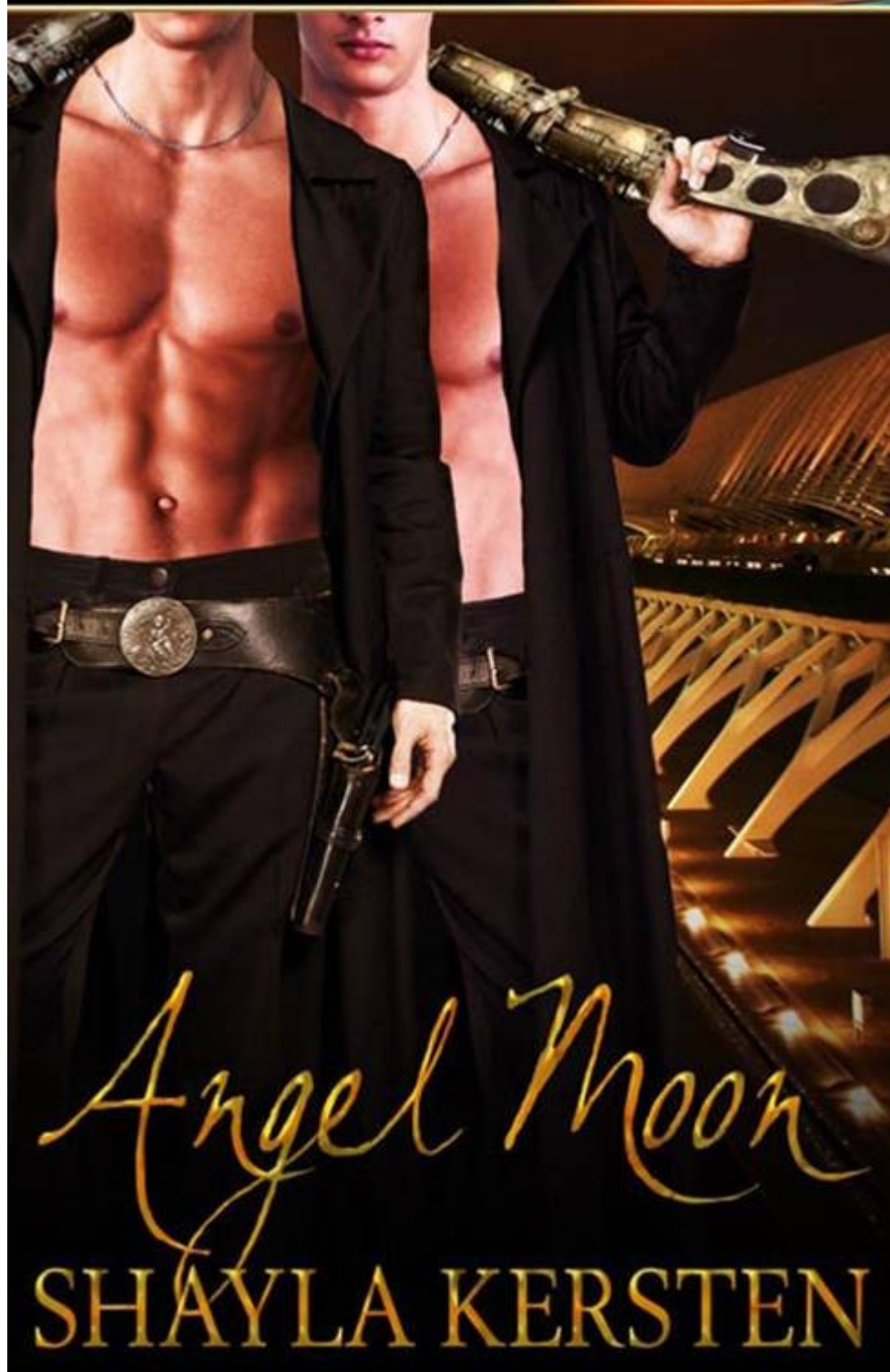


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



## Angel Moon

Shayla Kersten

Terra offers sanctuary to both Angellum and Virkolan. Unknown to the humans, a truce exists there. To Terrans, the two species exist as myths. One is a frail, winged creature from religious texts. The other, a demon of the night, living off blood. Both are far from the truth...

Sorin thought sanctuary was the answer to their problems. Terra, with its plentiful creatures, full of fresh blood and off-limits to the millennia-long war with the Angellum – who wouldn't think it paradise? Except paradise comes at a high price. Claiming a bounty on a renegade angel hasn't ended up the way he planned at all.

Teo loves his ship, his life in space, but he loves Sorin more. The plan seemed sound, but the bounty is a fraud and now the price is on him and Sorin. He'll make the best of the rest of his life with Sorin, even if it's only for a few weeks.

But when hope appears from an unexpected source, both men grab chance by *her* wings.

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Angel Moon

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# *ANGEL MOON*

**Shayla Kersten**

### *Acknowledgement*

To Brandy Walker for feeding the plot bunny! Thank you!

## **Chapter One**

"You and your fucking bright ideas!" Teo dodged behind a stack of crates as heat sizzled past his leg. The acrid smell of ozone raised the hair on his neck. Popping out from behind his cover, he squeezed off a burst of return fire. Sweat matted his hair and kept trickling down his forehead and into his eyes. The thin atmosphere made every breath a chore. He rubbed his coat sleeve across his face but the water-resistant material just moved the sweat around and added grit to the mix.

Sorin rested his ass against the wall. The heavy bundle draped over his shoulder forced him to lean forward. His ragged breathing spaced out his words. "If you...would have landed...closer we'd be in flight by now."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah... We've had this argument already." Thin air and hard exercise was a bad combination. "Sensor blind spot here...other side not. Almost there." Teo didn't bother to look for a target. Sticking his hand around the corner, he fired a fast volley. He jerked back as another blast from their pursuers smoked the corner of the crate. "Move!"

With a deep breath, Sorin pushed away from the wall. He resettled the burden on his shoulder then took off at a fast trot. Even as big as he was, Sorin struggled with their prize.

"Better him than me." With a final random blast toward the men chasing them, Teo followed his shipmate.

Even if this crazy idea weren't Sorin's, he'd be doing the muscle work. Sorin was taller than Teo by at least six inches and his body broader. He was bigger than any Virkolan Teo had ever met. Almost considered a giant, Sorin brought a certain amount of prestige to the ship, and to Teo.

Heat singed Teo's right arm. Gritting his teeth against a yell, he switched his blaster to his left hand and returned fire. No sense in giving their pursuers the satisfaction of knowing they'd hit something.

As they rounded a corner, the warehouse door gaped open like a giant mouth. Dawn lightened the darkness to a heavy gray.

"Damn..." Teo wanted to be off planet before first light. Less likely for the angry mob behind him to see any identifiable markings on his ship. The entire mission was gone to hell. He should have known better.

The small smuggling and cargo jobs they'd scrounged up lately had barely paid enough for provisions, but at least they hadn't had anyone shooting at them.

"Move it!" Teo stopped at the corner. Sorin would need at least a few seconds lead to get the ship's hatch open. Firing off a couple of shots, Teo chanced a quick peek around the corner.

Even in the dim lights of the warehouse, the Angellum were easy to see. Their milky skin almost glowed. With no room for lift, they'd furled their wings, leaving a small vee of white feathers jutting skyward to frame their heads.

A shudder sped down Teo's spine. He'd never been so close to the Angellum before. His war efforts were spent on the *Compensa*. While it looked like a small trader, he'd retrofitted it with weapons. He laid claim to bringing down an enemy troop transport. A small one but it counted. He'd also taken out three of their long-range scouts. Although those were mostly self-defense. Smuggling decent weapons to Virkola was his most valuable contribution to the eons-old war.

Teo fired another volley, scattering the creatures. A flurry of return fire slammed into the wall. Wood splintered under the impact. Scorched wood added to the odor of burning air.

The low-charge warning on his blaster beeped. "Fuck!" Ready or not... Teo squeezed off one final shot then sprinted toward the warehouse door. His lungs burned

from lack of oxygen. Muscles all over his body screamed for more. He darted through the door then made a sharp left. Blaster fire peppered the wall near the opening.

The *Compensa* squatted thirty-something feet away. The ungainly ship looked like a fat-bottomed *gasa* squatting on a nest. The wide bottom normally held cargo. Today, the door gaped open to an empty hold.

*Another few yards... Lightheaded, Teo stumbled, feet dragging. Sorin...love you...*

"Come on, asshole. Don't you dare quit on me now!"

*Who you calling asshole?* Indignation increased his resolve. *Kick your ass...* Gasping for air, Teo dove for the open hatch.

Blaster fire flew over his head in both directions. Sorin stood over him with a long gun, returning cover fire as the hatch slid closed. Thuds marked the Angellum's continued volley. Sorin kicked an oxygen tank toward Teo.

Grabbing the mask, Teo inhaled deep for the first time since they left the ship over an hour ago.

"Come on, flyboy. Let's get this bitch out of here." Sorin grabbed him by the arm, almost dragging him toward the door.

"Where's your load?" He'd be pissed if Sorin lost it after all. Teo glanced around. The heavy canvas bag was stuffed into the open enviro-suit closet.

A secondary hatch slid open. Teo ran into the corridor. "You get that secured." Reenergized by the oxygen-rich mix in the main part of the ship, Teo climbed the short ladder to the helm right above them. "I'll get us out of here."

Slamming into his seat, he grabbed the flight yoke. His left thumb hit the standby button on the left control, freeing the yoke and the engines. His right thumb pressed the comm control. "Hang on!" He took a deep breath. Yanking hard on the yoke, Teo took the ship straight up. The back blast from the engines pointing down on full thrust should take care of anyone too close.

Acceleration sucked him back in his seat. High gravity forced the air from his lungs.



“Fuck!” Sorin’s yell echoed through the comm, making Teo smile.

Serves him right after this mission. Then again, if his mate was correct, this could be their last mission. Once they delivered their booty, they’d have enough credits to retire to Terra.

As the atmosphere thinned, the welcome sight of black space greeted him. Teo wasn’t sure he wanted to retire. He knew he’d miss this. He’d been reared on a ship, with nomadic mothers seeking solace from the war in the quiet of space. And what about the war? Running off to the sanctuary of Terra made him feel like a traitor.

However, Sorin was a dirtsider. He still had bouts of space sickness on occasion, but at least here he was safe from slavery – or worse – by the Angellum.

Vicious creatures, the Angellum had occupied parts of the Virkolan homeworld for nearly two millennia. Pockets of Virkola stayed, fighting a war of resistance or just eking out an existence in hiding. Others fled for the stars, entire families stuffed into ships too small with nowhere to go or cold space stations – living off dried provisions or meager prey. A few other planets had outposts where Virkolans were able to live, but they existed because the Angellum let them. Most assumed it was because there was no room for angels to fly.

Virkolans were a peaceful people, they didn’t have many weapons to fight off invaders. Since they hunted with the intention of taking their prey alive, most of their weapons were nonlethal.

Teo had done his part by smuggling real weapons to the resistance. He’d met Sorin on one of those trips. It had taken a lot of convincing to get him to leave with Teo. And Sorin’s clan wasn’t happy losing the gentle giant.

He grinned as he set the heading for the rendezvous. The convincing had been a lot of fun. Finally Sorin had agreed. Now they were bonded, living apart wasn’t something they’d even consider. And Teo liked making Sorin happy.

For whatever reason, the Angellum ignored Terra. The few who lived there stayed hidden, living as legends and myths. Since Terrans had very short lifespans, beings like the Angellum and Virkola were easy to believe as folklore.

As the ship's sublight engines kicked in, a noise from below warned Teo of a visitor. Flipping the ship on auto, he pulled his weapon from the holster. Pain screamed through his wounded arm.

"Sorin?"

"Yes." Sorin's voice floated through the open flood hatch. "You were expecting someone else?" Sorin's head popped up. "I brought you something to eat. Plus, I need to treat your arm." He shoved his medkit across the floor then came up the ladder to the helm.

Teo's good luck had someone with a healer's skill fall in love with him.

One hand carried a small, heavy plas-board box. Scratches and small growls indicated the occupant's irritation. "Here." Sorin held out the cage.

"I don't need that." Even though it would help healing. "We don't have many live ones left."

"I know, but once we're finished with this job, we won't have to worry about it. We'll have plenty."

If they finished this job. A sense of foreboding had hung around since Sorin first got word about it. Supplying arms to the resistance was one thing. Quite another to deal with the Angellum themselves.

While the creatures displayed a pale, ethereal beauty, their souls were as dark as space. And twice as cold. They'd invaded Virkola without any provocation. Even now, no one knew for sure why. Envoys sent to talk were returned dead, shredded into pieces by vicious claws. Virkolan slaves might have an answer, but no one ever escaped captivity.

The Angellum ruled Virkola from the highest mountains or sky cities. Not easy places to escape. Or attack. Of course the height wasn't a problem for the winged angels.

"Just take it. You need the strength. I can't keep this bucket of bolts flying with you laid up in the infirmary."

"Well, that's not exactly true."

While Sorin knew the basics of flying the *Compensa*, he wasn't very good at it. Taking off and flying straight were about his limits. Landings had been...interesting.

"Ha, ha. Drink."

Teo took the offered meal. Maybe it would get rid of the rest of his lightheadedness.

"Let me see that arm."

"I can't do both at the same time. Make up your mind which."

Sorin's left eyebrow rose in a delicate arch. Sure sign of the beginning of an argument. "Eat first."

"Thanks." Arguments could be fun because they were usually settled in bed. Then again, between his aching muscles and the searing pain from the blaster, he didn't know if he'd be up to sex. Best not to irritate his mate when he was in no shape to distract his ire.

Teo opened the cage. The small, ugly creature protested with a flurry of squeals and squeaks. Teo wrapped his fingers around the dark brown rodent then lifted it to his mouth. Teo's fangs slid free. A quick bite on the soft underbelly filled his mouth with blood. Sucking hard, he drained the rat. He slipped the carcass back into the box. He and Sorin would eat the meat later when they were settled in flight.

Rats were never enough to sate a Virkolan but it helped stave off a range of illnesses brought on by lack of fresh blood. The jolt would help Teo heal but not much more than that.

If this deal went down the way it was supposed to, they'd be able to retire on Terra...called Earth by the local population. It was said that Terran blood was almost intoxicating. And some people were pleased to let them feed. Although Teo couldn't think of the specifics, humans had another name for Virkolans. Even had legends about them and their origins – all of them so far from the truth it was funny.

Sorin cut the sleeve away from the wound. Patches of burned material were embedded in the seared flesh. Bile rose in his throat at the combined smell of ozone and cooked meat. Not a pretty sight. Enough to make Sorin want to moan with empathy, but he kept his noises to himself.

Digging in his kit, he found an antiseptic wash. The strong odor stung his eyes and nose. Even Mr. Stoic managed a small frown. As he rinsed the burn with the liquid, he used a pair of tweezers to pull away the remnants of cloth.

Teo's frown deepened. A little.

Sorin kept his head down as he rolled his eyes. Sometimes Teo's bravado was annoying. The man never seemed to just let go. Even in sex he was controlled and calculating. Not that Sorin minded. Teo made calm and cool work. Just once though, Sorin wished his lover would let loose.

"Did you open the bag or just dump it?"

"Dumped it." Sorin swabbed the wound with ointment. "I wanted to check on you." He cut his gaze up at his lover. "Besides, I wanted backup just in case."

"Yeah. I could see that. I didn't expect her to put up such a fight."

With a bandage in place, Sorin set aside his kit then wrapped Teo in a tight hug. "A little scary, huh?" While Sorin had had encounters with the creatures before, the usual tactic was to run. One angel, even as small as this one, was more than a match for a full-grown Virkolan. And they were rarely alone.

"You did great." Teo's hands ran up and down Sorin's back. "Why'd the thin air get to me like that? Didn't seem to bother you."

Shrugging, Teo let out a long sigh. Sometimes Sorin missed dirtside so much it hurt, but Teo's arms around him made everything right in his world. "Probably the difference in lung development as children. You grew up in ship's atmosphere, which usually has a higher percentage of oxygen than Virkola."

Teo's lips nuzzled the sensitive spot just below Sorin's ear.

"Good thing I talked your dirtside ass into joining up with me. Don't know if I'd have made it back in without you."

Wet heat ran around the shell of Sorin's ear.

Sorin snorted a short laugh. "Without me, you wouldn't have been there in the first place."

"Speaking of our cargo..."

"I wasn't."

"Yeah, yeah..." Teo pulled away from the hug. "Let's get the cargo stowed properly then get cleaned up."

Soft lips, hard pressure then the quick kiss was over.

"Good idea. Then you can rest some."

"I'm fine. I don't need to rest."

Sorin dipped his head to hide a grin. His lover would never admit weakness, but Sorin knew how to work the situation. "I'll rest with you." This time Sorin let his smile show.

Teo's frown fell away into a wide grin. "Oh, *that* kind of rest."

"Come on, you degenerate." Sorin grasped Teo's uninjured hand then tugged him out of the chair. "Let's deal with our cargo."

The short trip down the steep ladders and tight passageways took longer than normal. The blaster had cut across the outside muscle in Teo's forearm. Flexing the

muscle had him grunting and groaning every time he gripped a ladder rung. If it didn't heal properly, he could lose some use.

Sorin kept his thoughts and concern to himself. Teo didn't like to be fussed over. Sometimes Sorin wondered how the hell they'd ended up together. Teo was such a solitary creature. For him to want someone enough to bond...

Pleasure drew a smile on Sorin's face while emotion tightened his throat. Virkolan bonds were for life, but few people found Sorin and Teo's strength of connection. He couldn't imagine life without Teo. If they could get to Terra, everything would be great. No war, no worrying about provisions, weapons. And many warm-blooded creatures to feed on.

Except guilt tinged his plans. Leaving the war behind also meant leaving people he'd known for most of his life. While he lived on a ship now, he'd been reared in a dirtside cave. Like most of his people, they hid their small lives from the Angellum, subsisting on rodents, small creatures from the woods and smuggled provisions. Striking back only when rare opportunities presented themselves.

Sorin shook off his thoughts. "How do you want to do this?"

"I'd like to just stun it again in the bag." Sweat coated Teo's face. The acrid odor of sweat clouded the small area.

"Yeah, but the reward is better if it's alive. We don't know what another stun so soon would do."

Teo took a deep breath. "Fine. I'll stand back with a stunner just in case. You open the bag. Then we both run?"

"Sounds as good a plan as any."

The prisoner had been quiet so far, thanks to a neural stunner. However, the effects didn't last long.

Sorin peered through the thick glass of the door to the storage room. Extra locks had been installed on the trip to the Magium moon. Small ships like the *Compensa* didn't have a real brig.

White feathers poked through a rip in one side of the strong canvas bag. A few were scattered on the floor. "Damn. We need to hurry. The stun appears to be wearing off."

"Looks like it can free itself." Teo peered through the window. "Might as well let it."

Not wanting an argument, Sorin was tempted to agree. But he had no idea how to treat an injury and the reward was less than half if it was dead. "Just...cover me." Sorin flipped the two manual locks then pressed his palm against the sensor. The final lock released with a hiss as the door slid open.

A sweet scent, like an open meadow on a spring day, filled the room. Sorin tensed at the odor. Open fields in his world meant trouble. The musty smell of a damp cave would be more reassuring.

The creature's exposed wing fluttered hard then stilled. The front of the large canvas bag, near the zipper, pulsed with a snuffling noise. Sorin would have to be careful. The creatures had a mouthful of sharp teeth and their mid-wing joints as well as their hands had vicious claws. Sorin had seen the remains of an *alopsa* after an angel had finished with it. The three-hundred-pound animal hadn't stood a chance against the winged fury.

Sorin glanced over his shoulder. His lover, brow furrowed, fingered the trigger of the stunner. A nervous musk joined the fragrant air. Virkolan pheromones produced by adrenaline. Not a good thing when the enemy had a very sensitive nose.

The bag stilled. Sorin took two long steps then grabbed the zipper. As he yanked, the bag came alive. The Angellum inside kicked and punched the material. Sorin worked the zipper down about halfway before he jumped out of reach.

Holes ripped open in several places, exposing feathers and very pale fuzz-covered skin. Hisses turned to screeches as the angel ripped the rest of the zipper open.

Sorin ran for the door as the loud whoosh of wings sent cold terror through his veins. He dove past his partner, landing hard in the small corridor. Breath caught in his chest, he curled his body into a tight ball.

Teo, weapon still trained on the angel, slammed his hand against the door sensor. They swooshed closed just as the angel banged against the door. "Shit!"

Rolling over, Sorin lay on his back, knees bent in the small space. "That was close."

Kneeling next to him, Teo exhaled hard and shook his head. "Should have stunned the damn thing. No bounty is worth you getting hurt." Teo caressed his cheek.

The easy familiarity and warmth curled through Sorin. "I'm fine."

High-pitched screeches filled the small space. The walls almost vibrated with the hard pounding on the door.

"I think she's pissed." Teo grasped Sorin's hand then pulled him to his feet.

Peering through the window, Sorin examined the creature. He'd never been this close to one. Luck had it they found this one on the Magium moon. And with such a small contingent. The Angellum rarely traveled with just a couple companions. Usually there were at least six.

Rumor had it that six was a family unit—a male and his five wives. The idea of five wives sent chills down Sorin's spine. He'd never mated with a female. Wasn't sure he ever wanted to.

According to Virkolan custom, same gender bonded for life. If children were wanted, a female pair sought out a male pair. Genetic contributions were made in a ceremony involving the two males and the female who wished to procreate.

The angel's screeches slowed and the pitch dropped to a guttural cry. An occasional howl rose and fell.



Sadness crept over Sorin. *Afraid and lonely...* His hand reached for the locks without thought behind the move. "Damn!" He yanked his hand away. "Are they mind controllers?" He backed away from the door.

"Don't know. Guess it could be." Teo's body leaned against Sorin's back. His chin rested on Sorin's shoulder. "Hadn't ever heard anything about it. Why do you ask?"

"Had a thought that I don't think was mine." The pull to open the door was strong. Sorin turned away. "Did you think she's afraid and lonely?"

"No. Didn't think it 'cause she doesn't sound afraid. Scary, yes." His arms wrapped around Sorin. "Makes my balls want to shrink and hide." Teo's speech was chopped, words cut short or changed. Sure sign he was stressing, be it fear or bravado. Or possibly pain.

"Well, let's get out of here before that happens. I like your balls right where they're at."

"Agreed." Teo pulled Sorin's hand as he moved toward the ladder. "We're supposed to rest now. Which gives you a chance to check on them."

## **Chapter Two**

Teo climbed the ladder ahead of Sorin, leading the way to their quarters behind the helm. Less chance his lover would hear him grunting in pain. His arm burned as if he'd just been struck. The numbing of the ointment must have worn off.

Seeing an angel up close wasn't something he'd ever wanted. He'd almost stunned the thing in spite of Sorin's wishes. Less than half the bounty was still a lot.

Sorin had lived most of his life under the threat of the Angellum. He'd been in close encounters with them a number of times. Raids on the small pockets of resistance were standard on Virkola. Several times Sorin's clan had had to move without any warning. Escape tunnels wove through the mountains, equipped with booby traps. Intruders usually found a ton of rock blocking their way – or worse, on top of them.

Born and reared in space, the idea of living in a cave with mountains of rock and dirt above – Teo tensed against a hard shudder. He'd been overjoyed when Sorin agreed to join him in space. As much as he loved his mate, he wasn't sure he could handle living underground. Living in space also kept his contact with the Angellum at a distance. Today was the first time he'd ever seen one in person.

As he reached the helm level, Teo waited for Sorin to pass him then he closed and locked the bulkhead behind him. If the angel got free, she'd never be able to get past the heavy, reinforced steel. The rest of the ship was locked down as well. He'd seen to it before they arrived on the Magium moon.

The few steps to the bunk were almost too much. Coming off an adrenaline high mixed with pain wore him down. "Finally." Teo sprawled across the bed, too tired to strip off his dirty clothes.

Sorin didn't scold him for messing up the covers. Instead, he crawled on the bed, straddling Teo. "How's the arm?" He settled his ass over Teo's crotch with an interesting wiggle.

"Hurts." No use lying. At close range and touching, the bond would tell more than Teo wanted.

"I'll get you a painkiller."

Before Sorin could move, Teo slipped his uninjured arm around him. "I'd rather you stay here. I'll survive." Besides, a painkiller could make him drowsy. Not something he wanted with an angel onboard.

Sorin nodded, his smile twisted a little as he gave in to Teo. "Maybe I can do something to take your mind off it."

"Sounds like a plan." Teo drew a long breath then exhaled. His body wouldn't unwind properly. Not with danger so close. But something about being in jeopardy sent signals straight to his dick. While a hard-on wouldn't have been proper as they ran from the warehouse, the memory of the adrenaline high was enough to get a rise out of him now, pain or no. Even the gasping breaths from the lack of oxygen added something to his needs.

Leaning forward, Sorin ran his tongue across Teo's lower lip. A shiver slid down Teo's spine. "And you probably need to go ahead and check my balls. There's a lot of tingling going on down there."

"Tingling, eh?" Sorin darted his tongue between Teo's lips then back out again. "You think they're still hiding?"

"Couldn't tell ya." Squirming beneath Sorin's weight, Teo tried to roll him off.

Sorin's hands slid up Teo's arms. Grasping his wrists, he pushed Teo's hands against the wall. "I think I know how to make you rest that arm."

With both of Teo's wrists tangled in one of Sorin's large hands, Sorin popped open a hidden drawer. A set of cuffs, tethered to the wall inside the drawer, dropped out.

“Damn!” Desire bolted through Teo’s body. “Works for me.”

Teo had installed the cuffs as a precaution. Once, before Sorin, he’d taken on some rather shady passengers. One of them had tried to take over the ship by seducing him. With the hidden cuffs, he’d had a little trick up his sleeve. He eventually hid all kinds of booby traps all over the *Compensa*. His ship wasn’t much, but it was his and he damn well planned to keep it that way.

The cold leather tightened around his wrists as his cock tightened his pants.

Only with Sorin could Teo relax enough for this kind of play. Even though Teo had a hidden quick release—never knew when plans could turn on a person—he’d never trusted anyone until Sorin. Their connection had been complete from the first day they met. And it kept getting better.

Sorin tucked a pillow under Teo’s injured arm. “This should keep you from using your arm.”

With a deep breath, Teo closed his eyes and let his mind empty of all the day’s turmoil. The ship was secure, the cargo locked up. His lover near enough to smell the salty tang of sweat. All was right in his world—except for the increasingly aching hard-on. Even the pain lessened as the muscles in his arm eased.

Light pressure teased across his cock. His eyelids fluttered in an attempt to open but he forced them closed. Waiting for the unknown, he kept his breath shallow.

A finger ran the length of his zipper, slow, the nail clicking, tooth by tooth. Then back the way it came, a little faster, less pressure. This time, when the teasing finger started down, the slider moved with it. The tightness of his pants eased as the zipper split across the ridge of his cock. With a quick jerk, the button opened.

Cool air teased his hot skin through his thin undergarment. Instead of easing his need, the difference made him harder. “Oh yeah...” A gentle tug against his restraints threatened to interrupt his pleasure with pain.

“Be still.” Sorin’s soft command only added to Teo’s anticipation. “You strain that arm, I’ll knock you out with a tranq.”

In spite of his size, his lover wasn't normally a domineering person. Not weak by any means. Just not one to put himself forward. So when he took control...

Teo couldn't stop a shudder of pleasure. "I'll behave."

Sorin's hand slipped under Teo's undergarment. Long fingers curled under his length. He drew a sharp breath, holding it as Sorin teased the underside of his cock. Sorin's other hand slid up Teo's stomach, pushing his shirt up as he moved.

Moaning, Teo squirmed under the double assault. Pheromones teased his sensitive nose and taste buds. The air was thick with Sorin's arousal. His scent combined with Teo's was a heady mix. The first time they met, the same brought them together in a dark corner of Sorin's clan's cave. Not much privacy for a first time and it sure as hell didn't last long, but Teo hadn't been able to stop thinking about him.

"Love you." Sorin's breath teased Teo's lips.

"You too." His voice cracked on the words. He'd never needed anyone as much as he did Sorin. His desire to keep him safe forced everything else he did into second place. The tension of today's job had been almost too much.

Soft lips suckled at Teo's lower lip. A teasing tongue fluttered back and forth then made a fast retreat.

Teo lifted his head, chasing Sorin for a real kiss.

"Patience."

Dropping his head back to the pillow, Teo took another deep breath. He'd learned very early in their relationship not to rush his lover. Amazing things came out of Sorin's mind if left to stew on something.

Kisses tickled the side of his neck. Licking and nibbling accompanied the soft flicker of lips. The occasional bite nipped harder than others. The surprise of sharp teeth thrilled him. "More."

Once again, he tested the restraints. Temptation to free himself warred with the wonderful teasing. Besides, the pain in his arm was neutral for now. If he pushed it, the burn would distract him. The only distraction he wanted was Sorin.

Sorin kissed a path down his stomach. Spit left a trail of dampness. The cold air sent a fiery chill racing down his flesh.

Teo took small breaths. Even moving enough to breathe disturbed his wait for Sorin's next move.

Sorin's palm pressed against his dick, warm and wet, then fingers slipped under. Tight around his flesh, Sorin's hand moved slow and sure. His thumb rounded over the tip with each stroke. Nerve endings fired jolts of heat.

Rocking his hips slightly, Teo matched the pace. Not enough. Needed more. He flexed his hips, urging. He pushed down the rising desire to free his wrists, to take over.

"Patience." Sorin nibbled his way back up Teo's stomach. His free hand pushed Teo's shirt up farther.

A sharp nip of teeth on his nipple sent shards of pleasure ripping through him. His body tightened, chest arching into his lover's mouth, and he gasped for air. "Sorin..." The hand on his cock kept a measured pace.

So close to the edge, Teo needed just a little more of something—a little faster, a little tighter—to push him over. Subtle rocking wasn't getting the hint across. "More. So close..."

Sorin's tongue flickered his sensitive nipple as lips locked hard around the tiny nub.

"Yes." Closer.

The rhythm changed. Not much. Sorin's hold on his cock was little tighter. An added twist around the length—just slightly. A bit faster.

"Almost." Teo flexed his hips but his efforts sent Sorin's pace a little off kilter. With a deep breath, Teo forced his body to still. *Patience...* He wasn't sure if he heard Sorin's thoughts or his own mind scolding him to wait.

Teo drew ragged breaths. His head—the only part of his body moving—thrashed from side to side. He caught his lower lip between his teeth.

Pleasure mounted. Pressure building. Teo pressed his hands against the wall, bracing for the explosion drawing near.

Sorin's weight shifted. His mouth gave up Teo's nipple. The mattress rocked a little as Sorin lay beside Teo. Talented. His hand didn't miss a beat.

One arm slid under Teo's neck. Warm breath caressed his cheek. "Love you." The words teased his lips as Sorin's mouth settled on his, hard. Rough beard and demanding tongue added the needed contact.

Warm wetness splattered across Teo's stomach. His moans were lost to Sorin's mouth. Teo returned his kiss with frantic zeal. His body rippled with pleasure. Eyes opened to find his lover's eyes closed.

Sorin locked their bodies together with a leg around Teo's. His body rocked to his muffled groans. The ridge of his cock rubbed hard against Teo's hip.

Slipping his fingers into the wall opening, Teo fingered the code for the quick release. His uninjured arm slid around Sorin, pulling him tighter. "You gonna come for me."

With a moan, Sorin buried his face in Teo's neck. Heat, sweat and hard moaning breaths tickled Teo's skin. "Oh yeah..." Sorin's frantic motions stilled, his cock pressed hard against Teo's flesh.

"Kiss me." Teo's words disappeared in the flurry of lips coming together hard then soft. And again, almost desperate. Teo ran his fingers through Sorin's sweat-damp hair.

Emotion clogged his throat. He closed his eyes against the sting of tears. Sorin was his life now. If this crazy plan worked, they'd have a long, peaceful life together on Terra.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sorin jerked awake as a high-pitched alarm chirped near his head. His hand slammed on the mute. Easing away from Teo, he peered at the small screen. A reminder blinked in red letters. Time for contact with the people offering the bounty on their guest.

Rolling out of bed, Sorin wrinkled his nose at his stink. Between sweat, dirt and now the dried come lining his pants, he was a mess. And not enough time to wash off the worst of it before signaling.

Worry kept gnawing at his gut. Well, that and hunger. Sorin grabbed a protein bar out of a drawer before he slipped from the small cabin. He needed blood. They both did. More than a couple of rats' worth. For weeks they'd been without a decent supply. Provisions of all kinds—fuel, food, blood animals—were dangerously low. He knew it. Teo knew it. But neither would bring it up. Talking about it wouldn't produce the credits needed to resupply.

The idea to capture a wanted angel was a bit outrageous. Okay, a lot outrageous. The last thing he wanted was to deal with one up close. Or to have one of the dangerous creatures near Teo.

Sorin ripped open the bar then stuck it between his teeth as he slid into the helm seat. His fingers played across the keyboard, tapping out the frequency for the message and keying up the information. With everything set, he chewed on the tough bar of dried meat and blood. He hadn't had any fresh meat—other than rats—in months. Not since the last time they'd made dirtside near Sorin's clan.

Even then, the pitiful feast was interrupted by an attack on the hunting party. No one was injured, thank the heavens, but everyone's mood was dampened considerably.

The console beeped the time. Sorin hit a sequence of keys to send the message then waited. He timed the response to get an idea of how far away the others were. The turnaround didn't match the information. The grid coordinates given were farther away than the comm sending the message.



Leaning back, Sorin hesitated at sending the confirmation. The hair on the back of his neck lifted and a shiver ran down his spine.

They could be using a relay. Or a boosted signal.

As much as he tried to rationalize his fears away, it wasn't working. He didn't have much choice at this point. He'd already confirmed they had the package. Not sending the final sequence wouldn't change much. Except raise suspicions. If the buyer was closer than the signal indicated, they'd start searching for the *Compensa*.

Sorin keyed the codes then hit send. Pinpricks of light caught his gaze as he chewed the rest of his snack. As a dirtside child, he'd always thought the stars would be bigger in space. After all, he was closer to them out here. He reined in his attention. Flipping a couple of switches, he checked the monitor in the angel's cell.

She was curled into a corner, hiding inside her body-length wings. The feathers fluttered here and there as if in response to a tremble. The air circulation system shouldn't blow hard enough for a breeze.

"Guess I should feed her." Sorin exhaled hard as his heartbeat jumped. The idea of getting close again wasn't pleasant. However, he'd installed a slot in the door for that purpose. All he had to do was stick the rations through. The expensive rations.

They'd spent more money than they could afford for a few supplies for her. Sorin knew from old stories that angels needed to feed every five or six hours. Speculation by his clan made need for resources the top reason Virkola had been invaded so long ago.

Angel rations were a packet of soft vegetative matter with a little animal protein. Evidently angels didn't eat much meat although they enjoyed hunting it. Armed with their bare hands and teeth. Their sport wasted precious Virkolan game.

"Get it over with."

Sorin stuffed the last piece of dried meat in his mouth. He double-checked the monitor again before he flipped it off. Unless she could shed her wings, she was safe in her cage.

Stepping out of the helm, he started to wake Teo but stopped. The more Teo rested, the faster his injury would heal. Sorin needed to tell him about the signal returning too fast but it could wait until after he fed the angel. He didn't need help or backup dealing with her. He wouldn't open the door, just the feeding slot. What danger could the angel be?

He released the bulkhead seal, slid down the ladder then resealed it. Just in case. The familiar sounds of the ship hummed around him as he ducked into the galley. One packet of angel food later, he headed down the corridor to the makeshift brig.

The door locks were all in place. He peered into the room. The angel still hid behind her wings in the far corner.

"Good deal." Sorin triggered the combination on the slot in the middle of the door. As it slid open, he stuffed the foil packet through it.

A loud whoosh startled him but he couldn't move back. A pale white hand with long claws held tight to his forearm. A loud hiss accompanied a high-pitched screech.

"Let me go."

The voice was the stuff of nightmares. A hoarse hissing sound that sent fear sheeting down Sorin's back. His balls shriveled as his need to flee grew. "Fuck!" He pulled with adrenaline-fused strength, but she proved stronger.

The angel flapped her wings in wide, slow sweeps. The tops teased the ceiling. A sweet odor curled through the opening.

Sorin's thoughts blurred. His purpose was lost in a fog of flowers. Pulling. Why was he pulling? He closed his eyes to focus. Relaxed his arm. A deep breath. The sweetness turned sickly, like congealed blood... Warmth engulfed his hand then cold. His eyes wouldn't open.

Dying?

No.

Who answered? Who asked?

The hissing voice silenced. Another hiss then the air was thick with the heavy scent. His body warmed all over. The faint hint of light disappeared as softness enveloped him.

Arousal stroked through him. Need and hunger so sharp, he cried aloud. Or he thought he did. The softness muted sound but not touch. Every cell in his body cried out with need. Every synapse fired desire. A profound ache tightened his throat. Sobs racked his body. He floated in a world of warmth and pleasure. His cock hardened, easing into wet heaven.

*Teo?*

*Hayyot!*

A name? *No...*

Elation swirled through Sorin as his mind repeated the word. The whisper of another voice joined his, melding the word into a prayer.

Pure ecstasy ran through him. His cock responded. The warm depths welcomed his seed. His body racked with waves of rapture.

"Sorin!" A shout penetrated his cloudy mind. "No!"

Pain shot through Sorin's brain. A sense of loss so deep it ripped through Sorin's body, deleting his elation.

His soft cocoon opened, vomiting him out like the foul taste of rotting food. Sorin curled on the hard surface and mourned the loss. Tears streamed down his face.

Cruel hands pulled him away, dragging him into the cold, lonely heart of darkness.

"Sorin! Wake up." The deep, coarse voice rang a sense of familiarity. "Come on. Wake up and talk to me." The sense of loss was strong, emanating like the scent of fear.

*I'm here.* His mouth wouldn't move. He wanted to answer, to tell... The name was just out of reach. He knew the name.

"Baby, wake up. You can't leave me behind."

Fingers pressed against his throat, a palm on his chest. A drop of moisture fell on his lower lip. His tongue, thick, feeling as if coated with fur, lapped at the salt taste. Teo... "Teo..."

"Yes!"

Rough arms wrapped him in warmth but not the cloud of softness from before. Regret thickened his throat even as he rejoiced in Teo's hug. "What..." His mouth was dry as a desert at noon. He swallowed hard but he had no spit.

"The angel." Teo's shaky breath warmed Sorin's neck. "She had you." His voice cracked then he cleared his throat. "Why did you go in there?" Anger overrode the sound of relief.

"Didn't." His mind couldn't focus. The last thing he remembered was...Teo and him. In bed. "Can't. Remember." His head hurt worse as he tried to wade through the blur.

"It's okay." Teo rocked back and forth, holding Sorin. "We can talk later. Let's get you cleaned up. Make sure you're okay."

## **Chapter Three**

Warm water seemed to clear the worst of the clouds from Sorin's mind. He still couldn't remember what happened with the angel. He'd finally recovered enough to recall sending the signal to their buyers. Buyer sounded wrong when dealing with sentient life.

Where'd that come from?

He'd never thought about the Angellum as anything except enemies.

The small tub was not even a third full. Water was rationed as much as anything else on a ship. Behind him, Teo dipped the warm water over his head, rinsing soap bubbles from Sorin's hair.

"But you have no idea how the door was opened?" Teo spoke in a very neutral tone.

"No." Sorin shook his head. "After I sent the confirmation, I went to the galley, grabbed some rations for her. I remember opening the slot, but after that, nothing. It's all white and...and fragrant?" The term didn't seem right but it was the only word that fit. "I really can't explain it better."

"I woke up alone. I called you on the comm and you didn't answer." Teo's voice cracked. "There's nowhere on the ship you wouldn't have heard me. I checked the camera in the angel's cell." A deep breath whispered down Sorin's neck. "Your clothes were scattered all over. Shredded clothes. There was no blood but the clothes were in pieces."

The fact he was naked when Teo rescued him seemed to have slipped Sorin's mind.

"I ran to the cell as fast as I could. I could hear the angel—singing. A sweet smell lingered in the room."

Sorin nodded. "It was almost cloying at first."

"I yanked her wings and she opened. Didn't really put up much of a fight." Teo poured another dipper of water down Sorin's back. "It was as if she was done with you. Rolled you out of her grip then she curled into her wings. Didn't try to get away or stop me from taking you."

"Sounds too easy."

"Yeah. Except you —"

"I what?"

Teo dropped the cup then came around to Sorin's side. "You looked like you'd had sex."

"Sex?"

"Your dick was still half hard and wet. I could smell your come."

"Sex?" His mind rolled through vague flashes of his ordeal. Not that it was that much of an ordeal. He'd not been hurt. In spite of the shredded clothing, he didn't have a scratch on him. Anywhere.

Pleasure. Fuzzy memories of pleasure...of ecstasy even, drifted on the edge of his thoughts like a barely remembered dream. His stomach roiled at the idea of sex with a creature so vastly different. Bile threatened the back of his throat. "Why would an angel want to have sex with a Virkolan?"

"I don't know." Teo's frown eased a little. "What do you remember?"

Sorin wasn't sure he wanted to tell his lover the details. Sometimes Teo seemed insecure in their relationship. Virkolans bonded for life. He'd never leave Teo, and his lover should know that. Still. No need to tell him sex with an angel was amazing and terrifying at the same time. "Not much." Sorin met his partner's gaze. "It's like a dream. I have a feeling but I can't form the memories." That much was true, but the feelings didn't need to be shared.

"The buyers. Fuck! How long was I out of it?" Sorin stood too quick. His head spun a little but Teo was there to steady him.

"About an hour, I guess."

Sorin's mind focused on his earlier concerns. "When I signaled them, the reply was a lot faster than it should have been. Could have been boosters, but I...I had a bad feeling."

"How soon?" Teo tossed him a towel.

"What time is it?"

"Almost fourteen hundred."

Sorin half-assed dabbed at his wet skin. "I sent the confirmation at ten twenty. Even if they were as close as I calculated, we should still have an hour or so. If they're lying about their location, then they're probably planning an ambush." Sorin slapped a button, opening the closet. *Damn!* This was all his fault. Dreams of a big payoff, life on Terra. Because of his wish for an easy life, he could get them both killed. Almost had on the base.

He yanked items off the racks. Still half wet, he struggled into his clothes. "I'm sorry. I should have known better." He couldn't face his lover.

"Calm down. We'll figure something out." Teo rubbed Sorin's shoulders.

"How? They have our current route, our comm signal, probably more. Who knows? Fuck!" How could he be so stupid?

"Look, worse-case scenario, we eject the angel out an airlock and hightail it out of here. They can't check every heading out of here."

Sorin's heart skipped a beat at Teo's suggestion. "We keep the angel."

"Fine. We keep the angel and hightail it out of here."

Nodding, Sorin let out a long breath. "Then get us the hell out of here. My gut is telling me our rendezvous won't go down well."

"Okay. Come up when you're dressed." Teo ran out of the room.

Nausea gripped Sorin hard. He leaned against a bulkhead, sliding to the floor. The slight hum of the engines changed, indicating increased speed. Unlike dirtside vehicles, nothing indicated a change in direction, but knowing Teo, they were headed straight down or up from their previous position. And as fast as the little ship could handle. While his intellect understood space had more vectors available than Virkola did, his nature didn't want to think about it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Teo set the auto-control then leaned back in his seat. "Okay..." So the bounty was a setup, but why? He hadn't asked what the angel had done to warrant a reward. Hadn't cared. The money seemed worth the risk.

A little smuggling here and there wasn't enough to keep his ship flying forever. Things were getting worse than when he started thirty years ago, with more work needed to keep her flying. While he knew Sorin's clan would welcome them, Teo wasn't sure he could handle life restricted to caves with only brief nighttime forays to hunt and scrounge for food. Other places—like a space station or an outpost or even another ship—might welcome two able-bodied men, but Teo had lived most of his life in charge of his destiny. He wasn't sure he was wired to take orders from someone else. Terra held the lure of living aboveground in a technologically advanced society with plenty of food and blood. A perfect compromise between a life in space and one underground.

The bulkhead chimed before it opened. Teo rested his hand on his blaster until Sorin's head popped up through the hatch. "You calmed down?"

"Yeah." Sorin plopped into the navigator's seat. "I should have known better." Disappointment colored Sorin's tone.

Better than anger. Cool heads were better in tight situations. Although Teo hoped they were heading out of danger. Except for one thing. "So what do we do with the angel?"



"Don't know yet." Sorin heaved a deep sigh.

"We can't afford to feed her for long."

"I know. We can barely afford to feed ourselves, thanks to me."

Teo didn't say anything. They'd spent credits on finding the angel, bribes and leads, plus provisions and fuel. Even a few extra weapons—mainly the stunner so they wouldn't kill the creature. All with the expectation of the reward paying off a thousandfold or more.

Now they were headed away from the more-populated areas of the galaxy with limited provisions, few credits and an unwanted passenger.

Sorin glanced at the controls then Teo. "Are we going to have enough fuel to evade them?"

"Maybe. We'll need fuel soon. As soon as I think we're out of any kind of sensor range, I'll set course for somewhere we can refuel." Not that there were that many places in range.

The *Compensa* was a medium-range ship with a limited nearlight drive. Larger, more-modern ships could calculate a jump without a cluster of pointers. At almost fifty years old, she needed the point-to-point beacons to guide her NL jumps. And the nearest cluster was rapidly receding as the *Compensa* hightailed it at top sublight speed in the wrong direction. The lack of a pointer limited his options for refueling.

"Until then?"

"I'd like to know what the angel is wanted for." Teo pushed out of his chair. "And exactly what she did to you."

Sorin followed as Teo headed down the ladder. "You're not confronting her alone. And make sure you have that stunner handy."

Laughing, Teo held up the slender stun stick. "Afraid she'll have her way with you again?"

"I don't know what she did, but I don't want to do it again." Sorin's gaze dropped away from Teo's.

*He's hiding something.* A twinge of anger flared. Now he definitely wanted some answers.

When they reached the door, they bumped shoulders trying to peer through the window at the same time. "Sorry." Sorin moved away, his face blank.

Teo glared at him then schooled his expression. "She's in the corner, but her wings are folded back."

This time when Sorin moved toward the window, Teo gave ground.

His lover's face softened.

Biting back words, he tried to understand how Sorin could have feelings for a mortal enemy. "What did she do to you?"

"I don't know. Drugged me, for sure. The sweet smell..."

Teo yanked Sorin's arm, pulling him away from the window. "But you aren't— You don't. Why do you look like you have feelings for her?"

"Feelings?"

"Yes." He couldn't say "love" but— "A tenderness. Toward her. A vicious enemy. One who drugged you. Raped you?"

Sorin's face flushed under his tan skin.

"So you've remembered more. You did have sex with her."

"Yes." Sorin ducked his head then straightened. His gaze narrowed and his forehead furrowed. "But I was drugged. And what I remember comes in bits, like flashes from a strobe."

Teo glanced from his lover to the window. "Shit!" He jumped backward, dragging Sorin with him.

The angel's face filled the viewer. Her ice blue eyes were calm. No anger or ill will. Or did angels show emotions like Virkolans? The only one he'd ever seen was fury.

Teo held on as Sorin tried to pull away.

"Will you let go! She can't get out." As soon as Teo released him, Sorin hit the comm button. "What did you do to me?"

"You weren't the one but were all I had." The high-pitched voice seemed to vibrate through the speaker. The words were Virkolan but they were stilted.

Embarrassed by his reaction, Teo gathered his wits back around him. "Who is the one?" *Certainly not me.*

Her icy gaze slid from Sorin to him. "You took me from the one."

"You were plotting against our people." Her uncomfortable stare made his skin crawl.

"No." Her smooth forehead didn't crease but the slight swell of center ridges looked like a frown. "I had to..." She closed her eyes, tilting her head a little to the left then the right. "It was time for the *treylas*." Her eyelids popped open. "Mating. And the testing."

Sorin glanced at Teo. "Mate?"

Shrugging, Teo whispered, "Beats me." He'd never heard anything about angel mating habits. Everyone knew the males had more than one wife. No one really wanted to know more. At least he didn't.

"My time was now. The *treylas* is done." Her head tilted from side to side as she looked from Teo to Sorin. Her gaze stopped on Teo. "Do you wish me also?"

"Hell no!" Teo backed up a step.

"Then I am only for one." She dropped her gaze, and once again her small brow ridges swelled. "I had known of Virkolans taking Angellum during the *treylas*."

"That's not why we took you." Sorin's smile was a little too dreamy for Teo.

Teo stepped forward. "He's my mate." He resisted the urge to wrap a possessive arm around Sorin's waist. "We took you for the bounty on your head."

"My head?" A slender hand with very long fingers ending in claws rose to touch her pure white hair. "My language...not yours."

"For money." Teo thought all the Angellum spoke their language. Not that it mattered.

"Who would buy me?"

Sorin bumped his shoulder against Teo. "People will pay a reward for the capture of a wanted person – an outlaw."

"Outlaw." She closed her eyes again.

"Criminal." Teo wished she would keep them shut. Her unblinking stare was unnerving.

"Criminal." The stare was back, leveled on Teo. She nodded. "My crime breaks Angellum law. Not Virkolan. Why you?"

"For the money."

"No money. We will die together soon."

Something in her voice struck a nerve of sadness in Teo. "No, we won't. We figured out it was a setup. We're moving away from the rendezvous. How'd you know it was a trap? And why?"

"And was the trap for you or for us?" A deep frown lined Sorin's forehead.

"For me. Maybe you. Some Angellum find killing Virkolans...amusing. I do not. Once our males would fight each other for their wives. Since the discovery of the Virkolan, they've...substituted others as targets for their innate aggression." She took a deep breath. "I stop them when I can. I am known for this...and other things. Have been hiding."

"So, you didn't try to assassinate a member of the royal family?" Sorin asked.

"I disrupted a royal hunt. Stole their prey. One of the...cousins was injured."

Teo narrowed his gaze at his lover. Sorin looked to be swallowing her story. It was bad enough all his hostility toward the angel vanished after he'd fucked the creature. "Sorin. We need to talk."

Instead of the expected argument, Sorin nodded. "We'll be back soon."

The angel pressed her hand against the glass and bowed her head.

Sorin's hand lifted then dropped. He turned halfway toward the door then stopped, pushing the comm switch again. "What was the prey?"

"Two Virkolan females."

Taking a deep breath, Sorin nodded. "Let's go."

Sorin led the way up the ladder. He wasn't sure how to handle his jealous lover. While Teo was possessive, his behavior was something new. Everything about him—his tone, his stand, even his moving closer to Sorin—screamed jealousy.

After scrambling up the last ladder to the helm, Sorin stood to one side of the door while Teo slipped into the pilot's seat. Sorin took the navigator position. "I think she's telling the truth."

"You would. You're still reeling from the drugs she slipped you." Teo's gaze ran over the console and various settings but not once at Sorin. His shoulders were squared as he sat rigid in his seat. His jaw ticked with clenched teeth.

"I'm not." Sorin leaned over then grabbed the arm of Teo's seat. Twirling Teo around to face him, Sorin held on to both armrests. "I didn't plan on having sex with her, I didn't want to have sex with her, and I damn sure don't want to have sex with her again. Do you understand?"

Teo's clenched jaw eased a little. His gaze flicked between Sorin's and his lap. "I... I'm sorry. I just... I thought we were good. Only needed each other."

Sorin laughed. "You are all I want, all I need. I barely remember what happened. But!" He held up his hand. "I do remember it felt good."

The jaw clamped down again.

"But hell, I was stoned to the gills and I got to come. You'd have felt good too."

Teo's lower lip stuck out a little then he pulled it back. "Probably."

"Next time, we feed her together. And with a mask. The drug had to be inhaled. The sweet smell made me breathe deeper then I started feeling a little dizzy. Next thing I know, you were there, all protective and stuff." Sorin grinned as he leaned closer. "I kind of like the protective thing. It's a little bit of a turn-on."

"Really." Teo's face flushed red. He ducked his head. "How much of a turn-on?"

Sorin grinned. "This much." He pulled Teo's hand over to his crotch. His cock had been on half simmer for a while. A nagging little voice of truth reminded him the hard-on started when he'd been near the angel. Shame had as much to do with the heat rushing through him as arousal. Not that he'd ever let Teo know. Sorin blamed remnants of the drug.

With a soft chuckle, Teo leaned in for a quick kiss. "I guess we should do something about this. I'd rather have you spent and empty next time we visit your girlfriend."

"Girlfriend. Right." Sorin rested his forehead on Teo's. "I think I know what happened though."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd heard stories about female Angellum. Not that I ever believed them, but it explains what happened to me."

"Tell me." Teo pulled away, a worried frown creasing his forehead.

"Seems when the female is in heat, her pheromones are irresistible. Some Virkolan males..." Sorin fought back a blush. Interspecies sex was kind of a taboo. Talking about it wasn't easy, even after he'd experienced it. "Seems some will kidnap a female in heat for the high."

"What?" Teo's lip curled in distaste.

"They usually abandon or kill the angel. They don't take well to captivity and usually end up killing themselves, trying to take as many of their attackers with them as they can."

"So, she thought we wanted her for sex." Teo leaned back in his seat. "I always think of the Angellum as the big bad in the galaxy. Hard to believe our own would be so...cruel."

"Well, it's not exactly as if the Angellum are innocent bystanders. The hunt she was talking about, I've seen. Or one like it. On Virkola." Tears stung his eyes. After thirty-three years, the memory was still painful.

"What do you mean?"

"One of my close-cousins and her mate were teaching hunting skills. She was a lot older than I was. The rest of us were hidden from the prey. Watching Klaindra's technique when the angels attacked." Sorin couldn't control the shudder. "We were just youthlings. The elders had trained us to hide at the first sign of angels. Drummed it into our heads. We slipped deeper into cover, but we could see..." He closed his eyes.

The scene played fresh across his eyelids. Twilight was as bright as day for Virkolans. The slashing claws, blood spurting across the pale green grasses of the field. The hideous screeches still taunted Sorin's nightmares. The angels flew away covered in bright red blood.

"They were vicious but Klaindra was still alive when we reached her. They'd disemboweled them both. Almost careful not to hit a major artery or organ. Like they wanted them to die slow and painful." Sorin's throat caught. If he said anything else, he'd end up sobbing in the floor. He hadn't talked about Klaindra in years. She'd been his sponsor, promised to guide him, care for him if his parents couldn't. Even while his parents still lived, she'd been like a second mother to him.

Strong hands massaged his shoulders from behind. He hadn't noticed when Teo had moved from the pilot's seat.

"You don't need to say more." His strong arm slid around Sorin's neck. Soft kisses ran from Sorin's ear to his jaw.

"But I do. If—and I don't yet believe her story—if she saved the prey from an angel hunt, then she's definitely different." Sorin shook his head. "I've heard rumors of friendly angels but never believed it. Kind of like stories about two-headed *gasa*."

"Yeah. So what do we do now?"

Sorin relaxed into Teo's embrace. He couldn't seem to shake the vision of Klaindra's death. "Hold me?"

Teo nuzzled Sorin's neck then leaned over to check the console. "We have a little time before I need to make course changes. I think we have time for some holding."

"Maybe something more?" Sorin spun the chair around. His skin ached with the need to be as close as possible to his lover. Heartbreak and ecstasy warred for his mind, but his body concentrated on Teo. He needed the sensory memories—of Klaindra's death and of the pleasure at the angel's hands—blotted out by the steady passion of his mate.

"Come here." Teo pulled Sorin out of the navigator's chair, slamming him against the bulkhead. "Need to be quick." His hoarse whisper added to Sorin's need.

Teo pressed against Sorin, the hard ridge of his cock pressing into Sorin's thigh. Strong, calloused hands clasped behind his neck, pulling his head down to his shorter lover's level. A hot tongue demanded entrance, tossing any idea of speaking. Sorin's lips parted. Relaxing against the wall, Sorin gave control to Teo.

"Need to fuck you," Teo mumbled between deep kisses.

Sorin blamed insecurity for Teo's aggressive lovemaking. "You can have me whatever way you want. I'm all yours."

A half growl ended in a low whimper. Teo tugged Sorin away from the wall then stepped toward the hatch.



Rough hands fumbled with Sorin's pants. The fastener gave way under clumsy pressure. He whirled Sorin around, facing the nav chair. Yanking his pants down to his thighs, Teo pushed him forward.

Something new... Not that Sorin minded. He knelt on the cushioned seat then gripped the backrest with both hands.

Teo yanked a small emergency medkit from the wall. Half whisper, half mumble, Teo ripped open the box. "Better be some fucking lotion in here."

Sorin kept his chuckle to himself. He'd put sex lubes in all the medkits.

"Thank the stars!" The medkit hit the floor, scattering loose bandages and vials.

As cold pressed against Sorin's hole, he rested his forehead on the back of the chair. His opening flexed, welcoming his lover. The burn of entry reminded him of how long it'd been since Teo had fucked him.

Teo's length filled him quick as his girth stretched him. "Oh yes." Teo sank his teeth into the hard cushion of the backrest.

Fingers dug into one hip. Teo's other hand ran up Sorin's spine, rucking his shirt up around his armpits. His fingers wrapped around the bunched cloth, through the neck, then pulled. Sorin's collar tightened around his throat.

Teo used his shirt like a harness, riding Sorin like a burdenbeast from the old tales. His cock rammed hard and fast, pushing pleasure higher. His balls slammed against Sorin's own, teasing his scrotum.

"You. Feel. Good." Sorin gasped for air around each stroke. His heat rose to a feverish pitch.

With a harsh growl, Teo leaned over Sorin's back. His shirt tickled Sorin's skin. "You are *mine*." His body shuddered, pushing Sorin deeper into the chair.

Hot come slicked Sorin's passage. His body flushed with delight and desire. Teo's possessive snarl was almost enough to send Sorin to his pleasure. Not quite.

Teo wrapped his arms around Sorin's waist. One hand gripped his aching cock. A tight squeeze around the base only postponed the inevitable.

"Not yet, love."

The endearment counteracted Teo's hoarse order. Sorin almost cried when Teo slid his cock out of him.

Teo released Sorin's length. His hands tugged at Sorin's hands, pulling him up. "Turn around." As soon as he did, Teo pushed him into the seat. As he dropped to his knees, Teo pulled his hips down to the edge of the seat. He wrapped his hand around Sorin's hard-on.

"Yes." Sorin grasped the armrests, his fingers digging into the worn skin coverings. His hips flexed up, pushing his cock through Teo's tight fist.

"Be still."

"Don't know if I can." Need demanded action.

"Try anyway." Teo dipped his head into Sorin's lap. His hot, wet mouth engulfed Sorin's cock. Fingers massaged his balls, teasing them apart within the sac then back together.

"Damn." Sorin tightened every muscle, forcing his body still. He closed his eyes against the erotic sight of his cock disappearing into Teo's mouth. Didn't help. His mind supplied what he denied his gaze. He'd never last at this rate.

He exhaled hard as Teo released his balls. Maybe now — Fuck!

A finger circled his hole, first one way then back again. After a couple rounds, the tip dipped into his well-used ass then back out again.

"Gah!" Sorin half swallowed his yell.

Again, Teo teased the rim then dipped inside. His tongue teased his cock, dipping into the slit then circling the edge of the crown.

Sorin couldn't control his body. His hips flexed up into Teo's mouth, down onto his finger. "More!"

"Patience." Cool air chilled his wet cock as Teo admonished him.

Gritting his teeth, Sorin fought the desire to take matters into his own hands. His body simmered just below explosion.

A finger slid into his ass all the way then back out again. Another flitted around the rim then shoved deep.

"Yes."

He teased and shoved, this time with two fingers. Then three. "Yes." Sorin rocked into the motion, meeting each stroke.

Teo's mouth matched the plunge of his fingers, swallowing Sorin's cock deep with each thrust.

"Yes!" So close. Desire flooded his body, pulsing toward his groin. "Yes!" Rising heat engulfed his body. "Yes!"

His muscles clenched. His body stiffened into stillness as his cock erupted with a flood of come.

Teo swallowed his length deep, taking the flood of semen down his throat.

Tremors raced through Sorin. His body was both flushed and chilled. Muscles cramped but the pain was part of the pleasure.

The waking nightmares receded into the back of his mind. The only thing that mattered now was Teo. Him and Teo.

A beeping startled Sorin out of his languid afterglow. His wet cock chilled as Teo released it.

"Time for course change." Teo snuck in a hard, fast, come-flavored kiss. Tucking his cock in his pants, he moved to the pilot seat. "Perfect timing. And why I wanted to stay in here instead of going to our cabin."

His hands gleamed with come and lube. Teo grabbed some of the discarded bandages from the medkit, scrubbing at his hands before he grabbed the flight yoke. He settled in his seat then flipped off the auto. "We need to head for a pointer now,

whether it's safe or not. We'll be too far out of range of a fueling station if we're not careful."

Sorin couldn't move. He watched Teo handle the ship much like he'd handled Sorin's body — strong and confident.

The dream of a huge reward and retirement on Terra slipped away. Sorin tried to find disappointment, but as long as he had Teo, he really didn't need much else. Too bad he hadn't realized that before he talked Teo into this crazy job.

## Chapter Four

Teo maneuvered the *Compensa* into a tight heading toward the center of the flashing pointers. This jump point led to a part of the galaxy that was pretty much deserted. The nearest refueling station was Dead End, a small space station at the farthest part of the explored galaxy.

Most people who showed up at Dead End were hiding from something—authorities, Angellum or unhappy associates. The current owners had claimed the station after an unfortunate accident killed their predecessor. No one asked any questions. Best to refuel and leave without too much contact with anyone.

He triggered the comm. “We’re about to jump. Hang on and be ready for anything.”

Sorin slipped through the hatch then into the nav seat. “I hate this place.” He buckled the harness, which secured him from the shoulder, over the chest and to his hips.

“I know, but we don’t have much choice. We don’t have enough fuel to get anywhere else.” Teo was already strapped in. He slipped a pair of lightshields over his eyes.

The other end of the jump was a pointer cluster within a few milliparsecs of Dead End. Unusual situation, no one knew who installed the cluster or why. It didn’t make much sense in the middle of nowhere. However, once there, they could jump into a more-populated area.

Sorin put on a pair of lightshields and braced his hands on the armrests.

The yoke pulled forward on its own. Teo fought against the gravity well of the cluster. Clusters were powered by a singularity similar to the concept of a black hole. The closer the ship approached, the more force was exerted on the ship. An

uncontrolled ride through a pointer cluster would rip the *Compensa* into shreds of metal, the shards too small for anyone to identify.

Teo leaned back, bracing his feet against the flooring. "Here we go." A slight bump signaled entry. Starlight stretched into long trails until a burst of light—so bright it would damage a Virkolan's unprotected eyes—exploded in the viewfinder. With a lurch of the ship and a hiccup of light, the normal star field resumed.

Sensors noted the position of Dead End. They'd made it through again. A gamble, but this time a necessary one.

Setting a course for the station, Teo reset the auto. With a long sigh, he leaned back in his seat.

Sorin flashed a quick smile as he unfastened his harness. "I should check on Hayyot. See how she fared."

"Hayyot?" Teo wasn't familiar with the term. A name for the angel?

Sorin frowned as he stared at Teo. "It just came to me. Rolled off my tongue as if I've always known it."

"We need to get rid of her." And soon. Teo didn't like the bond his mate seemed to have with the angel.

"I know, but how? I don't want to hurt her."

"Maybe we can release her at Dead End. Angels come there sometimes. Maybe she could wait until some of them showed up."

"Doing what? Most people on the station would kill a lone angel on sight. They wouldn't bother with questions of why she was there."

*I wish we hadn't...* "Okay, but we can't keep her long. Rations are way too expensive. We can't afford her." *And I don't want her.*

Sorin's raised eyebrow and set lips made Teo wonder if his lover had caught his thoughts. Sometimes they could hear each other through the bond. Usually in stressful situations. Not many had the ability.

Teo returned his attention to the console. They were within sensor range of the station. "Dead End Station, *Compensa* requesting landing instructions for refueling."

The comm crackled with a little static. "*Compensa*, didn't expect you in this neighborhood." The feminine voice belonged to one of the three claimants to the station. Virkolans. Two bonded females and a single male.

A bit of a strange situation. Most Virkolans bonded with mates of the same gender. For procreation, they entered into an agreement with a bonded couple of the opposite sex. Females took on the role of parents. Males usually made no claims on the offspring. However, these three apparently lived together without benefit of another male.

"Hit a bit of a detour. You know how it goes."

"Yes, we do. Hold one." The comm went silent.

Teo frowned as he guided the ship in closer. He needed instructions now. Making him wait wasn't normal procedure. The station usually wanted to turn around ships—and profit—as fast as possible with minimal fuss.

As he drew closer, he could see four out of the five docking ports were empty. Definitely no need for a delay.

"Sorin, grab the long gun and bring me the stunner." Might as well get some use out of the expensive equipment. "Something's not right here."

Looking a bit startled, scrambled for the hatch. "No one could know where we were going, right?" he called out from the weapons locker opposite their quarters.

"No, but they could guess." Teo keyed the comm again. "Dead End, requesting refueling instructions."

"Can we make another jump without fuel?" Sorin returned with the weapons.

"Maybe, but we'd be pushing it. We're almost on fumes as it is." Teo usually erred on the side of careful. He'd rarely run so low. The gauge read less than an eighth.

The comm crackled to life again. "*Compensa*, dock at the northern pier. Heading three-four-one. Standard rate of descent."

“Roger, Dead End.” Releasing the comm, Teo shook his head. “They’re sending us to the most deserted end of the station. No need when closer ports are open. Mostly warehouse storage on that end. Minimal people.”

“Fuck.” Sorin flipped the long gun on its side. “Fully recharged. How do you want to do this?”

“We need fuel. If we run now, I’ll bet money we’ll have a ship right on our asses as we go. Without fuel, we’ll never make it. Don’t think the ship can handle an emergency jump at full speed.” Teo neared the docking port. “You stay inside the hold, weapon ready. I’ll deal with the hookup. We’ll have to play it by ear.”

A fueling extension pushed toward them. A newer ship could fuel without the crew ever opening a hatch. Unfortunately, old ones like the *Compensa* required a little help. Not much. Just long enough to plug the extension into the fuel port then release it.

The ship bumped into the docking hatch. Clamps from the ship clicked into place, holding them secure.

Teo powered the engines to idle instead of shutting down.

“Isn’t it dangerous to refuel with the engines on?” Sorin’s blank expression didn’t give away any emotion.

“Yes, but I have a really bad feeling about this. I’d like to be ready to go without having to pull a restart.” As Teo stood, Sorin wrapped him in a hard hug.

“Love you. Be careful.”

Returning the embrace with equal fervor, Teo whispered, “You too.” He didn’t bother to give Sorin the rundown of what to do if he didn’t come back. After three years of being on the ship, Sorin knew the drill.

A lump settled in his throat as he slid down the ladder to the hatch. He had no idea what waited out there.

If the buyers had found them, he felt sure they’d have blown them up on approach. He held out hope that someone on the station heard the *Compensa* carried valuable



cargo and were intent on stealing it. If that was the case, the situation would be easier to handle. But it also meant word was out. Every ship in the galaxy would be looking for them.

Without another word, Sorin slipped inside the main cargo hold, leaving the hatch open but the hold dark.

Teo continued the short distance down the corridor to the small hatch. They only opened the main bays when loading large cargo. Other times, they used this one. It's what the station personnel would expect. Normally, he and Sorin came out together. Once in a while they stayed on the station for a change of scenery.

He tucked the stunner into a crevice beside the hatch. He'd rather carry it, but he wanted to see what waited before he showed his hand.

The hatch slid open. One of the females waited, a wide smile on her face. Maarta, he thought. He always got their names confused.

"Welcome, Teo!" She stepped forward, both hands out to greet him. "Glad to see you again. It's been too long."

Clasping both her hands in his, fingers circling wrists, Teo returned her smile. His stomach flipped a little but he kept his voice steady. "Can't stay too long this trip."

"Is Sorin with you?" Her nails dug into his skin. "We had hoped to have the pleasure of his company again at midmeal."

Neither he nor Sorin had taken meals with Maarta or her mates.

Teo tugged his hands back and she made no attempt to stop him. "Sorin's feeling a mite poorly. Came down with a bug on the last cargo run." Moving to the fueling extension, Teo made the hookup. "Think it's just another bout of space sickness." Lying as casually as she had, he added, "You remember the last time."

Maarta's laugh was almost real. "Yes. He was so pale. Maybe you should stay awhile. Let him get his stomach back where it belongs."

"You want to go in and ask him?" Teo nodded toward the open hatch. "He's in our quarters."

She nodded then disappeared through the hatch.

She'd never been on the *Compensa*. His stomach did a few flip-flops.

The fueling gage read half. Another ten minutes and the ship would be full, or close enough.

No sound came from inside the ship. Sorin would have heard the pack of lies they had fed each other. And he'd know Maarta was coming in. If anything went wrong, the sound of even a scuffle would carry through the hatch.

Sweat beaded in the small of Teo's back. His nerves needed action, but pacing would reveal his anxiety.

An eternity crawled by as the fuel loaded. Teo caught himself holding his breath. After easing air out slowly, he pulled in a long, deep breath. Almost.

Footsteps echoed in the hatch, matched by footsteps coming from the opening to the station warehouse. Maarta made it through first.

"I see what you mean, Teo. He's a poor sight."

Unhooking the extension, Teo wasn't sure what to do about payment. The movement in the warehouse grew louder.

"Good to see you again." Maarta grabbed the extension, pulling it away from the ship. "I'll put it on your account."

Teo knew there was no such thing as credit the way they lived, but he didn't question. "Thanks, Maarta. See you next run." He took long strides toward the hatch, trying not to run. Slamming his palm against the hatch control, he whispered as the hatch slid closed, "Be careful."

Running top speed, Teo headed to the helm. Sorin followed on his heels. As they settled into the pilot and nav seats, they could see Maarta, head held high, as she

backed away from the docking port. Several Virkolans he didn't recognize came through the door before she could get in.

One tall, scar-faced male grabbed her by the arm. He shook her like a child's toy then tossed her aside. Her body hit the deck hard enough to bounce.

The comm came to life. "Get out of here." Takra's voice filled the helm.

"There're people in the docking area. I can't leave until they're clear."

"You have to go now..."

"But Maarta?" The idea of sacrificing Maarta after her help. Or of her mate being willing—

"We're already dead, Teo." Takra's voice broke. A cough ended in a gurgle Teo recognized. "Just go before her sacrifice is lost."

Teo slammed his hand against the releasing clamps. The pressurized air of the dock kept them in place. With a deep breath, Teo nudged the engine to life, pulling away.

The strangers in the docking area ran for the door but found it sealed. With a silent whoosh of wind, all of the people were gone. Blasted into space.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Sorin's horror filled his voice.

The same horror shivered down Teo's back. "Takra was dying. They'd already killed her. If Maarta wasn't dead when she hit the deck, she soon would be. At least this, it's quick."

Teo flipped the controls to reverse the engines, pulling away from the station.

The comm crackled again. "May fortune follow you." The sound of a blaster ended the transmission.

## **Chapter Five**

Sorin stared into the holding room. Hayyot was sleeping, wings curved over her body like covers. He didn't want to disturb her but the incident at Dead End needed some answers. Answers Hayyot had and Maarta had been willing to die for.

"What did Maarta say to you?" Teo rested his hands on Sorin's shoulder.

The warmth helped with the chill in his soul. A little anyway. He didn't think anything would banish the horror forever. As a dirtsider, the idea of dying in the cold of space terrified him, though he'd never admit it to his space-loving mate. Teo would never survive as a dirtsider.

"A gang of thugs – Virkolan thugs for a change – showed up yesterday. They were looking for us. Said we had a cargo they wanted."

"But why would Maarta and Takra die for us?"

"They wouldn't. It wasn't for us." Sorin's voice cracked. He took a couple of deep breaths. "It was for her, Hayyot."

"For an angel?"

"Evidently she's some kind of underground peacemaker. She's opposed her people and their treatment of Virkolans. She's trying to forge some kind of peace."

"I never heard of anything like it."

"Evidently not many have. Maarta and Takra were part of the movement. They took over the space station so they'd have a safe, out-of-the-way base to operate from. Hayyot was normally here. Safe." Sorin turned around. He didn't know whether to be angry or sad. If he'd known... "The story of the bounty was meant to fool idiots like me. More money than we'd ever need. I should have realized it was too good to be true."

"Why was she on the base where we found her? Why wasn't she here?"

"I don't know. Maarta didn't have time to go into it. She wanted us to know we can trust Hayyot. And we have to keep her safe."

Teo's gaze narrowed. His lips parted then clamped shut.

"I know you don't like it, but we owe Maarta and Takra. They died for this, Teo. And maybe Dardro too. She didn't mention him."

His lover wasn't exactly political. Teo liked to get by with the least amount of trouble. Not surprising, considering he'd grown up with plenty of it.

"I know. But I'm not sure what we can do. We can't run forever. Where is a safe place to take her? Did Maarta give you any ideas?"

"No. We need to talk to Hayyot."

Teo squared his shoulders and pursed his lips. "It's going to be hard to trust an angel."

"When we first met, you said you couldn't trust a dirtsider." Sorin slipped a hand around Teo's waist. "And look at us now."

"That's a little different."

"Yes, it is." Sorin wasn't sure how the next tidbit of information would be received. "But I believe we can trust her."

"Why?" Teo's face slammed shut like a door. His gaze grew cold and his face turned to steel. "Because you fucked her?"

"Well, kind of. Yes." Let the shit hit the fan now and get it over with. "It's like some kind of bond...a connection. Not words like we sometimes hear from each other. Just a feeling. And no, I don't want her again. I thought we'd established that already."

Teo's face flushed a little darker. "Sorry." He bowed his head, touching his forehead against Sorin's chest. "I can't lose you, you know that, right?"

"You never will. At least not to another being." Sorin pulled Teo into a hug. "But we need to talk to her."

Teo nodded against Sorin.

*Together!*

"Yes, together."

"I didn't mean for you to hear that." Teo chuckled as he pulled away.

"I know but the most heartfelt thoughts tend to find their way through."

"Yeah. Okay. Let's talk."

Sorin turned toward the door. His arm rested across Teo's shoulders. "She was asleep." Peering through the window, he saw her sitting in the corner, her head bowed. Rapping his knuckles against the glass, he waited until she acknowledged his presence.

Her luminous gaze met Sorin's. A nod accompanied the curling of her fingers.

Opening the hatch, Sorin stepped in, holding his breath. While she hadn't hurt him, he was a little nervous facing her without the protection of the door. A small sniff. None of the sweet scent as before. Only the slightly musty smell of an unwashed creature.

"You are quite safe. The only time you would be in danger is during the *treylas*. I won't have another for...eleven of your moon cycles."

Teo stood back as Sorin approached her. While somehow he knew she was harmless, Sorin appreciated his lover's caution.

"Maarta and Takra are dead." Sorin watched close to see her reaction to his announcement.

The wide eyes closed. Her head bowed and a long trilling sigh pierced the air. When she looked up again, her face was calm. "I felt...their passing. I hoped I was wrong."

"You're telepathic?"

"Not in the normal sense. And not with others of the Angellum."

"Only with Virkolans?" Now that was surprising. The telepathy among Virkolans was usually limited to lovers—more especially, bonded mates and even with them strong telepathy was rare.

"Close contact over prolonged time...forges pathways. Most of the Angellum avoid physical contact with your people. To avoid the hate and fear."

Part of Sorin's mind wondered about the Virkolans taken as slaves. How would they avoid contact? "I haven't been around you long, yet I believe we exchanged thoughts. Or at least impressions."

"You coupled with me during the *treylas*."

Teo stepped forward. "What exactly is that? *Treylas*."

"The words. I don't remember. Uh, fertile time?"

"Fertile time?" Teo's voice joined Sorin's as they both asked.

"Female Angellum are slaves to the fertile time. They must mate. Because of the drive to procreate, the Angellum have filled their world and moved out into the stars to fill others."

Teo held up one hand. "Wait. Are you saying your people invaded Virkola because of population problems?"

"Yes. Population. It is against Angellum law to interfere with childbearing. With each male accorded five wives, each wife entering *treylas* at least once per year..."

"Damn." Sorin never thought it could be so simple.

"Yes. War brings new lands for offspring but also...decreases population."

"Wait a minute." Teo took another step closer. "You're saying your people would rather cure the overcrowding by killing off their own soldiers rather than using a little birth control?"

Hayyot's features twisted into a frown as she rolled her eyes.

Sorin didn't think it was possible for an angel to display embarrassment but she seemed to be doing a damn good impression.

"The Angellum seek me and my collaborators. Not just for helping Virkolans but working on a...cure to *treylas*."

"Birth control." Sorin shook his head slowly. Disbelief struggled against the futility of years and years of war.

"The base where you found me. We were to test a substance that would make females unable to bear children."

"Did it work?"

Hayyot shook her head. "You took me before the cure was administered."

"Can we take you back there?" Teo wasn't hiding his enthusiasm for the idea. His entire manner perked up. "Would your people still be there?"

"Perhaps, but not likely. They would have moved after my disappearance."

"So where should we go?" Sorin hoped his question would come across as a little less desperate than his lover's.

"At this time, I do not know."

Sorin nodded. "We don't have many provisions for you. Can you eat Virkolan food?"

"Only some plants."

"No animal protein."

She nodded her head. "We do not ingest meat well." Her lip curled a little. The almost Virkolan gesture made Sorin smile.

"We'll have to find some angel rations."

"They're expensive." Teo let go a long sigh. "Not sure we have enough credit to get much more."

"I have credit." Hayyot stuck her hand into a hidden pouch under her feathers. "You are welcome to have."

Sorin checked the balance on the credit stick. Quite a bit of credit. Enough to make up for some of the expense of their failed mission. Maybe keep Teo happy. He passed the stick to Teo.

"It cannot be traced."



"Okay." Teo tucked the stick in his breast pocket. "Where would we find angel rations without getting our asses blown out of the sky?"

"The Crerange Base on the Filmon moon. My people have arranged for a steady supply of provisions through there. Smugglers."

"Filmon is at least a three-day haul," Teo said.

"We don't have enough angel rations. Any place closer?"

"I need to...recover from *treylas*. I'll sleep." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "The word." She made a clicking, trilling noise. "I can't think. Long, deep sleep."

Sorin flitted through several words then tossed a couple out. "Trance? Coma?"

"Coma! Yes. Maybe...two days."

"We have a couple of passenger berths that will be more comfortable. We'll move you there."

Teo elbowed him in the side.

"What? I'm not going to keep her locked up."

"Fine. Do what you want then meet me on the bridge."

After Teo was out of hearing, Sorin smiled at Hayyot. "Sorry. He's... His life hasn't been easy and most of his troubles have been because of the Angellum."

"Doesn't that describe most of your people?"

"Yeah. I guess it does." Sorin motioned toward the door. "Come on. I'll get you set up. Do I need to do anything while you are asleep?"

"No. In two days...will need water and some food then."

"We have a couple of rations left for you. I'll make sure they're available."

"Thank you."

Sorin led the way, wondering at his trust in her. Somehow, his contact with her left him with the absolute impression that she wouldn't harm him or Teo. He hoped his feelings were accurate.

\* \* \* \* \*

Teo slammed the ladder hatch shut then stalked onto the bridge. He trusted his lover. Believed Sorin didn't want the angel. But part of him didn't like seeing Sorin friendly with her.

All the talk of birth control. Not exactly something he'd ever worried about. Being bonded to a male had its advantages. Rarely, a male and female Virkolan would bond for life. Most people looked at it as a harmless aberration. For all of known history, his people bonded with someone of the same sex. Procreation was very controlled. Unlike, evidently, the Angellum.

He reset the *Compensa's* course. The Filmon moon wasn't exactly the safest place in the galaxy. He'd been there a time or two. The base was a popular destination for smugglers and thieves. Never trust anyone there. As if he trusted anyone anywhere.

The ladder hatch slid open. Teo didn't bother to look. He doubted Sorin would bring her to the bridge.

Strong hands gripped his shoulders, massaging tense muscles. "She's already out cold. Her breathing is so shallow she almost seems dead."

Teo curbed the thought wishing she was. He didn't want to argue. Maybe the angel's friends would be at Crerange and they could dump her with them.

"Course all set?"

"Yeah." Teo closed his eyes and let Sorin soothe his nerves with a deep massage. Asshole knew his weaknesses too well.

"We should get some rest also." Sorin's breath warned Teo of his nearness, which didn't stop a shiver down his spine when Sorin sucked on his earlobe.

"That kind of rest again?"

"Maybe..."

Teo checked the ship's readings again out of habit. "Sounds like a good idea." Twirling his chair around, he faced his lover. "Then some real rest. We'll both need to

get some sleep before we get to Crerange. That place is dangerous. Outlaws who are willing to shoot you in the back just to steal your clothes." He set his hands on Sorin's hips. "They'd worry about the holes later."

"Speaking of holes..." Sorin pulled Teo from the chair. "You have one I'm very interested in."

"Really?"

"Actually two." Sorin cupped the side of Teo's jaw, his thumb pressing inside his mouth.

"Hmm..." Teo laughed around Sorin's thumb. "Sounds like we could come to some kind of agreement."

"Good." Sorin pulled his thumb free and replaced it with a hard kiss, full of heat and tongue. He lifted Teo off his feet, shuffling backward toward their quarters. "I plan to use you hard. As hard as you did me."

"Oh yeah." Teo wrapped his arms around Sorin's neck, letting his giant lover carry him through the tight corridor.

The short walk had Teo's cock filling fast. Sometimes his need for Sorin overwhelmed him. This looked to be one of those times. His throat ached with emotion and desire. He couldn't get close enough without Sorin getting inside him. Sometimes even that didn't seem like it would be enough.

Once they made it into their room, Sorin slammed his hand against the door mech. As soon as it slid closed, he dropped Teo, pushing him back against the door, hard. He crushed Teo with his tall, muscled body. "I'm going to take you every way I can think of. And then some."

Teo recognized the signs. Sorin became very aggressive sexually when things became tense. And Teo didn't mind at all. He usually ended up pleasantly sore and so sated he could sleep for a week.

They didn't have a week, maybe not even days, but they'd make the most of what they had.

Teo stuck his hand down Sorin's pants. Grabbing his hard cock, Teo whispered, "So fuck me already."

With a short growl for a warning, Sorin pushed Teo to his knees. His fingers threaded through Teo's hair, pulling his face against Sorin's crotch. The hard ridge of his cock mashed against Teo's nose and lips.

Sorin's other hand loosened the button. He tightened his grip on Teo's hair. Pulling him away, he yanked down his zipper. His thumb caught the thin undergarment, pulling it down. His hard length popped free, smacking Teo in the cheek. "Suck me."

Teo opened as Sorin fed him his cock. Deep and fast, the length clogged his throat. With both hands tangled in Teo's hair, Sorin held his head still. His hips flexed back and forth, fucking Teo's mouth.

"You feel so good."

Teo couldn't answer, but he welcomed the roughness. Only with his lover, with Sorin.

"Hot mouth." Sorin held Teo's face tight, pressing his nose against scratchy pubic hairs for a second. He released before Teo choked. "Just wait until I get my dick in your ass."

Moaning around the mouthful, Teo slipped his fingers into the top of Sorin's pants. He tugged both pants and underwear down to Sorin's knees. Slipping his hand between his thighs, he rolled Sorin's sac between his fingers.

"Fuck yeah." Sorin's strokes grew erratic. "No. Too much."

"Ahhh..."

With a hair-pulling yank, Sorin pulled Teo's mouth off his cock. Leaning over, he planted a bruising kiss on Teo's already-swollen mouth. As fast as he'd attacked, Sorin released him.

Dazed, Teo stayed kneeling by the door as Sorin stripped near the bed. His clothes landed in a pile. Just in case. Teo pushed away thoughts of their slim chances to get out of this alive. For now, they were not only alive, they were together.

Sorin sat on the edge of the wide bunk. Using his arms as props, he leaned back, legs spread wide. "What are you waiting for? You wanted to play with my balls, so get over here and play."

Teo started to stand then thought better. Instead, he crawled across the room on his hands and knees.

A grin splashed across Sorin's face. His thick dick waved hello as he approached. "I think I like this game..."

Kneeling between Sorin's legs, Teo lowered his face to the heavy sac hanging just off the mattress. His lover's natural musk and the scent of come rising were the sexiest aromas in his world. Using the flat of his tongue, he licked the wrinkled scrotum, leaving a heavy trail of spit behind.

Soft grunts showed Sorin's appreciation. "Suck them."

Using his lips, he nibbled at one side until he had a ball in his mouth. Sucking gently, he rocked back and forth, tugging the scrotum slightly.

"Yeah, yeah..." Sorin's hips squirmed back and forth then from side to side. "Feels so fucking good."

Teo moved to the other ball. Hands curled in his hair again then pulled him away.

"Strip. I'm going to fuck you now." Sorin's gaze stayed on Teo but his hands moved to a drawer near the headboard.

For a minute, Teo expected the cuffs again. His strip became a race to get out of his clothes. Tossing them in a separate pile, he stood naked, cock hard and aching.

Instead, Sorin pulled open the drawer with the sex lubricants. He dropped a tube on the bed then reached for another hidden compartment, this one under the bed.

Oh shit.

Sorin wasn't usually one for toys. Teo had just about given up on the idea of ever using them again. Before Sorin, he'd spent a lot of time alone on his ship. Sometimes his hand just wasn't enough.

"Get on the bed. Hands and knees." Sorin moved off the bed.

With his head down, he couldn't see what Sorin pulled out of the drawer.

A warm hand teased along Teo's spine from his ass to his neck then back again. "This is going to be a long night." His finger dipped between Teo's cheeks, pressure nudged against his hole.

Teo's anal muscle flared, opening for Sorin's finger. Instead, cold lube pushed in. Too thick for a finger, too slender for Sorin's cock. One of his toys. Teo thought he knew which one. "Fuck!" The toy came alive, vibrating and twisting as it pressed into him. His pleasure gland went into overdrive with the combination.

"Interesting." Sorin pulled the dildo almost out then pushed it back in again. "I can see the fascination. My cock certainly won't turn like that."

Teo chuckled between gasps. "Like your cock better."

"Glad to know." Sorin's laugh was light, almost carefree. As if they didn't have people looking to kill them and an angel onboard.

"Oh shit." Teo dropped his head to the mattress. "You're driving me crazy here."

"Good. Consider it payback."

"The good kind, I hope."

"Yes." His voice caught a little.

Teo craned his neck to look over his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Don't mind me." Sorin shook his head. The sadness in his eyes contradicted his smile.

"Hey!" Teo crawled forward, letting the toy slide from his ass. Rising to his knees, he moved toward Sorin. "What's going on?"

Shutting off the toy, Sorin tossed it on the floor. "I feel like this is all my fault. I insisted we do the job so we could live a life you aren't really interested in."

"Whoa there. If I hadn't agreed, we wouldn't have done it." Teo slipped an arm around Sorin's neck. The other went around his waist. "We were in it together. Like everything else."

"But I pressured you. Now good people are dead and we'll probably be the same soon." Sorin rubbed his cheek against Teo's.

"We're not dead until we are. Don't be burying us too soon." Teo had his worries, but he'd come out of worse before. A few extra cuts and bruises maybe, but alive. "Everything will work out."

"But I should have been happy with what we had. This ship, food to eat and each other. I shouldn't have wished for more."

"We can't give up our dreams. Goals help us reach out for something better. We need something to strive for." Teo pulled back so he could meet Sorin's gaze. "If I'd given up my dreams when I was stranded for five years, I'd have died there." He'd barely reached puberty when the old transport he'd lived on had been abandoned, leaving him behind, forgotten in the rush. Half the ship useless, open to space. He'd kept the old engine and life support running enough for one gangly youth to live. Breeding rats for blood and meat. Hopeless didn't begin to describe his life.

Sorin took a deep breath.

"And what about you? If I'd given up after our first encounter, I'd have never gotten you offworld. So if you want to blame someone, blame me for falling in love and bringing you on ship to begin with."

Sorin's face flushed a little and a smile crooked the corner of his mouth. "I'm glad you didn't give up on me. Even if this ends badly, I wouldn't trade our life together for anything." His arms wrapped around Teo as he buried his face in Teo's neck. "Not even for all the credit in the galaxy or sanctuary."

"Good." Teo nibbled on Sorin's neck. "Now you were going to fuck me, weren't you?" His hand dropped to Sorin's dick, now about half hard. A couple of rough strokes helped things recover.

"Yeah. Want to make sure we go out with a bang." He muffled his laugh on Teo's neck.

"So, let's get back to it."

Sorin pulled his arms free then pushed Teo's shoulders. "On your back, mister. Feet in the air." His weak moment evaporated. The strong, demanding voice was back.

With a grin, Teo obeyed. He hooked his hands behind his bent knees, pulling his thighs to his chest. His ass rose off the bed a little. "Like this?"

"Perfect." Sorin grabbed the lube then coated his cock. "You know you're beautiful like that. Splayed and ready with lust and desire written across your face." His hand slipped between Teo's legs. "And this." His fingers curled around Teo's cock.

The soft touch along with Sorin's words sent frissons of desire spreading across his groin and lower stomach. His muscles clenched. "Oh shit." He didn't want to come. Not now.

Sorin's hand slipped lower. Hard pressure around the base of his cock helped. Sorin's other hand tugged his balls. The immediate need eased. "You're kind of primed today." A wide grin lit Sorin's face. Finally.

Teo couldn't stand to see his lover depressed and doubting himself. "All because of you."

"And you always return the favor." Sorin released Teo's balls then fisted his length. Lube glistened in the low cabin light. "Look what you do to me." Leaning forward, Sorin rubbed the tip of his cock up and down Teo's crack, teasing his anus.

"Oh yeah." Teo closed his eyes. Muscle by muscle, he forced his body to relax. With tension gone, each sensation heightened. A touch of Sorin's hand, fingers across his balls. The thick crown of his cock pushing past the slight resistance of his ass. "More."



Relaxation techniques he could handle. Patience was another story. Sorin's slow push wasn't enough. He needed hard, slamming strokes. A little pain made the sex seem more real, made him feel more alive. And right now he needed that.

Deeper but still slow. Sorin's balls pressed against his ass and held.

"You look so good."

Teo opened his eyes. His gaze met Sorin's hungry one.

"So good." Sorin's hips flexed, pushing a fraction deeper. "Stroke your dick." A flash of tongue wet Sorin's lips. He pulled Teo's leg up against his torso, freeing Teo's hand.

Running his hand across his chest, Teo tweaked his nipples before taking a winding, lazy trail to his groin. "You want to watch, huh?" His other hand still held his leg.

"Yes." He pulled out for a quick, short stroke. "While I fuck you." His gaze flitted back and forth between Teo's cock and his face. "I like to watch you come."

"Really?" A shiver of desire trembled through him.

"Yeah. As you get close, your face scrunches up, nose wrinkles, deep frown. The closer you get, the more twisted. Then you're there and everything relaxes. Your mouth opens and all the wrinkles fall away. Almost like watching you age then grow younger."

Teo fisted his cock, matching Sorin's slow pace. "Really. And how do I look all wrinkled and aged?"

"Still beautiful." Sorin's smile lit up his face. "You always will be to me." Sorin had to be in love.

Teo never considered himself beautiful. Or even good-looking. "You're blind but I love you anyway."

Sorin moved a little faster but with short strokes. "Well, you're a fool for keeping me, but that's okay."

"Kiss me."

Pushing Teo's leg down in front of him, Sorin caught Teo's mouth in a soft kiss. A mere melding of lips, no tongue. Almost innocent. Each pass deepened. From closed mouth to open. A tongue swiped here then there.

Teo's throat ached with need as he tried to push Sorin to a harder kiss. He rocked his lower body, urging Sorin to faster strokes. "Need you. So much." His breath caught against the pleasure of Sorin in him, on him, touching.

Sorin's tongue invaded. Hard, deep, as needy as Teo. His body moved faster but with erratic strokes and awkward bumps. His neck strained to keep contact.

Teo kept rocking, slow and steady, against Sorin. His hand, still around his cock, was squashed between their bodies. The pressure kept him simmering on go.

"Oh fuck." Sorin pulled away from the kiss with a harsh gasp of air. His hands planted beside Teo's shoulders. With Teo nearly folded in half, Sorin pounded into him.

"Ah...ah..." Pleasure shot through Teo. Hard jolts of ecstasy and joy. "Yes." He squeezed his dick with a hard, pulsing grasp. "So close."

"Oh yes." Sorin's gaze locked on Teo's. Sweat beaded across his forehead and dripped down his nose. "Come for me." His strokes slammed, each one harder than the last.

Teo thought he'd split in two, but he'd go happy.

"I want to feel your body clench around my cock as you come."

"Yeah..." Muscles cramped from his tight position, but the pain only added to his growing climax. "Yes! Sorin!" Come spurted through his fingers, dripping on his stomach.

Sorin swooped in for another kiss. Hard and deep, without a trace of tenderness but so welcomed. Hot and tasting of the salt of sweat.

Teo's pleasure had never gone so high before. He didn't think more was possible. His leg slid out from under Sorin's chest. Wrapping both legs around Sorin, he held on while his lover plundered his ass with a few final strokes.

"Fuck!" Sorin buried his face in Teo's neck. His mouth sucked hard on tender skin. Slick heat spread inside Teo, adding more lube to his passage.

Sweat and come slicked their bodies, mixing and spreading where they pressed together.

"Damn, Sorin..." Teo threaded his fingers through Sorin's dark hair. Tugging his face away from Teo's neck, he pulled him into another hard kiss. Bruising lips and tapping teeth gentled into a slow meeting of mouths. "Amazing. You. Were. Amazing."

A bloodshot gaze met Teo's. Maybe some of the salt was from tears.

"I love you so much." Sorin's voice cracked a little. "Never forget that."

Teo wiped some of the moisture from Sorin's face. "I won't. I plan to have you reminding me for a long time yet."

## Chapter Six

Sorin sat in the nav seat, watching Teo watch the readouts. The last two days had been a little too quiet.

Hayyot appeared to be coming around from her self-induced coma. She'd stirred a little. Well, she'd changed position. Something she hadn't done since she'd gone to sleep.

Most of their time was spent between watching the sensors and having sex. Lots and lots of sex. As if they'd never have another chance. Sorin kept pushing his dark thoughts aside.

Attitude could keep a person alive in a bad situation. If he let his attitude turn morose it could get him killed. Or Teo.

"I'm getting a blip of something on the edge of the sensors." As if distance from the screen made a difference, Teo leaned closer.

"No idea what?"

"Huh-uh. We need to find a way to upgrade the *Compensa's* sensors. A ship has to be practically on top of us for me to tell what it is."

"How long until we know where it's heading?" Even Sorin knew they needed more than one point to judge direction.

"Probably an hour. Unless they disappear." Teo glanced at Sorin with a smile. His shoulders popped up then down in a slight shrug. "We can always hope."

"Yeah." Sorin stood then stretched. Tension was killing his muscles. If they got out of this situation alive, he wanted to find a nice, deserted rock to hide behind for a while. Just to relax. "I'm going to check on Hayyot."

"Okay." Teo lifted his face. His lips pursed slightly.

Leaning over, Sorin planted a kiss on his mouth. "Back in a few."

He kept his mind blank during the short walk from the bridge to Hayyot's quarters. He'd gotten very good at not thinking over the last two days. Thinking led to bad thoughts, which led to trouble.

The door slid open as he pressed the button.

Hayyot lay on her right side. She'd been on her stomach before.

Sorin pulled the chair away from the tiny desk. Setting it near her bed, he sat down to watch her. Until Hayyot, he'd never had a chance to study an angel up close. Her features were close to a Virkolan's. Face a little flatter, brow maybe a little broader than standard, with a hint of ridges. Her mouth held rows of sharp teeth, almost like a Virkolan's fangs multiplied by a dozen. Her lips were full and almost a shade of blue. One of the few color variations that strayed from white.

Her body was covered in long, white feathers, about the length of his palm. Her wings had longer feathers. Averaged maybe the length of his forearm. The skin of her face and hands so pale it was almost translucent, with a hint of fuzz, like a *gasa* chick.

"Mmm..." She rolled over again. This time close to the edge of the bed.

Sorin moved closer to catch her if she fell.

Her wings fluttered as she moaned again. Words spilled out here and there, but nothing Sorin understood. She also trilled, a soft, almost whimper of a sound.

"Hayyot?" Sorin whispered. He was afraid disturbing her would harm her somehow.

Her eyelids flew open. Limpid blue pools stared at the ceiling.

"Are you okay?" Sorin knelt on the hard floor near the bed. "Do you need something?"

Her gaze turned on him but seemed blank. "Who?"

"It's Sorin. You're on the *Compensa* with me and Teo."

Eyelids fluttered. Her head moved from side to side like an exaggerated no. "How long?"

"Two days. Like you said."

She nodded as she closed her eyes.

"Do you need anything?"

"Water."

Sorin took two long steps across the room. Pushing a recessed button caused a sink to pop out. A hidden cup was just inside the cupboard. With the cup full of water, he returned to her side. "Here."

He started to run his arm under her shoulders, help her sit and drink, but he stopped. Her wings were under her. Would they bend as she sat up? The only times he had seen her sitting, her wings had been unfurled beside her.

With a soft groan, she raised her head from the pillow. Sorin stuck his forearm in front of her as an offer of assistance. She grabbed hold of him, pulling herself up. Her wings moved with her, bending to line her back.

After a few sips, she motioned the cup away then eased back down on the bed. "This has been a most tiring *treylas*. I fear for the...outcome."

"Are you sick?"

"I am sure it will pass." She took a deep breath. "I shall rest more."

"Do you need food?"

"Not...yet..." Her breath caught between the words.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"No. It is not...required." A wan smile graced her blue-tinted lips. "I will call if I need assistance."

Sorin nodded. He didn't really want to leave but he did. She didn't look well. So many had died already because of his greed and selfishness. He didn't want to lose her as well.

\* \* \* \* \*

Teo shook his head slowly. The blip had moved at a trajectory straight for the *Compensa*. He didn't believe in coincidence. More modern sensors would already know the type of vessel. If there were bulletins out for his ship, they'd know what they were looking for.

A change of direction could tell him if they were following. Then again, it would warn whoever was following that he was aware of them. And there was fuel to consider. Changing course would use more fuel and probably not deter a pursuer.

Staying on course and keeping an eye on the other ship seemed like the best answer for now. He could always try to run later, when they were closer to a pointer. Better chance of getting away. Unlike the double jump pointer at Dead End, the next cluster was attached to six others. He'd have more choices of where to go.

"Well?" Sorin handed him a cup of bloog tea.

Made from the dried blood of *seras*, it was cheap, kept forever, just add hot water. Tasted like crap, but some of the nutrients of the blood survived the process.

The idea of a live *seras*, three times the size of the average Virkolan with sharp hooves and a mean disposition, set his stomach to growling. He hadn't had a decent feed in ages. Rats just weren't enough.

"I'm going to stay on our current heading. If they keep coming toward us, we'll run later."

"Okay."

Teo glanced at Sorin over his cup. His lover didn't object to his strategy or even question it. Part of Teo wanted to thrill at Sorin's trust of him. Unfortunately, he believed his lover was resigned to his fate more than confident in Teo's abilities.

"How's the angel?"

"She has a name, you know. And Hayyot is awake." Sorin blew his breath across the hot beverage. "But I don't think she'd doing well. She can't seem to stay awake for long."

"Did you give her some rations?"

"Said she wasn't hungry. She only took some water."

"Maybe someone at Crerange can help her." Teo checked the sensors again. A cloudy spot popped up not too far from them then was gone again. He set his drink aside. "What have we here?" It could have been some kind of natural energy blip. Or it could be something worse.

"What's wrong?"

"An anomaly popped up then disappeared. Could be a ship hiding its energy signature."

"Can ships do that?" Sorin leaned closer. His gaze scanned the sensor readout.

"Not ones like ours. Only the newest and most expensive would have that kind of equipment."

"Like the Angellum's ships?"

"Yeah. Just like that."

Sorin placed a hand on Teo's shoulder. "What do we do?"

*I wish I knew.* But Teo wouldn't tell Sorin that. Having someone else worry didn't make the burden lighter. "Could have been anything. So we keep going." He picked up his drink. Over a long sip, he eyed the weapons console. All weapons showed fully charged except one torpedo tube. The thing had been fucked up for a couple of months now. Oh well. Hopefully, one tube wouldn't mean the difference between victory and failure.

"I'm going to warn Hayyot. If things get rough, I'd rather she be prepared. I'll be right back." Sorin grabbed Teo's hair, pulling his head back.



A soft, deep kiss, full of tongue, surprised Teo. Before he could react, Sorin let him go.

"Don't go anywhere without me, okay?" Then Sorin was gone.

"As if..." He could only wish Sorin were back in his dirtside cave. If careful, clans lived full lives hidden in pockets of caves on Virkola.

Sorin was only fifty-two, barely more than a youth. Things didn't look good for the normal span of nearly three hundred. Hell, things didn't look good for fifty-three.

The comm crackled to life. "Unidentified ship, state your name and business."

A cloud popped up on the sensor again but faded as the message ended.

"This is the *Compensa*. We're a trader-hauler seeking cargo on Crerange. And who might you be?"

"*Compensa*, prepare for docking and boarding for inspection."

"Whoever you are...we're running empty. There's nothing to inspect."

"Repeat. *Compensa*, prepare for docking and boarding."

"Fuck." Teo triggered the internal comm. "Sorin, get your ass up here!" The ship hadn't showed up in visual scans. The sensors still showed it as a cloud of static. Teo had no idea who they were dealing with. If it was angels, why didn't they just blast them out of the sky?

"I'm here." Sorin popped through the ladder hatch. "What's wrong?"

"Somebody wants to board us. Don't know who the fuck they are. They haven't shown themselves yet. Get Hayyot into one of the smuggler holds. She's the only thing they could find of any value."

Sorin nodded then disappeared through the deck.

"Fucked by fortune again..." He slapped the comm button. "Waiting for instructions." Then dropped the engines to idle.

The sensor cloud moved closer, looming twice as large as the *Compensa*. The fucking ship should be right on top of them.

Teo held the yoke in a tight grip. A quick yank, a pull on the thrusters would take them out of here at top speed. But without knowing who the enemy was, he didn't know if his ship's top speed was half of the boarders. They could catch him in seconds. Or blow him up without moving.

"Stand down your engines. We'll begin docking procedures."

"Engines are at stand down."

"*Compensa*, shut down your engines."

Fuck. He'd be helpless. Most of his weapons needed the engine at least on. "Not possible. I need some juice for life support and my engine is a little hard to start. Don't want a problem out here." Not true but it sounded good. If they insisted at this point, they were probably planning on killing them anyway.

Teo craned his neck in every direction, looking for the ship in his forward view screen then checked the other external viewers. They had to be above him. The camera there was on the blink. Again. A little credit would go a long way to fixing up the old girl.

"Understood. Standby."

"Roger." So they didn't want to kill them right away. Or they didn't want the hassle of a restart after they killed him and Sorin.

Sorin clamored up the stairs with his hands full. "Stopped by the armory on the way back." He tucked the long gun under the nav console. He handed a blaster to Teo then held up the stunner. "Where do you want this?"

The long, supple wand could hide just about anywhere, even inside clothes. Or under feathers. "Give it to Hayyot. If they find her... I'll meet you in the docking bay when you're done."

A tight squeeze on Teo's shoulder then Sorin was gone.

Flashing light caught Teo's attention. A ship lumbered into view. About three times the size of the *Compensa*, but the configuration wasn't familiar. Not an official Angellum

or Virkolan ship. Not that his people really had anything official. The size could be for cargo. Or several hundred troops. Weapons bristled from turrets on top and bottom. Other weapons probably hid throughout the bulk of the ship. A wide view screen ran across what had to be the bridge. Like most ships, the viewer didn't allow people to look in. A ship built to fight, even if it was just to protect cargo.

His survey reassured him of his decision to stay. With their armament, running would have been pointless. They'd have been dead as soon as he hit thrust.

A docking tunnel extended from the lower part of the ship, just above the weapons turret. "Time to meet the welcoming party."

Teo locked the bridge controls with a passcode. If they wanted the ship, they'd have to work for it. As he left the upper level, he locked the hatch at the top of the ladder as well.

Working his way down through the ship's levels, he couldn't stop the feeling he was saying goodbye.

"Hey." Sorin ran up to greet him as he reached the docking hatch. Strong arms embraced him. "Love you."

Then Sorin's warmth was gone. Next to him was the fearsome giant he'd first met three years ago. Few men were Sorin's height and bulk. His clan had been sad to see him leave. Men his size granted a clan a certain prestige.

Metal clanked on metal. The light above the hatch flickered red then finally green.

"Here goes nothing." Teo punched the hatch button. A hiss of air announced the door opening.

He glanced into the docking tunnel. Five Virkolans stood, weapons ready. One lagged behind the others. Their outfits were mismatched pieces of clothing from several worlds. Grim expressions greeted Teo.

"I'm Captain Teo Vladarkis. This is my ship. Who are you and what is the nature of this visit?"

"You have no need to know my name." The man standing behind the others pushed between two of the men. "And I'm here to claim the angel you hold for bounty." Nice. A coward hiding behind his men while he assessed the threat.

"Angel?" Teo looked at Sorin then back to the no-name coward, hoping his acting was up to speed. "I'm not fucking crazy. There's no angel on my ship. Last thing I want is to be gutted by one of those demons."

"We'll just check that out."

Teo fingered the blaster in his holster. If he gave in too easy, this crowd would never leave. "I don't think that's necessary." If he pushed too hard, they'd end up outnumbered and outgunned in a shooting war.

The coward got in Teo's face. "Well, I do." Chests almost touching.

Damn. A little breath cleaner would be a good idea. The stench could curdle blood.

Sorin reached between the two. His big hand settled on Stinky's chest. "He's my mate. Back off."

Stinky whirled around to see which of his men had snickered. All four had faces of stone. He turned back to Sorin. "I don't want his scrawny ass. I got a report saying you had the renegade angel. I want the bounty. I want the angel."

"No angel here." Teo backed up then flung his arm out toward the door to the ship. "Go see for yourself."

Stinky motioned his men toward the door but Sorin stepped in his way. "Two of them. And not you." The deep growl almost scared Teo. Normally his lover was a gentle giant.

But Stinky backed up. "Koris, Narndo. Search the ship."

Sorin let the two men pass then blocked the way. One massive fist on his hip, the other hand on his blaster.

Keeping a straight face, Teo followed the two men. He didn't want to leave Sorin alone but he didn't have much choice.

The first man pushed the control panel of the cargo hold then motioned for his buddy to go in. Each went through as if expecting trouble. Teo followed, forcing the most nonchalant air he could.

He leaned against the wall while they opened each closet and compartment. In a way, he was glad Sorin hadn't told him where he'd hidden Hayyot. He couldn't get nervous if they were close.

"Nothing here."

"I told your boss we were running empty. If I don't get cargo at Crerange, I'm fucked."

"Come on, Koris." Narndo pointed his gun toward the exit. "Let's keep looking."

Koris stopped near Teo. "Go on." Pointing his weapon's muzzle at the exit, he nodded his head toward the door.

Teo stepped through, his hands relaxed at his sides. The two men carried different weapons. Koris had an old-fashioned blaster, probably twenty years old. Unless someone loaded extra care on it, not too reliable. Koris was a little on the shabby side. It was possible he took better care of his weapon than himself, but Teo wouldn't bet on it.

When the trigger was pulled, a blaster built up ions under pressure in a chamber then discharged them as a stream of energy. The older the blaster, the slower to charge.

The other man carried a more-modern laser weapon. Still fired a stream of energy but had the capability to stun as well as kill. Teo couldn't see the setting from the way Narndo held the grip. Then again, Narndo didn't seem too comfortable carrying it.

"I told you we should have stayed away from Jenkins. He's out of his fucking mind." In the cramped space of the corridor, the harsh whisper might as well have been a yell.

Leading the way, Teo couldn't tell which one spoke. The other's whisper was fainter. Teo strained to hear but missed most of the words.

"Shut...if he...dead."

"Why I let you talk me into these things?"

Teo couldn't stop his grin. They sounded like him and Sorin bickering. Probably were mated as well. A little information he could use to his advantage. And he also had the leader's name. Jenkins. Not one he'd heard of before. Even the name was strange.

"I'm telling you there's no angel." Something bumped Teo's back. Muzzle or finger, he wasn't sure.

"Shut up. We'll see for ourselves."

"Fine." Teo stopped at the next door. Hayyot's original cell. The extra locks were still there but not in use.

"What's this room for?" Koris peered through the window.

"Troublesome passengers."

Koris stepped back. "Open it."

"It's not locked." Teo reached over and palmed the control. The door slid open. Remnants of the sweet smell caught Teo's nose. Or his imagination did.

Koris stepped into the room, rummaged through the drawers and small closet. "Let's go."

So far, they'd walked past five hidden compartments. These two couldn't find their ass with both hands. Surely, Jenkins wasn't that stupid. Or was something else going on?

\* \* \* \* \*

Sorin kept his glare trained on the leader. While he was one of the more-educated members of his clan, he knew how to play the silent brute. Sometimes his build worked in his favor.

The other two men shuffled their feet back and forth. Their weapons hung low and careless in their hands. Sorin could probably take them both out before they got a good grip on their guns. The leader was another story.

He stood his ground, glaring back at Sorin. His hand confident on his holster. He swaggered forward. "You look like a good man to have around."

"Hmm..." As if he'd have anything to do with him or his crew.

"You could do better than that pretty-boy captain of yours."

Sorin raised his eyebrow. The comment didn't make sense. Virkolans mated for life. The bond was rarely wrong. Once made, no one would consider leaving his mate. Any Virkolan, no matter how far away from Virkola or for how long, would know this.

The man looked Virkolan. The dark hair, eyes. His skin was a little light but not far beyond the norm.

"Jenkins!" One of his companions uttered the name with shock. The two men glanced at each other and shuffled back and forth. Their hold on their weapons tightened. The air was almost thick with unease.

"Who are you?" Sorin curled his lip as he spoke.

"Just another trader looking to turn a profit."

"I don't think so." He took a step toward the man. "If you were a real Virkolan trader you'd know better than to insult my mate."

"I meant no harm." Jenkins' bold voice contrasted with his step backward. "I just... I meant you could get better work on my ship. Better pay."

Sorin took another step forward and Jenkins back. His two men didn't seem inclined to help him. "I said he was my mate. I'm not here for the money."

"Your mate?" Jenkins' face paled a little more.

With Jenkins distracted and on the retreat, Sorin flipped his blaster out of its holster. With the muzzle stuffed in Jenkins' stomach, Sorin asked again, "Who are you?"

Jenkins held his hands out from his sides, far from his blaster. "Just a trader?" His gaze cut over to the two men as if looking for help.

One of them shrugged. "We'd like to know the answer too."

Biting back a grin, Sorin kept his brute scowl in place. He kept his attention on Jenkins. "What do you know about him?"

"Showed up one day with our real captain, Reekar. Next thing we know, Reekar doesn't come back from Crerange. This one claims he bought the ship. Didn't seem right but he had all the papers and Reekar's codes."

The other one nodded. "I didn't like it, but you have to stick with steady work. But Jenkins doesn't seem to know any of our customs or traditions. Claims he was raised away from other Virkolans but won't say where or by who."

Sorin leaned down until his face was in Jenkins'. With a hard shove of the blaster, Sorin said, "One last time, I'll ask you. Who are you?"

Jenkins blinked hard several times. The dark brown of his eyes seemed to move.

"You." Sorin looked at the man who spoke first. "Look at his eyes."

The man hurried over. "Name's Hadreal." He holstered his weapon then disarmed Jenkins. "Patrea. Heads up."

His partner looked up in time to catch Jenkins' blaster.

"Now, what am I looking for?"

"His iris moved."

Hadreal grabbed a handful of Jenkins' stringy hair and tilted his head back. "Looks like something is coating his eyes. Like plas-sheeting."

"Get your hands off me." Jenkins tried to pull away but stopped when Sorin put the blaster under his chin.

"I think you'd better do as you're told."

Hadreal pulled Jenkins' hair down until the man fell to his knees. "Patrea, hold his head."

Tucking the extra blaster in his belt, Patrea moved behind Jenkins. His hands sandwiched their former boss's face. Hadreal pried one eye open. His thumb brushed at the film. "It's blue!"



Hadreal pushed him to the ground then pulled his weapon. "The only beings around here with blue eyes are fucking angels. What are you?"

Sorin thumbed a hand comm. "Teo, you and the others need to get back down here. We have a...development?"

"What kind of development?" Teo's voice crackled back.

"Their captain is not Virkolan. Not sure what he is." Sorin didn't think angels could crossbreed with Virkolans. Maybe Hayyot would know. As far as this part of the galaxy, Angellum and Virkola were the only sentient species.

Terra was another, but while the Terrans were technologically advanced, they didn't have space travel past their moon and one large planet in their system. Terrans weren't even aware of other life outside their own. The Angellum and Virkolans living on Earth hid their true natures. Some Terrans believed in legends and myths surrounding a religious text and stories of creatures of the night. Most thought the stories ludicrous. The perfect cover for sanctuary.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Teo raced into the docking compartment with the other two men behind him.

"What happened?"

"He has blue eyes." Sorin pointed toward Jenkins. "Some kind of film makes them look brown. His men said he bought the ship from their former captain but they thought something wasn't right about the deal."

Teo grabbed the man by his throat. "So, who are you?"

"Ahhh..." Jenkins clawed at Teo's hand. His face went red. Sweat beaded across his forehead and on his upper lip.

"Let him go." Sorin tugged at Teo's hand. When Teo did, Jenkins fell to the floor. "Your hold shouldn't have done that much damage." Kneeling, Sorin checked for a pulse. Very fast. He should be stroking by now. "Take him to the brig. I'll get my medkit."

"We should toss him out the airlock." Hadreal toed the still form with his boot. "I'll bet he killed Reekar. The captain wasn't one to give up his ship so easy."

"Maybe." Teo took a deep breath. "But I want some answers. Do as Sorin says."

The four men glanced back and forth at each other. Hadreal shrugged. "Come on, Patrea. Let's do as the captain says."

Sorin winked at his lover. He'd expected to be dead by now. Not lining up reinforcements.

Hadreal and Patrea lifted the unconscious man.

"He's as light as an angel feather!" Hadreal looked at Teo then Sorin. "What manner of creature is he?"

Leading the two men toward the brig, Sorin's mind raced with possibilities. A mutant—some kind of Angellum and Virkolan hybrid? Could it be possible? "Put him on the bed in there. I'll be right back."

"Hold up." Teo trotted after Sorin. "What do you think?"

"No idea. Blue eyes, fragile, lightweight." Sorin shrugged. "I'll know more after I get my medkit. I'll run a DNA scan. It'll take a while."

"I have an idea. I want your opinion." Teo motioned up the ladder.

"You trust them to stay down there alone?"

"Strangely enough, yes."

Sorin shrugged then started up the ladder. As he keyed the code for the hatch, Sorin smiled. "Didn't think we'd make it back here again."

"Yeah. Me either." Teo climbed into the corridor. Before Sorin could get to the door of their quarters, Teo wrapped him in a tight hug. "So, my idea." Releasing Sorin, he leaned against the bulkhead. "Jenkins' men don't appear happy. They're quick to follow my orders and call me captain."

Hadreal's phrasing was unusual. A crewman didn't call another man captain when his own was present. It was a kind of unwritten respect for the title and the man carrying it.

"So." Teo took a deep breath. "I say we claim their ship."

"What?"

"Look, none of them seem to want the promotion. Don't think any of them are the type. We claim them as well."

Sorin stood in the doorway, grasping his medkit. "And Jenkins? If he isn't already dead?"

"I'll make him concede succession."

"You think it'll be that easy?" His relief that Teo was still alive — that they both were — fled at the idea of Teo facing a challenge.

"I don't think he'll challenge. If what his men have said is true, don't know that he understands the concept. Besides, if a little throat hold knocked him out, I don't think he'll be much of an opponent."

"What do we do about the *Compensa*?"

Teo swallowed hard. "We blow her up."

"What? You love this ship!" Parting with her would be like losing family. "I love this ship."

"Sorin, who knows how many people are looking for her. For us. In a different ship, different crew, we could become invisible again. Just another trader looking for a job. If we leave the *Compensa* intact enough to be identified maybe whoever is headed this direction will stop looking for Hayyot and us. Assume we're all dead."

"What about Hayyot?" While Teo wasn't thrilled with the angel's presence, Sorin didn't think he'd wish her harm now. Not with everything they'd found out.

"We move her over quietly. Keep her hidden."

Sorin nodded and tried not to let his relief show too much. "We should get back down there."

"Are you good with the plan?"

"If you are. I'll go wherever you do. You know that."

Teo leaned in for a fast kiss before he slid down the ladder.

Shaking his head, he watched his lover go. At least they were still alive.

## Chapter Seven

Teo's heart beat twice its normal pace. His chest hurt with the idea of losing the *Compensa*. He didn't even know what kind of shape the other ship was in. Or its name. Its disguised approach proved it had a more-advanced jamming system. It appeared to have better armament but that could be all show.

The four crewmen huddled in the corridor outside the brig. The door was open. Jenkins lay across the bed, his chest still moving.

Sorin brushed past Teo then into the room.

Teo turned his attention back to Jenkins' men. "What is your ship called?"

"*Vintul de Avere*." Hadreal laughed. "Fancy name for a banged-up old boat but she was Reekar's baby. Didn't really trust Jenkins' story. Captain would have died before giving the *Avere* up."

*Wind of Fortune* in ancient Virkolan. Teo's fortunes were changing. Maybe. The name fit.

"This doesn't make any sense." Sorin appeared in the doorway. "Everything is screwed up. His heart is in the wrong place. His liver—if it is his liver—is twice the size it should be. There's organs in him that I've never seen—in Virkolan or Angellum!"

Teo raised his eyebrows at his lover. No one needed to ask how he knew what angel physiology looked like. A quick glance at the *Avere*'s crew revealed blank faces. They didn't seem to catch Sorin's little flub. "Any idea what he is?"

"None."

"Excuse me, Captain Teo." Koris took a half step forward. "Captain, Sir. I might have an idea." The man's deference pleased him.

"Speak up." Teo already felt more comfortable about his plan.

"I heard Terrans were puny and frail compared to us."

Teo's mouth dropped open. "Terrans?" What would they be doing out here? They didn't have spacecraft capable of interstellar flight. "How do you know anything about Terrans?"

"An old spacer on the Farrange station. He claimed to have made it to Terra but was forced to leave. Talked about it all the time."

"And you believed his tall tales?"

"Not at first. But you know, every time he talked about it, the story was the same. You'd think if he was making it up, he'd slip and say something different."

"Good point." Teo bit his lip to curb a smile as Koris' chest puffed up and he broke out into a broad smile. "Very observant." A little pat on the back would go a long way with most people.

"Thanks, Captain."

Might as well jump in now. "I'm claiming the *Avere* as right of combat."

Sorin stepped out of the brig to stand behind him.

All four looked startled, their gazes darting from one to another, between Teo and Sorin.

Although his heart was racing, he kept his face blank. "I'm asking for your indenture and your loyalty."

Hadreal stepped forward. "I can accept that. At least you know how to take over a ship." He motioned toward the brig. "That one never asked."

Teo nodded. "That's why you didn't feel any real loyalty to Jenkins."

"Who wouldn't know to ask for indenture? To make a contract? He just came aboard with codes and papers and said the ship was his. Assumed we'd follow."

"Why didn't you call him out? Or leave him behind?"

"None of us wanted the captaincy. Thought we'd keep him around until we found someone better."

"And have you?"

"Yes." Hadreal stuck out his hand. "I offer my indenture for the next two years."

Two years for a new captain was a nice concession. "I accept." The bargain was handstruck, binding in Virkolan tradition.

"Me too." Koris followed suit. "Two years indenture."

"Aye. Two years." Patrea and Narndo fell in line.

"The beginning of a profitable venture." Teo shook each man's hand with a tight grip. His other hand settled over the top of their clenched hands.

Moans drifted out of the brig, reminding Teo of the final formality. Normally, combat ended with the death of the previous captain. Not necessarily a requirement but most captains wouldn't give up unless they were dead. Teo had no desire to kill Jenkins. In fact, he wanted to keep him around, find out his purpose.

"What do we do about him?" Hadreal nodded toward the brig.

"If he concedes, I want to keep him. You have no loyalty to him to interfere with your indenture. And I want to find out what he is and what he's doing out here."

Sorin ducked back into the brig. "He's coming around."

The brig was a bit tight for six people but he needed the men to witness Jenkins' concession. Even though they hadn't pledged to the man, Teo wanted them to witness the proper procedures. "Hadreal, Patrea, you come on in. Narndo and Koris, watch from the door."

Standing over Jenkins, Teo tried to mark any differences between him and a normal Virkolan. If he was a Terran...

His eyes fluttered open. The brown irises floated around for a second before settling. He tugged at the restraints on his wrists. "What are you..." He glanced past Teo to his former crew. "Why are you just standing there?"

"We've been asked to serve Captain Teo as his crew." Hadreal's voice was low and dangerous. Sent a few shivers down Teo's spine. Good thing he'd pledged to Teo. "We have no allegiance to you. Never did."

"I take the *Vintul de Avere* by right of combat." Teo pressed his fist to his chest. "You can accede to my claims or we can duel hand-to-hand."

"But the ship is mine. Reekar gave it to me."

"I never believed your story, Jenkins." Hadreal's fingers wrapped around his holstered blaster. "I think you killed Reekar. You haven't got the balls to face a man rightly for a fight. You even hide behind crew you're bound to protect."

"Killing your captain for right to the ship is allowed but only if the fight is fair and witnessed." Teo stepped between Hadreal and the bed. "Can you best me in a fair fight? Or do you concede your loss and live?"

Jenkins lifted his head to look around the room. His frantic search for assistance came up with nothing but harsh glares filled with malice. "I concede." His head fell back to the mattress. "Will you kill me?"

"No, not now. But you will find yourself locked up until we decide what's best done with you. Maybe we'll use you to feed on since they say Terran blood is very tasty."

Jenkins' blanched face and hard gasp confirmed Koris' suspicions.

"Keep him in here until we shift our possessions to the *Avere*."

"We have nice, tight brig, Captain." Hadreal gave a toothy grin, fangs extended. "Or we could lock him up in the galley."

The other men laughed as Jenkins squealed in terror. "Please don't. God help me!" His bound hands covered his face, forearms protecting his neck.

Hadreal touched his elbow against Teo's arm. "I think we have our answer, Captain."



"Think you're right." Teo left the brig. "Lock him up. We don't have much to transfer."

"If you want, Koris and I could go empty the captain's cabin. Not much there, but I think it'd be better without the stench of Jenkins' things fouling the room."

Teo wasn't completely trusting yet but he had to start somewhere. "Sounds good. We'll be over shortly. Sorin?" Teo motioned for him to follow. One part of the transfer needed to be done by the two of them. And he wasn't sure how just yet.

"Coming." Sorin fell in behind him. "How are we going to get Hayyot over there?"

"Not sure. Maybe the way we got her in here? The bag?"

"Sure would be easier if she wasn't struggling," Sorin said. "I need to go check on her. She wasn't doing very well when I hid her."

"Any idea what's wrong?"

"Only that she said her *treylas* wasn't going well. I'm still not sure what that means. I thought it was like an animal being in heat. Now I'm not so sure. Seems like that part of it is over."

"Get her and bring her up to our quarters. We'll wait until the last minute to transfer her."

"Good." Sorin took off down the corridor as Teo started up the ladder.

The small ship had been his home for nearly thirty years. Leaving it left a tight knot in the pit of his stomach. Logically, he knew they'd never be safe on her. Too many people seemed to be looking for them. But his heart didn't care for logic. It only cared for his mate and his ship.

Teo started on the bridge. He had hidey-holes all over her upper level for credits, small weapons and booby traps. The credits and weapons would go with him. He'd eventually do the same to the *Avere*.

The armory was next. Two cases in the floor of the cramped closet could hold his paltry stash. He'd always relied on a good blaster and his ship's weaponry. Getting into hand-to-hand pissing contests usually did no one any good.

"Teo! Help me!"

He moved to the open hatch. Sorin cradled Hayyot in his arms.

"She's unconscious." He climbed the first couple of rungs then handed her up to Teo, using one arm. Another reminder of his lover's strength. Sometimes he forgot just how impressive his gentle giant was.

"What happened?"

Sorin followed up the ladder and into their quarters. "I don't know. Her body feels hotter but I don't know what an angel's temperature is supposed to be."

Hayyot inhaled with a slight whisper of air then coughed. "Sorin?" Her eyes flickered open. Her pale blue eyes searched Sorin's face.

"I'm here. How can I help?"

"You can't. It is done."

"What is done?"

"Shush. Little time. Much to tell." Her eyelids fluttered as she drew a ragged breath. Sorin reached for her hand, avoiding the long claws, he clasped it tight.

A tiny flush of jealousy reared its head but Teo pushed it away. His lover was a compassionate man. He treated another living creature with respect and concern. Teo couldn't fault him for that.

"I need to protect it. I'll not live to see it...bloom."

"Protect what?"

She pushed his hand down toward her stomach. Both disappeared under her feathers.

"What?" Sorin leaned back but his hand stayed inside the pouch.

"Take it." Hayyot's voice broke, whether in pain or emotion, Teo couldn't tell.

"It won't come out."

"Must pull!"

"Hayyot, I don't want to hurt you." Tears welled in Sorin's eyes.

"I'm dead already. You must protect the *creota*. The...jewel."

*Jewel?* She had a jewel hidden?

"You must, Sorin. You are...one." Her broken words made no sense. She must be feverish.

"How?" Tears spilled down Sorin's face.

"Keep it safe. Tell no one. It will be...salvation." Her eyes seemed to drain of the limpid blue, clouding with white. "Pull!" Her arm yanked upward.

Sorin's hand came into view with an oval-shaped stone almost too big for his large hand. All colors radiated from its pearly skin. Slick, clear fluids covered the stone and Sorin's skin.

"Hayyot?" Sorin's gaze fixed on the angel's pale skin. "Hayyot?"

A long release of air escaped her mouth. The wide eyes lay open, the blue clouded by milky white.

"Sorin, she's gone." Teo wrapped his arm around Sorin's neck from behind. "Let her go." The ache of losing the *Compensa* deepened. Another loss, one he hadn't expected to feel.

"I don't know what to do..."

"We'll keep it safe and a secret. That's all she asked."

Sorin nodded. "What about her?"

Teo took a deep breath. "We need to leave her."

"What?" Sorin pulled away from Teo's embrace. His gaze seemed both hurt and angry. "Without proper burial?"

"Sorin, we don't have a way to bury her. And...well, if anyone comes looking for us and finds the ship..."

"They'll find her body."

"Yes. Proof she's dead. No one will think to look for the stone. We'd be better able to protect it."

Sorin looked down at Hayyot's body. Nodding, he whispered, "I wish a different outcome but I know you'd approve."

"Come on. We need to gather our things and find something to hold the jewel." Teo rubbed Sorin's shoulders. A jewel of unknown value or purpose. Teo knew Sorin would do as Hayyot asked. He was an honorable man. A twinge of greed made Teo wonder if he could find out more about angel jewels.

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Avere's* captain's quarters were twice the size of the *Compensa's*, even had an extra room as an office. Furnished much better as well. The bed was soft, deep with plush covers, and wide enough for two full-grown men. Sorin didn't know if he could sleep in such comfort. Another smaller bed occupied the office. Hadreal said Jenkins slept there when he first boarded.

Sitting on the bed cross-legged, Sorin stared at the case he'd found for Hayyot's *creota*. He didn't want to open it. Didn't want to think about loss right now. Teo was on the new bridge, getting ready to scuttle the *Compensa* and Hayyot's remains. Much more advanced sensors showed an Angellum ship approaching. It should be there in a few hours. The *Avere's* jamming system should keep them hidden for at least another hour.

The plan kept the bridge intact, only shooting out the lower levels, disabling the engines and life support system. Anyone boarding her would easily find Hayyot's body.

He couldn't stand it anymore. Sorin unlatched the case. The edges popped apart when the latches were freed. He leaned back. The jewel had been small enough to hold with one hand. The case could hold something twice that size.

At arm's length, he flipped the case open. The jewel took up all the space in the case. The towel he'd used to cushion it was wedged tight around the edges. "What the fuck?"

He wished Teo weren't tied up with learning the ropes on the bridge. He'd welcome his lover's input right now.

The multicolored jewel pulsed, the surface rippling. And it grew. Cracking the edges of the case.

Sorin scrambled off the bed. Walking around the bed, he examined it. Nothing else seemed to be happening. Timidly, he flipped the broken case over, rolling the jewel onto the bed. Still nothing. But the thing had grown more than twice its original size.

Kneeling by the bed, he couldn't stop watching it. Something riveted his attention. An emotional tie? A hint of Hayyot's eyes in the iridescent shell? Shell?

"Oh shit."

As if to confirm his growing suspicion, the jewel pulsed again then expanded. Now the size of a small child. Sorin closed his eyes. His mind raced through everything he'd ever heard about angels. Nothing popped.

Opening his eyes, he found the egg had grown again. *How big would it get?*

Sitting back on his heels, he settled in to watch. Part of him wanted to call Teo but another was afraid of his lover's reaction.

While Teo had eventually accepted Hayyot—to some degree anyway—he wasn't sure how his lover would feel about having a newly hatched angel onboard. He decided to let fate take its course. If Teo showed up before the angel, he'd deal with him then.

Otherwise—

The egg began to glow. A multitude of colors flashed from the shell.

Sorin scrambled backward. Did an angel egg explode? *Shit*. Better confess now before it hit the fan. When he reached the door, he hit the comm. "Teo, I need you in here."

"In a minute. We're almost ready."

"Not a minute. Now."

"Okay."

As typical with most ships, the *Avere's* captain's quarters were near the bridge. Within a minute, the door slid open.

"What the fuck?"

"Close the door." Sorin yanked his immobilized lover through the hatch then hit the door control.

"What is it?"

"The jewel."

Teo walked around the edge of the room, looking at the egg. "How..."

"It had already started growing before I opened the case. Seems to grow in spurts every couple of minutes."

His gaze narrowed under a deep frown, Teo asked, "It's not a jewel, is it?"

"Well, it could be."

Teo leaned against the closed door.

"If angel eggs are called jewels."

"Fuck!" Teo paced back and forth. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"Love to but our bed is currently occupied."

Teo glared at Sorin's attempt at humor. "What do we do with it?"

Shrugging, Sorin spread his hands. "Let it hatch. We don't have much of a choice."

"I could kick it out of the nearest airlock."

"Won't fit through the door."

Pulling his blaster, Teo held it up, pointed at the ceiling. "In pieces."

"You won't do that."

Teo's shoulders slumped and his frown eased. "You're right. I won't."

The egg took Teo's moment of weakness to expand again. The oval now filled the space across the foot of the bed. Big enough to contain a man Teo's size, it teetered on the edge of the mattress.

Sorin moved to catch it. As he rolled it farther up the bed, it expanded yet again. The shell went from hard to soft, absorbing Sorin's hands like a pillow. He yanked away, afraid he'd damage the shell.

"So what do we do now?" Teo stepped beside Sorin.

"Wait?"

"I need to finish with the *Compensa*."

Sorin slipped his arm around Teo's shoulders. "I wanted to be on the bridge —"

"Better you stay here." His arm snaked around Sorin's waist. "I'll be okay."

"How'd the others take your decision?"

"With a 'yes, Captain'. Didn't seem to faze them."

The egg began to glow with a bright white light. The colors from before seemed bleached. Heat radiated off the shell.

"Okay." Sorin pulled Teo back as he moved away. "Getting a little warm in here." With one arm around Teo, Sorin used his other to shield his eyes from the brightness.

A series of pops and crackles signaled yet another change. Daring a look, blue light appeared to shine through cracks in the shell. "It's happening."

With no idea of what to expect, Sorin pulled his blaster. Pushing Teo behind him, he waited with his weapon aimed at the glowing sphere. He'd promised Hayyot he'd care for what she called "salvation" but he wouldn't put his lover in danger.

The white light faded as the blue grew brighter. The more subdued color of light didn't hurt quite as much. Sorin fixed his gaze on the cracking shell.

Pieces sheared off, falling in large flakes on and around the bed. Cracks widened, filling the room with blue light.

A dark image appeared at the center of the oval. More of the shell fell away. The light slowly faded, its glare leaving an afterimage of brightness in Sorin's sight.

Surrounded by shards of shell, curled into a ball of feathers, lay an angel. The largest Sorin had ever seen. Nearly as big as Sorin. With feathers as black as space. "Uh-oh."

"What?" Teo blinked toward the bed. "Oh shit."

The black wings fluttered a few times then opened. The creature inside didn't have feathers. It had skin like a Virkolan. Pale like an angel but no body feathers. It stretched its wings. The room was too small for its full span. Its body rose up on its knees. His knees. A rather well-endowed him.

"He needs some clothes." Of all the stupid things to say.

Wide eyes, dark brown, almost black, hid under thick black eyelashes. His head swayed from side to side, much like a bird, like Hayyot. Finally his gaze rested on Sorin. His mouth opened but only a slight squawk came out.

He closed his eyes, his head still swaying. His wings shook hard, dislodging dark fuzz. Once again, he fixed a stare on Sorin. "Fa..." A deep breath. "Fa..."

Sorin shook his head. He knew what was coming and he didn't know how his mate would take it.

"Fa...ther."



## Chapter Eight

Teo paced the small corridor between the bridge and his new quarters. His new quarters currently occupied by a six-foot-six black-feathered angel. His lover's offspring. With great effort, he suppressed the urge to yell. He had to keep his voice down to keep the new crew from hearing. "What the fuck are we supposed to do with him?"

"Teo..."

"Don't Teo me with that reasonable tone." Teo dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. "How do we explain it to the crew?"

"I could take him back to the *Compensa*. Take my chances with—"

"You'd leave me for him?" Teo's heart jumped in his throat.

"Not like that." Sorin grabbed Teo, held him tight in spite of Teo's resistance. "You heard him. He's...well, he's my child."

"A six-foot-six child with wings." Teo buried his face in Sorin's broad chest. "Even if you survived whoever is trying to kill us, there'd still be too many questions."

"We could tell them he's an experiment."

"But why?"

Sorin's low voice rumbled in his chest. "Don't know. They accept you as captain. They've already pledged loyalty. Do we have to give them an explanation?"

"They may have offered their indenture, but if they believe it was under false pretenses they could break it. And with it, silence about our affairs."

The door to their quarters slid open. "Hungry." Hayyot's so-called salvation filled the doorway. His wings quivered and his mouth gaped open.

"Damn. Look." Teo pointed to Salvation's mouth.

Long, slender fangs jutted down from his eyeteeth. No sign of the razor-sharp teeth of an angel.

"You think he needs blood?"

"Blood." Salvation repeated the word.

"There's some rats in the galley." Teo couldn't tear his gaze away from the strange creature.

"I'll grab a couple. You stay here." Sorin pushed Teo toward the room then stormed down the corridor.

"Why me?" But his mate was already around the corner, footsteps scurrying away.

Teo searched Salvation's eyes for any malice but only sensed curiosity. "I'm Teo. Captain of this ship."

"Teo." A hand reached out. Nails, black as his feathers, ran down Teo's chest. Not sharp claws like Hayyot's. For some reason, the only connection to Hayyot was his wings. And the fact he emerged from an egg full-grown. Virkolans were born small, helpless and unable to survive without help. And it took them months to learn words.

"Do you have a name?" Maybe he knew more than a Virkolan child at birth.

"Teo." He touched Teo again.

"Yes." Teo couldn't stop his smile. "You are?" He mimicked Salvation's motion, touching the hybrid's chest.

"Salvation."

Teo took a step back. He ran through his conversation. He'd been calling him Salvation in his head but he didn't think he'd done it aloud.

A wide smile spread across Salvation's face. Teo would say he looked pretty pleased with himself.

"Fine. But let's call you Salva for short. People are going to have enough questions about you without Salvation as a name."

"Salva."

In spite of his misgivings, he realized the decision of what to do with Salva was made. He couldn't see abandoning him somewhere alone. Definitely wasn't letting his lover leave with him.

"What are you two grinning about?" Sorin carried several rat cartons.

"He picked a name."

"He what?"

Salva pointed at his chest. "Salva." Then to Teo. "Teo." As his nails brushed Sorin's chest, Teo said, "Father."

"Oh boy." Sorin took Salva's hand as it started to move away. "Sorin." He tapped his chest with Salva's fingers. "Sorin."

"Sorin?"

Sorin nodded.

"Sorin."

"Now we need an explanation."

"I was thinking about that." Sorin motioned Salva back into their quarters. "We tell them you rescued me from an angel facility. They'd been experimenting with my DNA. And Salva was the result. However, he's more Virkolan than angel and his loyalties were to me, not them. We escaped before they could kill him."

"Why would angels want to create hybrids?"

"So they can inhabit the lower lands."

"Oh... Good one."

Angels couldn't tolerate the higher oxygen of Virkola for very long. They'd get drunk. Their intolerance was one of Virkola's saving graces. Hunting parties did hit and runs from up high. They couldn't spend much time tracking anyone on the ground.

"So you two escaped —"

"With your and Hayyot's help. People should know about angels willing to help Virkolans."

“And we kept him hidden because we couldn’t risk Jenkins knowing. He’s obviously working for the angels. He was looking for one on our ship. Working against the angel rebellion.” Teo warmed to the story. Simple enough to keep straight. Just plausible enough to be believed. Most Virkolans believed all angels were capable of anything. Before Hayyot, Teo was one of them. And the *Avere’s* crew understood loyalty even if the relationship was new.

“So what do we do now?” Sorin asked.

“We do what we’ve always done. We survive.” Teo wrapped his arm around Sorin’s waist. “All three of us. And we get the word out about Hayyot, what she did and the secret the Angellum has protected all these years. I don’t know if it will help our side but at least it will shed some light into the darkness surrounding the war.” He pulled Sorin closer. “But for now, we’re still alive and we’re together.”

Salva’s face lit up in a wide smile. Before Teo could question his actions, Salva opened his wings. Both he and Sorin were wrapped in a feathery hug. Sorin’s laugh eased Teo’s surprise. Life was about to get interesting.

## About the Author

By day, Shayla Kersten is a mild-mannered accountant. By night, she's a writer of sexy romances. Torn between genres, Shayla writes erotic stories about hot heroes and their sexy women as well as hot men and their passionate heroes.

A native of Arkansas, Shayla spent four years in the Army as a missile specialist, stationed in Germany and Oklahoma. After her enlistment was up, she spent eleven years in New York City taking a bite out of the Big Apple. Even her love of theater and the nightlife of the big city couldn't cure terminal homesickness for the Natural State. In 1995 she returned to her roots in Arkansas.

Shayla now divides her time between her mother, her spoiled-rotten dogs, her dratted day job and her obsession – writing. And no, her mother doesn't know what she writes. That's between Shayla, her dogs and her readers!

Shayla welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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