't die from getting hit by debris. If our suits get breached, asphyxiation and rads will get us."

"Less talk, more walk," D'aroi cut in.

Hayden added, "The clock is ticking, people. Now's the time, do or die."

+ + +

Hayden returned to the constructor he was operating.

D'etor loaded it at a furious pace, likely knowing their lives depended on it. The hedgehog never spoke and never stopped, and Hayden was glad D'etor was with him. They wouldn't have made it this far otherwise.

Pierce spoke over the comm. "What does Captain Chaos want from us? The sky is falling, and we can't build this shit

from the inside out.”

He rarely put Pierce in check, but he couldn't let that go. “Yeah, E'no is out there. Jumped from a shuttle and got shot up saving your life. Attacked a federal transport to rescue Izzy. He even put the fate of the world in the hands of five misfits. He's exactly the person we need and we're not letting him down! Hear me?”

“I hear you.” Pierce actually sounded subdued. “So does everyone else.”

*Right.* The whole squad had access to this comm channel, but he forged on. “We got our orders to keep building, how long will these space suits keep us alive?”

Grim's voice came in calm and strong. “An hour under ideal conditions but this isn't ideal. We need to be sealed in with an atmosphere producer soon and that's still on the shuttle.”

*Shit.* They needed the shuttle back pronto.

E'milly cut in, “Already updated our schedule. The shuttle is shielded but we'll need a covered area to unload. I sent the plan to your comms.”

Hayden looked them over and gave an approving nod that only D'etor could see. “This should work. Good job, E'milly. Let's get to it.”

The young private spoke in a chiding tone, probably meant for Pierce. “Captain E'nosience has endured more than any of you will ever know. He's the finest officer in the Coalition and we won't let him down!”

“Kiss ass,” Pierce muttered.

Hayden let that one go. He tagged in, letting D'etor take over the constructor. It was only fair for Hayden to do some of the running with heavy loads. Raking up enough loose rock was exhausting and dangerous, as they'd rapidly depleted the options right inside the perimeter. An emitter might churn up the bedrock but it would also probably blast a crater that would make it impossible to build, judging by the way it had rolled that bus.

Puffing out a breath inside the helmet made him aware that he stank with nerves. No time to hesitate, he dashed out into the storm, dodging the shit plummeting around him. Only the lower grav made it possible for him to swoop around like he did, but there was a learning curve to it, and on the return, he was further slowed by the load.

The impact across his back stunned him momentarily and he tumbled forward. To his surprise, D'aroi came barreling out, grabbing both Hayden and the container of moon rock. She hadn't been boasting idly about how strong she was. He got hauled in like a raw recruit, and—everything went sideways for a second or two.

“Hayden? Can you breathe? Check his suit,” E'no ordered.

“No damage,” Pierce said.

“Gracias a Dios,” Izzy whispered.

“Stay inside, old man.” Only Grim would dare to be that blunt.

“Seconded,” Pierce added.

Okay, maybe they'd all speak their minds; he hadn't recruited them for their tact.

Hayden wondered how E'no had the intuition to source such a good squad. For his part, Hayden had brought great people too. While Izzy was scared shitless, she was a trooper. And Pierce might be pissed at the universe, worrying about Izzy too, but both women went hard at the build. The aliens seemed just as determined.

He wouldn't tell anyone, as he had to project strength and confidence, but his back hurt like the devil. At least a bruise, maybe a broken rib. But he'd deal with that later.

“Hell of an adventure!” Hayden declared as the walls came together.

Meticulous as ever, Grim checked the seal. “Like surfing a goddamn tsunami.”

+ + +

Maddy had never been a thrill seeker.

But excitement always found her anyway, like some messed up game of hide and seek. If people who'd gone to grad school with her knew she was currently flying an alien shuttle, playing chicken with huge hunks of space trash, they'd be beyond stunned. In all fairness, shock had her in a chokehold too.

She jumped when something big slammed into the side of the shuttle. *The shields will hold.* But she was terrifyingly aware that they'd only unloaded the constructors before she zoomed off. The rest of the equipment necessary to establish a self-sustaining lunar outpost was still on board. *If I screw this up, everyone pays.*

So failure wasn't an option; it was just that simple. But damn, that was a lot of weight to carry for someone who didn't work out. Thankfully, her reflexes were excellent. She slung the ship sideways and turned into the roll, so she only took part of the impact and nudged—

*What the hell is that anyway?*

Tapping the comm, she said, "I don't want to bother you, but this stuff doesn't look like anything I've ever seen. Definitely not from an old Russian satellite."

Silence.

*Am I out of range?*

At first, there was only crackling feedback, then Grim answered, "Not part of a launch rocket either?"

She shook her head, then realized he couldn't see her. "The metal isn't like anything I've ever seen before. Maybe grab a sample if you can."

"You think we have time to be testing space junk?" Pierce demanded. "It's hell on fire down here, woman!"

"And it would be worse if not for Maddy taking these risks for us," Izzy said.

She smiled. "Thanks, Iz."

“I love her, but I got you,” the other woman said in an affectionate tone.

“That’s enough,” Hayden cut in. “I want this channel clear unless it’s an emergency.”

She didn’t speak to say she understood. Not because she was cowed by Hayden’s order, but with five new pieces spinning toward her, she couldn’t divert attention. Even with complete focus, she might not block them all. *Time to earn that hazard pay.*

Actually, she wasn’t even getting paid. She knocked into the biggest chunk, trying not to mind that E’no hadn’t said a damn word. Now that she knew it was him, it was tough not to overanalyze everything he said or didn’t say. *He’s aware that we were special to each other. Is he really planning to let it go because I said to focus on the mission?*

She crammed that voice to the back of her brain, refusing to be drawn into an argument with herself. It wasn’t fair to be semi-mad at him for listening to her. Yet emotions weren’t logical; usually they were precisely the opposite.

*Not now. Think about that when you’re safe. When everyone is.*

Over the comm, she’d heard what Pierce said about the Kessler Effect and it was happening before her eyes. Ablation cascade, debris slamming into each other and creating more collisions, so that flying the shuttle got progressively tougher. If she didn’t land soon, the shields might even lose the fight.

And from there—

*No, don’t think about the worst possible scenario or jagged pieces of metal slicing through the hull.*

*Ah, hell. Too late.*

Now she had images from science fiction movies, people dying in vacuum and the way their faces looked. Most of that was probably special effects, but she really didn’t want to find out. Sometimes Maddy freaking hated her brain. For five more minutes, she fought the debris and shielded the growing build below as best she could.

She only hoped the time she was buying would be enough.

+ + +

High Admiral E'maleese inspected his counterstrike force.

These twenty soldiers had done well in physical training and they had the minimal intelligence required to suck up to D'orf. Four of them were junior officers and noncoms selected by the admiral himself for their cunning and sadism. None of them would question his directives.

“When Captain E'nosience returns, arrest him and his crew for disobedience. We will test repurposing on the humans while I decide what to do with the others.”

“Admiral.” Lieutenant C'abil saluted. “Reporting on Task Force Vigilant's position.”

E'maleese wanted that information; he postponed the lieutenant's reprimand for interjecting. “Good. They're headed back to the ship?”

“No, Admiral.”

The admiral's fronds shone orange with expectation. This was even better. “They're wasting time, waiting for safe landing conditions? Order them back at once.”

“They've landed and started construction.” The lieutenant didn't seem to understand the risk of delivering unwelcome tidings.

“Ridiculous, I set the schedule myself. The debris will make it impossible to succeed.” Eager orange blazed to the red of abject frustration.

Judging by the position of his horns, C'abil might realize he was in trouble, but he pressed on. “They landed ahead of the impacts and have constructed a shelter.”

Not for the first time, he wished he could discipline people properly.

E'maleese quested for some good news in this morass of incompetence. “They've hunkered down, trying to wait out the danger. That's not what I ordered them to do. D'orf, retrieve



them as soon as it passes. We'll call it a rescue and respond appropriately."

Lieutenant C'abil had the gall to disagree. Again. "The shelter is growing, Admiral. They're building the base despite the storm."

E'maleese had heard enough. Every version of E'nosience had the same traits: independence, innovation and bravery. All the admiral required was obedience, simple, unimaginative, obedience. His offspring *never* did as he wanted. If not for E'matroom's reluctance, he'd consider starting over entirely at this point.

He spoke in a dangerously level tone. "Captain E'nosience intends to be a hero?"

"Again," said a quiet voice.

The admiral snarled, "Captain D'orf, is this one of your soldiers?"

D'orf head fin snapped to attention. "This one will never again stand within range of your sensing pods."

E'maleese's voice remained calm but his fronds displayed a seething red. "I want him repurposed. See to it."

C'abil reported as D'orf led the luckless private out. "Admiral, we have comm signal from the moon's surface to the shuttle."

Another surprise. "Why is the shuttle still flying? What are they saying?"

The captain's voice was unmistakable through the static. "Maddy, bring the shuttle back now! We're running out of time."

Maddy—E'maleese remembered that name. He'd heard it somewhere before. But there was no Maddy in the task force. And his offspring's tone when he spoke the name troubled him profoundly. Suddenly, the pieces snapped into place.

*Maddy. That's what he called the human he tried to introduce to me. The UN extraterrestrial ambassador. Maddy. Madison. Madison Janelle Stern.*

“Do we have a visual record of the human ambassador?” he snapped.

C’abil put the picture on view, and there she was in full color with E’nosience glowing in contentment beside her. A spy. His offspring had smuggled a spy aboard the Vigilant. This defiance could not be brooked.

He would ensure that this spy got *exactly* what she deserved.

HAYDEN LISTENED TO THE STEADY bang of debris pelting the roof.

The atmosphere producer gave them air in their tiny shelter; it also carried the sound of potential destruction crashing down on them. The team in the unloading area would soon have the shield generator online and that would silence most impacts, all but the big ones. A big one hadn't hit yet but he feared it was coming.

He was with D'etor, Izzy, Pierce, and E'milly in the temporary mess hall. The captain, Maddy, Grim, and D'aroi were on the other side of the airlock door, installing the shield generator. Later, Hayden would set up the food dispenser in crew quarters. The space seemed homey because of what Izzy had hung on the wall. She'd crafted the male and female symbols into simple depictions of each species of the task force, holding hands with one another. It was a nice touch.

At the center of everything, this room would serve as the comm hub; it connected to the shuttle bay, crew quarters, and what would become Pierce's lab. The base didn't look like a typical prefab, dull metal and grimy industrial feel. Instead, the walls and ceiling glowed white, and the ambient light reminded Hayden of a clean room. This was their first refuge on the moon, the first place they felt safe.

In the middle of the storm, they had to stay strong to remain one step ahead.

And that meant eating well.

Multiple alien recipes were on file, but humans only had that damn nutrition cube. Hayden had a little fun tinkering with the settings. A bit later, he handed out his first constructor-made meals.

“Corn dog on a stick?” Izzy gaped in disbelief.

Hayden offered his trademark grin. “Faux corn dog on a stick, more nutritious than the real thing and you can eat the

stick.”

Izzy peered at her meal with concern, so he added, “Or return it to the constructor.”

D’etor took their meal with a silent nod while E’milly showed yellow fronds. Judging by her words, Hayden guessed that color was like an alien smile. “You’re a wonder, sergeant.”

He smiled to hide his insecurity. “See if you feel the same after you try it.”

Pierce and Izzy seemed to be waiting on Hayden to sample the food first. So he flourished his ‘corndog’ and took a big bite. It didn’t taste quite right but it was a damn sight better than a nutrition cube. Izzy smiled, Pierce shrugged, and the women tapped their dogs together in a toast gesture and started eating.

When the sound of bombardment subsided, Hayden checked his antique watch, “Shield’s up. You have time to finish your grub before taking a turn out there.”

“We really are building this thing from the inside out,” Pierce said, sounding incredulous.

When the pain in his back abated, he planned to get back to construction detail. If he could wait that long. Wearing two hats went without saying in an outfit like this.

Hayden nodded. “Cap says we have to keep showing progress. The admiral is more dangerous than the storm.”

+ + +

E’no didn’t try to hide his happiness.

His fronds gleamed yellow with satisfaction, partially hidden by his vac suit. Task Force Vigilant was performing wonderfully, the force shield ensured that they could continue building and he was working with Maddy. There were so many layers to being reunited with her, the person who had won his heart, even if he didn’t remember. But the *feelings* were there, apart from the memories, echoes and longing that gnawed at him like a hunger without surcease whenever he glanced at her.

They were still in danger, and there was much to do, but being near Maddy made him want to show her that he was worth her suffering and loneliness. That *they* were. The green of her eyes might be the prettiest shade in all known universes, and he could lose himself there. But not until they finished the lunar foothold.

“Well done,” he said. “We’ll take our rest period and then begin installation of our remaining equipment.”

“Humans don’t need the same rest schedule as the Coalition,” Grim reminded him.

E’no deepened his bright fronds to the green of tolerance; his progenitor would not allow himself to be questioned, precisely why E’no took a different tone. “I’m aware, but we are a team, we will function as one.”

“Whether we like it or not,” Maddy muttered.

Her discontent nettled him. He’d noticed that if he approached, she would suddenly find work to do somewhere else. As he watched her, she strode over to D’aroi, and her posture radiated determination. Idly he wondered how many times he’d memorized all the information about human body language. *At least twice.*

“Can I help with anything?” D’aroi asked.

Maddy inclined her head. “I have a question. When I was out in the shuttle, up close and personal with the debris field, I noticed it’s definitely not our space trash. Didn’t come from a launch rocket, a satellite, or our near-orbit station.”

The bit of frond showing under E’no’s vacc suit was orange, “Let’s explore that.” E’no nodded to D’aroi. “With the shield up, it should be safe for you to retrieve our find.”

“Your what?” Maddy asked.

“With me,” E’no said instead of answering.

The words were meant for everyone, so they formed up on him, and D’aroi skipped ahead to collect a two-meter piece of debris from outside cover. Out here, it was chaos in motion, and they shouldn’t linger. But he wouldn’t ask his people to

take risks he was unwilling to share. Grim and Maddy each grabbed something without being asked, then they got back into cover.

“This didn’t answer any of my questions,” Maddy noted.

Grim seemed to be studying the ragged chunk of metal. “What the hell is this made of anyway?”

“We only have a little air left,” D’aroi pointed out.

“Let’s get inside, then we’ll talk,” E’no said.

The other crew was about to exit, but he gestured for them to wait. This conversation was more important than the shuttle bay. Everyone took their helmets off and he shifted his display to a mysterious violet.

“Sergeant Wilder, we found something in the debris field.”

“What’s this?” Hayden asked when D’aroi gave him the hunk of metal.

“A bit of ablative armor from an old Coalition ship,” he answered.

“And that means?”

While Hayden might figure it out given enough time, but E’no had no time to waste. “Pirates. It means there’s a pirate fleet in your solar system.”

“Fucking hell,” said Pierce.

“Are their ships falling apart or what?” Maddy asked.

“Typically such a fleet is made of old vessels and non-Coalition crews don’t know how to maintain them. The debris field likely was carried to us by inertia when the fleet maneuvered,” E’no explained.

Hayden asked, “So this shit storm was an accident?”

Maddy shook her head. “I doubt it. The Vigilant probably spotted the pirates and was tracking the debris field.” She glanced at E’no with her brows contracted. “The admiral sent us into a death trap.”

Izzy let out a sigh. “If this was a movie, we’d cut a deal with the pirates or join them or something.”

“You’re welcome to try,” Pierce said. “God knows I find you incredibly charming and irresistible. Maybe alien marauders will too.”

“How much danger are we in?” E’milly asked.

That was an excellent question. D’etor was listening with their usual focus, logging all the information while D’aroi didn’t seem overly concerned. Hayden paced a little, and E’no appreciated how well everyone was taking this overall.

Grim spoke up then. “Fucking ‘yar matey’ pirates can’t do shit to the Vigilant.”

“They wouldn’t try,” he agreed. “Pirates usually follow Coalition ships and strike softer targets.”

“Like us,” Hayden realized.

“Like Earth.” Maddy saw the bigger problem.

E’no spared a glance for her, then elaborated on her assessment. “First they’ll try to blackmail the Vigilant by threatening Earth and our base.”

“Admiral Asshole won’t defend us.” Grim stated the facts. “Then what?”

“We defend ourselves,” Hayden said.

E’no shone command violet, full intensity behind his response. “Not only that, sergeant. We arm up and attack the pirates.”

+ + +

High Admiral E’maleese found it strange that he was known for his impatience.

In fact, patience was one of his greatest strengths. It took time to enact plans; sometimes waiting was the wisest course of action. Watching to see how an enemy would react permitted him to anticipate and counter, usually without resistance. He had been monitoring the situation on the lunar base, and he stared at the viewer.

The time for waiting had passed.

“The debris field has been almost completely absorbed. Captain D’orf, get the squad to the prime shuttle bay and launch at once. Take command of their little shelter, seize the miscreants, and all the equipment they stole. *You* will complete construction of Moon Base Vigilant. Remand Captain E’nosience and his renegades to my custody.”

“They’ll have to turn off their shields first. Will they comply with those orders?” Lieutenant C’abil seemed to have no sense of self-preservation whatsoever.

E’maleese’s fronds turned light magenta in disbelief. “They can’t have fully functioning defense shields already?”

“Sensors show they do.” Blithely, C’abil enlarged the image of the base. “It looks like they have more than half of the intended features complete. Only the manufacturing lab and the weapon launch platform remain to be built.”

E’maleese considered adaptation to be another of his strengths. “That is good news indeed,” he lied, changing his display to an icy blue. “Captain D’orf, new orders. Take the squad to the training area. Make sure they’re prepared for combat in all environments. Lieutenant C’abil will remain here to assist me.”

The admiral savored C’abil’s growing dread as D’orf marched his men out. He remained silent for some time, allowing the fear to ripen. Amusement flickered. *And they think I’m impatient. This is too pleasurable to hurry.* He let C’abil squirm, then he finally spoke. “Open communication with Moonbase Vigilant. I must speak to the captain.”

C’abil complied with visible relief, and soon the captain’s voice came through in response to the hail. “Captain reporting.”

“Update me on your progress.” E’maleese showed calm, command violet. “How soon will my weapons be ready to launch?”

“Grim and Pierce tell me we will be fully armed in a few cycles.” His offspring tried for a neutral orange, but the shade



betrayed his optimism.

The admiral found the report difficult to believe, but it wasn't the main impetus of this conversation. He shifted his fronds a powerful red, emphasizing the veiled threat. "Well done, Captain. Convey my congratulations to your team. Be certain that I'll recognize Maddy *personally* for her...service."

+ + +

Maddy dropped her drink.

It hit the floor and spilled everywhere as fear flooded her. She cut an urgent look at E'no, seeking him before all others, even now. Even when things were beyond complicated between them, and nothing had been resolved.

"He knows!" she managed to say. "He knows who I am!"

E'no displayed command purple for the rest of the task force. "Carry on without us. Maddy and I will join you shortly."

She followed him to the shuttle, currently the only place for a private conversation within the incomplete base. With everyone occupied elsewhere, E'no sealed the hatch and spoke seriously. "By the admiral's standards, the threat was subtle but unmistakable."

Maddy read deep worry in his blue fronds. "What are we going to do?"

Admiral Asshole had already hurt them so much. But it could get worse.

*I don't know if I can survive worse.*

E'no stepped closer; she sensed him syncing his rhythms with hers. *Heart of my heart, breath of my breath.* She could almost hear him whispering it as he had then. The sense of intimacy had been greater than anything she'd ever experienced, as if she was truly part of him. And now they were separate beings again, wounded and struggling.

He shifted to a light, hopeful blue, and some of the fear drained from her too. "We're on the same detail. We'll be

together every waking moment. Don't worry. I'll keep you safe."

She swallowed a sharp response, striving for a measured tone. "Look, I know you think you're immortal, jumping out of shuttles. But if you stick to me, you'll be in danger. And I'm not sure how much the admiral cares about you." It pained her to say as much, but sometimes harsh truths had to be spoken.

But E'no responded in the same dispassionate manner. "I'm more of a tool, I think. Or a pawn."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?"

"Ruining your life."

"You didn't. He did. More than once, it seems. I'll have to secure my freedom to have anything of my own."

She hoped—oh, she didn't dare hope. Her heart ached so much, but she couldn't look away from the sweet promise of his shifting fronds. So familiar and dear. Once he'd felt like the only person she would ever want or need. Could he be implying that he wanted her, again? For his own.

What E'no was saying was impossible. *He doesn't even remember me. Does he feel the same inexorable longing?* They were like lunar tides, governed by forces too strong to resist. He stood less than an arm length away and she flexed her fingers, yearning to feel the warmth of his skin.

*It's not safe for either of us.*

Part of her wanted to throw caution to the wind, but she'd done that once. The admiral wouldn't rest until he divided them, and she had no illusions about his methods. They would be decisive and brutal.

"I'm not here to see you get hurt," she said softly.

"I won't. But danger is irrelevant." He studied her with those brilliant golden eyes, melting her a little with the heat of his gaze. "He already took you from me once without me

knowing. For me, there is no peril greater than a second separation.”

THOUGH E'NO HAD ONLY SPOKEN the truth, the timing could be better.

There were other pressing matters, and he'd told the others that they would rejoin the group presently. While they handled personal concerns, his progenitor would be plotting against them. And the other crew was idle too, waiting for more information.

Maddy drew in a shaky breath, tearing her gaze away with what seemed like great difficulty. "We should get back to it."

E'no had studied human faces and her expression told him she still cared. Those signs came in the shine of her eyes and the trembling of her lower lip. But it was impossible to quantify her emotions. He ached for the wounds she had suffered in his stead while he blithely went about his business with no idea that his heart had been cut out. But he merely nodded and led the way from the shuttle.

The others were waiting in Pierce's lab, a larger space for the whole group. It was even bigger than the one on the Vigilant with glowing white walls and a few customizable chairs. Pierce promptly claimed one, and Izzy sat next to her. Hayden propped himself against the wall while Grim stayed vigilant near the door. D'aroi and D'etor stood sharply, their fins flickering somewhere between unease and concern; E'milly's colors reflected her emotions. Maddy hopped on a constructor and perched like a mischievous Earth creature he'd read about; in that pose, there was something quite cattish about her, not just those light green eyes, either.

"I could go on for some time praising you for getting this far. I'd like to," he said, fronds a joyous yellow. E'no shifted to command violet as he continued, "We have celebrations ahead, but we have much to do first. And you must have questions."

Hayden was the first to speak up. “Pirates, huh? Where the hell are they?”

E’no glanced at Maddy, and she took her cue. “We don’t know exactly. From the debris field, we can be sure they were close when they started to maneuver. As for where they are now?” She shrugged.

There was no point in hiding the truth. “The Vigilant must be tracking them, but they’re not sharing that information. Earth has probably spotted the fleet by now as well. We’ll add a sensor suite to our plans for the base.”

“I’m more concerned about what we do when we find them,” Izzy said.

Pierce bounded to her feet, hands fisted at her sides. “A *fleet*? You’re not sending Maddy to fight them in a shuttle!”

He countered her outburst with calm. “Certainly not. *I’m* the combat pilot.”

“Still, one shuttle against a fleet!” Hayden radiated impatience, echoed in his movements. “What kind of fleet? How many ships? What are you planning?”

E’no shifted his display to a questioning orange; this was where he required input from the crew. They were smart and resourceful. Together they would find a way.

“It could be as many as a hundred, but we’re only interested in one, the gateway ship.” He had the task force’s full attention. “That will be the largest. It moves the fleet throughout the galaxy, apparently without traveling the intervening space. The Coalition isn’t sure how.”

“The Coalition has competition,” Grim surmised.

*A reasonable conclusion.*

“The rest of the fleet will be made up of known species in stolen ships. We know nothing about the aliens who operate the gateway ship, but the pirates would be stranded without them.”

“We fight our way through a hundred hostile ships?” Somehow Izzy made that sound reasonable. “Then we defeat

unknown enemies with superior technology.” She smiled and made an ‘easy-peasy’ gesture. “After that, we get corn dogs!”

Her bracing words had an instant effect on the team. Izzy was like a morale boost in human form.

“We’re going to need weapons.” Hayden seemed to be trying to be practical and hopeful. “Pierce can issue us all emitters.”

“Hand weapons and a shuttle won’t be enough,” Pierce said. She drew in a breath and fortified herself with a long look at Izzy. After regaining some fire, she addressed E’no. “I’ll whip up some ship busters with the big constructor the admiral gave us. We already have a launch area.”

“We cannot save ourselves or the Coalition by becoming killers,” he said sternly. “We must utilize more civilized tools.”

At that, Hayden snapped his fingers and smiled. “Show him your zapper, Pierce.”

Pierce uncovered the weapon she’d hidden in one of the lab constructors, three feet long with a fat stock and glowing clear tube for a barrel. “State of the art in Coalition style personal weaponry.” She tucked it in the crook of her elbow. “I’ll need a volunteer.”

“You planning to shoot somebody with that thing?” Grim asked.

Before Grim could object or volunteer, D’etor spoke. “Me. I’ll be the test target for your demonstration.” Their head fin angled forward. “I’m not afraid.” D’etor strode to the center of the room while the rest of the squad spread out along the walls.

“Is it safe for you to point that thing at D’etor?” If E’no read Hayden correctly, he was concerned for his teammate.

Pierce’s reply didn’t allay all uncertainty. “Depends. Sensors will adjust for any species in the Coalition database but some settings do more harm than others.”

Izzy interjected, “We’ve run a gazillion simulations since we showed you, Hayden. We wouldn’t hurt anyone on the

team.”

E’no’s frond display shifted, tinged with curiosity. “Settings? What are you proposing to show us?”

“I adapted the Coalition’s repurposing tech. This zapper can induce a half dozen different physical, mental, and emotional states in a target for a short time,” Pierce said. “Most settings are safe, but there are exceptions. If I hit D’etor with the illness setting, for example, they’d puke their lunch and soil their space suit but if it hit you or E’milly...”

“We’d eject our zard stones.” E’milly finished the sentence, displaying yellow. “Excuse my crudeness, please, captain.”

Pierce inclined her head. “Exactly. And that would take you out for a lot longer.”

Before E’no could respond, Hayden said, “Use the base setting. The same one you tested on me.”

Though he wasn’t like his progenitor, he still needed to approve the demonstration. So he appreciated it when Pierce said, “Captain?” and seemed to be awaiting confirmation.

E’no took a moment to consider, then with an imploring blue, he addressed D’etor. “You’re sure?”

D’etor drew to full attention, head fin fully erect. “Ready!”

Pierce aimed and pulled the trigger. E’no waited for some sign that the weapon had worked. Everyone else studied D’etor as he wavered his head fin.

“What’s going on? Why is everyone looking at me?” the private asked.

Maddy and D’aroi rushed to the confused test subject as Hayden explained, “Thirty seconds of recent memory erased and another few seconds before they can form new ones. And that’s the basic setting.”

E’no’s stones ground as he analyzed the possibilities. In such a short time, the achievement was staggering. “What else can this weapon do?”

Pierce replied, “Besides the confusion effect, there’s illness, tremors, mirth, terror, doubt, and remorse. I can add a few others.”

The captain didn’t like his own ruthlessness, but their situation was dire. “Could you make a larger one to replace one of the shuttle guns for ship-to-ship combat?”

“To zap a whole crew?” Pierce thought aloud. “Would depend on the size of the ship. I’d probably have to do away with the sensor identification feature and pick a safer setting. It will be complicated, but yes. A larger area of effect is possible.”

“How soon?”

+ + +

“Route the communication to the viewer,” High Admiral E’maleese ordered.

He enjoyed his pet officer. It was so easy to keep C’abil in constant terror.

The image of a pirate captain appeared. These creatures were even uglier when they were unkempt. “I am Captain C’anak of the wandering fleet. Who am I addressing?”

E’maleese put on a disdainful shade of command display. “High Admiral E’maleese of the Coalition ship, Vigilant.” This would be fun. “What demands would you like me to refuse?”

The pirate captain seemed to be startled by that response. Doubtless the imbecile had only dealt with lesser beings before. “High Admiral, we’ve noted the Coalition interest in this system. We have no desire to interfere. If you’ll supply us with a few items, we will leave in peace.”

E’maleese turned to a cold blue. “I don’t think so. Out of curiosity, what were you hoping to gain by importuning me?”

“A few constructors would be helpful as our numbers grow beyond the capacity of our ships. Provide us with a small, space-worthy craft and some constructors and we’ll trouble you no further.”



E'maleese controlled his fronds to prevent them from displaying his pleasure. *Now we're getting to the good part.* "You're incapable of troubling me, Captain C'anak. I simply do not wish to share anything with you. Return when you're starving or wounded and the Coalition may be charitable."

Now he'd discover how much spine the pirate captain had.

"The life-sustaining planet in this system is extremely fragile. And you have a small presence on its moon. The base also appears quite vulnerable."

*Diplomacy must be another of my strengths. I'm going to give these pirates nothing and in return they might give me everything.*

He spoke in a brusque tone. "The planet has been poisoned by its inhabitants. It is of no concern to the Coalition. The tiny, temporary base we have on the moon has all that you've asked for. Constructors and a shuttle, feel free to take them."

The pirate captain showed suspicion and hesitance, but ultimately said, "You must find the inhabitants expendable. But we accept your offer. Goodbye, High Admiral."

Lieutenant C'abil could not silence his laughter. E'maleese froze him with an icy stare. "Something amuses you?"

C'abil snapped to attention. "I merely thought to congratulate you. You care nothing for the humans, and you want Captain E'nosience to fail." C'abil was still too comfortable and spoke too freely in his presence. E'maleese would fix that. "You shared nothing and may get everything you want."

E'maleese showed his most powerful royal purple. "I *will* get everything that I want. I always do."

+ + +

Hayden took D'etor and D'aroi to install the upgraded sensing equipment.

Grim and Hayden had produced the new equipment from Coalition designs on file. While Pierce was constructing her ship zapper, Hayden intended to find the pirates. He also

wanted to learn more about his alien teammates. All three of them had emitters on their belts and zappers in holsters on their backs.

They completed the installation. As they started back to the shelter of the base, D'aroi broke the silence, "Is something troubling you? You've been very quiet."

Hayden had been hoping for a question like that; D'aroi was good people. "The only thing troubling me is those space pirates." He put a smile in his voice. "We did the job right without me yammering at you and I thought you might like a break from my voice."

D'aroi seemed cheerful too. "I like your voice, Sergeant Wilder. Whenever you want to talk, I will listen."

They were approaching the airlock.

"I know you will. You're both good soldiers and you won't ignore orders." He turned to face them as he explained, "Respecting that means *not* giving orders when they're unnecessary. Respecting you means not babbling at you when you could be thinking for yourselves."

As they entered the base, D'etor spoke. "Our briefing on humans said you were social beings that sometimes make sounds for no other reason than to comfort yourselves. C-designations do that too."

Hayden merely shrugged; he couldn't say exactly why he liked D'etor but he did. The alien was a brave soldier who didn't waste words. In some ways, he reminded Hayden of a young Grim. They entered the sensor suite that had been their first shelter on the moon and checked the viewers.

"Sensors are online," D'aroi reported, "and there are the pirates. The fleet is assembled halfway to Mars."

Hayden inspected the viewer. "Is that a half dozen close to us?"

"And approaching," D'etor confirmed. "There's another one farther away, coming fast." D'etor's voice was deceptively calm. "It's towing something, sergeant."

He opened the emergency channel without hesitation. “Get in your vacc suits now. We got incoming!”

+ + +

Maddy put on her suit as fast as she could.

Nearby E’no stood waiting for her. *Our lives are on the line, and he’s watching out for me first? Maybe...*

No, it wasn’t the time. It might not be for a while, either. The mission came first. Some things were more important than one woman’s heart.

E’no displayed calm until Maddy got her boots on, then he flashed to an urgent red. “We must get to the shuttle immediately.”

Maddy followed him double time. *He must have a plan.* E’no would never abandon the base or the task force. As they ran by, E’no directed E’milly and Izzy. “Be ready. I’ll issue orders as soon as I confer with Sergeant Wilder.”

“Yes, Captain.” E’milly didn’t salute, but to Maddy, she seemed ready for action. She touched Izzy on the shoulder as they passed, no time for more. E’no was already moving at a speed that was hard to match. When they got in the shuttle, E’no immediately powered up the shields and asked, “Can you give me a direct link to the sensor suite?”

The shuttle had its own shields, another layer of protection. Her heart swelled when she realized he had led her to the safest place on the base. Quietly, she made the connection and put the image on the viewer. Several small ships hovered a few klicks from the base and another farther out but approaching fast with an asteroid in tow.

E’no spoke over the comm. “Will they break through the shields?”

“I believe that’s what they intend,” D’etor said. “With enough speed and mass, they could shatter this moon. Judging by their current trajectory, I believe they intend to smash our shields and gain access to the base.”

E'no showed a joyful yellow for a split second even though Maddy was the only one to see his colors. She wondered if he was managing his frond to display to reassure her. But E'no also had a reckless side; Maddy wasn't sure what he might do.

“Task Force Vigilant, if the pirate's calculations are correct, they plan to knock out our shields.” E'no showed royal violet; his voice too was commanding. “We can't predict the damage, so take cover. E'milly and Pierce, get the shield generator back on as soon as possible after impact. Sergeant Wilder, you lead the rest of the team against the raiders.”

“And what are *we* doing?” Maddy really wanted to know.

E'no's happy yellow came back, as if he lived for moments like this. “We're capturing some pirate ships.”

THE MOON QUAKED.

In fact, the entire base shook but it didn't fall apart. Hayden drew his emitter and said, "E'milly, Pierce, get that force shield back up. The rest of you, with me."

As they raced into the bay, the shuttle was launching. It zoomed out low. Hayden could see the pirate vessels swerving as it swooped at them. "Captain E'no's giving us some cover, let's find positions."

They hurried outside through the open bay door and took shelter in the depressions around the base made by their excavations for constructor fodder. Hayden tucked the emitter away and drew his zapper. "Set these on illness."

"Sergeant, I'm not sure the Coalition would approve of using the illness setting," D'aroi objected. "It will cause the pirates great physical discomfort."

He smiled. "Don't worry about that. You, Grim, and D'etor will cause them greater discomfort when you crash into them. Capture them as Izzy and me zap them."

Hayden counted twenty pirates approaching in sloppy formation with two groups further behind. A few flashes from pirate fire hit the shuttle bay wall. Either the pirates were bad shots or they were almost as civilized as the Coalition. Either way, the pirates were in trouble. Hayden let them get closer, judging the distance for D'aroi's charge from her performance when they'd liberated Izzy and Grim back on Earth.

"Attack!" he yelled and the task force went into action.

The ten pirates in front were already doubling over when D'etor and D'aroi collided with the group, knocking sick pirates into those who hadn't yet been zapped. Grim wasn't far behind them and he fired as he charged. It took seconds to subdue the first group. A flash struck D'etor; they flew back and bounced hard off the ground.

The second and third groups had opened fire. Grim and D'aroi dove to the ground, taking cover among the downed first group.

Hayden yelled, "C'mon!"

He led Izzy to join the three spearheaders.

"I'm fine," D'etor said over the comms.

"Bullshit!" Izzy swore as she dove on D'etor and slapped a patch on their suit. "D'etor's bleeding, Hayden!"

He ordered, "Switch zappers to terror," and fired at the nearest cluster. Affected pirates fled; others bolted as well, confused by their companions' actions.

"Sergeant." Grim spoke before D'aroi could. "The Coalition wouldn't approve of us using fallen enemy soldiers as cover either."

"Then the Coalition will love this."

Hayden lifted an alien pirate in front of him and pointed his zapper at its head. He turned to make sure all the pirates saw the threat. They did; the other two groups lowered their weapons and backed away.

"Grab some prisoners and let's get to the base." Hayden scowled. "It won't take them long to regroup."

+ + +

Maddy prepared herself as E'no powered up the shuttle and the launch door opened.

"Can you operate the guns?" The warm orange of his fronds showed it wasn't exactly a question.

Maddy wondered why she wasn't scared. Maybe it was because having him close by made everything better. Even in bad circumstances, she wanted him beside her. The emotions she had been repressing threatened to bubble over, and she tamped them down with heroic effort.

*I should get a medal. But it's possible nobody will even know what we were trying to do up here if things go bad.*

“I helped install these guns.” She didn’t think E’no needed reminding. “These are deadly weapons. Pierce’s zapper isn’t on board yet.”

She strapped herself into the gunner’s seat with a sense of resigning herself to fate. Everything was in their hands, and she’d try her best. But all the ways this could go bad would leave her weak in the knees, if she let herself focus on them.

“We won’t kill anyone.” E’no was watching the viewer; it showed Hayden and his small squad entering the shuttle bay.

E’no launched and looped the shuttle around, swooping on the pirates to slow their advance on the base. Then he flew right at the enemy ships.

“Target their landing cone.”

Though she’d helped install the guns and knew how to use them, she had never fired them. Now she was in combat, the moon’s surface rushing by at impossible speed while she tried to get a lock on the thrust cone the small shuttle was perched upon.

“They’re just little shuttles, smaller than ours!”

“You saw them on the viewer,” E’no pointed out.

“I thought they’d be bigger!” Clenching her jaw, she tried to wrestle the landing gear of the first pirate shuttle into her sights. She fired and a cloud of moon dust erupted around the vehicle. A direct hit to the landing support—the shuttle tilted over.

“Well done!” E’no’s orange fronds lightened to yellow; he was enjoying this.

“Thanks.”

He really did possess a sort of otherworldly, ethereal beauty. Maybe it was irresistible attraction speaking, but sometimes he almost glowed when she glimpsed him in her peripheral vision. *No. Stop thinking how alluring he is.*

“Let’s take out another!” E’no sped the shuttle through a tight turn and the next pirate craft was dead ahead.

Maddy's stomach lurched into her throat, but she focused on her target. "This isn't a game to me!"

Despite her protest, she fired again. This time her shots splashed the underbelly of a pirate shuttle and destroyed its ground support. It fell with a clumsy flop, kicking up more moon dust. The other four shuttles were taking off but E'no accelerated in ascent, then came crashing down on the rearmost ship. Ramming his shields against theirs he forced the smaller shuttle down. It bounced on the moon surface, and E'no hovered, making sure it couldn't take off again.

The other three skiffs fled at top speed. They didn't seem interested in fighting.

E'no opened a channel. "This is Captain E'nosience of Task Force Vigilant addressing all hostiles on this moon's surface." His fronds winked a happy yellow, then changed to command purple. "You're defeated. You cannot return to your fleet without my cooperation. I don't wish to harm you further but that decision is yours."

Hayden's voice crackled in the cockpit. "This is Sergeant Wilder. We've captured five pirates and chased off the rest. Force shields are up, you can come home."

E'no continued to address the pirates. "Acknowledge!"

Hayden spoke again. "Captain E'nosience, come in..."

Maddy answered since E'no was in the middle of negotiations. "We hear you, Hayden. The captain is occupied right now. Can you put Grim in charge of the prisoners and get out here? E'no just captured the rest of the ground forces and three pirate crafts."

Before Hayden could answer, a resigned response came from the downed shuttle. "Acknowledged, Captain. We surrender."

+ + +

High Admiral E'maleese's fronds shimmered crimson, trembling with his outrage. "What just happened?" he snapped.



“Well, Admiral...” the lieutenant began.

“Not you!” Crimson deepened to nearly black. “I do not wish to hear from *you*.” He turned to his most cooperative officer. “Captain D’orf, what is your assessment?”

D’orf’s head fin bent nearly in half with deference. “It seems that Captain E’nosience repelled the pirates’ attempt to take the base’s assets.”

“*How?*” E’maleese demanded. “Pirate fleets typically have emitter defenses. Are these pirates *so* backward they have no preparations against Coalition weapons?”

Lieutenant C’abil broke the silence. “Perhaps the captain’s unit didn’t use Coalition weapons. The guns they installed on the shuttle fired deadly projectiles and explosives.”

“Aha!” Perhaps there was a reason the admiral hadn’t repurposed this annoying little lieutenant yet. “Then E’nosience is a criminal. A murderer!” Again, E’maleese addressed D’orf, “How many casualties were there in that little fracas?”

D’orf scrutinized the data, then checked it again. “Apparently none, Admiral. Our sensors show no harm to any of the pirates, Private D’etor was wounded though.” His spines extended as if in preparation for an attack, and his head fin continued to show the greatest respect.

“You expect me to believe the renegade Captain E’nosience used illegal weapons against the pirates and the *only* casualty was one of his own?” Incredulity didn’t begin to cover the admiral’s reaction.

*My own offspring is my greatest failure.*

“Merely wounded, sir. Even with only the medpacks the task force has, they should make a full recovery. As for ‘renegade’, we have no evidence that the captain disobeyed any of your orders, Admiral.”

“Lieutenant, it is apparent that the burden of our endeavors has become too much for you.” E’maleese consoled himself by terrorizing the junior officer. He willed his fronds to royal

violet. “You may watch me obtain the evidence before I relieve you of duty. Hail Captain E’nosience immediately.”

+ + +

E’nosience spoke into the shuttle comms. “Report, Sergeant Wilder.”

He glanced at Maddy; she’d performed wonderfully but she was clearly unsettled by the ordeal. He wanted only to have her safe and happy again.

Hayden’s voice came back. “We took the pirate’s weapons and herded them back on their shuttles. Only one skiff can fly but they all have life support. Grim has five pirates at the base, there’s no room for them. As is, we got six shuttles worth of pirates crammed into three.” Hayden sounded a little frustrated. “We only have temporary solutions.”

E’no tried to listen carefully but he couldn’t stop watching Maddy. What was her reaction to all this? He let his display become a concerned blue knowing that she alone might recognize it. “Private Rivers.” For the moment, he left Hayden’s remarks unanswered. “How is D’etor? Are the prisoners giving you any trouble?”

Grim’s deep voice conveyed a smile, an expression rarely seen on his face. “D’etor is sleeping with their head fin at a jaunty angle if I’ve learned to judge. The medpack indicator says D’etor will be fine and I think that’s right.” He sounded more serious when he spoke of the prisoners, “Got the pirates locked to the shuttle bay wall, they’re getting uncomfortable. Their weapons are keyed to each pirate’s biosignature so we can’t use them. We can feed the guns to the constructors and make something good out of ’em.”

Before E’no could give any orders, an unmistakable and unwelcome voice sounded on the comm. “Vigilant to Captain E’nosience, respond.”

E’no displayed a reassuring green for Maddy, who definitely flinched. “This is the captain. You have instructions?”

“Indeed I do,” E’maleese snarled. “Begin by telling me what you’re doing right now.”

E’no and Maddy exchanged glances, then E’no said. “We were attacked by pirates. I’m determining the best way to return them to their fleet.”

“Let me handle that.” E’maleese didn’t sound happy about the captain’s victory. “I will send a shuttle to bring them to the Vigilant.”

E’no turned a defiant red. “Begging your pardon, Admiral. That’s not Coalition policy, only Coalition citizens are subject to our laws and we do not detain captives.”

“I will take care of their return for you,” the admiral insisted.

He didn’t shift his frond display. If anything, the red only grew brighter. That would infuriate his progenitor. “I dealt with the attackers. It’s best for me to negotiate with the fleet to ensure they get their people back and that there will be no further hostilities.”

“You must obey the chain of command,” E’maleese reminded him. “Yield the pirates to me.”

“The pirates claim you sent them to take our shuttle and constructors yet I received no orders to give them anything. Was there a breakdown in the chain of command?”

E’maleese shouted through the comm link, “You’d believe the pirates?”

With effort, he returned to a peaceful green; conciliation might serve better. “The Vigilant should have known of their presence yet my team received no warning. I find it difficult to understand how you were unaware of the debris field you sent us into when we landed but the Vigilant did not alert us about that either.”

“How dare you question me!” Maddy flinched at the admiral’s retort.

Despite the danger, E’no relished taking on the admiral. “I’m merely suggesting, if these pirates have stealth

technology that can confound the Vigilant's sensors, it would be safest to risk only my small crew dealing with them. We can't endanger the ship."

There was a long pause. E'no guessed the admiral was trying to get what he wanted without admitting he'd withheld information from the task force. Perhaps there were officers on the Vigilant that weren't aware of his treachery.

"You deal with the pirates, Captain," E'maleese spat. "You'll get no help from the Vigilant. Recall that you're on Earth's moon with a mission. I expect reports every cycle."

E'no shone with a relieved yellow. "The mission is always on my mind, Admiral."

MADDY COULD TELL THAT E'NO was in a hurry, but he tried to conceal it by managing his frond display.

The affectionate green was only tinged at the edges, revealing the truth to her discerning gaze. He spoke in a measured tone. "You were trained in diplomatic relations with extraterrestrials. You'll be my liaison with the pirate fleet. Start with our captives."

There was no reason to argue. She was a member of his crew and the most qualified to negotiate; it was a relief to have an assignment she'd officially been trained for instead of serving as a pilot or gunner. Maddy never imagined that she would use what she'd learned in the simulator. When she'd started practicing, it was more like a game.

"I'll take care of it," she promised.

E'no let his frond cape brush her as he slid past, and it wasn't accidental. His people didn't do casual contact. "I know. Having you near grants me complete peace of mind."

Her heart fluttered. Every little thing he said felt right. The captain left, proving how fully he trusted her to do this right. She smiled as she activated the comm.

A D-designate alien responded to her hail, the angle of his head fin indicating caution. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Madison Stern. You can call me Maddy. I'll be speaking for Moonbase Vigilant."

"Captain D'yimmer."

There were others in view; the pirate shuttle currently held more than twice its intended capacity. It was standing room only in the small craft. She studied their body language, trying to sleuth out what she could.

"Nice to meet you. Let's see what we can do to get you home."

“Home?” The alien made what sounded like a scoffing noise. “How would that *ever* be possible?”

“I don’t understand. You don’t wish to rejoin the fleet?”

D’yimmer replied, his head fin at half-mast. “My wishes don’t factor. It will be difficult. Operating this overcrowded shuttle is next to impossible. All the control stations are holding three instead of one. And the fleet itself is already overpopulated. If you repair our two downed shuttles and allow the other three to collect their crews—”

“No pirate vessels will be permitted to return to this moon at this time.” Captain D’yimmer didn’t seem stubborn, so she pressed on. “The shuttles that retreated are empty. They could take extra passengers.”

“Without the two you captured, there won’t be room for all of us.”

*I need to come up with a plan.*

E’no never rejected an option just because it seemed ridiculous. Consider that he’d brought humans on board the admiral’s ship, jumped from a shuttle to save Pierce, and...

*He fell in love with me.*

“The disabled shuttles belong to the Coalition,” she said. “We accepted them as part of your surrender. We’ll build a shelter for your extra crew here on this moon. When we can transport everyone safely, will you return to the fleet?”

D’yimmer’s head fin indicated that he was considering the offer. “We could. But without those ships, there will be no room in the fleet for all my people. I’ve never heard of the Coalition taking prisoners.”

*Maybe the ridiculous option will work.*

“We’ll have housing ready in less than a cycle. Retain as much of your crew as possible and return to the fleet.” She tried to offer a compromise. E’no had put her in charge of negotiations, he could find a way to make the deal work. “You’re not prisoners. When you return to the fleet, inform your leader that we await contact to discuss the repatriation of

the rest of your people. Tell them to contact the moonbase directly. The Vigilant will not be involved. Do you agree to our terms?”

“Yes, if you’ll provide relief for those inside the damaged shuttles also. They’re just as packed as this ship.”

Maddy nodded, offering verbal confirmation in case he didn’t understand. “We’ll aid them as well. We have a deal.”

+ + +

Hayden clenched his jaw, surveying the scene.

Long-term, a nine-person task force couldn’t contain fifty captives. Oddly, the pirates didn’t try anything while his crew built the new annex; that was when he would have struck. If he were in charge, the pirates would have built their own damn shelter, but forced labor ran counter to Coalition policy. Being civilized got on his nerves, and now they had to care for fifty pirates.

*This is such bullshit.*

The new area was bigger than the rest of the strike force base, a big dome with cots, makeshift force shield, and a cobbled-together atmosphere producer. There were food constructors near the door. As far as Hayden was concerned, the pirates could feed themselves. He checked the restrictions on the constructors to make sure they could only produce food.

A group of captives were playing what looked like a complicated form of tag, stopping often to discuss the rules. Hayden watched them with a skeptical eye. Was it possible they were acting guileless so he’d let down his guard? He’d wanted to take their vacc suits but E’no had vetoed that idea.

“Where would they go? We already have their weapons. If we take their vacc suits, we’ll have to add sanitation facilities. The aliens in the pirate fleet are more diverse than those on the Vigilant. We’re not devoting additional time or resources to their temporary shelter; we have other duties.”

There certainly were some strange sorts among the pirates. Hayden was trying to remember if he’d seen the squid-faced

one in a Coalition dossier when a C-designated alien approached.

“That’s close enough,” Hayden warned, checking the settings on his zapper.

The pirate held up his hands and angled his horns. “My name is C’aloo. You’re from the life-supporting planet of this system?”

*Friendly. That’s just how I would play it.*

“You can call me Sergeant Wilder. That’s all you need to know.” Hayden wasn’t about to share information for the pirates to report to their officers. “Keep to yourselves and give me no trouble. We’ll have you back with your fleet as soon as we can.”

“I’m in no hurry.” C’aloo glanced around and spread his arms. “I’ve never been in such a large space. My friends are trying to remember how to play R’eteg. None of them have played it since they were young. I’ve never played it, I was born on a fleet ship.” He shrugged. “Maybe when they’ve agreed on the rules, I’ll join in.”

Hayden looked past C’aloo at the group of pirates chasing each other in circles and dodging about. Carefree as little kids, they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

*If we give them a ball, they might never want to leave.*

+ + +

E’no assigned Maddy and Hayden to interview the pirates.

There were a lot of different types of aliens, and he’d review the specific details at length later. But for now, they needed to debrief as a team. He set up a comm link while Maddy collated the data.

“Task Force Vigilant, I’d prefer we had this discussion in person, but prevailing conditions make that impossible.” He paused to collect his thoughts. “There are too few of us and too many tasks at hand.”

“You can say that again,” Pierce muttered.



He ignored that little remark and went on, “Soon I’ll negotiate with the pirate leader about the return of their people.” He glanced at Maddy, his fronds shifting to an inquiring amethyst. “What do we know about them?”

“There’s a lot of them,” Hayden chimed in. “The shelter we made is the most room many have ever had to move around. They must be packed like sardines in their ships.”

Maddy confirmed, “The fleet is overcrowded.”

“Most of them are from Coalition worlds,” D’aroi said. “I don’t understand why they live this way. Are they so different from us?”

Izzy put in, “They’re all so young. Most were born in the fleet or joined as children.”

“You say ‘joined’.” Grim tilted his head with a troubled expression. “Could that mean conscripted?”

E’milly seemed to be pondering the situation as well. “None of them complained about being pirates.”

“None of them complained about being captured either,” Izzy said. “I think some of them are happier here.”

Hayden’s voice sounded somber. “I doubt it’s much fun on those pirate ships and I agree with Izzy. They looked young to me, running around in here.”

Maddy added, “We only know about the ones we captured. We’re making assumptions about the fleet. It’s true the two captains I interviewed are young adults. The one I negotiated with appeared to be about the same age.”

Pierce swore, and it was colorful. “Children. Fucking kids. Who would make a crew like that? An entire fleet?”

As their captain, E’no experienced the same shock. To him, they seemed more like refugees than pirates. And he never could walk away from someone who needed saving. Perhaps the problem could be solved in another fashion.

“Did we learn anything about the gateway ship?” he asked.

“Not much,” Maddy replied. “We kept the questions simple. I didn’t want it to feel like an interrogation. Things have been cordial so far. It’s better for us if they’re not angry or afraid.”

Grim’s voice echoed like he was moving around in the sensor suite. “So we know nothing about our target except it exists. One big ship in the middle of all those little ones.”

“I did ask some about it,” Izzy admitted. “They say no one ever goes on it but they have a lot of crazy ideas about it. Some say it’s fully automated or crewed by robots.”

“Robots?” D’aroi sounded confused, “The Coalition has strict restrictions on artificial intelligence. We only deal with organic beings.”

*That’s intriguing.*

E’no might have the beginnings of a plan, the seeds anyway. “Pierce, when will the ship zapper be installed?”

“In an hour, or as you say, a span or so.” Judging by her tone, Pierce enjoyed her work. “Just finished it, we’ll haul it to the shuttle and set her up right away.”

That was a start, but E’no needed more. “How long will it take to repair our new shuttles and equip them with zappers?”

“If you can get them to the shuttle bay, I can fix them,” Pierce reported. “Maddy shot them up pretty good, we’ll have to replace their thrust cones.” She paused to calculate. “Installing new zappers...if you let Izzy and E’milly help, a full cycle.”

It would have to do. E’no had one last question. “Do you think some of the pirates might want to stay?”

“Why would we want them?” Hayden demanded.

“They won’t be joining the task force, but we could use support or security personnel that owe their loyalty to us, not the admiral.”

“By offering a safe haven, we expand our power base,” D’etor said.

What a sharp soldier that one was. E'no bloomed in the color of quiet triumph. The admiral would never see this move coming.

“Perhaps we don't need to attack the pirate fleet. We can rescue it instead.”

“YOU WANT TO PUT A pirate base on the moon? How’s that in the best interest of Earth *or* the Coalition?”

Hayden couldn’t decide if that was a complaint or not. He’d never served under an officer as unconventional as himself. Normally, he’d be looking for loopholes, but he never had to maneuver around the captain’s orders. Instead, he had to be creative to navigate within the captain’s commands.

“Evaluate that for yourself,” the captain said. “My orders stand.”

The debrief ended soon after, freeing the task force to return to their duties, and he considered the implications. Willing pirates would join the Coalition. Those who refused would have to negotiate with Earth. *The Coalition gets rid of a pirate fleet and Earth gains a space force.* It sounded kooky enough to be one of his own ideas. Now he needed to be inventive enough to make it work.

He studied the aliens in the annex. Their strange game was still going; when some dropped out, others joined in. Only the rest periods paused it. Hayde recognized C’aloo skipping and dodging with the rest.

Hayden cleared his throat and addressed the room. “Listen up!”

The commotion stopped and everyone turned to face him. Hayden put on a non-threatening smile. “We’ve got a deal to begin returning you to the wandering fleet, but we’ll only be able to send half of you back in the first run. I’m asking for volunteers to stay and wait for the second trip. If you’re interested, step forward.”

“Pick me,” C’aloo called.

Others echoed the request.

Hayden chuckled when he saw that more than half their number wanted to stick around. E'no's unusual idea might be a good one.

“Before you volunteer, I have to warn you. Captain E'no wants this facility upgraded and anyone who stays will be part of the work crew.”

Nobody bowed out. In fact, even more joined the lineup.

That was a surprise, but Hayden stuck with the plan. “Captains, decide who to take with you. We leave at the start of the next cycle, we can take thirty with us. Be ready.”

The next morning, he watched the three shuttles land for loading. He'd chatted a little with K'enir and E'nela last night. They seemed decent, but he still didn't trust them. K'enir was one of the new aliens, a squid-faced individual who was impossible to read. E'nela was more familiar, but Hayden didn't have Maddy's knack with frond colors. The two pirate captains each led a group to their assigned shuttles, accompanied by D'aroi and E'milly. The age and wear on the pirate shuttles were more apparent in contrast to the new thrust cones Pierce had attached to their underbellies.

Captain E'no and Maddy boarded the task force shuttle with the two pirate shuttles tethered to its controls. Maddy and E'no could fly the other two transports from their cockpit. He understood *why* E'no and Maddy had to make the trip; the captain was their best pilot and Maddy had done all the negotiating.

Those two obviously had a bond. Hayden was starting to think this E'no might be Maddy's lost love. Which might complicate the mission in ways he couldn't fathom just yet. Since the last message from Admiral Asshole, they'd been practically inseparable. His gut churned; those two were vital to the plan to save Earth. And now they were flying off to rendezvous with pirates. *I can't feel easy about that.* Sure, the captured pirates seemed naive and nice, but Hayden was an expert at *seeming*.

If shit went sideways, all could be lost.

+ + +

High Admiral E'maleese had to act fast.

With his offspring away from the Vigilant, it felt as if he might be losing some control over the situation. But with the right vector of approach, a crisis could become an opportunity. When he'd repurposed Lieutenant C'abil the first time, the adjustment hadn't fully mitigated his propensity to babble. The second fixed the problem. After two repurposings, C'abil didn't recall that he ought to be petrified in the admiral's presence. Yet those lessons could be repeated, so perhaps it wasn't all bad.

“Get me Captain C'anak,” he ordered.

Soon, the pirate leader appeared on the viewer. “Yes, Admiral?”

“You failed to capitalize on the situation. How, exactly, did you train your people?”

“I doubt that you would understand,” C'anak said in a tone that infuriated him.

He willed himself calm, his fronds reflecting the impressive self-mastery. “That is beside the point. You failed to acquire necessary resources, but there will be a second chance. They had the advantage in the battle for the moonbase, but you will be in a stronger position when they return your personnel.”

He had been monitoring the comms and had a good sense of what would come to pass. It would be ideal if the pirates handled former ambassador Madison J. Stern. In fact, he'd provide an incentive for the encounter to skew hostile.

“A human negotiator will accompany the captain. If she is neutralized as part of the exchange, I will give you all the supplies you requested before.”

Somehow, he kept his fronds from changing hue. E'maleese had no intention of keeping that promise, but C'anak was desperate and couldn't know his plan. The admiral reckoned that bargains made with outlaws didn't need to be

honored. They were tools for him to use and discard, perfect for imposing his will without leaving a trace.

The silence went on longer than he expected.

“Did you understand my offer?” he finally asked.

“I believe so. You want us to kill one of the humans, the captain’s companion.”

“That’s such a violent word,” E’maleese said in his kindest tone. “And have you decided how you’ll greet her?”

“I have not. After your claim that we could retrieve supplies from the moonbase, I don’t trust your words, Admiral. I will consider your proposal and decide what’s best for my people.” The pirate leader terminated the communication without awaiting a response.

The old C’abil would have made an annoying and inappropriate response, giving the admiral an excuse to punish him. Now he stood quiet, leaving E’maleese to steep in undiluted rage. He embraced the feeling and let it wash over him; there was strength in such emotions.

One day soon, they would *all* suffer for blocking his path to power.

+ + +

With a faint smile, Maddy imagined how shocked her parents would be if they knew she was piloting three ships at the same time.

They’d despaired of her ever leaving the library and getting a real job. Since she didn’t work nine to five, this might not count in their eyes either. She must’ve given some sign of her melancholy because E’no stepped up behind her, radiating concern.

“Something is wrong?” he asked.

“Not with the mission. I was just reflecting on my life choices.”

“You have regrets.” It wasn’t a question.

Probably she should answer in the affirmative. Because who didn't? But when she glanced up from the controls, she saw the tentative hue of his fronds and she couldn't make herself say something that might hurt him. Time had softened her anger and her determination to keep him at a distance. And now it was just the two of them, flying toward Mars for more than a full day.

"No," she said softly. "I'd do it all again."

Their best and brightest memories marched through her head, sparking a genuine smile. He drew closer as if pulled by forces beyond his control. It had always been that way between—from the first moment he landed on Earth and she was assigned to parley. Maddy set the controls to auto, as that would be fine for a while. The system would notify her if it encountered conditions outside acceptable parameters.

Then she stood, voluntarily decreasing the space between them. It wasn't quite an invitation, but it was the most she had allowed since she realized he was the one she'd loved and lost. An olive branch of sorts, though nerves still quivered through her at taking the risk again.

Or maybe it wasn't nerves. He'd *always* had the ability to make her shake.

Even if he didn't remember.

E'no inhaled slowly, seeming to savor the scent of her skin. And his obvious pleasure did things to her. "I look at you, and I *ache*."

"Me too," she whispered.

"May I...?"

Whatever he was asking, she gave permission at once. "Please."

He brushed her hair back, revealing her cheek. Not such a wildly intimate move at first, but then he leaned in and nuzzled his face against hers, as if he was marking her like a cat. In what seemed like another life, she'd teased him about that, and now her breath went shaky and shallow at how history repeated.



“You don’t like it?” he asked.

“Quite the opposite.” She gathered some composure, enough to respond properly. “It reminds me of old times.”

“I did this before?”

“Oh yes.” Breathy tone.

E’no came closer still, so that his fronds wrapped around her, feathery and silky at the same time. And somehow, it was still the sexiest thing she’d ever experienced. She recalled how it felt against her bare skin, his body against hers, and she gasped. Need quaked through her, urgent and sharp as a knife. Her nipples went tight, and her core melted, hot and slick, yearning for him alone. His scent deepened, sweetness and spice that expressed how much he wanted her too.

“I want to know how it was for us.” His voice rasped more than normal, another sign that it was becoming difficult for him to resist.

Maddy smiled. “It was lightning and thunder. And it was also the delight of curling up together when the storm abated.”

He nuzzled her throat and nipped a little. Her knees nearly buckled.

“If I could, I’d steal the stars for you. But they’re already in your eyes.”

“That is an *amazing* line,” she said, trying not to show how moved she was.

“It’s the truth. Your eyes are the color of hope.”

She couldn’t help it; she nuzzled him back, finding the spot that drove him wild before. It was an unfair advantage because she recalled every touch, every breath, every sigh. But who said life was fair?

Her very civilized Coalition lover growled a bit. “We need more time. And better surroundings. When we come together again, it shouldn’t be rushed. Or on a shuttle floor.”

That made her laugh softly. “It’s *when*, is it?”

“You have the right to refuse.” E’no sounded as though those words pained him. “But I *hope* it’s when.” Before she could react, he went on, “I’m not sure I can live without you. Perhaps I can, but it will be a hollow existence without my heart.”

When he said things like that, what woman could hope to resist him?

+ + +

The trip was excruciatingly slow.

Not least because E’no knew something beautiful awaited on the other side. But they finally drew within hailing distance, and he watched the three pirate skiffs getting closer on the viewer.

He opened a channel to his own shuttles carrying the captives to be returned.

“Captain E’nela. Captain K’enir.” He showed a hopeful light blue. “Be ready, your friends are almost here to reclaim you. Sensors show three shuttles with crews of fifteen each approaching.”

E’nela’s fronds flashed alarm red for a moment before she regained control. K’enir didn’t even try to hide his stress. “Forty-five in three ships? Has the fleet become even more crowded in our absence? That leaves little room for us.”

E’no changed his display to command purple, “I repeat, you should be prepared.” He cut the link and turned to Maddy. “Looks like you were right.”

“You said they were pirates.” Maddy’s face creased with worry. “I only asked if we should expect them to behave like Earth pirates.”

“The shuttles require a crew of five, at most, to operate.” The blue of his fronds darkened, as he shared her concern. “That leaves a potential three boarding parties of ten or more each.”

She studied the viewer. “D’aroi can handle herself. How about E’milly?”

He didn't try to control the meditative mauve. "She excelled in every test, and she trained faithfully with the rest of the task force."

"She's dedicated," Maddy said. "You're her idol, a childhood hero. She'd do anything for you. Even die for you."

E'no's stones ground at the prospect of such a catastrophic outcome. *What if I've ordered her to do just that?*

E'no raised his two shuttles on the comms again. "Extend your docking tubes. It's almost time for your return." His fronds shifted to command purple, tinged with orange. "Please continue broadcasting, I wish to observe that your return goes as agreed. We will make you privy to all communication with your fleet." He pretended not to notice K'enir's tentacle scrunch and E'nela's fearful dark blue fronds.

At his signal, Maddy hailed the pirates and soon the face of Captain D'yimmer appeared on the viewer. "We're here to collect our own as agreed." His spines were down but his head fin twitched.

"We're ready." Maddy betrayed no sign of her unease.

E'no took pride in her calm demeanor.

Pirate shuttles pulled alongside the other two ships he commanded. The docking tubes joined and he switched their view to the ship interiors. His captives stood in lines, waiting to enter the tubes. The moment the iris opened, pirates with clubs rushed in and subdued everyone aboard. D'aroi and E'milly offered resistance, but E'milly was overpowered first. It took eight pirates to get D'aroi on the floor. Mentally, he saluted their performance.

*Excellent. Make it convincing. They believe they've won.*

D'yimmer addressed Maddy again. "Captain C'anak has instructed me to renegotiate. You will relinquish control of our ships and surrender immediately."

"What of our captives?" Maddy asked.

E'no strapped into the gunner's seat and allowed his fronds to flare yellow; he was out of D'yimmer's sight, and she would

understand the subtext.

“We cannot allow repurposed Coalition spies amongst the fleet.” D’yimmer’s head fin stood confidently. “They will be jettisoned and you will yield.”

On that cue, D’aroi and E’milly produced their zappers and began firing. Almost as quickly, former pirates rose and attacked their new captors. The fight was swift and brutal. In their situation, E’no would have been outraged over the treachery and utter disregard for their former comrades. With the shuttles recaptured, E’milly and D’aroi led the others up the docking tubes to take the pirates’ ships

E’no did not misinterpret Maddy’s smile. He relished in it as she told D’yimmer, “Here’s our counteroffer. You’ll give us two more skiffs and flee in terror.”

*Time to test Pierce’s handiwork.* Without hesitation, E’no fired the zapper on D’yimmer’s ship. The response was instantaneous; the larger ship raced back toward the fleet at maximum acceleration.

E’no spoke over the comms, showing a worried blue. “E’milly! D’aroi! Report! Are you hurt? Were there any casualties?”

“We’re fine, Captain.” E’milly sounded excited.

“Easy work,” D’aroi reported in a matter-of-fact tone, “but the captains would like to speak with you.”

He changed to command purple. “K’enir and E’nela, I’m sorry that your return didn’t go as planned.”

“Are you certain?” E’nela asked. “Apparently, you had a plan.”

K’enir’s voice throbbed with anger. “If it had gone according to the fleet’s plan, we’d all be dead.”

“The Coalition’s reputation for repurposing has made it impossible for us to return.” E’nela’s green did not denote surprise.

“But you haven’t been repurposed and you won’t be forced to join the Coalition if you return to the moonbase.” He asked

a question, even though he knew the answer to give them the sense of being free to choose. “Are you willing to pilot the new shuttles?”

“We’ll also keep the new captives under control.” E’nela’s green denoted she was at peace with her new situation.

“We must hurry,” K’enir said, tentacles revealing major agitation. “The fleet will hunt us down.”

WHEN THE CAT WENT AWAY, the mice would play, or so the saying went.

But Hayden wasn't a mouse, and he worked his ass off to improve the base before the captain got back. E'no had said they shouldn't waste time or resources before. But he'd said nothing about what Hayden could do once they left.

Loopholes were a maverick's best friend.

It didn't sit right, making their 'guests' stay in vacc suits constantly. His first order of business was getting hygiene facilities set up, then he made more furniture. People shouldn't be stacked up against the walls like tentpoles. He hadn't been fully on board with taking in this space flotsam, but if he was doing something, he'd damn well do it right.

"Done yet?" Grim asked.

He hadn't heard the big man approaching, no mystery there. Grim had so much training that he was like a ghost, all light-stepping proficiency. Hayden groaned, stretching as he worked the kinks out from his back. The bruise he'd taken felt like it was healing okay, just some residual soreness. That was another bonus to being the de facto man in charge. Nobody could tell him where or how he ought to be working.

Instead of answering, he posed another question. "Can you think of anything else they might need?"

"The assurance that we won't shove them outside without their suits if they put a foot out of line?" It didn't sound like Grim was joking.

"E'no wouldn't do that. He's Coalition."

"They're scared of *you*," Grim pointed out.

Yeah, he'd gone hard on them, testing to see how they'd react. But most of them truly were like children, and he was

starting to regret his initial approach. There might not have been any need for a bad cop in this situation.

“They’ll get over it.”

“I have an idea, if you’re interested,” Grim said.

“I’m listening.”

“I’ve been feeling cooped up. I could take some of them with me, map the

topography. We have scans, but it’s not the same as a visual inspection.”

Hayden laughed. “You just want to be the first man to go hiking on the moon.”

“Make sure they spell my name right in the record books.” That was a tacit admission of the rightness of that statement.

“Are you asking for my approval, inviting me to join, or telling me your plan?”

Grim smirked slightly. “Which one gets me outside?”

He thought for a moment. “I’d like to go. Some exercise wouldn’t hurt, and I’m not sanguine about leaving you alone with a bunch of unknown elements.”

“If I get taken out by a bunch of confused kids, then I had it coming. I’ll limit the first group to ten, and if it goes well, it could become a regular thing.”

“When are we leaving?” Day and night had no meaning here.

“After the next rest cycle?” Grim suggested.

“You’re on Coalition time now?”

Grim lifted a shoulder, unfazed by the joke. “It’s easier. And I like to be understood.”

“Fair enough. I’ll meet you at the airlock first thing then. Think Maddy and Cap will be back by then?”

“I hope so. Izzy wanted to hail them to check in, but Pierce said it was a security risk since the admiral is probably scanning all the channels.”

“She’s right,” Hayden said.

He parted ways with Grim and went to see how Pierce was doing. On the way to the lab, he smiled over seeing Izzy deeply engaged in a game of Re’teg. She had such an effortless way with people, no matter who they were or what they looked like. Sometimes it amazed him how well she fit with Pierce, who was more of a curmudgeon.

The woman in question was peering at her display, muttering about something when Hayden came in. “How goes it?” he asked.

“I’m trying to amp up the potency of the ship zapper, but if I dial it up, I’ll start liquefying brains.”

“That’s to be avoided,” he agreed.

If the Earth military ever got an inkling of what they’d developed, it would become a real issue. But Hayden had enough problems without fretting over theoretical ones. He propped himself against the table and peered over her shoulder at the weapon stats.

“Damn. You’ve already improved the duration by twenty-seven percent.”

“I was trying for thirty, but I ran into problems with the power usage.”

“We can’t drain the ship each time we fire.”

“Exactly. Right now, we can do one shot, then it needs to power back up. It’s fine for a limited engagement and it will buy us time, but it’s not a win button.”

“Will it work on the Vigilant?” he asked.

Pierce paused, staring at the scrolling numbers on her display with a mildly offended expression. “Some of it. We’ll have to hit the right spot.”

+ + +

The pirates were already circling back, probably cussing the panic that had set them running in the first place.



Maddy tapped the controls frantically, constantly checking proximity alerts. “We’re getting out of here!”

E’no confirmed, “K’enir, E’nela, leave a small crew with E’milly and D’aroi to help control those borders.”

She took comfort in his steady tone, and he shone with cerulean confidence.

The others seemed to take heart as well. They couldn’t feel the same painful mixture of adoration and yearning, however. To them, he was simply the captain.

To her, he was every bright and beautiful constellation that she’d only glimpsed through the narrow lens of a telescope. Until he appeared on her radar, shining like a star drawn to Earth just for her. With effort, she reminded herself to be professional.

*Finish the mission.*

“Take your people and as many of the attackers as you can handle on the other two shuttles,” she added. “Retract the docking tubes and let’s get moving!”

As the pirates raced toward them, they got their ships in order, putting top speed toward the moon. Maddy watched the viewer, seeing the gap widen. It might be tight. And she couldn’t risk warning their ground personnel on the comm. But soon, they outpaced the ones that were trying to catch up.

*So long, suckers.*

Maddy chose a short-range channel to contact E’milly and D’aroi. Hopefully Admiral Asshole couldn’t scan for this. “That got a bit rough. What’s our status?”

“Let them think they had me right until they gave themselves away.” E’milly’s happy yellow fronds were tinged with red excitement. “Just like we thought they would! Did I do it correctly? I used the tremors setting and they dropped their clubs and didn’t resist much after that.”

“I hope you did it right.” D’aroi’s erect head fin showed she was just as enthused as E’milly. “Because that’s what I did too.”

Relief warred with anxiety, as Maddy finally allowed herself a smile. “You both did great.” Next, she signaled the two newly captured shuttles. “We’re heading home. All squared away?”

“When we get there, what happens to my crew and me?” E’nela’s blue shimmered gray with concern.

Maddy respected the former pirate captain’s dilemma. “We’ll give you as many options as possible. No one will be forced to join the Coalition. My home world, that blue ball below the moon, isn’t in the Coalition. You might cut a deal with them.”

“I will consider the possibility.”

Maddy tried to be reassuring. “You did the smart thing, fighting off those attackers and coming with us.”

“It was the only choice I had.”

“Maybe, but some would have hesitated. I respect what you did, what you *are* doing.” If nothing more, she could offer hope. “We’re not a by-the-book Coalition op on that moon. Maybe you can find a place with us.”

“I hope so,” E’nela said in a somber tone.

They flew on for almost a full span. E’no was busy scrolling through data gathered on the pirate fleet’s skiff capabilities and she tried not to be obvious about stealing glances at him. Tough to resist when he was in hard-at-work officer mode. Maddy was just starting to relax when she glimpsed new ships leaving Mars’ orbit. Not shuttles—they were bigger and presumably faster.

*Oh. Shit.*

+ + +

*Two ships.*

E’no had been hoping for more. These two vessels were enough to destroy five tiny shuttles. At this point, they were alarmingly vulnerable.

“A pair of light cruisers after us, Captain!” K’enir called over the comm.

To his sensing pods, they resembled converted yachts, shoddy armor and as many secondhand weapons as the pirates could fit. He monitored their speed; they could catch him before he got to the moon but barely.

Shifting his display to a royal shade, he said, “I see them. All part of the plan.”

“They’ll be shooting at us while we try to land!” E’nela protested. “Does your base have anti-warship weapons?”

E’no put his hands on Maddy’s shoulders as she sat in the pilot’s chair, whether to reassure her or himself, he couldn’t say. That was simply where his hands needed to be.

“Against those little ships? We won’t need them.” He retained the command purple, never faltering. “Stay on course and be ready for a new heading on my order.”

They were almost a full span’s travel away from the moon and the cruisers would take nearly that long to catch up. He changed places with Maddy, she stretched before strapping into the gunner’s seat.

The moon filled up the front viewer, and their haven looked so tiny from this remove. When the pirates got close, E’no opened up a comm to his convoy. “Captains, do you have the Vigilant on sensors? Chart a course directly to it.”

“We see it, orbiting Earth and just a little closer than the moon.” K’enir’s face quivered more than usual. “You said we wouldn’t have to join the Coalition!”

Briefly, E’no flashed an excited yellow at Maddy, the equivalent of a human wink. Then he responded in command mode. “You won’t. Obey my orders, and we all get back to the base safely. Understood? Now plot a course.”

“Understood, course set.” E’nela wore a hopeful blue shade. “You have some strategy in mind, don’t you?”

He didn’t reply directly. “K’enir, confirm!”

The former pirate made adjustments. Then, “Confirmed, course set.” K’enir sounded like he was making a wish. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Captain.”

E’no hoped he did too. Everything he’d done since he decided to bring Hayden aboard the Vigilant felt like a wild gamble. The stakes got higher with each bet. But until he met Maddy again, he didn’t realize how high the stakes were. He was wagering his ingenuity to win his own freedom and more importantly, hers. His whole being came alive when she was near. Touching her had started a conflagration that might never burn out. Not until he returned to the heavy elements that made up the stars all around them.

“Be ready to change course on my order. My next order will be to break off and race for the moonbase, be ready for that too.”

“Yes, captain.” E’nela and K’enir answered in unison.

The pirate yachts drew closer, closer, nearly in weapons range when he gave the order. “Now! Head for the Vigilant!” As he executed the turn, he opened a channel, “Captain E’nosience to Vigilant! I’m bringing two pirate ships as ordered.”

“This is not a secure channel.” Lieutenant C’abil sounded incredibly confused. “They may be monitoring your communication.”

“Close the damned channel!” For the first time, E’no enjoyed hearing his progenitor’s voice, mainly because of how it vibrated with rage. “It’s a trick, you fool!”

The pirate yachts slowed and changed course, entirely unwilling to engage with a ship like the Vigilant. E’no made a sound of pure delight. “To the moonbase! Go!”

He turned his own craft, and the two shuttles bound to it responded as if he had a hand on their controls as well. He feinted a ramming maneuver toward the cruisers. “Put some fear into them, Maddy!”

As the pirates tried to run, she zapped them both. Visceral terror sent them into immediate retreat. Hopefully, the ships

would be paralyzed long enough for him to get his people home. Another adjustment, and their skiffs zoomed after E'nela and K'enir.

*Home. The space I share with Maddy. The shelter we made for ourselves, out of the admiral's reach.* Nine good soldiers and fifty pirates on a cold orbiting rock.

Home.

THERE WAS A FAMOUS PHOTO called “Earthrise”.

Hayden had seen it growing up, a picture taken by William Anders in 1968. But what many people didn’t realize was, it had been taken from lunar orbit, not from the surface. The Earth didn’t actually rise from here, and the sky was black. Depending on how the moon was turned, the Earth was either partly visible or not at all, but it didn’t change positions on the horizon.

He walked at the back of the group, keeping an eye on the former pirates between him and Grim. The big man seemed to be in his element, setting a brisk pace as they crunched moon rock underfoot. This was something Hayden never imagined he’d do, trailblazing on Luna. Okay, technically, Grim was doing that, but still.

They kept a good pace, mapping craters, scars likely from old impacts, and various topography. Since they had limited breathable air in their suits, they had to get to their target, a plateau a reasonable distance from the habitat, within the allotted time. Hayden kept an eye on the gauge since attention to detail could mean the difference between life and death out here.

“This is incredible,” C’aloo said.

The young alien acted like he had never been on a planet before, and maybe that was right since Hayden recalled him saying he had been born in the fleet. There might be medical considerations and they didn’t have a doctor on the team for humans, let alone one trained in alien physiology. This was a lot more complicated than it seemed on TV.

“What is?” Grim asked.

“Walking. I’m tired, but I like it.”

The other young recruits agreed in a low murmur. Sometimes Hayden felt more like a minder than a sergeant. *I*

*could teach these green soldiers a hell of a lot.* The admiral probably wouldn't take it well when he found out they were building more than a simple staging area for the supposed attack.

He checked his antique watch. Since it was all mechanical, it kept perfect time, even all the way up here. So he knew it was 5:38 in the morning all over the Midwest, earlier in the desert and on the west coast. Earth time didn't carry the same weight up here, though. He chuckled to himself over the pun.

Here and there, he glimpsed detritus from past moon landings, bits of metal half-buried in the dust. It felt strangely like walking through the remnants of some other civilization, though there were billions of humans running around on the mudball he called home. Ahead, Grim picked up the pace.

They were almost to the end point. A little more exertion, and the first moon hike would be complete. He didn't count returning to base as part of this momentous occasion.

As they crested the rise, Hayden shaded his eyes with a gloved hand, trying to see if his helmet was playing tricks on him. But no, something bright glinted when Grim shone his light around to get a better look at the area.

The other man paused. "What is that?"

C'aloo was already running, eager like a puppy, and the other recruits helped him dig the piece out. It was oddly shaped, ovals on ovals, and some of the material looked like it might be organic, skin or bones or he didn't know what. But other bits were clearly some unusual alloy, a metal that hadn't scarred despite immersion in the harsh moon soil. Hayden didn't know why it gave him the shivers, only that it did.

Grim knelt, brushing away the dust with a careful hand. Watching him, Hayden decided this must be how archaeologists felt after unearthing some inexplicable find, like a Viking torc outside of Cleveland. Nobody else seemed eager to touch it, though it didn't react to Grim's cautious cleaning.

“Some of these glyphs look almost like Coalition symbols,” he noted.

*Almost.*

“What *is* this?” C’aloo asked.

Hayden didn’t have an answer, but his course here was crystal clear. “Take it with us. We need to find out.”

+ + +

High Admiral E’maleese mentally composed his next message to his broodmate.

He couldn’t tell her that their offspring had confounded him. That would only give her hope. She was always harping on about how he should allow E’nosience more autonomy when their progeny needed only to obey.

The captain required discipline, not agency. When E’nosience charted his own course, he begged to be repurposed. That must be E’matroon’s fault. The admiral secretly despised his broodmate’s softness, but she came from a high-ranking family. He’d needed her to ascend to his current position; now he needed her to leave him alone.

He watched the images on viewer again and again, seeing the two shoddy pirate ships on E’nosience’s tail. *And then he used me. Me.*

The sheer effrontery tinged his fronds scarlet. He’d reviewed the footage countless times and still couldn’t believe his sensing pods. Under other circumstances, he might approve of such a daring scheme, but not when the maneuver left him looking like an ineffectual buffoon in front of the entire crew. Thankfully, C’abil didn’t speak unless spoken to these days, and D’orf was off following orders.

“One more time,” he ordered. Silently, C’abil replayed the encounter. “There! Was that a weapon they fired?”

It didn’t look like any hostile action he’d ever seen. That was why it took multiple reviews for him to process the data correctly. Based on the way the pirate frigates responded, they appeared to be fleeing an unpleasant stimulus.



“Sensors recorded an energy surge,” C’abil replied.

A warm, satisfied glow suffused him. *So, the task force is making weapons after all. Weapons that will soon be mine.*

+ + +

After five days in close quarters, E’no flashed a cheerful yellow as he landed outside the shuttle bay.

Everyone wanted a word, now that they were back, and he acknowledged a dozen comm signals as he powered down. He planned to talk with them all. But as always, there was much to do, and matters had to be handled in the right order to get the right results.

First he called Hayden. “Our new skiffs must be protected, upgraded, and outfitted. Get them in the bay and see to it.”

After checking his vacc suit, he offered a hand to Maddy. It was the longest pause while she gazed at him, seeming to consider the gesture. And then she put her gloved hand in his. No one would be wondering about their relationship any longer.

They exited the shuttle together and entered the bay where K’enir and E’nela were overseeing the unloading of their former comrades and current crew. E’no approached with a peaceful green display.

“We made it.” K’enir’s rhythmic pulsations indicated joy and relief.

E’nela’s olive hue was more subdued. “Thank you, Captain.”

“I’m glad we all returned safely. Your competence and cooperation made this possible.” His fronds shifted to deep violet. “I have two requests.”

E’nela waited with an air of quiet expectation while K’enir said, “Anything.”

“I don’t wish to worry about our new guests. They assaulted you and your crews, so I’ll leave them to you.” He emphasized his command colors. “My task force will assist as

requested. Please remember that retribution is not my way, and that we must coexist as best we can.”

“Yes. Thank you, Captain.” K’enir still seemed excited by their escape. “I will take care of them.”

He accepted that pledge. “Then I’ll consider them your responsibility now.”

E’nela’s orange fronds showed she agreed with K’enir’s words if not his enthusiasm. “Your second request, Captain?”

So far, he liked E’nela; she always seemed to be thinking, trying to foresee outcomes and move one step ahead.

“Since we’re one unit, we should dine together. You, K’enir, and my crew.” He kept his fronds a less demanding purple, still in charge but not insisting. “We have much to discuss. The dome is our largest meeting space, and I want everyone to know that I encourage open communication. Will you handle the arrangements?”

Briefly, E’nela swapped looks with K’enir, and the pair seemed to come to a consensus. “The late meal is three spans away. Will that suffice?” E’nela asked.

“Indeed. I’m looking forward to it,” he replied.

+ + +

“You didn’t tell me this was a formal dinner,” Maddy said as E’no pulled a formal uniform from the constructor.

“Dinner at the captain’s table is a diplomatic occasion.” The light blue of his fronds indicated hope.

Maddy moved to the constructor, remembering a comfortable dress she’d liked. It was a pretty shade of blue and of course, it had pockets. “What kind of diplomacy do you have in mind?”

She adjusted the controls until she produced a reasonable facsimile, then she ducked around the wall to change in relative privacy. From the sound of it, E’no was doing the same. It put a bittersweet smile on her face, remembering how they used to take forever getting dressed, unable to resist one last touch.

*It might be that way again.* She stepped back into view.

“We need to deal with the pirates immediately. The admiral has used them against us twice. We’ll take that tool from his hands. But before we move, I need to know more about them and that gateway ship.” He drank her in, golden eyes glowing. “I love looking at you.” Then he gestured gracefully. “Whenever you’re ready.”

They entered the dome annex to the task force’s full attention. E’nela and K’enir stood by their chairs around the long table in the middle of the area. Everyone else was at the table. Grim and Hayden were close together with D’etor on Hayden’s other side. Izzy and Pierce were shoulder to shoulder while E’milly and D’aroi sat across from them.

The space was full to bursting with pirates, all watching to see what happened next. While Maddy preferred not to be the center of attention, E’no basked in the recognition like it was his birthright. Shining royal violet, he held a chair for Maddy and sat at the head of the table with her to his left.

“Please be seated.” He turned to the two former pirates. “My team is used to speaking openly. I hope you’ll do the same.”

“I tried to make some fancy dishes,” Hayden interjected as E’nela’s crew brought their meals.

Maddy poked at the food. She guessed that Hayden had taken his best shot at Salisbury steak, but the conversation seemed more important. The aliens seemed delighted with their fare at least. K’enir was harder to read but E’nela showed a clear yellow.

“What’s it like in the wandering fleet?” Maddy started with an innocuous question.

“Nothing like this,” K’enir replied quickly. “We barely have one constructor per ship, meals are usually a long line to disappointment.”

Hayden looked puzzled. “With one constructor, you can make more.”

“How?” E’nela’s dark blue denoted sadness not curiosity. “Constructors are complicated. We can modify weapons and make simple foods, we’re not engineers.”

Izzy wore a sympathetic expression. “Why are all of you so young?”

K’enir answered, “It’s not easy living in the fleet, wandering the stars. There are no old pirates.” His features stilled; possibly he was reflecting on the difficulty of his situation.

“We’re curious but we don’t mean to pry. You must have questions of your own.”

“Many.” E’nela displayed orange curiosity as she turned to E’no. “What do you plan to do with us?”

E’no’s frond cape shifted to the cobalt Maddy recognized as empathy. “That depends.” His royal shades began to reassert. “As an officer of the Coalition, I can offer the rehabilitation that comes with citizenship.”

“You mean repurposing?” K’enir trembled visibly. “I prefer a clean death.”

Maddy could see almost everyone agreed, she put in, “You might work something out with my people.”

“Would your Earth accept so many alien refugees?” E’nela got to the heart of that problem.

*Probably not.*

Hayden spoke up then. “Here, you’re not refugees. You’re good workers with skills we need.”

Hopeful murmurs swept the room. Many had been listening, and the idea of staying was apparently popular. D’etor sat quiet, though Maddy noticed they paid more attention to Hayden than anyone else. Grim was studying the aliens all around them, but she couldn’t tell what he was thinking. And Pierce? She was forking down that faux meat with sheer determination.

“Thank you for saying that,” C’aloo piped up. “We don’t get complimented often.”

Maddy glanced into the crowd to find him. The aliens nearby seemed nervous that he would be chastened for blurting out his thoughts.

Rather, that was an invitation for Izzy to dig deeper. “That’s too bad. I bet you know lots of useful stuff.”

“Like what?” the little minotaur asked.

“Anything you could tell us about the gateway ship would help a lot.” Maddy thought that was pretty smooth, and E’no shot her a gilded, glowing look.

“There are no life signs,” E’nela volunteered. “Something happens, we don’t know what, then there’s a light and we’re somewhere else.”

“Sometimes that place is good. Sometimes it’s bad.” K’enir made a gesture that scanned philosophical to Maddy, though she wasn’t trained to read his body language.

“I’m not good with folks being denied real homes,” Grim said then. “I’m all for bringing you into the fold, however it happens.”

“The admiral will not approve,” E’milly pointed out.

“This admiral you speak of.” K’enir sounded like he was thinking aloud. “He must be the one who sent us to take your constructors.”

D’aroi made a sound that Maddy recognized as amusement. “I bet he also set up that double-cross.”

“Possibly,” E’nela admitted. “Captain C’anak is a brute but he’s not duplicitous.”

“Then our course is clear.” E’no glowed with command presence. “Maddy, contact C’anak and inform him that the admiral has failed. Tell him we will meet him in person.”

E'NO REGULATED HIS FROND DISPLAY to hide his worry.

This was the biggest risk he'd taken yet. The whole task force was in the shuttle with Maddy piloting, Grim and D'etor strapped in as gunners, and the rest of the crew trying to get comfortable. The ships of the pirate fleet looked tiny as they left Mars orbit.

They'd look a lot bigger in a cycle. On either side of them were the linked shuttles that followed Maddy's piloting, copying the moves this skiff made. Those shuttles were loaded with the special weapons Pierce had made. He didn't doubt that they'd serve as he'd asked; Pierce had proven herself a master weapon designer. He hoped what he envisioned would be sufficient.

Ahead, K'enir and E'nela piloted their ships with minimal crews. The rest of their crews were still on the moonbase, adding amenities and keeping the rest of the pirates occupied. But it wasn't the time to worry about the base since K'enir and E'nela were confident in their people.

There was no reason to bring additional personnel. They only needed one boarding party, and he had the best with him on this shuttle. He was risking the best the Earth and the Coalition had to offer. Without them, peace between the two factions was unlikely. In many ways, he was risking Earth too.

Concern crept into his display, his fronds fading to gray. He spoke to ease his mind. "D'etor, will you be able to target and fire the other shuttle's zappers from here?"

"Of course they can!" Pierce answered for D'etor without seeming to realize she was being presumptuous. "Those guns are connected to ours, just like the flight controls at Maddy's station. I set everything up myself!"

"That question wasn't about the tech," E'no said drily.

She blinked. “Wait, are you asking if D’etor understood the instructions? Fucking smart as a whip, that hedgehog! Tell him, D’etor.”

“Yes, Captain.” They brought their head fin to attention. “I am prepared to fire the other shuttle’s weapons. Grim and I have been monitoring their status.”

“Sorry, D’etor. I shouldn’t have butted in. I just get itchy when I have to wait.” Pierce retreated to Izzy’s arms, receiving a comforting pet to soothe her.

Humans were fascinating. He stole a glance at Maddy. One in particular.

*Now I have us on this dangerous mission because I think it’s the right thing to do.*

At least Pierce’s little outburst seemed to have released some tension. The task force was beginning to relax when D’aroi asked, “Hedgehog?”

+ + +

Maddy relinquished the pilot’s chair to E’no.

The task force had rotated stations on Coalition schedule, and now as they approached the wandering fleet, they returned to where they’d started. Only now E’no was ready for combat, and it was time for her to become a diplomat.

She hailed the pirates and C’anak’s unkempt image appeared. “We’re here to parley, as promised.”

“I can see that. In your little stolen ships,” he sneered.

C’anak wasn’t the brightest C-designate Maddy had met. That was probably why he’d brought his entire fleet.

Maddy showed him a human smile. “Stolen? Is that a compliment coming from a pirate? I’d say you *gave* us these skiffs, surrendered them at least.”

“Only because your admiral tricked me!” C’anak shook his horns in what Maddy recognized as outrage. E’nela had told her C’anak won his position by being the most violent of the captains.

She didn't plan to placate him. "He's not my admiral. And he used you to try to hurt my crew."

"What are you to him? Coalition renegades?" He puffed himself up. "You think you're pirates like us?"

Maddy's goal was to keep him talking. Keep him distracted. It didn't matter what she said. "Something like that. We don't follow the admiral's orders." The longer the conversation went, the closer the shuttles could get to the fleet.

"I *give* orders, I don't follow them!" C'anak lowered his horns.

The minotaur pirate was getting angry. She glanced at E'no; his frond cape tipped toward crimson and he nodded slowly, human style, as he studied the viewer.

*Nearly there.*

"Orders or not, the admiral got what he wanted from you." She paused.

E'no displayed excited red; they were close enough. "Or he would have if you could have taken us in a fight."

"Take you? I will destroy you!" C'anak turned his back and shouted, "Power up the weapons and fire!"

+ + +

Hayden strapped in as the shuttle zoomed in amongst the fleet.

He followed the action on the viewer; they skimmed between the larger ships, zigging and zagging around the explosions. Light weapons shook the shuttle but didn't penetrate its force shield. D'etor and Grim fired without hesitation. *Good soldiers, both.*

E'no deployed the unmanned shuttles, releasing their payload of mirth mines. Former pirate skiffs zoomed by; they were attempting the same reckless maneuver as E'no, the only way not to be blown to bits. Then the viewer flashed with light, showing a massive explosion. The whole shuttle shook.

"What hit us?" he demanded.



“Nothing,” E’milly answered. “C’anak’s ship just took major damage.”

“What? Not from us.” Pierce wouldn’t have installed anything that would cause grave bodily harm.

E’milly’s display deepened to midnight blue. “No, Sergeant. One of the frigates shooting at us hit C’anak’s destroyer. Its engine is on fire, it could explode.”

*Good news, bad news.*

“Do we have time to get clear?” he asked.

Too bad about C’anak and his crew, but they’d been given every chance to cooperate. Fool around and find out; that was Hayden’s motto. Then E’no ruined his satisfaction with a new set of orders.

“Get ready to deploy!” the captain called.

Hayden shook his head. There was no way he’d heard that right.

“Onto a burning ship?”

“The faster the better,” E’no agreed.

The captain was taking this hero shit too far. “They’re the enemy! Boarding to save them doesn’t make any damn sense.”

*Dark purple.* Hayden had noticed E’no flashed that color when he was about to get real stubborn.

“They are in danger; we can help them.”

“They don’t know how to use their constructors,” Daroi’s head fin was stiff as she donned her helmet. “Do you think they know how to handle an engine fire?”

“Do we?” Swearing under his breath, Hayden put on his own helmet and took station by the docking tube iris. Pierce, Izzy, E’milly, and D’aroi joined him.

D’aroi shrugged. “I do.”

“We all do,” E’milly added, her display a lighter blue. “It’s an old design. We can find a way to deny the fire oxygen or jettison the engine. We *must* help them.”

*Yeah, this one graduated from E'no's school of saving the day all right.*

Maddy broadcasted on all channels as Hayden led the team through the tube. "Cease fire! C'anak's ship has been damaged. We're attempting a rescue."

*A lot of good that's gonna do, half the fleet is probably pissing themselves in terror or giggling themselves sick. The other half will probably try to kill us.*

"I love this plan," Izzy said with laughter in her voice. "Let's do this."

With E'no at the controls, he must have overridden the system to open the pirate's docking iris. The run made Hayden queasy. *I can't believe I'm boarding a burning ship. This is not a sound command decision.* But a good soldier followed orders, even when they made no sense. The task force exited the tube onto C'anak's ship.

On the other side of the airlock, the dirty room was packed with scared pirates; they rushed towards the task force, scrambling for the open iris behind them.

"Base setting," Hayden ordered.

Then he zapped a few. Izzy closed the iris to the docking tube. They zapped and muscled their way out of the room. The corridor beyond was full of pirates rushing around but they dodged the task force. Zappers looked like guns, and guns meant trouble.

E'milly punched up an image on her comm and showed Hayden. "This is where we are. There's the engine room."

He studied the map, then said, "OK, go save the ship. Pierce, you're with me." As D'aroi led Iz and E'milly down the corridor, he turned in the opposite direction, walking purposefully with his zapper in firing position, looking for trouble.

Pierce probably suspected they were going after C'anak. He didn't have to tell her. When they encountered three armed pirates, Hayden guessed they were getting close. He zapped them; Pierce charged and disabled them more permanently.

They broke the pirates' guns and took their clubs. Zapper in one hand and club in the other, he proceeded with Pierce to the bridge.

Hayden heard shouting through the holes in the iris. Someone in there was dumb enough to fire a gun inside a spaceship.

“Do not let them reach the engine room! Do you hear me? Stop them!” That had to be C'anak.

Hayden wasn't worried; he'd trained with the others, and he didn't give a shit about the pirates. He scanned the scene with the limited line of sight provided by the gaps in the iris. There were five armed pirates, and none were wearing vacc suits. The C-designate who was shouting into a comm had to be C'anak.

He gestured to Pierce; she stole a glance, then dove away from the iris. Hayden copied her as the doorway exploded with weapons fire. They retreated, crawling backward on their stomachs as all five pirates fired through the opening.

“Mirth grenades, next chance you get,” he ordered, “Make us some grenades.” Louder, he called to the hostiles, “You're done, C'anak! Your engine is about to explode. We're here to rescue you!”

More shots came in answer to his appeal. “I'm not gonna be rescued and repurposed by Coalition monsters!”

“Dammit, we're not Coalition!” Pierce scowled so hard her eyebrows touched. “Why does everyone fucking assume that?”

Her mad face made him laugh, despite the situation. “We got to think up our own name. Like the moonbeams, moonies, mooners?”

That earned him another frown and two pirates rushed out, likely imagining they were distracted by the exchange. Hayden shot at the pirates on reflexes alone, but zappers weren't entirely accurate at range. He missed, and Pierce squared off, zapper in one hand, club in the other.

She smoothly dodged a clumsy strike as Hayden stood. “Let’s end this. Tremors,” he told Pierce quietly. “I want C’anak to remember how it goes.”

*He fooled around and now he finds out.*

Sometimes brute force was the answer. In perfect synch with Pierce, he grabbed a pirate and together, they shoved them back through the door, followed swiftly by three point-blank zaps. C’anak and his two remaining pirates dropped their weapons as the shakes set in. They tried to fight hand to hand, but it was pitiful.

A split second later, Hayden grabbed C’anak by the horns and banged the pirate leader’s face on a control panel. “Don’t want to be rescued, huh?” Then he pulled out his comm. “How’re we doing down there?”

Izzy’s cheerful voice came back, “No problems here, we had to eject the engine. How’s my girl?”

Hayden rolled his eyes.

“I’m good,” Pierce said. “Kicking ass and chewing gum.”

D’aroi pointed out, “No engine means the atmosphere producers have stopped.”

Hayden swore. *It’s always something.*

“How long do we have?” he asked.

E’milly chimed in and Hayden wondered if he’d always picture the color yellow when he heard her voice. “A couple of hours, if the ship wasn’t full of holes.”

“REPORT,” HIGH ADMIRAL E’MALEESE SAID crisply.

“All five lunar shuttles are currently engaged with the pirates, halfway to Mars,” C’abil responded.

The two of them stood in the comm center, all viewers trained on his progeny’s latest reckless misstep. E’maleese finally glimpsed his moment. Though he had given his offspring every opportunity to return to the correct path, now it was too late. The admiral must seize the advantage, it was time to strike. His frond display flushed fiery orange with delighted anticipation.

“To confirm, we’re registering weapon fire and explosions?”

“Affirmative, Admiral.”

His fronds reddened further with satisfaction. “In his haste, E’nosience has left the moon base unprotected.”

“It seems to be an oversight,” C’abil agreed.

“He’s not used to predicting outcomes, weighing all factors and determining the wisest course of action. I have tried my best to teach him.” Briefly, E’maleese pretended to be a regretful parent, but he didn’t change his frond display. Too much effort would be wasted on C’abil.

“As you say, Admiral.”

That sounded almost sarcastic. He glared at his subordinate, but C’abil didn’t seem to register his suspicion. Without being asked, he continued to monitor the readings from the battle and the base. The new C’abil was so bland and obedient that E’maleese might keep him around indefinitely.

*I must seize this opportunity.*

E’maleese opened a comm channel. “D’orf, E’nosience has been intractable, and I can no longer trust his loyalty to the

Coalition. We must reclaim those resources at once!”

Captain D’orf responded with admirable alacrity. “I will not disappoint you!”

“You won’t have the opportunity. I’ll meet you in the shuttle bay and oversee this operation myself.”

*And take credit for everything.*

He swept out of the comm center without another look at C’abil and savored the fumbled salutes as he marched toward the bay. Each crew member displayed a delightful level of terror, some even slamming up against walls to give him ample space to pass. But as he passed a curve in the corridor, he heard a whisper, barely discernible above his measured footfalls.

“...out of his mind.”

*I could not have heard that correctly.*

Though he was tempted to ascertain who had spoken and discipline the lot of them, his destiny awaited.

+ + +

Maddy crossed to the stranded vessel to coordinate the evacuation in person.

She could respond to comm hails anywhere, but she excelled at in-person interaction, and she’d been trained to calm people in a crisis. Izzy and Pierce looked glad to see her. E’milly’s dark fronds showed that she was overwhelmed, and D’aroi had a couple pirates tucked under each arm. There was no sign of Hayden.

E’no’s voice came over the comms. “I’ve docked our empty linked shuttles to the ship. K’enir and E’nela will be there shortly. Exit through the docking portals.”

“This way,” Maddy said, beckoning to the closest refugees.

There weren’t enough functional escape capsules, and herding a bunch of chaos bunnies who were still shaking off the zapper effects? Not a lot of fun. Doing it while the ship was hemorrhaging atmosphere? Even less so.

They made progress slowly, as the ship listed without its engine. According to the scans, they'd found most of the crew.

"You should get to safety," Izzy said.

Maddy shook her head. "Take Pierce and go. Make E'milly and D'aroi head out with you. I'm making one final check. E'no will have our asses if we leave anyone behind."

Izzy sighed and patted her shoulder through the vacc suit without arguing. "Find Hayden, okay?"

Her suit beeped, letting her know she'd been at this for too long. *One final walkthrough.* The ship really was screwed; there were pockets of zero G where she had to use her hands to pull herself along the deserted corridors.

*I feel like I watched a science fiction movie like this once. Now I just need the chest-bursters to drop out of the ceiling.*

"You good?" Hayden set a heavy hand on her shoulder from behind.

Somehow Maddy swallowed her scream and swung her light around. "I'm picking up life signs but I can't find them."

"So help me, if you say 'they're all around us'..."

At the obvious Aliens reference, Maddy choked off a laugh, noting the next problem. "I'm running out of air."

He checked his own gauge and swore. "Ten minutes. Keep calm, Mads. The oxygen will burn faster if you panic."

*You think I don't know that?* But talking wasted air too, so she kept quiet, still tracking the readings.

"What are you two doing?" E'no demanded over the comms.

"Seeing this through," Maddy said.

"Following orders, captain sir." Hayden was still pissed about this rescue op.

"You have new ones. Get off that ship!"

Maddy cut the comm connection, ready to deal with the consequences later. She signaled left and hauled herself along

the corridor with Hayden moving carefully behind her. The danger wouldn't be from these pirates, but the state of the damaged ship and their diminishing oxygen.

Finally, they found a small group of young E-designated aliens huddled up inside a wall panel. Thankfully, they were in vacc suits, or they would be dead already. After all the noise and explosions, they were too scared to come out.

She didn't have time to coax them. Their air was running out too.

"If you stay here, you'll die," she said. "Do you understand that?"

Hayden muttered, "We will too. Leave them."

"No! Don't leave us," one of them whispered.

E'no sounded in her ear. "Get out of there. *Now*. That's an order."

"When I'm done," she snapped.

It seemed like forever before the little ones crawled out and followed her toward the last intact docking tube. She made them go first, but Hayden wouldn't budge until she got across. Her vision was sparking by the time they reached the other side of the airlock.

She whipped off her helmet and hunched over, trying not to hyperventilate.

The captain must've come at a full run. "Are you all right?"

"We saved everyone," she wheezed. "Every last one."

"And you risked your life! Against my orders."

Just then, the comm beeped. Grim spoke. "C'anak is demanding to talk to you, Captain. He's refusing to settle down."

+ + +

E'no's anxiety faded.



He wanted to drag Maddy off and make it clear how he felt about her stunt aboard the ship, but their responsibilities wouldn't wait. "This isn't over," he said.

Maddy made a fluttering gesture with one hand. "For now it is."

He wheeled and went to deal with the former pirate leader. C'anak looked terrible, but it hadn't diminished his attitude. "Finally!"

E'no was in no mood to tolerate any defiance. "Let's discuss the terms of your final surrender."

"Surrender?" C'anak still had fire in his gut. "You ambushed me!"

"You attacked us first. And friendly fire destroyed your engine. Let me be blunt. Your fleet is breaking up. We're currently trying to find a ship to take you off our hands."

"Take me?" C'anak moved his head from side to side, angling his horns in what was meant as an intimidating display. "I'll be the captain of any ship I board!"

His fronds glowed purple. "Will you? Even after we claim the useless hulk of your ship? I suspect we'll need to bribe one of your ships to accept you."

"My ship? What are you doing with my ship?" Finally, the C-designate seemed to be alarmed.

The captain saw no reason not to tell him. "We'll tow it away and smash it into the gateway ship."

"You think that will do anything? The carrier can withstand more force than you can produce! It will see you coming and expand its defense shield."

That could be a problem. "What do you mean, 'expand'?"

"Coalition fool!" C'anak's expression was plainly a sneer. "The carrier ship can extend its force shield to protect itself and all the ships with it. The greater the threat, the bigger the shield."

"Thank you," E'no said. "You've been quite helpful."

“I’m not finished!”

“I think you are. Grim?”

The big man took over and E’no didn’t have the luxury of wondering what happened next. This new information meant he needed a new vector of approach. And maybe, just maybe, he had the rudiments of a solution.

A cycle later, E’no maneuvered his three shuttles close to the gateway ship. The task force had been fully briefed on their roles.

Half a dozen pirate ships flew in his wake, closing on the gateway ship. He got on the comm to warn them. “You’re not expected to escort us. It will be safer if you back off.”

Some ships peeled off. Others stayed the course.

*I did what I could.*

The ones nearby offered no sign of treachery as E’no buzzed the gateway ship’s force shield. Instead, they cleared away from the three little skiffs.

It was time to test his theory. If a ram wouldn’t work, then...

“K’enir, E’nela,” he spoke into the comms. “Bring the payload.”

The two former pirates had C’anak’s wreck in tow, accelerating toward the gateway ship. He calculated their arrival time and gave orders accordingly.

“Get in position. We’ll have to act before they arrive.”

Pierce manned the guns. Hayden, D’etor, Grim, Izzy, E’milly, D’aroi, and Maddy waited at the iris that capped the docking tube.

He hadn’t wanted Maddy on the boarding team.

But she’d insisted. “You have no clue what’s on that ship. This could be the most important diplomatic mission in the history of Earth or the Ancient Coalition.”

There was no refuting her statement. She was part of the squad, whether he liked it or not.

“Will this work?” Izzy asked.

The question revealed more than Izzy intended. E’no surmised that even a cheerful person like her needed reassurance; that was how risky this mission might be.

His fronds displayed a hopeful light blue. “Impossible to say. Too many variables, too many unknowns. It’s all guesswork.”

“Our best guesswork,” Grim said.

C’anak’s dead ship was still a span away when Pierce reported, “The force field has expanded. We’re inside the gateway ship’s shield.”

E’no aimed the two empty shuttles at the giant ship and followed at a safe distance. Thanks to Pierce, the two skiffs were guided missiles. Twin warhead shuttles smashed into the gateway ship, and a corona of light rose like a small sun. The shockwave bounced their vessel, but E’no locked onto the jagged wound in the hull and steered through the turbulence. *Almost there.*

“We made a hole!” Pierce slapped palms with anyone who held out a hand.

“It’s go time!” Hayden said.

+ + +

With some of the best flying Hayden had ever seen, E’no threaded the needle with the docking tube.

After checking that his air looked good, Hayden dove, not knowing what the hell he’d find on the other side. He raced through and grabbed hold, tumbling sideways to make way for the rest of the landing party. The gap in the hull showed a huge, alien machine, no moving parts, just glowing gold, silver, blue materials woven together in a dizzying pattern all around.

*Is the whole ship like this?*

The others followed and soon the six of them were clinging to the sides of the hole. Destroyed fragments floated away, drifting in vacuum, and burnt remnants swirled around them. He had no frame of reference for the ship's interior. While Coalition vessels didn't conform to human design specs, this one looked like it had been crafted by a mind so alien that Hayden didn't want to encounter the being behind it.

"What the hell?" Izzy looked around in wonder.

"Captain, are you seeing this?" Hayden asked over the comms.

"I am, but I don't know what I'm seeing." The captain's voice came through.

"It's like we're inside a giant computer," D'etor said.

Actually, now that they said that, Hayden could see it. Chips and electrodes and wires lined the walls. The colors slowly settled into patterns he could interpret.

"Great work, D. I think you just saved my sanity."

Movement startled him as a pair of robots entered, same colors as the ship. The machines were three-foot cubes. They extended tentacle-like arms and began repairing the gap. *Can't let them finish the job.*

"Emitters," Hayden called.

Grim blew one up, and D'aroi snapped off a quick shot that hit almost as fast as the big man. He spared her a look that Hayden might even call friendly. *Seems like he's warming up to some of our alien teammates.*

"We need to move," Maddy said.

Hayden nodded. "Look around. Is there someplace we can go?"

"The robots came out a shaft over there," E'milly reported.

She and Izzy aimed their emitters in that direction.

"Another over here," Grim called from the other side.

Two more repair bots emerged from the shaft Izzy and E'milly were watching. E'milly shot first but Izzy didn't hesitate. More mechanical parts for the pile.

"E'milly, stay with Iz and keep our exit open. The rest of you? We're following Grim."

Hayden took care where he touched. Exposed circuits might lead to a nasty shock, and they weren't metal-plated like the droids who moved through these ducts. Zero-G meant they could travel with their hands, a guided glide. He checked his six constantly, making sure the group was all together.

Then he opened a comm channel. "We're exploring, captain."

"Quickly, sergeant. We don't know how long the force shield will remain extended. And we've orchestrated what might be a catastrophic event."

*I know C'anak's hulk might crash into us. We're not sightseeing here.*

But he was still relieved. *Glad the captain's still online.* If the comms cut off, he was next in chain of command, and he definitely wouldn't make the same decisions as E'no.

Izzy reported in. "The bots are coming faster!"

"They seem to have an urgent imperative to seal the breach," E'milly added.

"You heard them, people. Let's get a move on."

Up ahead, Grim appeared to have eyes on something Hayden couldn't make out. "What's this?" the big man asked.

He got closer. The shaft ended in what looked like a hatch. While they couldn't open it, emitters on maximum power did.

Grim went first. Then Hayden. Gravity returned as he lifted himself out of what was now a floor hatch. Not Earth gravity, definitely, but stronger than the moon. Hayden surveyed the scene; it looked like a small bridge.

*This ship was occupied once. How long ago?*

Grim was already inspecting a control panel. “This looks like the symbols on the relic we found on the moon.”

D’etor, Maddy, and D’aroi entered next. D’aroi stood with an eye on the entrance, weapon cocked, standing guard duty while the others handled the anthropological research.

Maddy went over to Grim, tilting her head. “You didn’t tell me you made an important discovery.”

“We’ve been a little busy,” Grim said mildly.

*So damn true.*

Hayden had wanted to talk to Maddy about that, but the action and orders hadn’t let up since then. He went over to an unlit display, hovering a hand over it. *What the hell. What’s the worst that could happen?* He touched it and an image appeared in the center of the room. It showed the Earth orbiting the sun slowly. A red, circular band showed the Earth’s path with a series of blue symbols imprinted within the band. The symbols changed, right in time with the ticking of Hayden’s watch.

Grim and Maddy came over to see what he’d activated.

After scrutinizing the tableaux, Maddy suggested, “Measurement? Or maybe a countdown?”

“K’enir said the gateway stays in a system for a time,” D’etor noted. “Maybe a year on the life-sustaining planet in that system?”

Grim broke it down. “Then those symbols are a measurement *and* a countdown.”

D’aroi let out a slow breath. “What are we trying to achieve here?”

“That’s what I want to know,” Pierce muttered over the comm. “Would have been better—”

“To nuke it from orbit?” Pierce and Izzy had more in common than Hayden had initially realized. Both of them loved their movie quotes.

Then again, so did he. Aliens was just eminently quotable.

E'milly's voice came again. "These things are coming as fast as they can. Their rate isn't increasing anymore, but we're firing constantly."

The Earth in the image started moving faster; the symbols changed more quickly.

Izzy broke in over the comms, "We can keep them at bay as long as our emitters charges last. But...I wouldn't waste any time."

Hayden checked his watch and the Earth image. At the rate it was moving, he estimated ten minutes before it completed the cycle.

"We're leaving. Now!"

Hayden waited at the floor hatch until everyone was in the shaft. Grim had exited first, Maddy last. He followed, and they went as fast as they could back to Izzy and E'milly. The sound of emitter fire accompanied the journey, and the sound of his watch echoed in his head, more a memory than something he could actually hear.

"In the tube now!" Hayden shouted.

Bots swarmed the initial entry room, great piles of smoking metal all around Izzy and E'milly. D'aroi waded in without hesitation, and Grim laid down cover fire for everyone else. His shooting was quick and precise. Hayden made sure the others got out before he crossed. The bots didn't give chase.

Their orders must be to seal the breach, not pursuit.

Still, he didn't feel safe. "Get us out of here. Now!"

Their skiff sailed clear as the shield retracted, and a blue flash rocked their entire ship. The light left him light-headed, like some strange field had nearly sucked them in.

When he could focus again, he saw that the whole damn gateway ship was gone, along with a few unlucky pirate ships.

HIGH ADMIRAL E'MALEESE BRISTLED WITH anticipation, his frond cape red as the desolate planet in this system.

“Shuttles two through five, land with me,” he commanded. “There.”

“Yes, Admiral.” D'orf always displayed delightful alacrity.

The misguided pirates rushed out to greet them; they must have mistaken his shuttles for those belonging to Task Force Vigilant. They'd soon learn the consequences of that error.

“Do not disappoint me. Attack!”

As he shadowed his soldiers out of the shuttle, emitter blasts knocked pirates down in every direction. A few scrambled to the safety of the big dome.

“After them!” he ordered.

E'maleese turned his attention to the pathetic, fallen pirates. An emitter blast would knock most Coalition citizens out for a full span, and these ridiculous lackeys didn't have their screens on because they'd believed their hero had returned. For a moment, he savored the delicious irony.

A young-looking C-designate stirred and tried to rise; E'maleese drew his emitter and shot the pirate. He went gold with joy and shot again. It was good to be the admiral.

“Lieutenant,” he addressed the highest-ranking officer in his vicinity, an S-designate. “Gather this riffraff and hold them until I require them.”

The lieutenant saluted, but her snout scrunched in confusion. “Hold them?”

He showed command purple. “You heard me.”

Still she hesitated. He *hated* having to explain. Why were good soldiers like D'orf so hard to find?



“The Coalition doesn’t take prisoners and we don’t kill,” he said. “Once we repossess the base, they will remain here until their cohorts pick them up.” That lie seemed to work; the lieutenant now appeared willing to comply, and he made a mental note to have her disciplined. “In the meantime, use your emitter on any that move.”

The admiral moved to assess the situation; Captain D’orf should have declared the base secure by now. He found the soldiers loitering some distance outside the entrance to a large dome connected to the main base. His soft-brained, soft-hearted progeny must have built it for the pirates. It wasn’t in the original plans.

His fronds brightened to red. “What’s the delay? I ordered you to take the base!”

D’orf’s head fin quivered in a fearful salute; he had the proper attitude. “The defense shield is preventing us from gaining access, Admiral.”

*Intolerable.*

He activated the comm. “Lieutenant C’abil. Report!”

“Sensors show a small force shield generator protecting the dome.”

“Target the dome with the ship’s emitter and hit it with full power!” he ordered.

“Full power may destroy the dome, and we show ten life forms inside.”

That sounded like the old C’abil. *Does distance grant him the illusion of safety?*

“This is a rescue mission! We’ll save these deluded pawns, whether they want to be rescued or not!” *I may have to repurpose the entire crew. I’ll start with the repurposing technicians.* “Fire that weapon!”

The dome shattered.

Glowing with triumph, the admiral stormed through the wreckage. There were five bodies on the ground. “Shoot them! It’s the only way to be sure.”

“Of course, Admiral.” D’orf dutifully fired his emitter on the felled pirates.

D’orf was a good soldier, perhaps the only one that wouldn’t need repurposing when the admiral purged the Vigilant.

+ + +

Hayden stared, sick with shock and dismay.

The image on the viewer was grim, the pirate dome destroyed. Vigilant shuttles and soldiers surrounded the main base. *Trust Admiral Asshole to stab us in the back.* This time, the odds were stacked against them to the point that it was ridiculous.

Four pirate ships had joined them for the return to the moon. E’no had put E’nela and K’enir with their crews on two of them. Grim, D’aroi and E’milly were stationed on another while Hayden had Pierce, Izzy, and D’etor with him on the fourth. Maddy and E’no were together on their shuttle, no surprise there.

Pierce’s voice came across the comm. “Can you come down here for a minute?”

He glanced at Izzy and shrugged. “D’etor and I are on our way.”

With Pierce asking for him and not Izzy, she must be up to something. *Maybe it’s a tactical advantage.*

Hayden shouldered his way through the crowded corridors. The pirates were still packed in but thanks to constructor tech at least they were well fed.

Pierce was waiting in the mess hall. “These food constructors,” she gestured to the one she was working on. “Can they do the same things as regular constructors?”

He moved next to her and adjusted the machine. “They’re the same, I just have to remove the restriction programs.” He smiled at her as he worked. “There, it’ll do whatever you want. What are you working on?”

“Defense against repurposing tech. Don’t like what I’ve come with so far.” She punched up data on the display. “It has to be unnoticeable, something inside the body.”

Hayden frowned. “This looks toxic as hell.” He turned to his companion. “What do you think, D’etor?”

D’etor’s head fin angled forward as they assessed the information. “I don’t question its efficacy, but this would only be suitable for someone who preferred death to repurposement.”

Before Pierce could react to the criticism, proximity alerts rang out. The moon base didn’t look any better up close. Sensors indicated five life forms in the base surrounded by a hundred Coalition soldiers. Bad odds indeed, unless those pirates were Spartans.

He opened a comm channel to the captain. “We have to get down there!”

“Confirmed,” E’no replied. “I’ll cover you.”

That was all Hayden needed to hear. He double-timed it back to the bridge with the hedgehog close behind him. “D’etor, take us in.”

The vessel swooped, and then shook, emergency lights flashed, and the artificial gravity blinked off. He latched on to the nearest object to keep from floating to the ceiling.

“The Vigilant is firing on us. I need to land.”

E’no couldn’t do much about the Vigilant. Hayden nodded in approval as D’etor maneuvered to the best of their ability. They landed on emergency power, and after checking the integrity of their vacc suits, Hayden led his crew out onto the rocky surface of the moon.

“Emitter screens up! Pierce, Izzy, take half of the pirates and flank left behind us. D’etor, with me.” He addressed the pirates. “Let’s give ’em hell!”

But the Coalition saw them coming, no cover on the lunar surface. They closed to range and fired. Coalition forces fired back, and bodies dropped on both sides.

Hayden crouched to a duck walk, providing a smaller target while firing and advancing. D’etor, still beside him, copied his action. This soldier was steady as a rock, and Hayden was growing fond of them.

“We can’t win this,” he whispered.

“No,” D’etor confirmed. “Those behind us *might* if the other ships follow our lead.”

They’d both been listening to the comms. E’no was in a desperate dog fight while K’enir and E’nela had retreated from the Vigilant’s fire.

“That’s a big if.”

An emitter discharge blasted Hayden backward. His brain went supernova as D’etor caught him, and that was the last thing he knew.

+ + +

Maddy drew in a deep breath and let it out, shaken by how fast the situation had turned against them.

Alone with E’no on the shuttle, it felt like only two of them existed in the universe. She needed a moment with him, just for them. Yet for every second they lingered, the more the situation worsened at the moonbase.

“I’m going to be selfish,” she said quietly. “Just for a little while.”

He turned from the viewer and put the ship on autopilot. “It’s dire.”

“I know. But I need a moment with you to face the bad times to come.”

“I thought he had limits.” E’no closed his eyes and lowered his head, his fronds tinted the unabashed color of despair. “But now I don’t know what he might do. How far he might go.”

“We have to protect them.”

“I wish you would let me protect *you*,” he said then. “I was so frightened before. Losing you once left me incomplete.

Again? It's unthinkable."

This had to be about ignoring his orders to leave when she had been committed to getting everyone off the doomed ship. "I understand that. I do. But sometimes I have to do what's right, not what's easy."

His fronds slowly shifted hue, glowing with tenderness, and his golden eyes gained that lambent gleam, one she recalled from their former life. It meant he wanted her, maybe even as much as she wanted him. Maddy followed her heart, and as always, it led closer to him. Until she could breathe his breath.

He drew her in, fronds enveloping her in a burst of delicious space. That was the first thing she had noticed about him—how exquisite he smelled, like a tea shop full of deliciously spiced chai. He smoothed her back in gentle strokes. Perhaps this was meant to be comfort, but even though she could feel every inch of him, it wasn't enough.

She nuzzled her face against his. His people had scent glands like cats, sometimes in unusual places, and she loved each measured touch, the slow and careful marking of her skin, until she shimmered with his yearning. Her whole body felt hot and flushed, a fruit dewy with need and eager to be plucked.

When he traced her features and smoothed her eyebrows, a pleasurable shiver quaked through her. She almost pleaded for more, but there was no time. Not to have him as she desperately desired. They had been learning about each other, a slow and delicate investigative process before he went to ask for the admiral's blessing. Those memories brightened until she could scarcely bear the glow, illuminating her from within.

"You're so precious to me," he whispered.

"How's that possible? You don't even—"

Fronds silenced her with a whispering caress. Not demanding. He was all gentleness and care, until she couldn't bear the tension. She pressed close and closer still, and he made a sound she recognized as pleasure, although their

bodies didn't line up in the usual fashion. *But, oh, it's possible, and it would feel so good.* Maddy limned the side of his face with a careful touch, mirroring what he did to give her pleasure.

"I might not remember the details, but my heart recognizes you. My blood sings when you're nearby."

Just as she was about to throw caution to the wind, the comm beeped and D'etor's desperate plea came through. "Captain? Captain, come in."

E'no stepped back, his frond display showing how much the move hurt him. "This is the captain. Report."

She'd never heard D'etor sound so emotional, their voice cracking with the strain. "It's bad on the ground. Our position is overrun, and we cannot hold. Sergeant Wilder is down. What are your orders?"

+ + +

The comm blared with static after D'etor made contact.

*The admiral has won.*

The thought chilled E'no worse than the slow crystallization of ice out in vacuum. Yet he tried to find a sliver of hope. Maddy was with him, and that bolstered his spirit, warming his heart. Now his head had to find a way to protect her. The rest of the task force and most of the pirate refugees must have been captured. If D'etor could still communicate, they would try again.

That meant only two pirate ships captained by K'enir and E'nela remained, along with the three tethered skiffs. Not nearly enough forces to mount a counterstrike. Sometimes the most difficult aspect of leading was knowing when to stand down.

He hailed all channels and willed the sorrowful blue from his fronds, feigning a royal display. "Captain E'nosience to Admiral E'maleese. We must talk."

He endured the wait as best he could; doubtless the admiral was gloating.

“*Talk*, former Captain E’nosience?” His progenitor’s joyous flaxen display ground E’no’s stones. “I don’t believe we’ve ever had a conversation. Why start now?” His progenitor loved to fence with words when he thought he had the advantage.

While the admiral did possess a tactical advantage, the facts were on E’no’s side. He displayed violet. “You have my task force and a hundred illegal prisoners.”

“I have *my* soldiers. Your former task force is under my command. By joining you, the rabble volunteered for the Coalition, and I’ve accepted their service.” There was no end to the admiral’s disregard for Coalition law. “They will be repurposed into useful citizens.”

E’no made sure he was broadcasting on all channels, both his messages and the admiral’s replies. “What do you want for their freedom, E’maleese?” He could no longer address his progenitor with respect.

“What could I possibly require?” the admiral mocked.

“Me,” he said with quiet resignation. He allowed his fronds to show dark defeat. “You want me.”

The rogue admiral pretended to consider, stretching out every moment before replying, “I suppose your surrender would put an official stamp on my victory.” E’maleese’s joy deepened to purple authority. “I’ll humor you. What is it that *you* want, former Captain E’nosience?”

“Free the humans. Let the pirates repair their ships and go. The gateway ship is gone, they can no longer roam Coalition space.”

“You ask so much. You must think very highly of your value, former captain. Take down the moon base’s force shields as well and I will grant your wishes.”

“I’ll land in one span.”

As soon as the comm channel closed, Maddy said, “I can’t let you do this.”

“You can’t stop me.”

Her green eyes shone too bright, and she ducked her head. “I was afraid you’d say that. I’m so scared.”

“As am I. But as you said, sometimes we must do what’s right, not what’s easy.”

“I really hate eating my own words,” she muttered.

It was an odd thing to say, an idiom he didn’t quite understand. But there was no more time to dally.

It was over.

E’no stepped out of his shuttle onto the moon’s surface. Ahead to his left, surrounded by guards, his task force waited. E’milly stood at the front, her display a golden shade of orange indicating she still had hope. Beside her D’aroi’s head fin stood at attention, not an attitude of surrender. Hayden seemed groggy, leaning on D’etor, but neither of them appeared entirely dispirited. Pierce had an arm around Izzy, comforting her with gentle pats. Grim stood at the back paying close attention to the enemy’s position; it looked like he was calculating the odds and not enjoying the math.

*Do they think I’ve got another miracle? One more trick to save the day?* E’no only had a blue frond cape, sadness deepening with every step.

To the right, the pirates had been corralled behind a wall of Coalition soldiers. He cut a path toward E’maleese, and as he passed, first C’aloo, then others began to chant, “Eee-no! Eeee-No!”

He had infected so many with his dreams and now...

“Stop that racket!” E’maleese’s red display of power became bloody anger. “Silence that trash with your emitters!”

As if they’d been waiting for the cue, his task force struck out at their captors. Grim sprang backward and bowled over three guards before their emitters struck him. At the same time, D’etor, D’aroi, and E’milly attacked the sentries, drawing fire while Izzy raced straight toward E’no with Pierce protecting Izzy’s back with her own body. Pierce fell to a blast just as Izzy tackle-hugged him.



Izzy forced something into his hand as she whispered, “Put this in your mouth before you enter the repurposing chamber. Do not swallow it.”

Two soldiers dragged Izzy off him. The rest of his task force and many of the pirates lay unconscious on the ground.

“You see?” E’maleese strode toward him, still shimmering hatred and anger. “Do you see what your insubordination has caused?” E’maleese tore Izzy from the guards and blasted her with his emitter. He fired again as she fell. “Now give me what I want!”

He couldn’t bear to see anyone else hurt.

His fronds dimmed to the hue of despair as he followed his nemesis to the shuttle bay. He sent the message to all channels. “Suspend the shield on the airlock. Come out, E’maleese has promised to return you to your ships.”

Soon, the last five pirates emerged. D’orf led a squad into the base. Another group of soldiers surrounded E’no and the five pirates.

E’maleese’s fronds changed from red to royal satisfaction. “Get E’nosience and the pirates on the shuttles with the rest. I want them on the Vigilant as soon as possible!”

E’no went red with outrage. “You agreed to let them go!”

“Surrender new Coalition citizens to the demands of a criminal? Ridiculous.”

“And the task force?” If the admiral had already broken his word, there was little chance he would honor any established terms.

“Now that I can secure the necessary data, they are obsolete. They will return to Earth to evaluate the weapon’s effectiveness. Along with the rest of their ilk.”

*“NEVER GIVE UP, NEVER SURRENDER.”*

Maddy had shown *Galaxy Quest* to E’no in the early days of their relationship, a memory that she treasured. She’d explained it was strictly for entertainment, not a documentary regarding other extraterrestrials who had visited Earth. Once he understood he was simply meant to enjoy the story, he had been vastly amused by the creativity humans had to offer.

*I fell for him then, just a little.*

And kept falling even more, day by day. She wasn’t done, not by a long shot. Yeah, their situation sucked, but that didn’t mean she was out of ideas *or* options.

“Track those shuttles headed to Earth,” she told K’enir and E’nela over the comm. “One’s about to explode, we need to be ready to rescue our people when it does.”

“I’m not detecting any damage on sensors,” K’enir said.

The former pirates didn’t know Pierce like she did. “That’s why I don’t know which one,” she growled. “It’s a good thing our people were loaded in wearing their vacc suits. Just be ready to snatch them fast!”

Maddy had a fifty-fifty chance, and she needed E’no’s good fortune to pull this off, the luck of a leader who dove out of shuttles and survived being shot up. She closed in on a shuttle and directed the pirate ships to go after the other. The two captains weren’t willing to follow as closely as she was. She couldn’t blame them; they didn’t have ship zappers, it wasn’t their crew on those shuttles, and they hadn’t just relived the worst day of their lives when E’no surrendered.

The shuttle she was tailing stopped accelerating. Then it spun, there was a small flash, and things came flying out of it. Not things. People in vacc suits. She zoomed at them, glad for her experience doing dangerous stunts in a shuttle. Maddy cursed the whole way.

“Just a little more...aha!”

Two blue and gold uniforms, Air Force with a dash of superhero. She extended the retrieval unit as small explosions popped off inside the shuttle in a cascade effect. If the whole thing exploded, it might take her out too.

*How much air do they have left?*

No time to assume the worst, she switched that part of her brain off and acted on reflex. When the retrieval system locked on, she pulled in Izzy and Pierce.

Pierce pulled off her helmet and said, “Nice one!”

“Thank you so much!” Izzy hugged her from behind, leaning into the pilot’s seat.

But her work wasn’t done. E’no didn’t believe in leaving people behind, Hayden either. There were still more vacc suits out there, Coalition vacc suits. Maddy collected the five Coalition soldiers and raced off before the other shuttle blew up.

“You brought us some baddies to zap?” Pierce asked. “Gimme a gun!”

She grimaced. “I saved them because we’re still E’no’s task force. And I’m not telling our captain we let people die when we could’ve saved them.” She turned into Izzy’s embrace while Pierce disarmed and secured the soldiers. Maddy sighed softly. “Silly, isn’t it? I know E’no’s gone. Again.”

“Maybe not, Maddy cat.” Izzy hugged her even tighter. “Tell her, Nat.”

Pierce explained about the anti-repurposing device. “Looks like a silver lozenge. Probably tastes like battery acid.”

“But it’ll save him?” Maddy asked, fighting back tears of joy mingled with relief.

“It will,” Izzy confirmed. “Don’t worry, he’s coming back to us real soon.”

+ + +

High Admiral E'maleese inspected his newly captured moonbase.

Each perversion filled him simultaneously with revulsion and satisfaction. Humans were a disease; he was right to eradicate them as some viruses were too difficult to cure. The image from the sleeping quarters, depictions of Coalition citizens arm-in-arm with humans, was the stuff of nightmares. His fronds blazed deep red just thinking of it.

He listened to D'orf's report as long as he could stand the boredom. Finally, he interjected, "The task force didn't build the missiles?"

"That is correct, Admiral. But they left the design for such a weapon, plans for the chemical warhead that could wipe humans from the Earth."

The technician inspecting the constructor said, "I can easily delete those plans."

E'maleese brightened to a shade of outrage. "Don't you dare! That's evidence of the captain's crimes, it will be preserved."

E'no's task force had done much of the work for him. He had the means to make the weapons and the place to launch them. Fortunately, he was prepared for complications, and he already had a contingency plan.

He called the Vigilant. "C'abil! Where are the humans?"

There was a delay in the lieutenant's response. "Former pirate Captain C'anak wishes to speak to you."

"What he wishes doesn't signify. I'll use him in due time. I asked you a question!"

"Sergeant Wilder and Private Grim are en route to Earth, Admiral. Where shall we deposit them?"

He could tell the lieutenant was hiding something. "Where are the females?"

"The shuttle carrying Montez and Pierce exploded," C'abil replied.

“They’re dead?” His fronds became a pensive violet as he considered this news.

“There are no life signs among the wreckage.”

E’maleese hated unknowns. “Was the shuttle attacked? Could they have escaped?”

“There were no pirate ships in the area. Readings indicate there was an explosion inside the shuttle. If the humans ejected, they could not survive for long in vacuum.”

“This incompetence has cost me two valuable assets,” he snapped. “I want a full investigation. Send condolences to the families...and one more thing.”

“Yes, Admiral. Of course, Admiral.”

*Does the lieutenant sound relieved? About what?*

He needed to finish here and leave D’orf in charge of the moonbase. The Vigilant crew became careless when he was gone too long. But before he could leave, he must ensure that D’orf had the personnel required.

“Contact the governments of the Earth. Tell them we wish to study deviant human behavior, and we’ll trade political prisoners for some criminals. Can you handle that?”

“It should be easy. Grim is an escaped prisoner already and Wilder is being hunted by many governments. With the addition of their misdeeds on the Vigilant, their capture will be a major coup to the agency that secures them.”

“Exactly my expectation,” he agreed, shimmering orange in anticipation. “Get me some real human dregs. Murderers if possible. And Lieutenant, make sure Wilder and Grim end up somewhere *truly* terrible.”

+ + +

“You’re gonna love Earth.” Hayden grinned at his captors while assessing his situation.

Two little minotaurs and three lizards. More than he and Grim could handle since Hayden wasn’t up to his usual

weight. That emitter blast had left him seeing stars. He wondered where D'etor was and if they were all right.

The black and gold lizard officer answered, "We won't be staying, human. You will."

Hayden nodded. "Sure, sure. You got your orders." He gave the officer a little salute. "Sergeant Wilder. Or Hayden. My name isn't 'human'."

*First rule of engagement. Make them see you as a person.*

"Of course not. And I know your names." Huge lizard eyes half closed, as if he was reciting from memory. "Hayden Flynn Wilder and Darius Grim Rivers. I'm Sergeant S'atav."

It was interesting that the Coalition didn't realize that Grim was a nickname, not an official middle name documented on the big man's birth records. "Pleased to meet you. So, where are we going?"

S'atav seemed to be inspecting Hayden and the viewer at the same time, each with a different eye. "We're waiting in close orbit for specific instructions."

"Of course. Why not?" Hayden turned and pretended to study the viewer.

"I don't understand the question. Why not what?"

Hayden shrugged. "Nothing to worry about. The admiral is a straight shooter. He wouldn't send you off and forget about you. He wants to get rid of *me*, not you. Right?"

Just then, the ship console lit up. The pilot lifted her horns and reported, "Shuttle five just exploded!"

Hayden hid his amusement; Pierce could make *anything* blow up.

"Exploded? How?" Lieutenant S'atav demanded.

The pilot didn't seem to hear the question. "Now there's a pirate shuttle flying into the debris field. And we've gained a tail, sir! Two much larger pirate ships."

Hayden thanked his lucky stars for this opportunity, making up his mind to offer an Oscar-worthy performance.

“Holy hell. Do you even know what you did, that the admiral would feed you to the pirates?”

“Evasive maneuvers!” S’atav ordered, seeming to ignore Hayden’s instigation.

But he succeeded in needling another crew member. “I laughed in the admiral’s presence once. He gave an order so ridiculous that I thought he was joking!”

*Time to be downright sympathetic.*

“That’s rough,” Hayden said. “He doesn’t strike me as having much of a sense of humor, your admiral.” He studied the viewer, noting that the pirate ships were a long way off. “Good thing he doesn’t hold a grudge.”

“I excused myself from a formation,” a little minotaur said, sounding uneasy. “My mate was sick, and the admiral extended the exercise.”

“Damn it to hell. You’re *all* on his shit list. Please tell me one of you is in the admiral’s good graces?”

The fraught silence was perfect.

“We’re definitely going to die.” Grim spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, and that lent the statement even more gravitas.

“That’s enough,” S’atav snapped. “I won’t have you inciting fear among the crew.”

“I’m not the one making pirates chase us down,” Hayden pointed out.

Now the crew was talking amongst themselves, nervous rumbles about how the admiral had been more unreasonable of late, ordering people to do things that controverted Coalition tenets. And if he was questioned, he had the offender repurposed.

“Remember what the admiral did to Lieutenant C’abil?” someone whispered.

“At this moment, the pirates are the greater threat,” Hayden said calmly. “Each of those ships has a cannon that

could blow this skiff to smithereens. I oughta know, I helped install them.”

Now their unease ripened to outright fear. Judging by how scared they all looked, a terror zap wouldn't change how they felt one whit. *Time to bring this home.*

“What should we do?” the pilot asked.

Hayden had a feeling she was asking him more than S'atav. “We need to run. Now!”

“To where?” Sergeant S'atav asked in a carefully neutral tone.

*And this ship is mine, the crew along with it.*

The reassuring smile he offered didn't reveal even a hint of triumph. “Don't worry. I know just the place.”

+ + +

Coalition soldiers pushed E'no out of the shuttle and into the Vigilant's main bay.

More herded the refugees away while D'aroi, D'etor, and E'milly had their own escort. Five more guards joined the cohort keeping him in check.

“Captain E'nosience, you will come with us,” a lieutenant informed him, head fin standing alert.

E'no wore a lonely blue frond cape. He didn't speak, merely let the soldiers lead him. He knew where they were going.

The repurposing center looked the same as before but to E'no's sensing pods, it appeared ominous. The cream-colored walls gave no hope of mercy, and those chrome chambers were like the coffins Maddy had shown him on Earth. His physical body might not perish, but if Pierce's invention didn't function as promised, this meant the end of him. This would be the last time he missed Maddy; yet the pain of *missing* her was better than the emptiness of not knowing her.

“Captain E'nosience.” The technicians stood at attention behind their control console, and unless he was mistaken, he



glimpsed a mournful air in their deportment.

“The captain must be repurposed. Admiral E’maleese ordered the exact specifications of the process. You’ll find them on your console.”

C’orham shook his horns rapidly side to side. S’ilog’s face scrunched; he seemed to shrink. “This cannot be correct. This isn’t repurposement, it’s erasure.”

The lieutenant seemed unfazed. “You question the admiral’s orders?”

C’orham concentrated on E’no’s face as if the little minotaur was memorizing his features. “There will be no E’nosience after this, only an empty shell.”

E’no fell into a posture of despair, his fronds echoing the movement, and surreptitiously slipped the device Izzy had given him in his mouth. *Just in time, too.*

Two soldiers dragged E’no to the chamber, slamming the door after shoving him inside.

There wasn’t supposed to be any sensation in repurposement. Perhaps it was standard procedure to erase the memory of the experience. E’no’s mind blazed with white-hot fire, as if his brain would vibrate his skull apart. Involuntarily he bit the little device in his mouth. An eternity of agony later, everything went silent and black.

The door of the chamber opened and E’no fell out. He had no strength to stand. Illness ravaged every part of his body. His zard stones ejected themselves; they came up his throat, bleeding dark smoke, out of his mouth and onto the floor.

“Get him to medical immediately!”

Someone lifted him. He had neither the means, nor the will to resist.

When E’no recovered his senses, he was suspended in a healing pool, still in great pain. Three familiar faces peered down. “D’aroi?” he croaked. “E’milly, D’etor? How?”

All three were armed with zappers.

D'aroi's head fin stood at a jaunty angle. "Easy, captain. We knew about Pierce's anti-repurposing pill, and we figured we'd find you here."

His fronds brightened to match the turquoise of the healing pool. He had so many questions. "But you were captured. Under guard!"

D'etor spoke up. "We trained with our squad for emergency situations." Their head fin stood straight up as if that explained everything. "What does Hayden call us, the Moonbeams?"

"I didn't agree to that name," D'aroi said.

"How about E'no's Unstoppables?" At first, E'milly's fronds bloomed in a happy yellow, then she displayed somber magenta. "We need to get out of here. Now. Before they wonder why your guards haven't reported in."

HAYDEN SMILED WHEN HE SPOTTED Maddy's shuttle waiting at the farm.

"Sergeant Wilder," the minotaur pilot reported. "That's a stolen shuttle, you're taking us to a pirate shelter."

He used his most relaxed tone. "Nonsense, that's a rescue ship." He opened a channel. "Maddy, how many Coalition citizens did you save from that explosion?"

"Five," she answered without missing a beat. "All in good shape. How many did you rescue?"

Hayden shared a reassuring look with the crew. "See?" He addressed Maddy again. "You must've saved them all, got five here too. Landing now."

He left the shuttle crew to explore the farm while he conferred with Maddy, Pierce, Izzy, and Grim. "Back together, just like clockwork. Our next move is to—"

"Save E'no!" Maddy cut in with a glare.

"He's a priority, of course, but we gotta think about Earth too."

"Up your ass, Hayden!" She didn't seem interested in discussion. "We wouldn't have gotten this far without E'no. How far do you think you'll get without him now?"

"Don't forget the rest of our squad," Izzy added. "We're not all back together, and you know it." Izzy rarely got angry, but she was frowning now.

Grim weighed in with disapproval as well. "I like D'aroi. E'milly and D'etor too. We can't leave them with the admiral."

"We need them," Pierce said. "Besides, you said it yourself. No one gets left behind."

*They're all big damn heroes now.*

He folded his arms. “How are we getting on the Vigilant? Tell me the plan. And what about saving the Earth?”

“Figure that on the way or stay here.” Maddy didn’t look like she cared which he picked. “I only landed to drop them off.” She gestured at the Coalition soldiers, then she leveled her gaze on Hayden, sharp as a broken bottle. “I’m saving E’no.”

She was back in the shuttle before he could respond, launching without a second glance. *Guess saving Earth is on us. And maybe these Coalition types.*

The alien soldiers whispered among themselves, seeming confused and unhappy. *Time to smooth things over.* Hopefully, they didn’t read human body language well enough to realize Hayden had some discontent in the ranks.

He approached the soldiers and spread his arms in a ‘look around’ gesture. “What do you think? Beautiful isn’t it?”

“We think you tricked us,” S’atav said.

“Not one bit,” Hayden told him seriously. “I saved you. Come on, don’t you think Earth is lovely?”

S’atav kept both his huge eyes on Hayden. “That’s not the point.”

“No,” he agreed. “The point is that Admiral E’maleese isn’t using the Coalition playbook.” He regarded each soldier sternly. “He’s getting away with it here on the edge of Coalition space but sooner or later, the consequences will catch up with him.”

“We are guilty of dereliction of duty.” But the minotaur didn’t sound certain.

*Sometimes you push, sometimes you pull back.*

He turned around and looked at the fields, the sky. “The best you could do on the Vigilant was play along and hope not to get repurposed. And then hope some more that when the Coalition catches him, you don’t get blamed.”

“The admiral is infamous for finding scapegoats,” someone whispered.

“Exactly. Well, I gave you another option,” Hayden said smoothly.

+ + +

E’no lacked the strength to emerge from the healing pool on his own.

D’aroi carried him. While the treatment mitigated some of the damage, he should have remained there for another cycle. But they didn’t have that much time. He felt no stronger than a hatchling.

“Override the shuttle bay controls. The rest of the squad will come for us.”

*Maddy will, at least.*

“We can hide in S’inoog’s warehouse,” E’milly suggested, her frond cape vermillion. “It’s the closest refuge.”

Moving quietly, they followed the hallways. E’no had never noticed how graceful D’aroi could be, gliding along stealthily with the team. Though her every step caused him pain, he made no sounds that might give them away. She was trying her best to be gentle.

D’etor, scouting ahead, signaled a stop. Their next silent gesture said, *patrol coming*.

D’aroi set E’no down carefully. He lacked the strength to control his display, and his fronds turned a hopeful blue green. E’milly and D’aroi crouched beside D’etor, waiting for the patrol to come into view. They didn’t draw their zappers.

When the first of the five soldiers appeared, they rushed into action. D’etor tackled the leader, E’milly struck the next two, and D’aroi overpowered the last. Then D’etor and E’milly erased the last thirty seconds from the patrol’s memory. Just as he was about to praise them for the swift victory, a second patrol rounded the corner, drawing emitters instantly when they saw their cohorts on the floor.

“Surrender! We have you outnumbered.”

“Never,” D’etor said in a tone so calm that Grim would be impressed.

E'no wished he could do more than stumble out of the way, but a blast took him off his feet. The pain left him dizzy and sick. From the floor, the action flashed quick and chaotic. Dents appeared in wall panels, D'aroi was bodily hucking another soldier at the opposite wall, and E'milly took out another with neat, precise strikes. She kept glancing at him in concern, and he tried to pull himself upright.

The corridor swam.

A soldier seemed to recognize E'no then and ran right at him, ready to deliver a disabling blow. E'milly dove, covering him with her body, and she took the full force of the strike. She cried out, frond cape flashing red with pain, but she didn't move. E'no struggled to shift her, but she seemed determined to keep him safe, no matter the cost.

*I don't deserve this dedication.*

That gave D'etor and D'aroi the time to take the other two out. While D'aroi assisted E'no, D'etor got E'milly on her feet. Another zapper wave purged the memory of the second patrol, but several of the weapons showed low power.

“Everyone able to move?” they asked.

“I'm fine,” E'milly said, an obvious exaggeration.

“We have to keep moving,” D'aroi said.

When they got to S'inoog's door, E'no said, “Put me down. I'll walk from here.”

It took all his strength, but he projected command purple and entered the warehouse with only a little support from D'aroi. There, ten Coalition soldiers stood in line in front of S'inoog and his constructor. The first in line was receiving a zapper. S'inoog handed the soldier the weapon and studied the new arrivals.

“Attention!” bellowed E'milly, sounding a lot like Hayden, and bristling royal violet.

The Coalition snapped to, conditioned to obedience.

E'no forced himself to stride to the constructor, disguising his pain. “Master S'inoog, distributing the new weapon, I see.”

“Captain E’no.” S’inoog licked his eyes as if to clear his vision. “I thought...”

E’no willed his display to a deeper command shade, his fronds hurt more than when they’d been shot. Of course, Maddy had been there then, ready with a med pack. “You heard my negotiation with the admiral, and you thought what?”

“The whole ship heard, sir.” S’inoog was deferential. “Forgive me saying, you were repurposed and then the repurposing center was closed.”

E’no hadn’t known that. “The repurposing center equipment malfunctioned after my treatment, but *I* wasn’t broken.” He tried to exude confidence. “I retain command of loyal Coalition soldiers. He gestured to D’etor, E’milly, and D’aroi. “I’m here because these three are experts in the new weapon you’re issuing.”

As one, his squad opened fire.

+ + +

Maddy might have cut off her own nose to spite her face.

She’d flown off, furious at Hayden, but she didn’t actually have a plan for getting on board the *Vigilant*. Now she bounced through the burn, unable to believe the turn her life had taken. Before, she’d never had any aspirations to fly, but now it was one of her favorite things—that moment of freedom when her ship popped above the exosphere, gliding smooth and sure.

Earth below, still in danger. The moonbase in ruins. And E’no, counting on her to figure this shit out.

There must be a solution. But—

Her comm crackled with the sound of an unexpected hail. “Please respond. This is Lieutenant C’abil of the *Vigilant*. Do you hear me?”

“I do. What do you want?” she asked warily.

“We can help one another. We may have more in common than you might expect.”

This could be a trick. Or a trap. But she didn't have many options. "I'm listening."

"If you can get here in the next span, I'll allow you access to the lower shuttle bay. But I can't keep the admiral distracted forever."

"What are you hoping to get out of this?" she asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" C'abil asked.

"If it was, I wouldn't be posing the question."

"I've been watching him for a long time. And it's obvious to me that thriving within his regime isn't possible unless you're a mindless sycophant like D'orf. I'm smart enough to bide my time. And careful enough to make my own plans."

"You're trying to use us," she said.

"I prefer to think of it as mutually beneficial cooperation. Think carefully, *chaplain*." The stress on her fake title contained a hint of amusement. "This is a limited-time offer."

She made the decision instantly. "Provide coordinates and any access codes. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Though she expected a double-cross or the admiral to hail her as soon as she drew close to the Vigilant, that didn't happen. Instead, the lieutenant provided a clear trajectory, allowing her to circle past dead spots in the ship's sensor array, approaching like a ghost. He'd probably fritzed key grid points in rapid succession, preventing anyone from detecting what he was doing.

*Looks like we have an insider.*

The external bay doors opened, and she swooped the skiff in, landing it with a clunk. There was no armed welcoming party, an empty docking bay, just as she'd been promised. She popped the hatch and dropped down, ready for anything.

"I have one final surprise," C'abil said then.

*Oh shit.*

Maddy braced and fumbled for a weapon.



The internal doors opened, and four familiar figures limped in. From the look of them, they'd gone through hell getting here. D'aroi was supporting E'no. And D'etor had E'milly leaning on them too. She took them all in with a single glance, then her gaze went back to E'no.

*He's alive. But is he...*

"Maddy!" Incandescent joy lit him up, his fronds showing the brightest yellow.

He tried to run to her, breaking away from D'aroi's hold, and he would have fallen, but Maddy moved faster than she ever had in her life. She fought the urge to burst into tears because she had been so afraid that she'd never see him again. Not the one she—

"I'm here," she said, supporting him with both arms. "Always will be."

"I'm glad to see you," D'etor said.

E'milly let out a pained sound. "As am I."

"Are we getting off this ship now?" D'aroi asked.

The comm pinged. "I have a better idea," Lieutenant C'abil said.

"What's that?" Maddy wanted to know.

"You've proven to be an ally," E'no said thoughtfully. "So, I'm willing to entertain your suggestion."

There was a brief pause. "I don't have long. The admiral is coming. But...I too have faced—and avoided repurposing at his hands. You're a hero to so many, sir. Talk to the crew. Inspire them. *Lead* them."

*Hell yeah. We're taking the ship.*

A LINE OF BLACK VEHICLES kicked up a slew of dust down the long drive to the farm.

Hayden didn't like how heavy the retrieval team was. He liked the air support even less. Taking refuge at the farm had been a calculated risk, but it seemed as if the agencies hunting him hadn't wasted their time while he was building the moonbase. They'd dug deep to find this place. He signaled to Pierce, Izzy, and Grim. The Coalition soldiers wouldn't be able to read that gesture, but maybe they'd catch on if the shit hit the fan.

Chances were good they'd be gunned down if they tried to bolt. Talking it would be, and he came up with some of his best bullshit under pressure. He waited in an easy stance, propped up against the peeling red wall of the barn. The aliens nearby seemed to understand that this was a precarious situation, as nobody was making any sudden moves. Extraterrestrials had no rights here, and if Hayden didn't mind his Ps and Qs, everybody would wind up in a detention camp.

Sure, Pierce would blow something up eventually, and his people would get out, but it gnawed at him, how upset Maddy had been when she flew off. *I have to save everyone. Somehow.* But his sense of responsibility didn't stop at this little group. He had some ideas for how the Earth could be folded into the plan as well.

And it all started here.

“What's happening?” S'atav asked.

“Welcome party.”

“They don't look very welcoming,” Izzy said.

“Hayden Wilder!” A stern voice rang out.

Tall woman, no-nonsense haircut, wearing the standard-issue tailored black suit, white collared blouse, and sensible

shoes. She strode toward the barn without hesitation. *If I had a sniper on the roof, she'd be down already.* A dumbass move like that would get his whole team killed, but it wouldn't save Ms. Government Sunglasses either.

“You're wanted on multiple counts of—”

“It's good to be wanted,” he cut in. “But I'd rather be valued.”

She blinked. He'd succeeded in nonplusing her.

He went on before she could recite all his crimes. “It's not me you should be worried about, ma'am. I've been commissioned for a deep-cover espionage mission.”

“By whom?” she demanded.

“I'm not at liberty to say,” he countered smoothly. “The point is, that admiral who's running amok in near orbit means to deploy a biological weapon capable of destroying all human life on this planet. If you've been keeping tabs like I suspect, you should have logged some troubling requests on his comms.”

She paused. “According to unofficial chatter, he did ask for some criminals. That went over like a lead balloon among the powers that be.”

*Perfect.* E'maleese had no clue that he'd shown his hand and made Hayden's case for him. *He thinks we're all thick as fresh cement.*

He tilted his head at Pierce. “Show her the plans we stole.”

The best lies should be rooted in truth. This woman didn't need to know they'd also created those schematics. He doubted she'd be pleased if he assured her they'd never had any intention to build or use the warhead.

Pierce stepped forward. “Turn on your wireless file sharing.”

“How do I know you're not hacking my device?” the agent asked.

“Then do you want to come over and take a look?”

There was no question that Government Sunglasses was in charge because she didn't glance at anyone else. She marched right up to Pierce, who could have dropped her in ten seconds. Instead, Pierce showed her the files, letting her thumb through the implications at her own pace.

Then she pulled off her sunglasses, revealing hard brown eyes. "This is a game-changer."

"It's not the entire Coalition," Grim pointed out.

"Yeah, just that one rogue admiral," Izzy added. "If we take him out of the equation, we could benefit from an alliance."

"I don't know if I buy your story, but this is a credible threat—and above my paygrade. I need to send this up the chain."

"Good idea," Hayden said affably.

*Not getting shot, an even better one. And nothing unifies a people like an external threat.* If he compared the admiral to the Serbian extremist who assassinated Archduke Ferdinand, governments would fall over each other getting in line to stop E'maleese. He just had to push the right buttons.

Meanwhile, the agent moved off and made a call.

She came back five minutes later with a stoic expression. "Still not sure if I can trust you, Wilder. But I'm Agent Valenz."

That name rang a faint bell. "You were there when we liberated Izzy and Grim, huh?"

Her sour expression answered the question even if she didn't. "No comment. Looks like we'll be working together."

"Pleased to meet you." He gave her his best smile. "Can't have too many hands on deck when it comes to saving the world."

+ + +

High Admiral E'maleese strode onto the main shuttle bay of the Vigilant. *His* ship.

Lieutenant C'abil was waiting dutifully for him with a small security squad. He did not acknowledge their salutes. "E'nosience has been dealt with?" He showed his royal shade and glowered at the lieutenant.

"Exactly as ordered, admiral," In person, C'abil seemed spiritless once again. "Former Captain E'nosience is but a mindless husk."

This might require some explaining to E'matroon but her objections scarcely signified. He didn't allow his colors to show satisfaction; instead he maintained the intimidating purple. "Excellent, take me to him."

"Sir," Lieutenant C'abil began.

E'maleese wasn't about to tolerate stalling. "I said take me to him!" He fixed his sensing pods on C'abil. "I don't like to repeat myself."

"I understand, Admiral. But we don't know where the captain is at present. There's a glitch in our internal communications."

*Ridiculous.*

His fronds grew blood red and he closed on C'abil. "The Vigilant is state of the art, the finest ship in the Ancient Civilized Galactic Coalition. It does *not* glitch!" The admiral stared his anger at the whole squad. They cowered before him. "Tell me exactly what you know, temporary lieutenant C'abil."

"The repurposing facility followed your instructions." C'abil was clearly trying to mollify him. "E'nosience emerged from the chamber, unable to even stand. He even ejected his zard stones. He was taken to medical."

He allowed himself a moment of silent satisfaction. That was what came of turning aside from the correct path. His disobedient offspring wouldn't be content until he ruined himself utterly, refusing to heed E'maleese's advice and failing to grasp the greatness of the mission already chosen for him.

"Then that's where we must begin."

The admiral led the way, ignoring how the crew skittered out of his sight. Many didn't even salute before they fled. *Discipline on this ship has broken down entirely. I'll set them straight as soon as I see what's left of my unfortunate progeny.*

In medical, five Coalition soldiers emerged from healing pools. "This is the unit that accompanied E'nosience to the repurposing center and then brought him here," C'abil explained. "They were ambushed and received minor injuries."

*Ambushed? On my ship?*

E'maleese concealed his panic. "To the bridge! There's a mutiny underway."

+ + +

Maddy wished E'no would lean on her more as they exited the shuttle bay.

He was struggling, only using her for balance, striving to be independent. She admired that about him, but that same quality also made Admiral Asshole determined to break his spirit. She couldn't bear to see him in pain; it would be easier to take those wounds herself.

"Let me help you," she said when he paused in the hallway.

"You are," he answered, his fronds shining happy yellow. "You're the reason I can go on, even now."

Her heart fluttered, as it always did for him.

But D'etor had their mind on practical matters and didn't allow time for a personal response. "The five of us against the whole of the Vigilant..." Their head fin angled in what Maddy recognized as concentration. "We'll need an army."

"We have two," Eno replied. "The admiral isn't popular with the crew."

Though he didn't stop touching her, he shifted all his weight as he displayed a beautiful violet frond cape. "And I have promises to keep."

“And miles to go before we sleep?” Maddy muttered.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a decent night's rest. The admiral would have her hallucinating before long if they didn't neutralize him. E'no would have nonviolent solutions in mind, but Maddy was starting to wonder if that was possible.

“I like the cadence of that,” E'milly said.

“Probably because I'm quoting an old Earth poet.”

E'no paused, regarding her with glowing golden eyes. “I would like to hear more. But first, we must find the refugees.”

That was entirely on brand. She wasn't even surprised at this point. The heroic, selfless captain could barely walk under his own power, but he still had it in him to care about people he scarcely knew.

“You just don't quit, huh?” She couldn't decide if she adored this about him or if his single-minded attitude would be the death of her.

“I told them they wouldn't have to join the Coalition or be repurposed. I can't leave them to the admiral.”

*How does he make ridiculous requests sound so logical? First I'm a pilot, next combat medic, then gunner. Occasionally I'm a diplomat. And now I'm ready to become a soldier.*

Maddy sighed. “Where do we find them? Does the Vigilant have a stockade?”

“They wouldn't all fit in our old quarters.” D'aroi's head fin wavered as she appeared to consider possible locales.

E'milly flushed orange when one hiding spot seemed to occur to her. “They could be in our training area.”

That made sense; the task force had been added on to the Vigilant, and now their space might've been filled with pirate prisoners.

“How can we get them? Will C'abil provide cover?” She didn't trust their inside man.

E'no replied, "Even if he wants to, the lieutenant won't be able to assist. E'maleese must be searching for us by now, and C'abil will be under scrutiny."

"There will be even more patrols." D'etor went to scout ahead.

*We're in no shape for a fight. But maybe we don't have to.*

"I think we might be going about this the wrong way," Maddy said.

"You have an idea?" E'milly asked.

E'no leaned on her a little more, waiting for her to speak, and she had D'aroi's full attention too. Since they couldn't move without the all-clear when D'etor returned, she'd try to sell them on this idea. Maddy paused to get her thoughts in order.

"You remember what C'abil said, right?" she asked.

"Talk to the crew. Inspire them. *Lead* them'." E'milly was ready with the eager quote.

"He seems to be a clever one, and he wasn't telling us to storm the castle. We need to undermine Admiral Asshole's authority. Cast doubt on his ability to lead. What's the best way to address the whole crew?"

"Comm center," E'no said at once.

"Bang on. The pirates aren't going anywhere, they're safe enough for now. You said it yourself, the admiral is hunting *us*."

D'aroi had her head fin tilted in a way that showed real approval. "They probably won't expect us to head there. They'll concentrate guards and patrols near the pirates."

Maddy nodded. "Let's bet it all on how much the crew hates E'maleese." She turned to E'no. "Do you have a rousing speech left? One to win hearts and minds."

His golden eyes glowed so brightly it hurt her to gaze at him. Then he said, "You'd better believe I do."



*If only simple rest could cure me.*

But the damage had been considerable, and E'no needed time in a healing pool. *Time we don't have.* Thankfully, Maddy had come up with a credible plan. Her mind never ceased to amaze him, an endless font of innovative and creative solutions. To have such a partner for life...

He didn't dare dwell on the beauty of that future. No, he wouldn't deserve her until everyone was safe.

Soon, D'etor returned and projected a three-dimensional image of the ship from their comm. "The patrols are concentrated here, here, and here."

"As I predicted." D'aroi seemed pleased about that.

"I can overload junctions near the comm center," E'milly said. "No casualties, but it will draw off the single patrol stationed near the comm center."

"Better to avoid a stand-up fight," Maddy agreed.

E'no had nothing to add. The pain made it difficult to focus, and he needed to marshal his energy for the moment that mattered. Part of being a good leader meant knowing when to trust the team. And his squad was superlative.

"Let's move when E'milly gives the cue," D'etor suggested.

E'milly tapped at her comm furiously, inputting codes that E'no hadn't even realized she knew. *What an enterprising person. I'm so glad I chose her for the task force.*

Then alarms sounded, as the ship responded to the power surges.

"Now!" she said.

The group moved out.

E'no let D'aroi transport him, though it stung his pride to do so with Maddy watching. But her demeanor seemed more worried than anything else. They moved as quickly as they could, occasionally dodging new patrols that had altered their route, likely on the admiral's orders. Everyone was on high

alert, and E'no's whole body throbbed by the time D'aroi reached the comm center.

"We made it," Maddy whispered.

"There should only be two inside," D'aroi noted. "I'll secure the area with D'etor and admit you when it's safe."

She set him gently next to Maddy, who reached out at once. E'no again told himself that there was no shame in accepting help, a trait the admiral had tried to burn out of him. All gentleness, all kindness, all compassion and desire to serve others. But somehow, thanks to Pierce and her terrible invention, he was still himself at the core.

Not the puppet his progenitor had tried to make of him.

A few muffled thumps, then the iris swished open. "Quickly." D'etor signaled everyone in.

With Maddy's help, he limped inside. E'milly followed and immediately began securing the premises while D'etor and D'aroi took up guard positions at the door. There were two unconscious Coalition citizens on the ground. Maddy went over and zapped them while E'no collapsed into a seat at the console.

*I only have one chance to get this right.*

"I don't know how long you'll have once we hijack the feed," Maddy said. "So do your best and make it count."

He let his fronds brush her fingertips, taking pleasure and strength in the contact. Then he hit the button that would carry his words to the entire ship. "This is Captain E'nosience. I must inform you that Admiral E'maleese is no longer fit for command. He has committed unspeakable crimes against Coalition citizens, including me. My record indicates that I have been repurposed *five times*, purely on his whim."

He paused to allow that to sink in. Every crew member on this ship would understand the gravity of that transgression. Then he went on, "I'm here to assure you that everything will be fine. Simply refuse his orders and return to the values we hold dear. Harm none. Leave even non-Coalition worlds better than we found them. I've always tried to help whenever I can,

and I'll help *you* as well. You can regain your honor and your sense of self-worth."

Another pause. Soldiers would be coming soon. *Time to finish the call to action.*

"Join me. Choose freedom."

MADDY HELPED E'NO INTO THE empty hallway.

They followed D'etor, E'milly, and D'aroi away from the comm center. "Where is everybody?" she asked.

"Where's who?" E'no's orange frond display showed that he didn't understand the question.

*What am I missing here?*

"Everybody. Your speech should be drawing them in."

"Indeed, it was a fine speech." E'milly glowed a proud yellow.

D'etor always stuck to the facts, but they appeared pleased as well, if Maddy was any judge. "Logical and moving."

D'aroi's jutting head fin showed she was just as impressed as E'milly. "Stirring, we'll have many allies on the Vigilant now."

Maddy blinked, now certain the nuances of the situation must be escaping her. "Many? Who? Where are they?"

Their blank stares nudged her toward the answer. *Of course. The Coalition is ancient and very civilized. E'maleese couldn't find soldiers willing to kill and E'no can only inspire civil disobedience.* E'no's most passionate supporters were likely planning a sit-in.

"Captain E'nosience, hello," a friendly voice said.

The speaker was an elderly D-designate, part of a small group milling in the hallway. At the sight of E'no, they lined up in polite formation and waited to be acknowledged.

E'no approached the group, his fronds deep purple. Maddy guessed from his manner that he knew the citizens addressing him. "Hello, D'amalia, so good to see you. How may I help you?"

“The better question is, how can *we* help you?” A serious-looking S-designate lizard alien asked.

“What’re you planning to do?” Maddy asked.

*Have an angry tea party?* Somehow, she suppressed the urge to be sarcastic, knowing the aliens might not even understand her tone.

“We’re planning to wait here for the next patrol and give them a stern warning.” The S-alien seemed entirely serious about their intentions.

*How does the Coalition ever get anything done?*

“A fine idea.” E’no beamed daffodil yellow, directing his words to the venerable hedgehog. “I wonder if you might accompany us, Citizen D’amalia?”

So it went, they moved toward the training area encountering small clusters of courteous dissidents. E’no exchanged pleasantries with each group, encouraged them to speak to the next patrol they saw and asked the eldest female to accompany the task force. Being forced to debate the correctness of their course of action might slow down the patrols at least. E’no must be leading these old ladies to safety. They pushed forward until Maddy glimpsed the guards outside the training area.

E’no faced their new supporters. “Behind that door are a number of young potential citizens being held by the admiral.” There was a collective gasp. “I have personally guaranteed their safety and freedom.”

The entire brigade murmured in support. “Quite right,” said D’amalia.

“Absolutely! I would do the same.”

“You’re a good person, Captain.”

Sometimes Maddy found his gentleness frustrating, but she also enjoyed seeing how well he communicated. E’no shifted his display to a kindly green. “Then perhaps you might explain to the guards that the Coalition does not keep prisoners?”

“Of course, Captain.” Turning with alacrity, D’amalia led the scolding initiative.

The guards were better equipped to withstand zapper fire than the righteous, aged ire E’no had unleashed on them. They raised their weapons, but who could be prepared for such an onslaught? Maddy suspected her *own* mother couldn’t best these aliens in either chiding tone or censuring gesture.

“Now see here,” D’amalia began. “I understand you’re keeping potential citizens in confinement. That violates all manner of basic rights.”

Another alien weighed in. “You should be ashamed.”

“Do your progenitors know what you’re doing on board the Vigilant?” A third boldly entered the verbal fray. “Would they support this behavior?”

D’amalia delivered the final blow. “What are your names and official identification numbers? I’ll notify both the Coalition authorities *and* your progenitors.”

The guards fled.

Maddy stifled a laugh. *This has to be the most civilized jailbreak ever.*

+ + +

E’no had expended too much strength.

He leaned on Maddy more than he meant to. Yet her warmth drew him, and he wanted her close but he couldn’t read her expression. It would be easier if she shared her moods in colors, but he’d noticed that she only ever shifted to pink—and that under very particular circumstances.

He inspected the huge iris separating them from the holding area. It wouldn’t open. “D’etor, E’milly?”

“If everyone could stand back a moment.” D’aroi gently herded the concerned citizens away from the blast zone.

On his cue, E’milly and D’etor fired their emitters and the dented iris swirled wide. On the other side, more than a

hundred former pirates awaited their fates. A few stumbled forward, tentatively hopeful.

“It’s Captain E’no!” C’aloo yelled.

“What a fine-looking group,” D’amalia said but as she studied them closer, her fin drooped. “They’re half-starved and clad in rags!”

“E’nosience!” E’maleese’s voice boomed over the comm.

He adjusted the device. “There’s no need to shout. I have you on full volume.”

“Good!” The admiral’s anger was audible. “I want your followers to hear how you’ve condemned them all to share your fate!”

E’no displayed peaceful green for all to see. His progenitor’s threats no longer mattered. “My fate?”

“Yes. I don’t know how you vandalized my repurposing facility, but it will soon be repaired. First, I’ll test it on those incompetent technicians. Then I’ll have you erased. Everything! Your memories, intellect, *and* personality. When I’m done there will be nothing left of you.”

“That’s what you intended all along,” he said quietly. His calm contrasted to the admiral’s mounting and irrational rage.

“I’ll go much further than that! I’ll purge the whole ship if I have to.” E’maleese’s rant chilled to icy malice. “Everyone who heard your little speech, your ‘task force’, those pathetic pirate wretches. The population of the Vigilant will look upon you and not know who you were. No one will have pity for you. Your name will never be spoken again.”

E’no couldn’t have made a better speech to inspire those around him. “Thank you for sharing your vision,” he said with complete sincerity. “If you’d care to confess anything else, I’m sure the crew would like to hear it.”

He switched off the comm and turned to the assembled pirates and citizens. “Those are the stakes, my friends.” He leaned on Maddy, not knowing how much longer he’d be able

to stand. “If any of you wish to surrender or retreat, I’ll understand.”

“Never!” The elderly Coalition citizens seemed utterly incensed.

More voices chimed in. “How could you even think such a thing?”

“The admiral must be stopped,” D’amalia said firmly.

“We cannot allow this!”

“Thank you all.” He addressed the young refugees next. “Accompany these citizens. They’ll ensure that you’re dressed and fed.”

Those words consumed the last of his strength. Pain. So much pain. He couldn’t hold on. The walls spun, and for the second time, E’no collapsed.

When his sensing pods dimmed, the last thing he saw was Maddy’s face.

+ + +

Hayden had been born to make the best of a bad situation.

Showing off his high-beam smile, he said, “Say hello to Agent Valenz, squad.” Then he aimed his grin at the fed. “Agent Valenz, welcome to the team.”

She didn’t seem impressed. “Team? Natalie Pierce, Isabella Montez, and Darius Rivers, all escapees from federal custody. And these aliens don’t look any better.”

He gestured, chuckling. “That’s Sergeant S’atav. His group just joined up, but I guess we’re all Moonbeamers now.”

“I fucking told you not to call us that,” Pierce reminded him.

Valenz had a poker face worthy of a diva’s pop song. “We’re going to the moon?”

Hayden faced S’atav and his soldiers. “Everyone who wants the accolade for saving a planet is.” He started toward the shuttle. “The rest can wait here on the farm.”



“How many can fit in this little spaceship?” Valenz asked.

She seemed to be eyeballing the size of the shuttle, and Hayden didn't have time for this shit. He didn't have the patience either. “Us and just barely. I'm not wasting time constructing vacc suits for anybody else. We'll make yours on the way.” But he needed her cooperation. “That asshole up there wants to kill every human on Earth and the moonbase gives him the staging point. We gotta take that back. Right away.”

“I'm waiting to hear back,” Valenz said.

But he could tell his tone was starting to work on her. Push and pull, until he had her where he wanted her. He modified his approach, aiming for reasonable conviction. “You need to talk to somebody, use the comm on the ship. Get us a warrant to arrest that asshole! We'll do it in the name of Nauru if we have to. Right now...” He addressed everyone. “Moonbeamers, move out!”

It was a tight fit, but they all got on. None of the Coalition soldiers cared to stay and try their luck with the ominous looking MiB's. Agent Valenz was the last aboard, and she appeared none too certain about these developments, but Hayden didn't give a damn.

If there wasn't an Earth-saving accolade yet, there would be before he was done.

E'NOSIENCE OPENED HIS SENSING PODS and he didn't see Maddy.

Two medics were looking at him, and one of them was making notes. The other made a gesture of agreement. *At least I'm still here. The admiral didn't take my mind, my heart, or my will.*

“Maddy?” He spoke with hope.

In that moment, only Maddy mattered. If he couldn't find her, it would be difficult to think about anything else.

“I'm here.” She took his hand.

Peace immediately suffused him, radiating outward from that point of contact. Something about this amazing human granted him a sense of solace that he'd never known. It was because of her that he could assure everyone else with complete confidence and say, *Yes. Everything will be alright. We can win.* No matter how bleak the odds.

He noticed that her hand was much smaller than his. Soft and delicate. Only five digits, too. His had six digits and the joints were entirely different. The feel of her skin was fascinating, warm, and silky at the same time. He traced lightly down the center, making her fingers flutter. She smiled at him with both her mouth and her eyes.

“How is he?” she asked the medical tech.

E'no managed to say, “I'll be fine.”

*I have to be. There's too much at stake.*

“You never should have left the healing pool, captain,” said a medic, head fin bent in concentration while they adjusted his medpack.

The other one studied E'no, showing a worried blue. “We need to get you back into one as soon as possible.”

“The admiral holds the medical center.” E’no recognized D’etor’s voice.

“Holds?” He struggled to stand.

Maddy helped him up. “A lot has happened while you were asleep.”

The huge room was filled with Coalition citizens and former pirates alike; he was the center of attention. A soft rumble went through the crowd, not quite a cheer, but E’no could tell by the brightening of displays and the angle of head fins that they all took heart in seeing him rise. *Give me time and I shall do more.*

“We’ve claimed more than half the Vigilant,” D’aroi informed him.

E’milly’s frond cape glowed starlight yellow. “Reporting in, Captain. The admiral only retains the bridge, medical center, a few feeding stations, a production warehouse, and nominal control of the engine room.”

It hurt to will his fronds purple. “Then we must secure the engine room.”

“Absolutely not,” Maddy said at once. “We need to get you to medical.”

It was impossible not to protest. “The engine room. I won’t put my needs above those of the people.”

He recognized her stern look even before she spoke. “These people need *you*. At your best and strongest. I’m not letting you sacrifice yourself for the sake of pride. You’re our leader, do you get that? And without you, Admiral Asshole wins. We’re taking the med center. No further discussion.”

The rest of the group quietly added their voices to Maddy’s insistence, and E’no couldn’t argue. While the delay might cost them, it would serve no one if he collapsed out of sheer obstinance. Finally, he acquiesced after a long, pensive silence.

“Fine. To the med center.”

The halls were guarded.

E'maleese's soldiers fired on the young refugees leading the way. It was pure chaos, crowds clashing so that some fell while others pushed from behind. The guards lost their weapons in the insistent wave, not violent but inexorable.

Witnessing the conflict pained E'no; there was no strategy in corridor combat, no clever plan to defeat the admiral's most loyal soldiers. But they couldn't stand down. Step by step, they pushed until there was no ground left to cede.

While his progenitor had started this, E'no would finish it.

+ + +

High Admiral E'maleese hated his staff; all they brought was bad news.

And C'abil was the worst of the lot. At least D'orf knew how to stand. This lieutenant had been repurposed until he seemed to have no spine at all, just bland compliance. Which was what E'maleese had intended, but somehow, now that he had it, the obedience angered him as well because he had no reason to punish this gormless null.

"They've taken the medical center." C'abil spoke in a monotone.

"What about the repurposing facility?" he demanded, his fronds jet blue.

That and the medical center were his only remaining means of control. If the rebels pushed hard enough, it would be difficult to retain authority. He couldn't brook the idea of being pushed around by a throng of witless malcontents, who lacked the vision to understand his goals, let alone possess the ability to help him attain them. This...movement must be contained. Immediately.

C'abil reported, "It's a stalemate, Admiral. We might take it if we redeploy from the engine rooms or the holding area."

He could concede the engine rooms temporarily. The engineers had sided with E'nosience but they were too civilized to cut the power anywhere on the ship. If he let go of the holding center, the forces he took from E'nosience would return to his enemy. On the other hand, he could claim the

repurposing facility and turn captives into soldiers, loyal to his cause. Briefly, the admiral considered the best course, then made a command decision.

“Send all soldiers from the engine rooms to reinforce the assault on the repurposing facility. Take it at once!”

His display turned red; he would neither be defeated, nor overcome. The admiral would personally see to it that he had the most loyal crew in the entire Coalition. First he would complete the mission that started all this annoyance, demoralize his hated offspring, and end the human species as he had originally intended. While the plan he had formulated to start wouldn't work, he had a backup.

“C'abil, open a comm link to the moon base! D'orf, order C'anak to complete construction immediately. And fire those missiles!”

+ + +

It was almost as crowded as the pirate ships inside the shuttle.

Hayden turned his back so that Agent Valenz could don her vacc suit. “All eyes front!” he said.

He inspected the backs of his new squad: four hedgehogs, three lizardmen, two mini minotaurs, a rainbow E, and the Moonbeamers (to hell with Pierce's vote). When he glanced over his shoulder, Valenz had her suit on. In terms of numbers, they were better off than the first time he'd landed on the moon. But Hayden would swap this lot to have that team back again.

*Save Earth, then get on the Vigilant. One problem at a time.*

“How's the situation looking?” he asked.

The little horned pilot answered, “The moon base, three shuttles and a pair of crashed pirate ships. Those other two pirate ships are still tracking us.”

“From a distance, right? Let 'em follow. Our mission is in front of us.” He addressed Pierce, who was with Grim at the

gun station. Izzy stood within arm's reach of Pierce, of course. "Where's our back door?"

Pierce seemed to contemplate dropping a clanker for a moment; she made eye contact with Izzy as they held a silent, light-speed convo that was only possible for people who fit together like hands in bespoke tailored gloves. Then Izzy inclined her head slightly.

He didn't have time for games. "You and Grim installed the force shields! Tell me where to go. Now."

"The launch pad," Pierce said.

Perfect, right where they were headed. "Take us in," he instructed the pilot.

"It's solid most of the time." Grim shared the details. "But when the shield gets hit, there'll be a soft spot."

The shuttle landed and Hayden ordered, "Check your suits and get moving."

Valenz stayed to watch him while everyone else exited. He winked at the agent and got on the comm. "K'enir, E'nela! Fire on the moon base with everything you've got."

"We won't make a dent," came E'nela's reply.

"I'm asking you to try anyway."

"Yes, Sergeant Wilder," she confirmed.

"Let's find that soft spot" He handed Valenz an emitter, offering advice she'd heed if she was smart as her haircut implied. "Don't try your pistol in low gee."

Hayden led the way with his weapon at the ready. The troops were next to a corner of the pad, farthest away from the rest of the base. The pad didn't have walls or a roof; it was only covered by the force shield, and there were four missiles already on it. A small tractor was maneuvering a fifth into place.

"How many do they need to wipe out the Earth?"

"The plan was to launch six at once," Grim told him.

That didn't leave much time. He checked his watch. *They're probably asleep on the farm.* When he looked to the horizon, the pirate ships were coming in fast.

"Everybody get ready! Line up behind Grim, He'll lead us in. Pierce!"

"I know what to do." Pierce was a pro. "Give me your watch."

*Damn.* He should have seen this coming. He wanted to argue. There had to be some other way. It wasn't just an heirloom; it was also his lifeline to a normal life, a tie to his past and his family. *And I'm the only one left.* With a deep wrench at his heart, he tossed it to Pierce.

"Thank you." Izzy sounded sympathetic, but she couldn't understand what he was giving up. Nobody did. "We'll get you another one."

There was no time to tell her that it was irreplaceable. Sure, they might find the same one, but it wouldn't be his grandfather's. The pirate ships started blasting. Energy beams and projectiles bounced off the shield.

"Here we go!" he called, then remembered he had Coalition soldiers available. "Cover Pierce and Izzy, shoot everything that isn't us, and be ready to form up on me."

The soldiers followed orders.

There was faint pressure when he passed through the 'soft spot', racing toward the launch pad. The missiles tumbled over as Pierce and Izzy ran toward them. The tractor rolled three times and stopped upside down.

*Dammit.* Hayden ran to the tractor and blasted the door open; there was an unconscious hedgehog pirate inside. He dragged them out.

Valenz sprinted straight at him. "What the hell are you doing?" she demanded.

"The Coalition doesn't kill," he said.

"You're not Coalition!" Valenz scowled, her anger palpable in her voice, echoed in the face she was making

inside her helmet.

“Neither do the Moonbeamers.”

That was the end of the convo as far as he was concerned. He peered past the force shield. The pirate ships had fired to maximum and were peeling off.

“There goes our soft spot,” Grim noted.

“Everybody on me!” He led them to the door of Pierce’s lab.

“On our way!” Izzy always sounded like she was smiling.

“We got five minutes,” Pierce added as the others came running.

“These are pirates.” Hayden knew to give specific orders to Coalition types. “They’ll have emitter shields. We have to beat them hand to hand and drag them with us, out through the other side of the base. Anybody who doesn’t make it dies.”

His heart roared in his ears like a freight train, drowning out their responses.

There were five pirates in the lab, wearing vacc suits. Lightning-fast, Hayden zapped C’anak. Pierce and Izzy each got a pirate. Grim tagged two more. The soldiers rushed and grabbed the stunned enemies. Clearing rooms with as much care as they had time for, Hayden led the squad through the comm center to the shuttle bay.

Where he stopped. “Grim, check the crew quarters. I’ll back you up.” He fell in behind Grim, calling back, “Everybody else to the shuttle. Now!”

*This feels like boarding a burning ship. Damned if E’no’s heroism isn’t contagious.*

Grim kicked the door open, then ducked behind the wall as emitter fire blew the door to pieces. Hayden shouted, “We don’t have time for this. This base is about to explode! Drop your weapons and come quietly if you want to live!”

“They can’t hear if they aren’t on our comm channel,” Grim pointed out.



*Got to do this the hard way.*

He dove low through the doorway, firing and hoping. Grim went behind him over the top. They stunned three and took their weapons. Hayden turned to see D'orf was hidden beside the door and had an emitter leveled on him.

Valenz breezed into the room, elbowed D'orf in the chest, and shot him cool as ice. "I don't take orders from you, Wilder."

MADDY DIDN'T RELAX UNTIL THEY had guards protecting the med center.

Taking the place exhausted E'no's reserves, and he barely made it to the private pool under his own power. Beyond this small space, the conflict continued in waves, but the medics had left to examine those injured during the push. Soft, calming sounds thrummed around them, not quite music in the way she understood it, more like natural noises, but the creatures didn't sound like insects or birds from Earth. Only the soft trickle of water or the susurration of wind registered as familiar.

*Finally, we're alone.*

The space was small, barely big enough for two, even with Maddy perched at the edge. And the pool itself was cunningly designed to take up as little space as possible. It reminded her somewhat of an ofuro, a Japanese soaking tub, while the shimmering liquid within gleamed like aloe vera infused with turquoise. He carefully removed his uniform, and she didn't look away. It felt like such a long time since she'd beheld him like this. It was beautiful and bittersweet to witness E'no's relief as he sank into the healing fluid.

*We lost so much time together. And I blamed him for abandoning me.*

An ache began deep within her, one that he could soothe with caresses and closeness. Maddy had kept those needs completely locked down because the timing and the situation hadn't been right. But now, now she didn't know if she could wait any longer.

*What are you thinking? He's wounded. Hurting.*

His frond display brightened when the pain scaled back and he found her unerringly with his golden eyes. "I wish I

could have argued but you were right. I just feel selfish being here when the ship is in turmoil.”

“The rebels will hold their ground as long as you need them to. Lucky for us, Admiral Asshole doesn’t have an endless stream of mindless thugs who’re willing to violate all Coalition tenets to further his aims.”

Something about that statement troubled her, but she couldn’t put her finger on it with nascent desire swirling around, distracting her. *How long has it been?* Nearly a year, when she counted back. Long enough for her to be recruited by Hayden and get trained in simulations for situations he thought might arise.

*Turns out, he knew what he was doing, the man with a plan.*

“You seem distracted.” E’no said then.

*I can’t admit it’s because it’s sort of hot, watching him like this.*

Or maybe she could. Open communication was important in a relationship. Keeping secrets wouldn’t lead to anything good. If she said ‘I’m fine’, it would create a barrier between them. And E’no was prone to overthinking; he’d create some internal crisis over her decision to hold back.

So she opted to be brave instead. “I’m thinking about the last time we were together. Intimately.”

His breath caught, and his gaze intensified, gleaming molten gold. “Yes. Though I don’t remember doing it, I still miss touching you. I imagine that we spent hours experimenting, learning what felt good between us. I miss the sweetness of your breath. The warmth of your skin...”

She crossed her legs, squirming a little. “Don’t tease me.”

“Who’s teasing?” E’no asked. “The pool is perfectly safe for humans. You could join me while I heal. It would be a far better use of our time.”

*Oh my God. Is he trying to get me naked during a medical treatment?*

On Earth, Maddy had a friend who worked as a nurse. Apparently, people got busy in hospital beds. Fear of loss could spark desperate yearning, and endorphins soothed physical pain. For some, the prospect of getting caught added spice as well. Tamsyn had interrupted patients in flagrante delicto with their partners more than once.

*And now I'm contemplating joining the club.*

+ + +

*This will never work.*

Yet E'no possessed the gift of endless optimism, and sometimes people surprised him. As Maddy did when she slowly rose and removed her clothing piece by piece. His breath caught when she slipped into the pool with him, the liquid rippling on her skin. Though her physiology was strange to him, he took tremendous pleasure in her trust.

This was another selfish impulse, indulging himself with Maddy while others struggled in his name. But for this stolen moment, he would put other matters aside and belong solely to her. He had longed for this from the first moment of meeting her again, a shocking attraction that ignored all their differences, an urgency that drew from his emotional need and bypassed his missing memories.

His body had known from the start. *This woman is mine, my missing piece.* Her spirit drew him like a magnetic force, even as her mind captivated him with its facile movement. That only left her form, and he ached to rediscover all the ways that she experienced joy.

“Come here,” he said.

“Is this really all right? Are you strong enough?”

“That’s not a question I wish to entertain,” he chided gently.

She glided toward him and he enveloped her in his frond cape. That was deeply sensual, a gesture he would extend to no other being. If she had one as well, the fronds would intertwine and writhe together, creating the sweetest of friction that would travel along their nerve endings to stimulate the

need to mate. But she had only hair and fingers and skin, human words with no equivalent in his native tongue.

“You don’t recall what we did before,” she murmured.

Reluctantly, he confessed, “That’s true. But I want to learn.”

“I’m happy to teach you.”

The heat of her shocked him, contrasted to the cool silky slide of the healing liquid. She pressed against him and he fluttered his frond cape along the delicate curve of her back. Her skin roughened, lifting with small bumps. He paused.

“Is that a good sign?” he asked.

“Very much so.” Her voice went soft and husky.

She shivered when he nuzzled against her neck. There was so much he didn’t know. If she was an E-designate, he would understand exactly how to proceed. But repurposing had stolen such precious knowledge, secrets particular to Maddy and her desires that he would study closely—and with great satisfaction.

“Here. I’m too hot for you to drag this out. We can take our time later.”

*Too hot.*

“Yes. You’re burning.”

“Especially here.” She pulled his touch to where she wanted it.

And he found her soft and slick, even beyond the added glide from the healing pool. He stroked her just so, and she made a sound that went straight to the heart of him. Arousal had been simmering, but now he was ready to mate. His body flowered, mating stem extruding from his waist with eager need.

“Touch me,” he begged.

Her caress came, careful and delicate, featherlight teasing on his sensitive flesh. Then she gave more firmness, stroking each stalk with loving care. His body jerked, and he rubbed

against her, craving more, more. He wanted to be part of her, but he couldn't find his words, the right ones to ask if it was possible.

But they were past the point of needing to speak. Maddy knew what he desired and wanted it as much. She hooked a leg about him and sealed their bodies together. It took some maneuvering, carefully circling her hips, and sometimes she used her hands to get him seated.

“Yes,” she whispered. “That’s it. Now you can move.”

His mating stalks fluttered within her, stroking, and he glided his frond cape against her skin, taking so much pleasure in her heat and softness that he might explode far too soon. Like her, he had waited for too long, wanted her too much.

“I need you so much,” he gasped.

“Me too. Don’t hold back. Take everything. Give yourself to me.”

That was all he could take. He burst with soul-brightening sweetness, and she tightened on him with a moan that set his nerve endings on fire.

*This woman. Everything. Forever.*

+ + +

Getting from the moon to the Vigilant took a long-ass time.

Longer than Hayden liked, frankly. But hopefully he wasn't too late. He liked the idea of riding up like the cavalry and turning the tide. Now they were within hailing range, and he couldn't resist the urge to gloat.

“Shuttle to Vigilant,” Hayden said. “Hey, Admiral! The plan’s kaput. Your weapons have been destroyed. You won’t be exterminating humanity after all.”

“Human Hayden Flynn Wilder, you...” E’maleese’s malignant tones cut off abruptly.

An incredibly, maybe even surprisingly welcome voice replied, “Confirmed, Sergeant Wilder. We’re tracking your shuttles. Bay three is ready for you.”

“D’etor, you scallywag!” *Thank God they’re safe.* He’d been worried about his favorite alien, though he didn’t let himself linger mentally over the ‘why’ driving that concern. “You running the ship now?”

Their reply was perfectly D’etor. “No. But we control the docks, Sergeant. What is a scallywag? Am I no longer a hedgehog?”

Izzy elbowed Hayden and he grinned at her, feeling unaccountably bashful. “Just means I’m happy to hear your voice. We’re on our way in.”

Hayden had reclaimed the upgraded shuttle E’no had left on the moon. With him, he had the minotaur pilot, Pierce, Izzy, and Agent Valenz. They also had D’orf and his soldiers in custody. C’anak and the pirates, along with Sergeant S’atav and his crew, were traveling on the other shuttle with Grim.

They reached the bay in record time, thanks to D’etor keeping the trajectory clear.

The shuttle bay was thronged with Coalition citizens and former pirates who scuttled away from the landing shuttles. E’no and Maddy stood at the front of the crowd, and E’no’s frond cape shone yellow as a sunny day. Maddy was glowing too, by Hayden’s estimation. On E’no’s left stood D’aroi, head fin at attention, and to Maddy’s right D’etor waited, attentive as ever. E’milly was bright like a buttercup, seeming as if the situation couldn’t be too terrible.

He grinned at all of them, saluted E’no and hugged Maddy. “You managed to save our captain, eh?”

E’no said seriously, “On the day I first landed on your farm and every day since.”

Hayden didn’t imagine that comment was meant for him, so he moved down the line to D’etor. Izzy hugged everybody who would let her while Pierce delivered the nods and arm punches that were her equivalent to hugs.

Grim came from the second shuttle and observed, “The gang’s all here.”

Hayden almost wrapped D'etor up in a bear hug but caught himself when they gave him a salute. Hayden let his smile go to full beam. "Don't salute, I'm just a sergeant."

D'etor pointed their head fin forward, speaking in an intent tone. "You're not 'just' anything. A scallywag perhaps."

He wished he could continue the reunion, but there was business to conduct. "Captain, let me present Agent Valenz." He signaled her to come forward. "She's here to extradite E'maleese for crimes and attempted crimes against humanity."

Valenz had done a good job of playing cool so far but she seemed impressed by the heroic captain. E'no said, "I wish you well but I don't have the power or the authority to remand the admiral to you." The captain showed purple. "E'maleese remains at large and the Coalition has its own laws and jurisdictions."

Hayden saw the expression on Valenz's face and decided now wasn't the time for debate. "Captain, you remember D'orf," he interjected quickly. "And his goon squad."

Still purple E'no addressed D'orf and his squad. "You will surrender Coalition uniforms, ranks, any weapons you retain and go."

*Go?* Hayden stifled a scoffing sound. E'no was recklessly civilized.

But D'orf was no genius. "Where?"

"I suspect you'll return to E'maleese," E'no told the bastard. "In which case you'll share his fate. You may attempt to make yourself useful among the civilian citizens. You'll never be trusted amongst my forces, and if you're ever found bearing arms again, you will be charged with criminal intent."

"And I'll kick your ass some more!" Pierce said.

"As for C'anak..." E'no paused as if to consider the right outcome.

C'anak and his pirates stepped forward. The former pirate leader stared at E'no and Hayden, then addressed Maddy. "Who do you serve? I will swear fealty to that one."



E'no didn't wait for her response. "I don't require the fealty of one such as you. Return to the ship that brought you here."

"And *I* don't serve anyone," Maddy added in a brisk tone.

The comm crackled to life with an urgent plea, S'ilog's voice. "Please help, we can't hold out any longer! The admiral must *not* take command of the repurposing center!"

THE SQUAD READIED THEIR WEAPONS and awaited E'no's orders.

“If the admiral takes the repurposing facility...” Involuntarily, his display changed shades slightly. “How long would it take him to repair the equipment?”

D'etor always paid attention to details. “Several cycles, Captain. Less if the technicians cooperate.”

Maddy pointed out, “He's captured some of our people. He'll turn them into obedient soldiers first thing.”

That was true, consistent with what he knew of his progenitor. Shame flashed through him at the prospect of the admiral harming even more citizens in his misguided push to power. His fronds showed a thoughtful mauve.

“D'etor, does the admiral hold an area big enough to keep prisoners?”

They did not think long. “Yes. The production warehouse, captain.”

He darkened to the royal hues once more. “Then we shall free the prisoners before the admiral has the opportunity to prey on them.”

The corridors would be filled with guards just as it had been when they battled to take the medical center. E'no refused to allow his followers to face the merciless onslaught of emitter fire again. This time, he possessed the advantage.

He addressed the entire task force, glancing at Hayden, Pierce, Izzy, and Grim in turn. “Advance carefully, protect yourselves and keep them busy.”

“I'll go as well,” Maddy said.

E'no couldn't keep Maddy from joining the fight. When she volunteered, she would follow through. And while he longed to protect her, if he tried to get in her way, it would

lessen her autonomy. He didn't want to diminish her freedom, only to adore her.

Agent Valenz called, "Me too."

Hayden scowled. "Not with that gun. Put it away or give it to me. We use emitters and zappers."

Valenz took off her dark glasses and stared at Hayden. "This isn't the moon, Wilder. She drew her pistol. "You're being ridiculous, I could end this quickly."

This seemed to be a human issue, and E'no agreed with Hayden, so he didn't interfere as the sergeant glared. "Maybe, but even if the Earth never joins the Coalition, we'll want their respect. I won't let you throw that away by perforating some poor citizen."

The looks those two gave each other signified a silent mental battle. Hayden must have won because Valenz holstered her weapon and drew an emitter.

Grim asked, "How are we occupying them, Captain?"

"Keep them firing." E'no showed a hopeful light blue. "Humans don't require the same rest cycle as Coalition." He faced the rest of the squad. "E'milly, D'etor, and D'aroi, guide the citizens and refugees and block the passages behind."

There would be no flanking maneuver from E'maleese.

"Understood." D'aroi's head fin showed highest respect as E'milly and D'etor saluted in turn.

There was a sense of tense readiness among the human cohort, and E'no shared that resolve. Pierce echoed it when she said, "This is our moment. Do or die."

"Do *only*," E'no said sharply. "Dying isn't an option!"

Maddy laughed. "It's an expression. An idiom? It doesn't literally mean anyone is going to die."

"They could," Grim said.

Izzy tied back her hair, then squared her shoulders. "We can do this! One more push and we save everyone. That's what Hayden promised when we signed on."

Her confidence immediately bolstered the rest of the squad and Pierce hugged her. Izzy was the one person who could easily get close to the explosives expert. Grim radiated stoic resolve, and Maddy... Maddy was—*no*. Better not to dwell too much on the wonder of her, or he'd never focus sufficiently to complete the task at hand.

“Move out!” E’no ordered.

+ + +

It was a battle of wills.

Maddy hunkered down, firing her emitter in measured intervals, rotating in sequence with Pierce, Izzy, and Grim. Hayden had some complicated plan that he was trying to put together. It involved some scavenged parts and a noisemaker, and she didn't want to know more. Her whole body hurt.

At this point, it had been hours. Or whatever the Coalition equivalent was.

The only good news about this standoff was, the opposition had to be even more exhausted. They needed a set schedule, guaranteed rest periods. They would definitely give up before the human faction did. At this point, it was a matter of when.

Sonic blasts thumped repeatedly into the walls, denting the panels. The noise made her head ache and sometimes they nailed a Coalition loyalist who came too close to their dug-in position. Now and then, a desperate soul imagined they'd gain glory for Admiral Asshole, but it never worked out well. More than half Hayden's crew had active duty military service in their rear view while Maddy and Izzy had logged hours in combat sims.

“How's everyone holding up?” Hayden asked.

“Fucking tired,” Pierce snapped.

“Just keep shooting,” Grim said, laying down more cover fire.

They'd chosen their spot well. No chance at being hit from behind. Maddy ducked as sloppy return fire slammed into the

spot where her head had been. *Close one. I'm getting tired too.* Since the Coalition didn't use lethal weapons, it wouldn't have harmed her long-term, but it would knock her back and leave her ears ringing for days.

"Be careful," E'no said.

But his tone didn't carry chastisement. Weary as her cherished one was, the words were all worry, delicately intertwined with a care so precious that it put a smile on her face, even at a time like this. His fronds glowed at her, yellow tracery on his command purple. *Because when he's with me, he can't contain his happiness.*

Their love shouldn't work. Her parents had fought their relationship, and then the admiral did worse. *But we're still here. Still together.* She didn't believe in fate, but something drew her back to E'no, time and again. The choices they'd both made ended with them shooting methodically at soldiers dedicated to the wrong cause.

*We're on the right side of this.* That had to mean something.

"I will be," she promised. "I've got a lot of good things ahead."

"Like alien bow-chicka-wow," Pierce said with a smirk.

"Nat!" Only Izzy could make her love's first name sound like a scolding endearment.

Hayden ran around the corner with a bunch of stuff in his arms. Maddy couldn't make heads or tails of what he was doing. Neither could E'no, it seemed.

"I'm not certain if that's advisable," the captain said.

But before Hayden could ask Pierce to build something strange and/or catastrophic for them to huck at the loyalists, the enemy's weapons fell silent. It was Izzy's turn to shoot but she aimed an inquiring look at E'no. "What's happening?"

Maddy shrugged. There was no telling. She'd lost the ability to predict what might occur ages ago, and it sure made life interesting.

Then a thready voice called, “We cannot stay at our posts any longer. We are far past our required rest cycle. We ask that you desist hostilities until a mutually agreed upon time. Do you accept our offer of a temporary truce?”

Pierce smothered a laugh, Harden put up a hand to draw attention and E’no spoke, “No,” barely more than a whisper through his fatigue. “No truce, they lack human stamina, they’re all but done.”

Hayden stepped forward with a charming grin. Or the one he used in that capacity. Maddy always thought it looked like he was trying to sell a poorly maintained car. “I have a counteroffer.” Hayden glanced back at his squad. “Surrender now or we overrun your position while you sleep.”

Following Hayden’s lead, they ducked in their positions and awaited a response. Maddy studied the stronghold for signs of movement. It didn’t take long.

Five of the admiral’s finest came charging. Grim fired first, and Maddy joined the fray; soon all five were on the floor. As the eerie silence that followed explosive action hung in the air, Maddy glanced over her shoulder to see Hayden restraining Valenz.

*Did she try to draw her gun?*

A hand waved from the enemy position. “We accept your offer. We surrender.”

+ + +

After the siege, Hayden hadn’t seen Maddy or E’no for half a cycle.

*Great, now I’m thinking in Coalition time.* He missed his watch. But they seemed too wrapped up in each other for a chat right now, and D’etor was back after completing E’no’s last orders. They had stayed surprisingly close to Hayden ever since, not that he was complaining. It felt good to have somebody who always sought him out first thing.

Like Maddy and E’no.

Izzy and Pierce.

*Wait...*

He didn't chase the thought down that rabbit hole. "Tell me something," Hayden said. "How bad off is that ship we ditched on the moon?"

"I'm not certain. I landed before it was blown apart with us still aboard."

Now that was interesting. "So it could be sitting there on the moon, still operable?"

He recognized D'etor's thinking expression, their head fin bent ever so slightly to the right. "I won't promise anything I'm not sure of," they finally said.

Another reason to trust D'etor. Hayden didn't favor people who easily said whatever folks wanted to hear, probably because he often did that himself. "I appreciate that about you. Truly I do."

"But that may well be true," D'etor added.

"What say we go take a look?" He included them all in the question: D'etor, E'milly, D'aroi, Grim, Izzy and Pierce.

"What're you thinking?" Izzy narrowed her eyes on him, seeming to suspect he was up to something.

*A fair guess since I usually am.*

He smiled at her. "Earth should have a star cruiser, don't you think? The Coalition came to us, so we should be able to go to them."

"Would it have to be an all-human crew?" E'milly's cape shimmered orange.

*Orange is a good color, right?* He wished he could ask Maddy. But she was talking to E'no nearby in a low voice.

He shook his head and chuckled. "Not if you're volunteering. I'd love to have you aboard, but I know how much you admire the captain."

"As fine a role model as a citizen could have," E'milly agreed. Her display gained some friendly blue too. "Yet it might be time for me to become my own hero."

D'aroi stepped forward, her fin at attention. "I'd like to join you also. I still like your voice." Her head fin pointed at him. "If not your feet."

He couldn't believe his luck. "We'll all go then!"

"Not all." Pierce had her arm around Izzy's waist. "I made those giggle grenades you wanted but we're done traveling."

Izzy beamed at the pronouncement. "We're going to settle down and maybe raise some moon babies. Grim's agreed to be our donor."

Grim said nothing to contradict the claim, so it must be true.

Hayden covered a pang at losing people who were like family. "I had no idea you were already making plans. You were that sure we'd win this?"

"I was," said D'etor.

"You realize none of those ships possess interstellar engines," Pierce pointed out. "The gateway ship brought them here."

He shrugged. "Then we get us a star drive."

"D'etor and I could build you one." Orange and blue looked pretty on E'milly. "Not as good as the Vigilant's of course but I bet Grim could find the design for one in the ship's records. He's great at that."

Hayden looked at the silent soldier. The man who he'd asked for the impossible and never worried that he'd get it. "Grim?"

The big man smiled, a rare expression. "You asking if I'm down for space travel, exploring unknown dangers?"

That was answer enough for Hayden. "Just like surfing a goddamn tsunami."

"The smallest star drive would barely fit in that pirate ship." D'etor never promised what they couldn't deliver. "There would be no room for anything else."



“I’m in,” Agent Valenz said, approaching with her smooth stride. “After I arrest the high admiral, I can’t imagine how Earth can compare to what I’ve seen out here. A new mission is in order. And I’d be a great starship captain.”

He laughed at her gall. “That’s a good one. We’ll talk.”

“I wasn’t joking,” she said with a hint of arrogance. “And indeed, we will. I still have to arrange extradition for you and the rest of these fugitives.”

+ + +

*They think they’ve won.*

High Admiral E’maleese paced the bridge, his sole bastion of power on the Vigilant. The news hadn’t been good, but now that D’orf had returned to him, he had his best and most loyal officers with him. As soon as they repaired the repurposing center, he’d rewrite half of them to be even better and more loyal. What did it matter if he was outnumbered twenty to one? E’nosience had beat worse odds and the admiral was far superior to his accursed, pathetic progeny. He opened his mouth to rant.

“Message for you, admiral.” C’abil interrupted his intended diatribe coolly, utterly without fear.

Somehow, that gave him a bad feeling. He glared at the incompetent little lieutenant. “I’m far too busy for messages, you fool!”

“From Coalition command.”

He used his strongest violet display. “In that case, delete it. I am in command here.”

“Very well, Admiral.” C’abil strolled to a console. “Then I’ll play it for the next ranking officer.”

C’abil activated the comm and said, “Message from Coalition command, Captain.”

The hated E’nosience answered, “I cannot comply, whatever the orders. I’m resigning from the Coalition.”

“As you wish, Captain E’nosience.” C’abil’s voice rang through the ship. “As the next ranking officer who isn’t accused of a crime, I’ll accept the judgment. ‘High Admiral E’maleese is hereby relieved of command and all authority for multiple infractions. As our system of jurisprudence is inadequate to handle a criminal of such heinous depths, we remand him to Earth’s custody in a gesture of goodwill in hopes of building a cordial and cooperative relationship’.”

“No!” His scream drowned out the words of betrayal. His frond cape flashed red. “This cannot be! Secure this chamber,” he ordered.

The iris opened, three metallic balls came through and fell on the floor. They flashed in unison. E’maleese realized how absurd and comical his situation was and he couldn’t stop laughing. Guards in protective gear whose names he’d never bothered to learn dragged him to the repurposing facility.

He was giggling too much to resist when they shoved him in the chamber.

WHEN HAYDEN LEFT, VALENZ WAS on the comm with Earth authorities, coordinating what would happen once they arrested the admiral.

To his mind, it was fitting that the asshole was being confined in a broken repurposing chamber. It was small and dark, no chance for escape, as the techs kept a close eye and there were guards emplaced to boot. A satisfying outcome all the way around.

“Permission to assist our fine captain?” Pierce asked in a gently mocking tone.

Hayden made a rude gesture at her. Generally, the woman did whatever she wanted and Izzy would follow, so asking for leave was just another way to mess with him. He would miss that about her.

Hayden loaded the rest of his team into the modified shuttle. Once they were free of the Vigilant, he hailed K’enir and E’nela, “How we looking out here?”

E’nela replied first. “It may not have been wise to release C’anak. His ship is headed to Earth.”

K’enir added, “We’re tracking it.”

He glanced around with concern. D’aroi and Grim stood at the guns while E’milly monitored the sensors, and D’etor had the pilot chair. “Can we fight?”

“Probably.” E’nela didn’t sound enthusiastic. “We outnumber it, but it’s the biggest ship left from the fleet. Its weapons could hurt us.”

K’enir was more optimistic. “E’nosience will lead a coordinated strike and we’ll disable it easily!”

“Right.” Hayden wouldn’t point out that E’no wasn’t with them. “Get as close as you can safely and I’ll talk to them.”

“Sergeant Wilder,” E’milly informed him, “With our enhanced shields, we’re just as tough as any pirate ship.”

Grim added, “With our zapper and our guns, we’re more dangerous too.”

*So we could win a fight but I want that ship. And I’d rather not risk losing one of ours.*

He hailed them on the comm. “C’anak, we’re coming after you. Respond!”

An unfamiliar frond cape appeared on the viewer. “C’anak does not command here. Why do you pursue us?”

*Interesting. Wonder what they did with him?*

“Then why are you headed to Earth?” he asked.

“We won’t serve the Coalition. The inhabited planet must give us shelter.”

“Or what?” He hit the ship-to-ship comm. “K’enir, E’nela, you got target locks on this joker?” He glanced at the gunner station. “Do we?”

“It would be better if we were closer,” Grim informed him.

Hayden made a snap decision. “D’etor, get us in docking position as fast as you can.” He called to the ally skiffs. “Open fire, I’m taking this ship!”

D’etor sped right at the pirate vessel. Light fire decimated their shields, and Hayden attached the docking tube in record time. Grim’s work with the zapper ensured no one on the other side would be ready to fight. D’aroi and E’milly followed him onto the pirate ship for backup, just in case.

It was a pitiful sight, even more crowded than any pirate craft he’d seen. The terrorized crew had nowhere to run.

Hayden spoke over the comm. “I can make your life better but I’m about to make it worse unless you surrender right away!”

K’enir pleaded with the pirate captain, “I implore you, save yourself and surrender.”

“You’re not up against the Coalition now,” E’nela added.

There was a long silence. D’aroi checked her weapons, eyeing the crowd. E’milly stepped up beside her, bolder and more confident than she had been when she first joined the task force. That seemed like so long ago now.

Then the answer came. “We accept. What are the terms of surrender?”

Hayden hid his triumph. “To start, I’ll head to the bridge and help you land on the moon.”

+ + +

“There’s something I want to show you,” E’no said.

Maddy grinned. “If it’s what I think, I’ve already seen it but I wouldn’t say no to a second viewing.”

His frond cape flushed in response to her gentle teasing. “That is not what I intended, though I could be sidetracked quite easily.”

“Not yet. I’d rather find out what you have in mind first. If you’re sure we have the time,” she added with a flicker of guilt.

“There is no pressing business at hand. We can afford to indulge ourselves.”

She nodded. “There’s work to be done, but we won’t have the strength to keep at it if we don’t reward ourselves now and then. Burnout is real.”

“Burnout?” E’no repeated the words as if tasting them. “How much harm does this ailment cause? Is there a cure?”

“It’s not a physical disease, per se. More like, you work too hard for too long, and don’t rest enough. Eventually you just don’t have the energy for anything. It’s a problem for creative people in particular but also in all sectors of the workforce.” Maddy realized she’d taken on the tone she used when she subbed for a professor who couldn’t get back in time for class. “Sorry to lecture.”

“I enjoy learning from you, no matter the topic,” he said.

“Now I know that you...” She trailed off.

*Love me. Now I know that you love me.* But it didn't feel right to say that word as a joke. They'd used it before, before he disappeared. And now she circled around it like a feral cat, wary of offering it in case she got hurt again.

*That wasn't his fault. And the admiral is gone.*

“You know that I...?” he prompted.

“Never mind. What did you want to show me?”

“A few things that I didn't have access to on Earth.”

That didn't clarify anything, but she decided not to delay the excursion. “Lead on. I can't wait, whatever the surprise.”

E'no led her to the quarters he had presumably occupied on the Vigilant. The space was half as large as the area where the whole task force had bunked, and Maddy identified various furnishings from her studies of E-designate aliens, not real life experience. That was the norm for her; learn it, then live it. There was a rest area, nothing like a human bed, and they'd have to address that once they moved in together.

Which she *hoped* would be part of their future. But they hadn't made any promises or plans yet. There had been too many factors in play, but maybe now...

“I'm not here with illicit intent,” he said, apparently misreading her expression.

“No? You. Me. A private room. A likely story.”

“You're joking.” His frond display shifted hues, proving that he appreciated and shared her humor. “And this encounter might evolve. But for now, first...” He activated something and the far wall turned into a viewing display.

A purple and yellow planet appeared, beautifully striated and wreathed in mist. There were three moons, one large and two small that seemed to be locked into orbit around the larger satellite. To Maddy, it looked like science fiction art, gorgeous and otherworldly at the same time.

“It's amazing,” she breathed.

“That’s my homeworld. There is no analogous word in the translators we’re using, but the closest one I can find is ‘Home Star’.”

She stepped closer, taking in the minute details. “Can we even see it from here on our best telescopes?”

“No. Your astronomers have not even discovered the system yet.”

“Then you came from across the universe to find me.”

“Yes,” he said.

Nothing more. No qualifications or limitations, and she adored him for that open-hearted affection. *I hope I can be worthy of devotion like this.*

“And I was waiting for you,” she answered. “You’re worth waiting for.”

+ + +

There was a bittersweet beauty in hearing those words.

Because E’no had chosen this woman and abandoned all else, including his duty to the Coalition. His progenitor had been given over to Earth authorities, largely due to his own actions. He didn’t doubt that it had been necessary, but it was painful, admitting that E’maleese had been damaged beyond all hope of repair.

He still needed to contact E’matroon and advise her of the situation. And to let her know that he didn’t plan to return. He didn’t look forward to sending that message, but he must observe the courtesies and show as much care as he could from this distance. She had always been the kind one, offering encouragement and gentleness when he needed it most, for there had been no pleasing E’maleese even when he was a hatchling.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Being you. And for waiting. You had no idea what had happened, or if you’d ever see me again. To mend your

wounds, you might have sought solace in someone else.”

She shook her head, her green eyes lit with a warmth that washed over him like a healing pool. “There *is* nobody else for me. I’m meant for you in this life, and maybe the next if there is one. Do your people believe in reincarnation?”

*Reincarnation.* He didn’t know what that word meant. But Maddy wouldn’t shame him for asking.

“Is this the belief that beings are made of energy and energy can be reused?”

“Sort of,” she said. “In some faiths, humans believe that the body houses a soul, and that your soul will be repurposed by a higher power. Nothing in nature is wasted, so if you live a good life, you’ll get a better reincarnation. I think it would be great to come back as somebody’s beloved house cat.”

It was an interesting idea, and he put aside pondering whether science could validate the theory. “I would want to be yours then. Always.”

“If I have anything to say about it, you will be.”

Joy broke over him, starshine and sunrise, and every lovely moment he had ever known, wrapped up in a human woman. E’no switched the display then, showing her images from his homeworld. She would never travel there, but he ached to share the places he had been and known as much as possible.

She took in the shifting scenes, eyes wide. “Oh. The water is purple more than blue. What causes that?”

“Algae. At night, it glows. There are many bioluminescent sea creatures.”

“Magical. Like something out of a movie.”

He moved even closer to her, enveloping her in his frond cape. Every moment he spent not touching her felt like time wasted. She nestled against him as he shifted the viewer one last time. An E-designate appeared, the most recent image he possessed of his kind and gentle parent, E’matroon.

“Who is this?” Maddy asked.



“Her name is E’matroon, and she is far more patient than the admiral deserved.”

“Your mother?” she guessed.

That was a human word but accurate enough. “Yes.”

“She looks like you.”

It was true that E’matroon’s sensing pods were gold, a trait that E’no shared. Many humans would say that all E-designates looked similar, but Maddy was exceptional even in this. She noted a few more minute similarities, a fact that pleased him immensely. He preferred not to share any qualities with the former high admiral.

*If I could purge his genetics from my body, I would.*

“I wish you could meet her. But under the circumstances...”

“You don’t remember, but it didn’t go well with my parents,” she pointed out. “So maybe it’s for the best.”

“Possibly. I have never spoken with her about what she would desire for me in a partner. Mostly, she comforted me when the admiral was harsh.”

“I’m glad she was there for you.”

“As am I. That’s why I’d like to record a message with you. For her. If you’re willing.”

Maddy paused, probably thinking about how wrong it went when he tried to get approval from the former high admiral. This would be different, though. E’matroon had no means of separating them, even if she objected, so Maddy must see that this was the right thing to do.

Soon, she seemed to make up her mind. “Let me change clothes and fix my hair. Then I would be honored to make a video for your mom.”

THE FORMER HIGH ADMIRAL E'MALEESE'S cell in the UN Extraterrestrial Ward was brightly lit.

There were two cameras watching him that he could see. Doubtless there were others he couldn't detect.

Again, he recalled being pulled, screaming, from the repurposing pod. There were gaps in his memory, though, a blur he couldn't explain. E'nosience had been standing at the control panel. Agent Valenz had placed restraints on him and told him he was under arrest.

Now he awaited trial...for what? The false memories E'nosience had put in his head? He searched his mind and could never accept that he was the sadistic, arrogant fool he found there. He had been rewritten, programmed to believe he was something he never could have been.

D'orf watched him through the iron bars that separated their cells. "You should have spoken to our attorneys, Admiral."

"Attorneys?" Emaleese's fronds cape dimmed to the darkest blue. "Humans who would speak on our behalf?" *Is D'orf a fool or a spy? Surely he's been planted to undermine my best instincts.* "Hah! I will speak for myself. Do you know what they did to us in the repurposing chambers?"

D'orf's head fin swept back as he answered, "I was never in the chamber, but the repurposing facility hasn't been repaired and it was inoperable. You might have been detained there, but nothing more occurred."

E'maleese flashed red at the lies his former second spouted without hesitation. *They've gotten to him too.* "I saw E'nosience at the control panel!"

"Correct. When Earth authorities arrived, he released the latch and ensured that you were taken from the chamber unharmed."

*That sounds like the soft-hearted leader they placed in my memories too.* E'matnoon would be worried when his messages stopped, but anger soon overwhelmed that minor pang of regret. To have his mind tampered with... and to be betrayed in this fashion by the entire crew of his ship? Unconscionable.

He glared at D'orf. "Can you imagine such a weakling defeating me?"

His former second spoke flatly as he turned away. "I do not have to imagine it."

+ + +

Through Agent Valenz and a hastily cobbled-together initiative, the UN had promptly confiscated the two ships Hayden had worked to salvage.

That woman thought she could waltz in at the eleventh hour and steal everything he'd worked toward? Well, he'd just have to steal it back.

Hayden smiled from ear to ear as the work crews left his ship. Two ships really, the main one that had been C'anak's last refuge, refurbished and upgraded in every way, courtesy of the UN's tentative accord with the Coalition. The second was the one D'etor had crash-landed; now it housed the star drive. The two ships could travel linked as one or be separated as needed. And Agent Valenz *honestly* believed she would be captaining it, just because a few Earth bureaucrats said so.

"What are you going to do?" Pierce asked.

Izzy hugged him without a word, maybe with a trace of tears in her eyes. He glanced around E'no's new moonbase, rebuilt and growing. There would likely be a permanent settlement here. Maybe one day, humans would live on Mars too, just like in the old science fiction flicks. The Coalition might even help with terraforming.

"Take care of yourself," Izzy said, stepping back.

Pierce nodded. "Whatever you have planned, it's better for us not to know. I'm hoping E'no can get Izzy and me off the hook for that escape."

Hayden nodded, but he didn't have high hopes. Maybe Pierce and Izzy could abide wherever Maddy and E'no ended up. Somehow he doubted they would settle on Earth.

Once the women left, he faced the rest of the squad, the ones willing to face perils unknown with him.

"It appears that Earth intends to annex our ship," D'etor said.

"That can't happen," Grim said at once.

E'milly added, "This isn't fair. They wouldn't even *have* those resources without our hard work."

D'aroi's head fin showed complete agreement. "Perhaps it's time for a clever plan?"

Hayden grinned. "I knew I liked you for a reason."

They kept watch on the site covertly, and he clocked everyone in and out. When he was certain the coast was clear, he signaled for his team to move out. He possessed a powerful knack for getting what he wanted and being at the right place at the right time. And all those instincts were yelling for him to take the ship and skedaddle.

*Better to ask forgiveness than permission.*

He hadn't told the team that Agent Valenz had been making noises about arresting them, but they needed to get the hell out immediately, yesterday if possible. The best way he knew to keep everyone out of prison on Earth was never going back. A starship with a functional FTL drive sounded like just the ticket.

Hayden checked the site one last time, then motioned everyone aboard. With any luck, they'd be off the ground before the UN even realized that the ship was being stolen.

"Stations, people. We don't have a lot of time before this goes sideways."

D'etor wasted no time at the launch, and Hayden ignored the hail that immediately sounded as they raced away from the moon. He laughed in triumph, imagining how pissed Agent Valenz would be when he realized he'd stolen the ship right

out from under her nose. *Good luck explaining that to the powers that be.*

And then he didn't *have* to imagine it because she stumbled out of the crew area, rubbing her eyes. "Dammit, Wilder, what have you done?"

"Taken what's rightfully mine," he said calmly.

Inwardly, he was cussing up a storm. He'd meant to steal a ship, not a federal agent. And this one was *pissed*. But they were far enough from the moon that she wouldn't be able to call anyone.

"I could shoot you. Nobody would blame me."

"You have no jurisdiction here," E'milly pointed out.

"It would be murder," D'aroi added. "And Sergeant Wilder has taught us that humans aren't all heartless killers."

Just then, a storage unit opened and C'aloo tumbled out. "Surprise!"

That gave Grim the chance to tackle the agent and take her weapon. Hayden promptly disassembled it and stuffed the components in one of the constructors. They could turn it into something useful later.

"What're you doing here?" Hayden asked the little minotaur.

"I wanted to go with you. So I've been hiding for a long time. I'm good at hiding. Also, I'm really hungry."

"Let's get you something to eat," E'milly said right away. She left without hesitation, leaving the rest of them to resolve the tension.

D'etor spoke then. "As I see it, Agent Valenz, you can join us or we will leave you at the first outpost we encounter. Without experience, however, you may find it difficult to make your way."

"A real Hobson's choice," she muttered. "I join a band of fugitives or get stranded."

Now that he'd won, Hayden could be magnanimous. "Don't think of it that way. It's the start of an adventure you didn't realize you'd be embarking on."

Agent Valenz swore. Then she said, "I guess that means I'm signing on, Captain."

He grinned. "Excellent. Welcome aboard!"

Everyone was at their stations except E'milly. As chief engineer, she should be tending to the star drive, but she was still helping C'aloo to settle in. She'd gotten him outfitted in a smart blue and gold uniform, and it looked like she had even polished his horns. Grim was at weapons control, D'aroi at comms, D'etor sat at the helm and Valenz stood behind his chair, cursing beneath her breath.

D'etor pointed their head fin forward. "Course, sir?"

"I'm curious to find out." D'aroi's head fin vibrated. "Do we have an objective? What's our mission, Captain Wilder?"

"Go on, mention exploring new galaxies, I dare you," Grim muttered.

"We'll get to that. First, Maddy provided a list of ideas for ship names. I like the Audacity. It got us this far, and it'll carry us farther than humans have gone before."

"Audacity," D'aroi repeated.

"It's good," Grim agreed.

The vote came down to all in favor except one, but Agent Valenz probably wouldn't support anything he suggested for a while. He went on to address D'aroi's prior question.

"Let's go looking for more pirate fleets and see if we can learn something about those gateway ships." Hayden studied the crew to gauge their reactions.

They were watching him, waiting for something. He noticed then that there was a box on his seat that hadn't been there before. He picked it up.

"We can start by visiting inhabited systems and search for more artifacts like Grim discovered," D'etor suggested.

“A superb idea,” Hayden said.

He opened the gift. Inside was a watch similar to the family heirloom he’d sacrificed to save the world. Its face was different, though; now it marked Coalition spans instead of hours. *Amusing, perfect, even.* While it wasn’t the one he’d lost, he would cherish it for the same reasons, because it came from the family he’d found along the way. He cleared his throat, trying to avoid showing how sentimental he felt.

“Thanks. I love it.”

“I’m so glad,” D’etor said quietly.

“Ok then. Set a course, and we can start our first mission as—”

Grim cut in, “Oh no. You’re not giving us a nickname! You’re terrible at it. Nobody’s calling us moonbeams or any bullshit like that. Read the inscription.”

Hayden turned his new watch over, and the engraving on the back read, “From Hayden’s Hellions.”

+ + +

E’no spent a long time trying to soothe Earth authorities, after Hayden absconded with the ship.

Privately, he felt that the man had every right to take it, but he had learned that humans didn’t always follow logical protocols. Maddy added her diplomatic touch and managed to cool down the discussion so the UN was no longer talking about trying to assemble an interstellar extradition team. That didn’t even make sense, given the planet’s current technological levels.

The pirate ships amounted to salvage and salvage rights were murky, even by Coalition terms. So, he thought they had gotten to the point where Earth was willing to write off their losses and be content that they’d gotten a prisoner out of the exchange, a scapegoat for how things nearly went catastrophically wrong.

But now, instead of the private time he craved with Maddy, there were other issues to discuss. He struggled to keep his

fronds from displaying his annoyance over how long these details were taking. Maddy let her fingers crush the edges of his cape, a silent point of contact that showed she understood his frustration. Once more, he focused his attention on the viewer.

“I’m sure you can understand that we have reservations,” the UK representative said in an apologetic tone.

“Deep ones,” the rep from Uganda added.

The USA delegate put it in plainer terms. “You’re *not* keeping that moonbase. It was nearly used to destroy our homeworld, and none of us will sleep easy until we have some safeguards in place.”

If he understood Earthspeak correctly, they intended to establish a military presence. He had no grounds to block that initiative, no desire to either. “We will remove our equipment and personnel at once,” he said.

Another human spoke. It took E’no a moment to identify the flag. This would be France. “Perhaps there is no need to be hasty. We were counting on receiving the technology from the ship and hoped to advance our own vessels by that analysis. I’m not saying the theft was your fault, but we would look favorably on being permitted to take possession of what’s already constructed and the machinery that made it possible in such a short time.”

*Ah. They want constructors and to keep what we built.*

He glanced sideways at Maddy, who inclined her head ever so slightly. E’no could spare the gear, and it would appease the UN, lending the illusion that they had won in those negotiations. Since all he wanted was the freedom to finally be with Maddy, this was all immaterial to his happiness. Later, the Coalition might claim that he’d had no right to cede these items, but C’abil seemed to want little more than to slip this system with his new ship—as soon as possible.

“I understand. We will vacate immediately, leaving what you need to complete the installation to your own



specifications.”

“Excellent.” The French representative seemed pleased with herself. “I’m so glad we can come to a compromise.”

“How soon can you relocate?” This flag was from India.

“Give us one of your Earth days. I’ll coordinate with the Vigilant, and you can take command this time tomorrow morning.”

“That’s more than fair,” someone said.

After that, it was simply a matter of voting and ratifying the agreement officially. That still took an exceedingly long time. By the time the call finished, he feared he might expire of old age.

“You did it,” Maddy said in the tender tone that always tugged at his senses.

“No,” he corrected softly. “*We* did. I could not have come this far without you.”

HAYDEN COMMANDED THE ONLY STARSHIP in the solar system.

He hadn't wanted to leave the system without saying goodbye, so they had been scanning the satellites to make sure it was safe to approach when E'milly tapped into E'no's negotiations with Earth. It seemed like Earth was getting the moonbase while E'no and Maddy had clearance to found the first Mars colony. Maddy had agreed to take refugees from Earth because she and E'no would give hope and aid to anyone.

*Hot damn. This is a moment for the history books. And I'm part of it.*

"Open a channel to Mars," he told D'aroi. "Audacity to Colony Leader E'nosience. "You read me, E'no?"

Soon, E'no and Maddy appeared on the screen. They looked happy.

"Hayden, you old fraud!" Maddy smiled at him. She was half tucked under E'no's yellow cape. "Look after yourself. And everyone else."

*Yeah, they're happy.*

"That's Captain Old Fraud to you." Hayden had gotten exactly what he wanted out of this crisis, what he'd wanted since the first time he watched reruns of certain TV show about space travel. "Just calling to say goodbye."

"Take care of your crew." E'no showed a beautiful green, reminding Hayden of a sunlit meadow.

He gave the pair a lazy salute. "We're out on the end of a spiral arm here. It'll take some time for us to get anywhere interesting." Then he stroked his beard. "Build us some houses to live in and maybe we'll be back in time to retire. I'm curious to see what kind of troublemakers Pierce and Izzy raise," he mused, not quite to himself.

“I’m intrigued to see that myself,” Grim said.

“If they don’t arrest all of you,” Agent Valenz muttered.

“Earth laws don’t apply on Mars colony,” he said cheerfully. He turned to D’aroi. “Broadcast this ship-wide.” He thought for a moment. “Crew of the Audacity, E’no just instructed me to take care of you. I don’t know what we’re gonna find out there, so I urge you to take care of each *other*.”

“We will,” E’milly promised.

“I’ll help!” The little minotaur bounced, beyond excitement and somewhere into joy.

D’aroi’s head fin added her support as she piped his next words to Maddy, E’no, and the rest of the ship. “We saved a planet together, but we’re not done yet. We’ll have homes on Mars and stories to tell when we get back. So let’s get started.” He gazed at the bridge crew and felt like an incredibly lucky man. “D’etor, take us out of here.”

D’etor glanced over their shoulder at him. “Acknowledged, Captain. But understand, we’ll take care of *you* too.”

Then that dear scallywag pilot activated the star drive, launching them deep into the constellations Hayden had always yearned to explore.

+ + +

The first citizens would arrive on Mars Colony Demeter in two weeks.

Pierce and Izzy were on hand to assist with the construction. Like the moonbase, the initial habitats were rudimentary. First shields, then walls pulled from the rock of the red planet they now called home. The color of their base materials gave the structure a curious warmth, like terracotta or adobe builds on Earth.

But when work hours ended, they disappeared, making up for lost time. Maddy could relate, as it felt like she and E’no had done the same thing, especially during those endless

negotiations. But now that everything was settled, they finally had a chance to simply *be* together.

Getting ready for the first influx with such a small staff on hand meant they were working long hours, but the end result would be worth it. They were still waiting on a reply from E'no's mother, but since they were so far from Coalition space, that was understandable. She'd sent along a video to her own parents as well, and to her astonishment, they had replied that they were applying to join the colony in the second wave, once all the infrastructure was in place.

"It's so surprising," E'no said then.

"What is?"

"This. Us. Being entrusted with such a colossal undertaking."

She smiled. For a moment, she'd thought he must have added mind reading to his bag of tricks. "It certainly is. I was just thinking about my parents."

"Oh. Yes. If they're approved for emigration, I'll have... what's the correct word? In-laws. With us here on Mars."

"I'm sure they'll warm up to you."

She rolled her head from side to side and stretched. Right now, the facilities were a bit basic, but each day they made progress toward making it more comfortable. Envisioning everything that might be needed down the line, that took a certain mental facility. Thankfully, Izzy and Pierce possessed different skill sets and complementary ones at that. *Just like E'no and me.*

"If E'matroon wanted to make the journey, would she be welcome here?"

"Of course." She didn't even need to think about it.

With all the former pirates, this was already a mixed alien and human colony, which would bring about its own challenges. Those who were coming in the first wave were seeking asylum for various reasons, and they had no

experience with first contact. But aliens might seem less scary than the dangers they'd survived on Earth.

"I love how quickly you said that."

It was time to stop being stingy with the words and to speak from her heart. There was no reason to hold back, no reason to protect herself anymore. "And I love *you*. Endlessly. You might have noticed."

E'no paused. Then his frond cape brightened to gleaming yellow sunshine. "I had an inkling, but it's beyond precious to hear you say it."

"You don't have to say it back. I know that for you—"

"I do, of course. Love you wildly. Beyond all expectations or understanding. You're everything to me, Maddy. All my hopes and dreams are embodied in you."

His impassioned declaration took her breath away. When she got it back, she stepped into his embrace, feeling like she had traveled a million miles to get here. The flutter of tendrils against her skin roused pleasurable chills, as always. It was a caress and a kiss and every tender touch she had ever craved.

"I don't mind what happens next, as long as I'm with you," she said softly.

"My future is yours. I hope to share it with you." He nuzzled his face against hers, golden eyes gleaming with a powerfully lambent hue.

"No matter what comes, I'm yours," she promised.

+ + +

Joy sang within Eno's spirit at the power of Maddy's pledge.

Finally, he felt worthy of a woman like her, and he would spend his entire life making sure that he always was. In his quiet moments, he had been researching human traditions. And he'd learned that he had vows of his own to make as well.

"I will always put you first," he told her. "Your happiness matters more to me than my own. I will work to build a future where we're both safe and fulfilled. I will not make decisions

without consulting you. And I will love you to the best of my ability for the rest of our lives.”

She stilled. “Those sound like wedding vows.”

“There are no formalities to be observed yet, as we haven’t established any policies regarding domestic unions, but yes. I want you to be my partner officially.”

“My answer is yes. And... do you think the work will keep until tomorrow?” Mischief sparkled in her green eyes.

“It certainly will. We have a cozy place to sleep.”

“Or do other things,” she suggested.

“Or that,” he agreed.

“To our room then.”

E’no followed Maddy with alacrity, as he always would. With Izzy and Pierce on the far side of the settlement, it felt like they were the only ones in the world. Every trial, every moment of hurt and uncertainty, had led him here. Gratitude spun through him, constellations of anticipation and delight fizzing through his body.

This time, he knew more of what she desired. And there was no crisis to call them away. He took his time, learning all the slick secrets of her soft body with tender touches and endless patience. Loving her as he did, this was an extension of that devotion, and he took great satisfaction in the way she arched and gasped and clutched at his head.

He brought her to satisfaction three times before joining their bodies. She was limp and trembling and he went slow, until she recovered some strength. And then she moved with him, aroused and urgent, as his frond cape wrapped them both up, sending another level of pleasure through him.

Afterward, he held her because he had been studying this as well. Her people preferred to stay close after mating. It wasn’t always that way among his, but he enjoyed this human custom immensely. The way she felt and smelled, he could never get enough. Everything about her was a feast for his senses.

*I only wish I could remember how I felt, the first time I saw her.*

But wishing for those stolen memories was futile. From this point on, he would focus on making new ones and building their future together. While the past couldn't be changed, they were together. And that was everything he wanted in the universe.

“Happy?” she asked, sounding sleepy.

“Perfectly.”

There would be challenges to come, but he had no qualms about facing them, as long as he had Maddy at his side.

“We have a phrase for this, you know?” She wrapped herself around him, nestling into his frond cape as if that was the most natural thing in the world.

Adoration nearly rendered speechless, making it difficult to get the word out. “For what, my love?”

“Us.”

“Tell me?”

“Happily ever after,” she whispered, pulling him close.

*Yes. That's the proper description. And I'm the luckiest person in the universe.*

Few people got a second chance with the love of their life, and E'no meant to spend the rest of his days treasuring her.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Ann Aguirre has been a clown, a clerk, a savior of stray kittens, and a voice actress, not necessarily in that order. She loves video games, Korean dramas, music, dogs and cats, and staring at the sea. Though she writes all kinds of genre fiction, she has a major soft spot for a happily ever after. Contact her at [authorannaguirre@gmail.com](mailto:authorannaguirre@gmail.com).

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book sprang from P.T. Maylee's fertile imagination, growing from one acorn of a scene to the majestic story-tree you just finished. We're so thrilled that you read *Steal the Stars* and hope you're eager for more in the Coalition series.

*Steal the Stars* is the first book in a projected three book series, as follows:

**Steal the Stars**

**Ride the Comet**

**Shoot the Moon**

In this first book, you've met some of the characters who will star in these stories. Others will be introduced in subsequent volumes.

Would you like to know when the next book will be available and/or keep up with exciting news? Visit [www.annaguirre.com/contact](http://www.annaguirre.com/contact) and sign up for the newsletter. Follow on Instagram at [instagram.com/ann\\_aguirre\\_author](https://www.instagram.com/ann_aguirre_author) or "like" the Facebook fan page at [facebook.com/ann.aguirre](https://www.facebook.com/ann.aguirre) for excerpts, contests, and fun swag.

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