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SOUL BOND

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Some bonds can't be broken by time. Or space. Or death.

When Captain Julian Gaspar captures an enemy spacecraft, he takes aboard a sapphire-eyed stranger who captures his heart. The powerful attraction that draws Julian to the mysterious Ellis is instant, undeniable, and throws Julian's well-ordered life into chaos.

The heat they generate burns as brightly and naturally as the stars—until Ellis is stolen away by a merciless pirate who trades in lives. In a heartbeat, Ellis is gone, leaving Julian broken and haunted by his last, angry words to his lover.

After five years of searching, Julian is finally reunited with Ellis, only to find him dying, imprisoned by a strange, ring-bound enchantment that is slowly draining his soul. Removing the ring will mean his immediate death unless Julian can find a source of powerful, ancient magic. Older than the stars. Older than time...

Warning: Contains spaceships, explosions, spiteful aliens, not-so-spiteful aliens, sarcastic alien yentas, the occasional naughty word and plenty of steamy man sex.

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Soul Bond

Christine Price

Dedication

For my mother, Jon and Bailey. Thank you. For everything. And O.W., my secret inspiration throughout it all.

Prologue

Glemisia

Coalition Standard Date 113-226.5

The alley outside the bar was dank for this time in the Glemisian summer season, the air heralding an early autumn. Ithivar pulled his thin jacket tighter around his shoulders. A low groan from behind him had his hand going to his blade. A cube of pressed garbage was knocked over as an approaching man tried but failed to use it to support himself and tumbled to the ground.

Ithivar waited in tense silence for him to rise. When the man remained supine, Ithivar grinned. *Looks like the night's off to a good start.*

The nearby bar was the closest one to the port. Most of the patrons were on shore leave and spending their recent pay, hot, horny and—by this time of the evening—completely drunk. Glemisia was home to half the galaxy's seediest elements, and Ithivar had always been right at home here. Years of mining had rendered the strong rock beneath the planet's surface a maze of twisting tunnels and corridors that were next to impossible to navigate. Murderers, slavers, blackmailers and pirates crawled across every inch of the world, and the Coalition of United Planets had long ago given up hope of routing the worst of its inhabitants.

Ithivar moved to the man's side and knelt down, his hands immediately moving to the prone figure's waist. Pick-pocketing was not particularly glorious, but it kept food on the table on a planet notorious for its starving poor. A quick search of the man's unfortunately empty pockets drew his lips into a sneer. *Damn.*

As the clouds passed from across Glemisia's third moon, he saw a bright flash from the man's hand. Uplifting it to get a closer look, he studied the large ring wrapped around the index finger. His brow drew together in surprise. A Zzesstari soul ring. This man was a corpse-feeler's property and was keeping an alien alive at the expense of his own life. Not a particularly glorious death. Not one that obviously paid either. He dropped the hand, leaving the ring untouched. The trouble wasn't worth the money. He lifted the man's chin to check for other jewelry.

He paused.

"Well, then." He produced a small hand torch from his pocket and cloaked the alley in a too-bright white light. "Huh."

He had seen this face before. Although the human's sharp cheekbones and slightly pale features were yellowed by sickness, Ithivar could easily imagine the alabaster shade staring back at him from an old bounty poster. He roughly pushed an eye open. The striking blue confirmed his suspicions. The captain of the *Maligned Kestrel* had posted a bounty on this man. Surely he was still worth a few eiroes.

Ithivar grabbed him under the shoulders and hoisted him up. Captain Gaspar was an honorable sort. It wouldn't hurt to get on his good side.

Ithivar made his way towards the spaceport where the *Kestrel* was docked, no one sparing him a second glance despite the limp form slung over his shoulder. He kept mostly to the side streets, to avoid whichever Zzesstari held the man's leash, and wracked his brain for the name of the man he held. Erris, Eros, Alice, Ellis...Ellis, yes. It was Ellis. And Ellis had done something rotten and pissed off Captain Gaspar, prompting an incredibly generous bounty. Strictly alive, with an unvoiced threat of dire consequences should anyone try to turn in the body. For the reward involved, it tempted even the hardest bounty hunters to change their tactics.

The *Kestrel* was docked alongside several other commercial vessels. Though the *Kestrel* had served in the fleet during the war with the Frenze, Captain Gaspar had retired the ship from federal service and moved into a less-regulated sector, and—from what was bandied about in bars and dives across the galaxy—it had not been an amicable parting. Years of dwelling outside the rigid structure of the Coalition fleet had done its work on the rig, and it looked more like a smuggler's vessel than anything that had ever been distinguished enough to serve the Coalition.

Ithivar moved quickly up the covered gangway that led to the loading bay and his charge groaned in protest. He ignored the pathetic sound and hit the intercom on the side of the ship.

"What?" a surly voice growled out a second later.

"I have a package for Captain Gaspar."

An audible snort came through the intercom. "A package? What sort of package?"

"A breathing one." Ithivar chuckled. "For now."

After a long pause, the groaning sound of moving metal forced him back as the gangplank began to lower. Amidst a cloud of condensed air, a squat figure stepped off the ship. Through the fog, Ithivar made out slightly crumpled features and a nose ridged with large cartilage deposits. The bat-like features marked him as Cembrian, a race not known for gentle mannerisms. The sound of his thick talons on the gangplank sent shivers up Ithivar's spine.

"Do I know you?" His words came out as a broken mix of Coalition Common and whatever language they spoke with their noses on Cembri.

Ithivar shook his head and tried to remember what he knew about the *Kestrel's* crew. The Cembrian must be Chief Engineer Barth Erinyes. According to reputation, he rarely bit.

“No.” Ithivar dropped Ellis’s half-dead body gracelessly to the ground. It didn’t merit a second glance from the Cembrian. Not even a flicker of emotion passed across his twisted face. “I’ve come to claim the bounty on this one, if it’s available.”

Barth snorted. “We posted that years ago.” He poked Ellis’s side with his tertiary claw. “Did you work him over?” Despite the deceptive calm of his face, something in his words made Ithivar suddenly nervous.

“No. I found him like this.” Ithivar offered a smile. “If you don’t want him, I could try and locate his corpse-feeler.”

For a brief moment, something ugly flashed in the Cembrian’s eyes and Ithivar fought to keep a sudden surge of panic from showing on his face.

“No need. The bounty is as good as ever it was.” Barth waved Ithivar forward. “Carry him inside, won’t you?”

Ithivar smiled. “I think I’ll take my eiroes now, thanks.”

“Very well.” The Cembrian pulled a palm-sized communicator from his pocket. “Medic to the gangway. We have a package for the captain.” He waited for the acknowledgement, then tucked it away and held out a hand. Ithivar swallowed nervously at the sight of the thick black talons adorning his short fingers. “Let’s have your datapad, then. And we’ll settle up.”

Reluctantly, Ithivar held out his ‘pad. Without sparing a second glance for the crack in the screen, Barth pulled up Ithivar’s accounting information and, a few terse moments later, he handed it back. “There. Off with you.”

Ithivar gaped at the number gracing the screen, double the already substantial amount from the bounty poster.

Before he could take another breath, thick claws had wrapped themselves in his jacket and pulled him flush against the Cembrian’s space. The rank smell of bog water filled his senses. “You understand that we were generous with our interest?”

Ithivar nodded quickly.

“You understand that we’re paying premium for your silence?”

He nodded again.

“If we ever so much as see your face at the same spaceport next time we dock, your body will be jettisoned so far out of Coalition space that you’ll fall off the edge of the universe.”

Released, Ithivar stumbled backwards, barely able to keep a hand on his datapad. Once safely out of the Cembrian’s range, he took a last look at the alien’s hard features. For just a moment, before the joiner of the tunnel slammed shut behind him, he saw the Cembrian kneeling beside Ellis’s prone form. Those same features had pulled in worry and a single finger was brushing the limp tendrils of hair away from the human’s face.

Chapter One

Glemisia

Coalition Standard Date 113-226.6

“...as you can see, the *Maligned Kestrel*’s recently redesigned weapons array does offer us a unique and incomparable method of protecting whatever cargo we might be required to carry...”

Julian paused at the buzz of the communicator in his pocket, just managing to withhold a curse at the abysmal timing. He’d been trying to win over the Zar Tef merchant family for years. If he insulted them by responding to the hail, the *Kestrel* would lose their business forever.

It buzzed again. This time, the curse slipped out. The matron of the family regarded him with a mix of shock and horror—the aliens’ reputation for being easily offended was obviously justified—and covered the sound receptacles of her youngest spawn.

“Pardon me. Apparently, my crew is in need of...guidance.” The excuse fell on deaf ears. Resigning himself to losing what could have been an extremely lucrative deal, Julian retrieved the small holoprojector and moved away from the small congregation of would-be clients. He pulled his communicator from his pocket, took a steadying breath to prevent himself from tearing into whichever member of his crew had inadvertently screwed them out of the deal, and answered the hail. “Gaspar here.”

“We need you back here. Now.”

He was accustomed to Barth’s gruff mannerisms, but this particular brand of anxious demand rarely reared its head.

“End the meeting.”

Near panic gripped his chest. He returned his attention to the Zar Tef. “I’m sorry, but we’ll need to postpone further negotiations for a later time.”

From the matron’s expression, he doubted he’d ever be invited back. The Zar Tef, who resembled anthropomorphic whales, were overly scrutinous in their dealings. Considering how much will he had exerted to avoid cursing for the first hour of their meeting, he doubted their interactions would have lasted more than one contract. It was unfortunate—the proposed itinerary would have carried them through close Coalition space, and the trips would have been uneventful. He suspected that whatever had prompted Barth to call him was going to prove the opposite.

He hastened through the traditional farewells and left them to ponder his sudden departure. He’d met the Tef in one of the few trading stations free of audio surveillance devices, but it was located a good

distance from the spaceport where the *Kestrel* was docked. Although tempted to hail a mechanized rickshaw, he wanted to make sure he got back to his ship in one piece. The bars were emptying and he moved apace with the rest of the crowd, all headed back to where the ships were docked.

Nearing the *Kestrel*, he studied his ship. As her captain for almost a decade, he knew every sound that purred out of the powerful engines and was intimately acquainted with every shift and sigh of the metal hull.

All the signs suggested that she was ready to take off at a moment's notice.

The gangway was lowered only partway and Julian launched himself up onto the edge by bracing his foot against the side of the boarding tunnel. Just beyond the hull's entrance, the cargo bay stood deserted and anxiety wound through his stomach. He hit the automatic close for the heavy hull door. The low scraping of metal on metal was loud to his ears and obviously drew some attention. The hatch separating the hold from the rest of the ship opened and his chief engineer appeared.

"Captain." Barth didn't salute. They had been serving together since before Julian was named captain and had long ago passed from shipmates to friends. "Glad you're back. She's prepped for takeoff."

Julian narrowed his eyes. "So I noticed."

Barth looked unapologetic. "Follow me."

Making their way through the *Kestrel*'s winding corridors, Julian easily kept pace with the Cembrian, the limp in Barth's gait more pronounced the faster he tried to move. The members of the crew they passed all eyed Julian with sympathy.

Once in the lift that would transport them to the higher decks of the ship—and his quarters—he rounded on the alien. "Let's have it, Barth. I feel like I'm heading towards a funeral." Barth's sloped forehead twitched a bit. "Who's injured this time?" It would explain the anxious tone of his message.

"Captain..." Barth paused. "Julian." He took a breath, a slight wheezing sound emitting from his nose. "A dock thief approached us a little less than an hour ago to claim a bounty we had out."

Julian frowned. "I don't remember any outstanding bounties." His stomach churned. "And if that's the case, shouldn't we be headed towards the brig?"

Barth's gaze filled with grief. "No."

Realization hit him hard, a barbed cudgel of inspiration. He looked desperately at the side of the lift, marking their progress and cursing himself for denying Barth's request to install a quicker system. He hit the button for his floor again. The sound of his fist hitting the plastiglass siding sounded loud, even to his ears.

"How is he?"

"Not good. I have our medic with him."

"How could he be here? We've scoured every planet in this entire damn system. Glemisia itself is home to a third of the galaxy's blackmailers. He couldn't have been hidden here!"

“We don’t have the answers, Captain.” The force of Julian’s anger slid off Barth like water from a smooth surface. He was one of very few who were able to remain composed when Julian reached the end of the leash on his temper.

“He’s been unforthcoming?”

Barth didn’t answer.

The lift ground to a slow halt. Barth followed him off and down the corridor towards his personal rooms.

“If we’re readying the *Kestrel* for liftoff shouldn’t you be down in the engine room?”

“Shouldn’t you be on the bridge?” Barth countered. “I’ve given the bridge crew orders to take us to the borders of Coalition space. If Ezvorkian comes for him, we’ll be able to settle the score.”

Julian nodded numbly. Barth broke away from Julian’s side and headed back to the lift, leaving him alone in the hallway. Reaching the doors to his quarters, he swallowed back the anxiety in his throat and opened the doors.

A pale, sickly figure was resting unconscious atop his sheets. The female medic seated next to the bed barely looked up as he entered. He made no move to come any closer.

“He’s not dead yet.” Her clinical tones won her no favors and Julian drew his lips in a grim line.

He needed no further prompting. He moved quickly to the bedside and knelt beside Ellis’s prone form, careful not to jostle the patch pressed against the inside of his elbow. It was hard to reconcile the ill man on the bed with his memories of Ellis’s vibrant personality.

He gritted his teeth. “What did they do to him?”

“He’s wearing a Zzesstari soul ring.”

What the corpse-feelers used to prolong their wretched lifetimes—one life in exchange for another. His heart seized and nausea slid through his stomach. They had to be worn willingly.

The medic let loose a long breath. “I give him a week. Less. And before you ask, we can’t remove it without killing him. I’ve read as much as is available on the subject. It’s not a lot.”

He had asked himself the price Ellis had paid. Now he knew. He choked on the welling of emotion in his throat. He wanted to look away from the prone body on the bed and cursed himself for considering even that small betrayal.

The gentle rumble of the floor indicated that they were taking off.

“Chief Engineer Barth thought it best to bring him here instead of the medical bay.” Julian didn’t respond and the medic sighed. “The best we can do is make sure he’s comfortable, Captain.”

“I can’t accept that,” Julian snapped.

“I know.”

Hesitantly, Julian reached out and took Ellis’s hand. It was frigid and the skin was waxy beneath his fingertips, but this bare contact was frighteningly real and he withheld a choked sob. He almost let go until

the ring adorning Ellis's finger drew his attention. How could he shy away from this contact when Ellis had paid so much? He tightened his grip and Ellis's brow twitched in his fitful illness. A low gasp escaped Ellis's mouth, and the sweat lining his forehead ran in thin rivulets across his skin. Julian touched the pale cheek.

Ellis jerked away. "No." The sound was barely audible, but from his lips it still managed to sound like a scream. "No. You can't... Don't touch me!" He jerked away, but Julian's grip on his hand tightened in response.

The medic leaned over and touched the patch. A holographic schematic of Ellis's body appeared in the air and she adjusted some of the medication the patch was feeding into his veins. A second later, Ellis stilled.

Julian's face twisted in rage. "I will find Ezvorkian. When I do..." Ezvorkian's name was hardly uttered aboard the *Kestrel* these days. Ellis's name—equally elusive—was whispered with more a wondering breath than a curse. His sacrifice had given their captain his life.

The medic made her way towards the door.

"What should I do if he wakes?"

"Say your goodbyes."

Julian's eyes squeezed shut.

"He made it back here, Captain. Let's make sure his last days are more peaceful than the years leading up to them." With that, she showed herself from the room.

Julian traced the other man's familiar features before leaning over and pressing his lips against the sweat-beaded brow.

Ellis murmured incomprehensibly for a second and then took a shuddering breath. "Julian."

Julian nodded, more to himself than the man lying on the bed before him. "Yes, Ellis. You're home."

Chapter Two

Deep Space, Frenze Trading Route “Baraconda”

Coalition Standard Date 108-239.8 (Five Years Prior)

The *Kestrel*’s nav team sighted the *Halygast* along the routes the Frenze had set up as an alternate supply chain. Though they offered the right credentials when hailed, a quick scan of Coalition access codes left Julian certain they were a merchant ship masquerading as a Coalition scout. It was a small ship, and a brief overview of the schematics revealed that most of it was cargo with little room for crew.

The perfect target.

The Frenze were running low on supplies and Julian could read between the lines of recent Coalition documentation: the war was ending. A few more months at best. Taking ships such as the *Halygast* meant peace was just that much closer.

The smaller ship’s weapons were laughable. A single warning shot across the bow prompted their surrender and their boarding party quickly rounded up the small crew.

Julian left his chief mate in charge of the bridge to examine the *Halygast*’s cargo hold. The manifest was conveniently located just next to the door. It was a surprisingly rich haul, a lot of the light titanium alloy that the Frenze used to manufacture and repair their ships. Julian sent his silent thanks to whichever Coalition lackey had decided that licensing privateers had been a wise idea.

Something jumped out at him and he stared at the word. *Elfrefxian chocolate*. He blinked, not quite believing it. The treat was so elusive that people had been known to murder for it. It contained a chemical that worked on a neurological level, inspiring agonizing joy.

They would have to sell it, of course; a pound of the chocolate was worth a year’s take.

But it couldn’t hurt to sample just a tiny bit to make sure it was the real thing.

Julian engaged the lock on the hold doors and made his way down the rows of heavy crates. It would take more than him and his small boarding party to move them. He grinned. They’d have to enlist a few of the *Halygast*’s crew to assist them.

Following the surprisingly detailed map of the hold, he slipped in between two rows of crates and paused. A young man was resting in a light sleep, tucked in between the crates. Julian frowned. The crew had been rounded up, which meant that they were either hiding the young man—which he doubted—or he was a stowaway.

He appeared younger than Julian by at least five years and had an almost ethereal quality about him; the very air around him seemed to be lighter. He was beautiful. Julian wondered if he was even human. Perfectly crafted features were set in alabaster skin, and dark blue-black hair framed his cheeks. His lips were soft with just the slightest touch of pink...the most fuckable lips Julian had ever seen. His heart hammered hard and he fought down the urge to do something unbecoming a man of his station.

Julian drew in a stern breath but stopped short of chastising himself. He prepared to speak and found himself interrupted by the younger man's chuckle.

"You can look your fill." Striking blue eyes opened to regard him. "I don't mind." The man smiled and stretched idly, showing off smooth skin and a well-toned body. "I assume you're a member of the party who just boarded?"

"Yes. And you are?"

"A wayward son." He stood a second later, taking his time to show off the planes of his body. "A wanderer. One might even say a wastrel, a wastrel looking for some excitement." There was a spark of humor in the words.

"Aboard a Frenze supply ship?" If he focused on the space above the man's head, he'd be more successful in keeping his wits. There was something irresistible about the so-called wanderer, the curve of the mouth, the casual slouch to the shoulders. Whatever it was, Julian wasn't sure he liked it. It was too tempting.

"I didn't know that when I came aboard. I saw their shipping manifest and decided it was a good place to be." He took a few steps closer to Julian. "Judging from your current course, I would guess that you're after a bit of chocolate before your captain finds out."

"I am the captain."

"Even better." The smell of the younger man was intoxicating, slightly sweet and musky all at once. "As I need a way off of this barge and you would be the man to ask."

Julian forced down his urge to bury his face in the man's neck. "Oh? And why do you think I'd help you with that? It seems to me that I should leave you here and let the crew decide what to do with you."

"That's not terribly generous. The crew haven't struck me as particularly noble. I'd probably be shoved out the nearest airlock, and that would be unfortunate." He held out his hand. "Ellis."

Julian automatically took it, finally making contact with eyes that reminded him of sapphires at night. "Captain Julian Gaspar of the *Maligned Kestrel*."

"I've heard stories about you, Captain." Julian almost pulled his hand back, but when he tried, Ellis's warm fingers reached out and stroked his wrist. "I understand you're quite an honorable sort. It's a rare thing in a pirate."

"We're not pirates. We're licensed by the Coalition of United Planets to—"

“Let’s save the PR efforts. There are much better ways to spend one’s time.” He leaned into Julian just slightly. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Julian caught the smell of him once again. “I might.”

“Good.” Ellis gestured back at the crates. “I’ll just collect my things, shall I?”

“I didn’t say you were invited to join us.”

Ellis’s eyebrow rose. “What? And give up a perfectly good opportunity to get to know each other? That would be a tragedy.”

Privately Julian agreed, but he kept his face impassive. Ellis was playing some sort of game. He could see it in the very turn of the man’s mouth. How far would Ellis go? And were his games along the same lines Julian was imagining?

“What would be tragic about it?” He was willing to play along.

Ellis drew closer and pressed up against his body. Julian tried to keep his face skeptical, hoping the other man wouldn’t notice his cock suddenly stirring to attention.

Ellis leaned in to whisper in Julian’s ear. “You’d never find out how good my mouth is.” All available blood shot straight to Julian’s dick. “That’s tragedy.” The back of Ellis’s hand strayed across his crotch. “Perhaps you’d like to find out now?”

“You don’t...” Julian paused as Ellis began running his hand up and down the outline of his cock through his breeches. It jumped at the younger man’s attention and Julian withheld a groan. “I’m not...”

“As I see it, I have two options: I can come with you, or I can get vented. If I come with you, we’ll have a chance to...explore things further.” He pulled down the zipper of Julian’s pants impressively fast. “If I get tossed out the airlock, at least I’ll have a last happy memory to get me through a few painful seconds.”

Ellis leaned forward and pressed his lips against Julian’s. They were warm and tasted just faintly of chocolate—*bastard*—but Julian found himself kissing back. A hand rose to curl into Ellis’s hair, and the younger man purred at his touch. Julian tugged on the thick black locks to pull him closer. Ellis melted against his body.

The kiss was searing. The gentle play of tongues quickly moved from exploratory to possessive. Julian hadn’t thought he was able to get harder, but the man’s lips beneath his made his cock strain against his undergarments, begging to be touched.

Ellis broke the kiss first and smiled. The lithe figure slid to his knees and freed Julian’s cock, wrapping his lips around the head and teasing it with his tongue. Julian groaned and forced himself to take a deep breath before he lost it completely. Ellis worked the shaft, stroking and soothing at once. He pulled back far enough for Julian to see him lick a bead of pre-come off the tip. He began to probe the slit and Julian reached down, meaning to push the man away. Instead, his hand wrapped around the back of Ellis’s neck and guided him back to his dick.

Ellis murmured in appreciation and lifted a hand to stroke the sensitive skin on Julian's sac. Julian's head sank back to rest on a nearby crate as he lost himself in the sensation.

Ellis's fingernails ran down Julian's thighs and Julian choked back a heated sigh. He had gone far too long without this type of contact. Ellis worked his cock and the blissful grow of his climax stirred in him. His hips easily found Ellis's rhythm, thrusting in earnest and fucking that perfect mouth.

Ellis's lips tightened around his shaft and Julian was blindsided by his own orgasm. He emptied into Ellis's mouth. The younger man swallowed around him and the sensation made stars dance in his mind.

Ellis gently released his cock and ran his thumb around the outside of his lips, catching and tasting any wayward drops. "That was incredible." He grinned with an arrogance that might have been annoying if he hadn't just proved how merited it was.

Resting his hands against Julian's hips, Ellis drew himself up Julian's body. He pecked at his lips, and Julian got the barest taste of musk and come before Ellis started to pull away. Julian leaned in to the kiss to taste himself. It was familiar, bitter yet rich and somehow right.

"Well, Captain? Should we explore this a bit more?"

Bringing Ellis back aboard the *Kestrel* with the express purpose of taking him to bed was an interesting thought, and it was on the tip of his tongue to invite him, but he hesitated. Despite the mind-blowing orgasm, he knew nothing about the young man.

Still... "There's merit in the idea."

Ellis smiled at the words and kissed Julian and retrieved his belongings. Drawing out his communicator, Julian grinned and hailed his chief mate.

Orifian replied. "Captain?"

"I've found a stowaway asking for safe passage. I'm bringing him aboard. Start the transfer of the cargo."

"Sir, he could be a spy sent by the Frenze. We should secure him in the brig until we establish his credentials."

Julian muted his communicator. "You know he's right."

Ellis winked. "If you want to chain me up, just ask."

Julian's spent cock began to stir again. "I don't think that will be necessary." Realizing his communicator was still muted, he shook his head and opened the channel again to repeat the message. "Let's get moving before we attract attention."

"Right away, sir."

Orifian sounded distinctly unhappy about the situation. Julian was going to get an earful later. In his peripheral vision, he could see Ellis inspecting him. The unnerving intensity disappeared when Julian looked his way.

"Come on. I'll get you settled aboard the *Kestrel*."

Ellis smiled and nodded. Slinging a small bag over his shoulder, he followed Julian back towards the doors of the cargo hold.

Chapter Three

Deep Space Shipping Route "Endoria"

Coalition Standard Date 108-242.3

"My quarters are completely unacceptable."

Julian leveled a skeptical look at Ellis. The young man stood in the doorway, eying him with a distinctly put-out expression. How he'd opened the door without alerting him was a mystery, but that did seem to be par for the course.

Without invitation, Ellis slid into the room and the door shut behind him.

"Unacceptable? You've only been aboard for a few days. You're lucky you were given quarters at all. If my chief mate had his way, you'd be languishing in our brig."

"I can't imagine it would be much smaller." He walked the length of the room and dropped onto Julian's bed. "This is comfortable. I think I'll make myself at home here."

"You think?" Julian put the datapad down beside him. "Well, I'm sorry to say that this room is already spoken for. And I'm not moving."

Ellis took the words as a challenge. Gracefully rising, he lifted a hand to the collar of his high-buttoned black shirt. With every step he took, he undid one of the pearlescent buttons and slowly revealed his smooth chest. Julian's cock hardened.

"Is—" Julian's voice caught in his throat and he coughed. "Is this how our relationship is going to work?"

Ellis paused. "Relationship?" He rolled his shoulders and the shirt slid off his lithe frame. "I like that." His tongue flickered out and wet his lips. "Are you looking for a relationship, Captain Gaspar?"

He lowered himself into Julian's lap. His knee brushed against Julian's crotch and Julian's head fell back. Ellis took it as an invitation and nipped at the skin of his neck before sliding his lips up to his cheek. Julian managed a shaky intake of air.

A breath passed between them.

Julian caught Ellis's lips in a searching kiss. Arousal licked through his body, nerve endings coming alive with his lover's touch. Ellis yielded to him, and Julian's tongue explored his mouth. He tasted sweet and subtly spicy, like the wine Julian remembered from his childhood—grown and fermented instead of synthesized by an AI's nonexistent palate. His tongue was warm and Julian lingered in the kiss. Ellis's lips

moved expertly, caressing Julian's even as a hand came to rest against his chest. Julian cupped the back of his neck and drew his too-warm body against him. They fit perfectly together.

Ellis broke the kiss with a gasp. They stared solemnly at each other, Ellis's gaze almost black with arousal.

"Do you know what you do to me?" Julian didn't recognize his own voice at first, choked with desire and deepened by the warmth curling in his stomach. "How can I concentrate when I know you're on board? Even two decks away, you distract me."

"You look like you could use a little distraction." Ellis's hand danced across the broad expanse of Julian's chest. Expert fingers undid the first button of his shirt and Ellis lowered his mouth to the exposed skin at the hollow of his throat.

His lips were still slightly wet and warmed by their kiss. The touch of them on Julian's skin sent the flames dancing ever higher through his body. Inch by inch, Ellis mapped Julian's chest, setting a rhythm that had him quivering: the snap of a button, the slide of his tongue and a short sigh that followed.

Snap-slide-sigh.

Snap-slide-sigh.

Snap-slide-sigh.

Julian dragged in a breath and wrapped a hand in Ellis's hair. His grip started out gentle at the silky feeling of the black strands between his fingers, but he could not stop tightening it when Ellis paused to nip at the tender skin beneath his left pectoral. Ellis gasped and looked at him through hooded eyes.

Julian dragged Ellis's face back towards his and crushed their lips together again. "I love your mouth."

Ellis didn't reply but kissed him again. Slowly, Julian rose, bringing them both to their feet. He walked his lover backwards to the bed. Before the back of his knees touched the soft bedding, Ellis stopped and Julian bumped into him. Ellis shifted his body, sliding his chest against Julian's.

Julian reached for the nearby controls to dim the lights. Before he could close the covers to the plastiglass window, Ellis grabbed his hand.

"Leave it open. I like to see the stars."

Julian nodded and pushed gently against Ellis's shoulders. The other man fell back onto the bed and stretched out, his hips wiggling suggestively. His legs were hanging off the side of the bed, and Julian used his knee to nudge them farther apart. Leaning down, he opened the button of Ellis's pants. Julian ignored the subsequent gasp and took his time lowering the zipper, scraping his fingernails against the soft skin of his abdomen. The hair there was sparse and soft. Julian's nails left lines in the pale skin and Ellis arched up into his hand, silently begging for more.

"So responsive." He dragged Ellis's pants down, freeing his hardened member. It stood heavy and proud. Julian smiled and ran his thumbnail up the length.

Ellis whimpered. With deliberately slow movements, Julian stroked his lover's hard cock. The flesh was warm and wanting. A play of pleasure and frustration danced whimsically across Ellis's face and his hips rose, searching out the elusive contact.

"Please," Ellis whispered.

Julian smothered a smile. "Please what?"

"I want..."

Julian jerked his wrist, the sensation robbing Ellis of his words.

His breath became a sob. "Julian, please, I want you in me."

Julian removed his hand, drawing another sob, and ran his tongue the length of his palm. Ellis groaned and dropped his head back. Julian smirked and freed himself of his shirt. His pants followed, and he left Ellis whimpering and waiting on the bed to move to a nearby bureau and retrieve a small bottle of lube.

Ellis squirmed up the bed, stopping to rest against the wide headboard. "Come here, Julian. I'm not feeling very patient."

"Bossy little thing, aren't you?"

Ellis deigned not to answer. Julian palmed the bottle and as soon as he sat on the edge of the bed, Ellis crawled over to him. Throwing a leg across Julian's thighs, he straddled his lap. Plucking the lube away, Ellis popped the cap and quickly coated his fingers. He began to reach back, but Julian grabbed his hand. "Don't."

Ellis suddenly looked unsure.

"I like to prepare my lovers."

Ellis smiled. "As you wish."

He held up his hand and Julian clasped their fingers together. Their hands slid slowly against each other, erotic in the casual dance. Drawing away, Julian reached between them. His palm brushed past Ellis's erection and elicited a mew of pleasure before he slid the first finger into his lover's body.

A low whine escaped Ellis's throat and he leaned forward, resting his forehead against Julian's collarbone. Julian breathed in the smell of his hair. It mixed with the teasing scent of their joined arousal and made him harder. His cock throbbed in anticipation and he added a second finger, scissoring the two in Ellis's body. His mouth found Ellis's neck and he ran his teeth across the sensitive skin, drawing up goose bumps. Ellis's arms looped around Julian's shoulders.

Finally satisfied with the preparations, Julian withdrew his fingers and gripped the other man's hips. Lifting him, his arms strained before he found the right angle. Without warning, he plunged into Ellis's waiting body. Ellis cried out and his face twisted in pleasure with the first few, careful jerks of his hips. Julian adjusted his position, leaning back so he could see Ellis's face as he began to casually thrust in and out.

Ellis seated himself on Julian's thighs and took him even deeper. "So good."

Julian did not reply, but set the pace. Slow, at first, to allow Ellis to adjust. Then quicker. When he picked it up, a spreading flush crossed Ellis's chest and neck, his cock waiting, wanting. Julian's hands dug into Ellis's legs and his thrusts became harder and more demanding. Ellis moved with him, their bodies easily finding a perfect rhythm.

Julian shifted just slightly, and when he next pounded into the pliant form, he hit the small bundle of muscle inside his lover. He was rewarded with a keening cry and a small spurt of pre-come splashed against his belly. The heat surrounding his cock was almost too much to bear, but Julian managed to keep from coming.

He wanted, needed, to see Ellis's face twisted in orgasm first. "I want you to come for me, lover." Ellis's iris was almost completely swallowed by aroused black pupils. "Could you? Without me touching you?"

Ellis barely managed to nod. Julian quickened his movements. It was impossible to concentrate on anything but the younger man atop him and the heat surrounding his cock. He jerked his hips three times in quick succession, his cock just brushing Ellis's prostate.

Ellis threw his head back, crying out. Come coated Julian's stomach. The supple body tightened around him, and Julian groaned—his orgasm drawn out of him by Ellis's. Their joined yells of completion filled the room.

Ellis collapsed atop him, his breathing erratic. Julian draped his arm across Ellis's back and tried to regain his lost senses. He nuzzled Ellis's hair and placed a soft kiss against his temple.

They lay in precious silence, the only sound in the room that of their breathing, the rise and fall of their chests strangely in sync. Roused from his half doze by Ellis shifting, the younger man began to rise.

"You're not leaving?" He didn't mean for the words to come out as plaintive as they sounded.

"No." He placed a reassuring kiss on Julian's lips. "But unless you want me to be a...permanent fixture, I had better clean us up."

Julian's lips pulled into a generous smile. "There are worse fates."

"Be careful of such words, Captain Gaspar." Ellis kissed his lover once again and rose. Half-asleep already, Julian barely understood the parting words. "They spell danger."

Chapter Four

Deep Space Shipping Route “Endoria”

Coalition Standard Date 108-251.7

Barth remained concealed among the long yards of bound cable. He didn’t know how much he liked Julian’s new toy hanging around engineering. The captain was sweet on him and had spent too much time secreted away with Ellis since he’d boarded the ship a little over a month past. The captain was escorting the young human across the gangways overlooking the ion thrusters. Orifian followed, more sour than usual, and Barth allowed himself a reluctant smirk. Anyone who ruffled the Coalition officer’s feathers was usually worth knowing.

The other engineers had made themselves scarce for the visit. It wasn’t unusual for Smews; the avian-like aliens were generally uninterested in chatting. It left Barth to navigate the social niceties when the bridge crew came to call and the irony still made him laugh. His people had a reputation for senseless violence and ugly tempers that they endeavored to uphold. His planet did not like visitors.

He stepped out from behind the heavy wire. The hunting talon on his right foot clicked audibly on the metal gangway and announced his presence long before he came into view. Orifian regarded him with the usual captious disdain that Julian tolerated with an annoyed tic in his left eye. Barth was used to it. It was Ellis he watched. He’d avoided the young man, partially out of deference to Julian. People usually reacted with revulsion and fear. Bastard that he was, the captain occasionally used him to gauge the merit of prospective crew members. One man had fainted at the sight of his high ridges of cartilage and the sharp upturn of his nose. Another had drawn a pocket-sized blaster he’d managed to smuggle aboard.

Ellis meant something. Barth could tell from Julian’s cow-eyed soppiness, so he’d avoided an introduction. Just in case Ellis ended up being one of the narrow-minded assholes who too often tried to throw themselves on the mercy of Julian’s good graces. On the plus side, he’d finally gotten around to a few of the long-term repairs that were taking up all of his damn time.

Ellis stared at him with obvious surprise and then grinned. “Your captain becomes more interesting all the time.”

Barth stopped in his place, surprised that such human lips could speak his native tongue. He sniffed and chuckled. “Ballsy.” The translation in Cembrian was anatomically correct, so he switched to Coalition Standard.

“You’ll have to excuse my limited grasp of the language.”

Barth's nose twitched at the same time Julian's eyebrow rose.

"I picked up bits and pieces last time I was in the system. It's really only good for party tricks and shocking people." Despite his words, Ellis seemed unaccountably nervous.

Barth was reminded of the last time he and Julian had played poker and he'd tipped his hand. "That explains your accent." Ellis smiled in relief. "What brings you all down here?"

Julian shrugged. "I got your request for a replacement output coupler and wanted to come and see what the fuss was about. Ellis wanted to see the engines."

Barth gestured to Orifian. "And him?"

"He's here to watch me," Ellis said. There was a bitter edge to the lighthearted words. "Orifian thinks I'll stick a blade between Julian's ribs as soon as I get him alone."

The first mate didn't deny it.

Barth waved a clawed hand for them to follow him. Though he kept his talons trimmed, they still hit the metal walkways at an uncomfortable angle and made for slow going. Julian knew him well enough to walk ahead, but Ellis paced him easily. Engineering took up more than half the ship, and the sight of the engines, even when still, was impressive. The glow put out by the power cells lit everything in a ghostly yellow-green light and made Ellis's eyes shine emerald.

"Thank you for not giving me away," Ellis murmured in Cembrian when Julian pulled farther ahead. "Knowing Cembrian is not a common trick."

"You don't have to tell me that."

Ellis inclined his head. They continued forward in silence until the human grew bored of the quiet. "This is very impressive."

Barth was accustomed to the human need to fill empty air, but there were few things of which he was prouder than the pristine conditions kept on his deck. "Thanks."

The output-coupler problem had come to light when Barth began his upgrades to the weapons relay. The one they had was incompatible with some of their newly acquired equipment, and without it they risked weapon malfunction. As it stood, they wouldn't be able to take on any Frenze ship, even one with weapons as paltry as the *Halygast's*, without risking a meltdown.

Barth could practically feel Orifian's glare digging holes into Ellis's back, but Julian was determined to ignore the obvious friction between them. Barth laid odds on another week before something gave. Judging from Ellis's determined expression, Barth doubted it would be the first officer.

"So tell me about this coupler..." Julian stopped in mid-step, his head cocking to the side. "Did you hear that?"

Barth frowned and listened to the thrum of the deck. There was something...off. Over the hum of the engines, he could just make out the barely discernable chattering of agitated Smews. He and Julian took off

down the gangway, not bothering to check for Ellis and Orifian, and ran quickly to reach the area that housed their main arming equipment.

Stepping onto the steep ladder, Julian spotted Ellis charging to his side. “Stay there,” he shouted.

Ignoring Ellis’s reply, Julian pressed his hard-soled boots against the sides of the ladder and slid down to the lower deck. Narrowly avoiding the edge that would send him straight into the electron blasters, he maneuvered around the weapons relay.

A group of Smews huddled around one of their own, a fallen comrade who lay unnaturally still on the cold metal deck. Agitated quack-like chirps spilled forth and Julian forced his way through thick, feather-covered limbs to get a look. The engineer lay prone, burns blistering his arms and torso.

Julian called back to the upper deck. “Call the medic. Get her down here.”

Barth sprinted towards the nearest communicator.

“What happened?”

Pidgin squawking spilled forth, half-deafening. Julian had limited knowledge of their language, but they managed to draw his attention to the weapons system and the underside of the cylindrical casing. Several wires hung precariously outside of the tubing, naked and dripping with the viscous fluid that cased the torpedoes.

He cursed. “Get him out of here.”

The Smews jumped to comply, lifting their injured comrade and pulling him towards the nearest ladder. Julian grabbed one of the aliens in passing and pulled off his tool belt. After looping it around his own waist, he pulled out a laser spanner and went to work on the casing. He was soon covered in the mucous-like fluid and every inch of bare skin began tingling in response.

Opening more of the bare hatch, he located the leak and cursed again. One of the low-running cylinders was draining out through a jagged slice in the siding. He grabbed one of the tools and tried to pin the ripped tubing. He pulled an electron welder.

“Julian!”

He hit the ignition on the welder.

Seconds later, Ellis collided into his side and tackled him to the ground. He slapped the welder out of his hand and sent it skating across the fluid-slicked deck. The sound of igniting fluid drowned out Julian’s shout of surprise.

Fire raced towards them. Hands grabbed his broad shoulders and forced him to his feet, pushing him towards the nearby ladder. Julian’s body reacted on instinct, and he threw himself up the first few rungs. His feet moved automatically after that until he was pulling himself onto the upper gangway. The fire had spread across the deck. Ellis was mounting the final few steps, and Julian grabbed the younger man’s shoulders to haul him up.

Ellis slapped his hands away, his face twisted with anger. “You idiot! Don’t you know how flammable yttrium phosphate is?”

Julian prepared to respond but paused when he saw Ellis’s left hand curled protectively against his side. Reaching out, he ignored Ellis’s recoil and pulled the arm forward. The same burns that had covered the Smew blistered his bare skin.

“Why, Ellis? *Why?*”

“Did you expect me to let you die?” The venom in his voice lessened, and he appeared uncertain.

Julian wrapped his arms around Ellis’s slight frame and carefully pulled him close. Ellis stiffened in his embrace, but slowly relaxed.

“As you keep reminding me, Ellis, I’m the captain of this ship. If someone is going to get hurt, it should be me.”

“Not if I can help it.”

Julian glowered.

Ellis forced a laugh. “Your first mate would introduce me to that airlock I’ve been so desperate to avoid.”

The clicking of Barth’s feet pulled their attention away, leaving an unconvinced Julian speechless in his place. Barth seemed torn between them and the fire on the deck below. A noxious-looking gas was creeping upwards, though the fire looked to be contained within the still-spreading pool of fluid.

“I’ll take care of the fire.” Barth reached out to close a clawed hand around Ellis’s arm. “You’d best have that looked at. It’s nasty stuff.” He moved to retrieve the chemical extinguisher.

The Smews had gathered in a small flock down the gangway and Julian made his way towards the crowd, Ellis tucked closely against his side.

Chapter Five

Deep Space Shipping Route "Endoria"

Coalition Standard Date 108-264.0

"You've been avoiding me since the accident in engineering."

The voice broke through Julian's thoughts. This late at night, he preferred to be alone on the bridge. The solitude allowed him to collect his thoughts and write the numerous and insufferable reports the Coalition required. Few dared impose upon it, and before now he hadn't needed to remind his newest "crew member" of that fact. He fixed Ellis with a half-annoyed glance before returning his attention to the datapad in front of him.

"Yes. And apparently you don't quite ken what that implies." A pregnant silence followed and Julian wondered if this would be when Ellis would take the hint and let himself be chased away. The depth of feeling he was beginning to see in Ellis's eyes terrified him.

"Oh, I ken. Believe me. I ken. I just don't agree with it." Ellis crossed the bridge to his seat. Julian wondered if Ellis would slip into his lap, but the other man chose to lean against the high back of his chair, gazing through the viewscreen to the stars beyond. "Why avoid such a perfectly good thing?"

"My chief mate will mutiny." He meant it to come out hard and unforgiving. Instead, his words came off as more of a whine and he mentally cursed. Orifian was distinctly unhappy about Ellis's presence and made that plain every time he cornered the captain. Julian had tried everything short of ordering the man to silence—a tactic he would have considered if he didn't so loathe the man's accusatory glares whenever he employed such a strategy.

Ellis sighed and leaned in close. The warmth of his breath tickled against Julian's ear. "Are you saying that the great Captain Julian Gaspar is being cowed by his subordinate? I find that hard to believe. Why don't you just admit you're avoiding me because I represent too much temptation?"

"I've never had a problem resisting temptation." He didn't tell the younger man that his stunt in engineering had scared the wits out of him. He couldn't even name whatever it had been that had motivated Ellis to jump into danger to save him. All they had was fantastic sex. He hadn't been prepared for the confusing emotions accompanying it.

"That I happily believe. But you've never been faced with temptation like me."

True.

Ellis looked practically inhuman in the dim light cast by the stars. Julian was reminded how hot Ellis's mouth was when wrapped around his cock, and he couldn't help the shiver that ran up his spine. He stood. Ellis danced backwards with lithe steps.

"Do you want to remain on the *Maligned Kestrel*?"

Ellis nodded.

"Well, you don't have to favor me in exchange."

Ellis smirked. "Is that what you're telling yourself? Well, Captain, though I can't say that I would have done the same had you been a woman, I can tell you that I didn't do what I did as a payment for safe passage."

"No?"

"Oh, no." Ellis moved into Julian's space and pressed his body against him. "I did it out of sheer masochism." His lips hovered a hairsbreadth away.

Julian could practically taste him. His cock stirred. Ellis smiled and pressed their bodies together, the strain of his own erection a demanding presence against Julian's hip.

"Masochism?" Julian repeated hoarsely. He thought about pulling away but remained still. The masochism went both ways.

Ellis's hand snuck out and flitted against the cloth outline of Julian's crotch. Julian's breath caught in his throat. Ellis leaned into him and placed a soft kiss against his neck.

"Pure..." Ellis reached for the clasp at the front of Julian's pants and undid it with quick fingers. "Unadulterated..." He slid the zipper down slowly, each inch perfectly audible. "Masochism." Ellis freed his erection. Soft and slightly cool fingers wrapped around the hot length. "You see, I've been waiting for you for a long time, but I don't think you're very good for me." He sank to his knees, leaning on Julian's muscled build to steady himself as he slid down his body.

"I could say the same." Julian tried to make the words come out smooth, but they were choked with arousal.

"Don't be ridiculous." He moved his mouth over Julian's cock, taking the entire length into his throat without choking or whispering in complaint.

Julian gasped. He had known from the beginning that Ellis was incredibly skilled with that mouth. Ellis was practically purring around his dick and all the blood in his body was pooling in that one point of contact between the crown and Ellis's tongue. Ellis swallowed around him and Julian cursed under his breath.

"Fuck, Ellis..."

Ellis pulled away, leaving him almost whimpering for more. "Yes, please."

Julian almost came. Ellis wrapped his fingers around the base of his shaft, preventing him from spilling right there. Ellis lifted himself up from the ground, his fingers skimming the bared skin between Julian's lowered pants and his shirt.

"I like that idea."

Julian grabbed Ellis's shirt and pulled him up to his chest. They kissed roughly, grinding against each other's bodies. A gasp formed in the back of Ellis's throat and Julian swallowed it greedily. With a few skillful moves, he lowered him to the floor. Julian lifted his shirt over his head to toss it aside. His pants followed soon thereafter.

Ellis's gaze trailed across his bared body with obvious appreciation. He soaked in the sight of his flat chest and the detailed muscles around his abdomen. His tongue darted out, licking the corner of his lips, his hunger growing in intensity.

Julian lowered himself to the ground between Ellis's legs and ran his hands down the other man's thighs. Ellis whimpered. Julian grabbed the waist of his loose slacks, pulling them down and baring his lover's lower body. His cock was flushed an angry purple and practically begged for Julian's touch. He smirked. He'd get there in a minute.

Ellis reached up to undo the buttons of his vest. The younger man's hands were shaking, and Julian found himself perversely happy that he wasn't the only one as affected by their proximity. He leaned in and gently pushed Ellis's hands away.

"Let me." He finished with the buttons and slid the light fabric off Ellis's shoulders. There was nothing on beneath. The cool air raised Ellis's nipples. The hard rings of copper called to Julian's mouth. He obliged. He ran his tongue over the pebbly surface, biting down just hard enough to draw a murmur before soothing the skin with his lips.

Ellis began squirming beneath him. "Please...fuck me."

Julian was tempted to ignore him and continue to tease the sensitive buds, but decided to take mercy. He reached out and ran his fingers along the soft curve of the younger man's lips. Immediately, Ellis opened his mouth and closed it again around Julian's fingers. He lathed the digits with his tongue as thoroughly as when he'd paid the same attention to Julian's cock. Blood pounded in Julian's ears, and his arousal roared through his body, demanding more.

He pulled his hand away. Settling himself over Ellis, he captured the man's mouth in a deep kiss. He reached a hand down between them and began to circle Ellis's tight hole with his fingers. Ellis arched up against him and Julian finally slipped a finger past the tight ring of muscle.

Ellis hissed into Julian's mouth, but kept grinding his hips against Julian's thigh. "I want you. Hurry."

"It would be easier if you came first." Julian angled his arm, seeking the small bundle of muscles within his lover's body. He crooked his finger and Ellis's entire body stiffened.

"No... I... With you..."

Julian worked another finger in. Moaning and gasping, his partner lost any semblance of coherent speech. Julian continued to tease in and out of his body.

It seemed like an hour before Ellis forced his eyes open. “Now. *Please*.”

“Yes.” Julian hooked his arms behind Ellis’s knees and pulled the man close to him. Grabbing the smaller man’s hips, he rubbed his cock against Ellis’s hole, waiting for Ellis to relax. A sigh escaped his lover and he pushed in.

Ellis’s entire body arched and a low groan was torn from him lips. Julian froze, unsure if the sound was made in pleasure or pain. There wasn’t much in terms of lubrication; he didn’t want to hurt the smaller man. He waited for Ellis to say something. Anything. His lover’s lips moved in a near-silent string of words. Julian strained to listen, grinning when he picked up on the bits and pieces of sound. They were nonsense, only occasionally interrupted by the word “please”. Steadying himself, he stroked his thumbs against the skin of Ellis’s hips and gently thrust.

He kept his eyes trained on the play of sensation across Ellis’s face as long as he could. The tight heat around his dick filtering all reason and thoughts out of his mind, he started to move quicker. His hips jerked as he almost pulled out of Ellis’s body and pushed back in. Ellis’s erection rested against his stomach. Julian angled his hips at the last moment, grabbing Ellis’s cock at the same time he found his prostate.

When the two touches hit Ellis simultaneously, he groaned and came. Threads of white erupted against Julian’s hand and his entire body shuddered. As he tensed, the heat around Julian tightened as well. His thrusts became faster and more erratic and he emptied into Ellis’s willing body. Julian loosed a hoarse cry, heat and pleasure ripping through him and ridding him of coherent thought.

He toppled forward, just managing to catch himself before he crushed Ellis with his weight. Ellis’s lust-soaked eyes opened. Reaching up, he stroked Julian’s cheek. A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Finding himself returning the smile, Julian carefully pulled out of Ellis’s body. Ellis grabbed Julian’s hand. It was still covered with come, and his clever tongue went to work once again, licking and sucking on every inch of skin until it was clean.

Julian dropped to the ground beside him, his entire body tingling with spent desire. Ellis released a contented sigh and rested his head against Julian’s chest. It felt strangely right. The heat of Ellis’s cheek against his skin calmed him, and their breathing eased into sync. He raised a hand and brushed his fingers through Ellis’s thick black hair.

The touch solicited a purr and Julian smiled. “You’re like a cat, aren’t you?”

The darkness around them swallowed the words. Ellis murmured an insensible reply, his entire body relaxing atop him.

The annoying buzz of his communicator reached his ears seconds later. Julian sighed and shifted under Ellis, eliciting a quiet protest.

“I have to.”

“Do you?”

“I’m captain, remember?”

Ellis wiggled against him and Julian swatted his ass. Reaching for the pile of discarded clothing, he pulled his communicator out of a pocket. “Gaspar here.”

“I’m sorry, Captain. Did I wake you, sir?” Orifian’s voice filtered out.

Julian doubted it was the communicator that made him sound deeply unapologetic. Ellis raised an eyebrow and scooted to the clothes, drawing his vest from the pile and pulling it on. Julian was hard-pressed to remember his chief mate was on the communicator and withheld a wistful sigh.

“Not quite. What do you need?”

“Your ‘friend’ is missing from his quarters. I’m afraid he may be a plant, sir, and is looking to ferret out our information for the Frenze.”

“I somehow doubt that’s an issue,” Julian said.

Ellis rolled his eyes in irritation. “Ask him what he was doing in my quarters.”

There was a lengthy pause from Orifian’s end. “My Eight Gods, Captain, is he there with you?”

Julian ran a hand over his face and tried to decide how he was going to run damage control. Until now, he and Ellis had played it relatively safe where his chief mate was concerned.

“Well, you can tell him it’s part of our routine procedure for all passengers.”

“How often is that ‘routine procedure’ enforced?”

Julian muted the communicator, pinning Ellis with an annoyed glare. “Perhaps you should quiet down while I try to unruffle his feathers.”

Ellis scowled. “It should be my feathers you unruffle, *Captain* Gaspar! He was going through *my* things.”

“You don’t know that.” Ellis loosed a sound that was suspiciously close to a growl and retrieved his discarded pants. “Ellis...”

“He’s been determined not to like me since I came aboard. Now either you start defending me, or...” Ellis trailed off, suddenly appearing disturbingly young and unsure of himself.

“Or what?” Julian had been privileged enough to hear some truly inventive threats follow in the wake of a well-placed “or”.

“Or you’ll have to go elsewhere for ‘favors’.” Ellis looked apologetic as soon as the words left his mouth, but that didn’t stop Julian’s gut from clenching in anger.

He snarled through it. “I’d hardly have to look far to find someone willing to share my bed.”

Ellis opened his mouth to speak, thought better of whatever he intended to say, and pursed his lips angrily. “Then start looking.” He quickly donned his pants, avoiding Julian’s eyes. Without a backward glance, he marched towards the other end of the room.

Julian practically felt him hit the button to exit the room and glared at the doors as they opened and closed behind his lover. His communicator was still blinking insistently in his hand, Orifian still trying get through to him. Julian didn't bother to withhold an irritated sneer. Tossing it across the bridge and out of reach, he grabbed his clothes and dressed quickly, abandoning his work for a lonely walk back to his quarters.

Chapter Six

Deep Space Shipping Route "Endoria"

Coalition Standard Date 108-264.95

Julian woke relaxed despite the regretful ending to his evening. It was strange after the frantic pace of the previous years. The war with the Frenze had caught him off guard and kept him shaky and uncomfortable, caught on an edge of his own devices; torn between his love for freedom and his father's expectations. His... "relationship" with Ellis was the same sort of indulgence he had enjoyed during his younger years but had lacked the opportunity to pursue since the beginning of the war.

He wasn't quite allowing himself to hum when he joined Orifian in his ready room, but only because he wasn't prepared to alienate the other man further. He had gone to bed without answering any more of Orifian's hails and the other man had taken it upon himself to barge into Julian's cabin to ensure that no harm had come to his commanding officer.

Julian wasn't fond of his chief mate but made the best of the circumstances. Conrad Orifian had been forced aboard by the Coalition when Julian had been hired on and he had little chance of ridding himself of the man until the war was over and he was able to break his ties with the Coalition without fear of repercussions. Julian was resigned to that and tried not to let the man's glare bother him while he pulled up the star map to plot out their course along the Frenze trading lines. Thankfully, they made it through the first hour without incident or comment; he couldn't imagine himself dealing with Orifian's contempt with particularly good grace.

A chime at the door interrupted their debate over the value of intercepting cargo vessels over passenger crafts. Julian didn't have the chance to call out permission to enter before the doors slid open and Barth strode inside.

"I need to talk to you," he said, either oblivious to or uninterested in the nasty stare Orifian fixed on him.

Julian eyed the Cembrian. Sometimes it was easy to read whatever was on the alien's mind. The current set of his jaw and twitching of the cartilage ridging his nose and cheeks indicated severe irritation, though at what was anyone's guess. Barth's irritation tended to run between relatively innocuous to horrifying on a galactic scale.

"I'm a bit busy," Julian said.

"I can wait." He stood against the smooth gray wall and allowed Julian to turn back to the table to collect his thoughts. Despite his attempts to focus on the star map, the alien's unwavering attention dug holes into his back. After a few abortive attempts to resume the conversation, he sighed. "Mr. Orifian..."

The chief mate's mouth dropped with indignant shock. As if staring at the previously clear routes in useless silence was an effective use of their time.

"Return to the bridge. We'll continue this conversation later."

"Captain, with all due respect—"

"Now."

Orifian made his way to the doors, huffy, and pinned Barth with a nasty scowl. The Cembrian ignored him, his silence more chastising than any well-placed words might have been.

They waited quietly until the door had closed. Julian finally allowed an irritated scowl. "I don't appreciate—"

"You know what I hate?"

Julian settled his hip against the table. "What?"

"I hate people who ruin a good thing for stupid reasons."

Julian felt a stab of annoyance at Ellis for involving his crew. It was poor form. "I am not discussing this with you."

He started towards the door, but Barth's hand shot out and pushed him back. His middle talon pricked Julian's shirt, not quite hard enough to break through the fabric. "Fine."

Julian had a short moment of satisfaction before Barth continued.

"*Don't* talk about it. Keep messing things up. If you won't have him, I will."

Julian sputtered. "What?" He cursed at himself a second later. Barth was after the shock value of his words and Julian had played right into it.

"What do you mean, 'what'? Are you insinuating something?"

"You are *not*—"

Barth's nose ridge twitched. "Why shouldn't I be able to fuck one of your cast-offs?"

"He's not a cast-off!" Julian missed the smug twitch at the corner of Barth's mouth. Did Ellis consider himself that way? With how their evening had ended, he wouldn't be surprised. Despite the heat between them, their last words to each other had been vile. "Stay away from him."

"Why? You don't want him!"

"Of course I want him! I'd have to be *dead* not to want him." Julian realized the trap a second later. "But you knew that, didn't you?" Barth nodded, suspiciously not smug, despite his triumph. "Is he listening?"

"No. I don't do underhanded bullshit like that." Barth straightened as the star map flickered out from a long period of disuse. "But just imagine my shock when I ran into Ellis last night and found out you had

practically chased him off, even though he's so obviously your type and, you know, practically *died* for you a little over a week ago."

On a ship the size of the *Kestrel*, Julian found it inconceivable that Barth had just happened to "run into" Ellis anywhere, but particularly good timing had always been one of the Cembrian's fortes. Good timing for him, at least. It tended more towards catastrophic for everyone else.

"What do you know about my type?" Julian asked. There was no point denying the unspoken question. Just the thought of the other man's carefree smile was enough to send ribbons of heat running through him.

"I know you," Barth said. "You have two days to fix things and get him back into bed."

"Or?" Unlike the curiosity sparked the night before, he was afraid of Barth's answer.

"I don't give ultimatums, Julian. It's less fun when you're expecting the consequences."

"I'll do what I can." His voice didn't shake. He could be proud of that.

"Do one better. He's currently moping in his quarters. An apology would go a long way."

"I have to finish my duties before I tend to my personal life, Barth."

Barth nodded. He knew the roles and responsibilities on the ship.

"But I will go to him. After."

"No more than twenty minutes after you leave the bridge, barring alien attack or death." Barth scowled. "I'm not afraid to make your life difficult."

"I think I've had about all I can stand of your meddling."

"It's a burden you'll just have to bear." Barth sniffed, but something resembling a real smile crawled across his face. "Don't fuck this up. I like him."

With that, Barth showed himself out of the room. Julian waited until the doors had closed behind the alien before sighing.

"So do I."

Nineteen minutes past the end of his shift, Julian found himself standing outside Ellis's assigned quarters. The corridor was deserted; the *Kestrel* rarely had passengers so few people stayed on the deck allotted for non-crew use. The sound of the ship humming around him was comforting in the stark emptiness of the hallway. He had taken the time to confirm that Ellis was not among the rest of the crew at the evening meal. A petty voice in his head whispered that the younger man was sulking. Julian ignored it and raised his fingers to hit the door chime.

The doors slid open and Julian found himself facing the younger man.

"Captain Gaspar. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

The memory of his voice, which had been teasing his senses the entire day, was banished by the stiff and noncommittal tone. Julian took a steadying breath. "I've come to apologize for my harsh words yesterday." Ellis peered at him through thick eyelashes. "It was uncalled for. And I have spoken to Orifian about respecting your privacy."

"You certainly know the way to sweet-talk a man," Ellis said, the barest trace of sarcasm in his words. "Won't you come in?"

He stepped backwards into the little cabin to allow Julian entrance. The quarters were more like a closet. A single bunk took up most of the space, and there was barely enough room for Ellis to store his meager possessions. Ellis backed away from Julian and took a seat on the bed, crossing his arms.

"I suppose I accept your apology," he said. "Was that everything?"

Julian smiled. "If you thought that was everything, why did you ask me to come in?"

"You are so arrogant." He started to stand but Julian placed a hand on his shoulder. The muscles were tensed under his shirt and Ellis stilled at his touch. "I'm not sure why I even opened the door."

"Yes, you are." He leaned over and pressed his mouth against Ellis's.

The tension in the younger man's shoulders flowed away, leaving him supple and relaxed under his hand. Pulling away, he pressed his face against Ellis's neck, smelling his skin before biting down on the sensitive skin beneath his ear. Ellis gasped. Julian began to nip and suck on the place where shoulder and neck joined, and a needy moan escaped his lover's lips. Julian pressed him down against the soft covers of the bed, bringing a knee up to rest between Ellis's legs, which spread in response.

"You think I'm a sure thing." A hand wrapped into Julian's hair, tugging in reaction as one of Julian's hands snaked down his pants.

"Aren't you?" A protest was drowned out as Julian fisted Ellis's cock. "It seems to me that you've been aching for me since you came aboard." Ellis didn't deny it and Julian began to stroke his dick with purposeful movements. "If you tell me you don't want it, I'll stop."

"Don't stop."

Their angry words were forgotten and Julian wondered why it felt so easy to forgive the interaction they'd had. His heartbeat seemed to strum out the answer, but he ignored it.

Julian grinned against Ellis's neck. He continued to work the other man's prick, his hand quickly dampening with pre-come and sweat. Ellis whimpered and jerked his hips in time to Julian's movements, driving Julian to move faster. Several torturous minutes later, he bit down on Ellis's neck and the smaller man came with a cry.

Ellis was reduced to a quivering lump beneath him, but managed to raise his head for a kiss. Julian's tongue flicked out to taste him, finding that familiar sweetness he'd been craving since his lover had stormed off the bridge the night before.

"You didn't..." Ellis murmured. Sex-induced drowsiness was already slurring his words.

Julian manhandled Ellis up the length of the bed. “Later.”

Ellis smiled. “Well, since you’ve decided to play nice...” He slipped out of Julian’s embrace and rose to collect his bag. Julian waited expectantly, his eyes widening when he saw the small bundle of tinfoil that appeared in Ellis’s hand.

“Is that—”

Ellis unwrapped small a corner and the heady smell of chocolate filled the air.

Chapter Seven

En Route to Coalition Spaceport "Aladosia"

Coalition Standard Date 108-512.5

Julian stepped onto the observation deck's glassy black floor. Ellis stood alone, staring out the plastiglass window at the stars. It struck him how...lonely Ellis appeared. In the time since boarding the *Kestrel*, Julian couldn't remember his lover ever being so pensive. Dark eyes beheld the galaxy, lighting up with the pinpoints of light visible beyond the viewing portal. Ellis stood at lax attention, his hands clasped loosely behind his back. He didn't look up, even when Julian's audible footsteps echoed throughout the room.

He moved up behind Ellis and wrapped his arms around the younger man's shoulders. Ellis relaxed into his embrace and Julian rested his head on soft black hair.

"I thought everyone became immune to stargazing after a year of space travel."

"Not everyone," Ellis said. "They remind me of a...story I heard, years ago."

"Oh?" Julian waited patiently for him to continue.

"It's said that the universe was once a single galaxy that orbited one star. The star had a Keeper, who was ancient and lonely. Unaging, he watched the worlds around him grow and develop, but his duty was to the star and he could not leave it. Over time, his loneliness grew and finally he decided that if he split the star into a million pieces, he would be able to visit each world. That's where stars come from, and that's how the universe was created."

"Science notwithstanding, being a billion miles away and untouchable still seems lonely to me."

"Yes," Ellis said, sadly, "and after he'd done it, he found himself changing as well. Without the star, he began to grow old and decrepit. He knew that he wouldn't have the time to visit each world. So he split himself as well. For each star, a new Keeper was created. Star elves. Like the ancient, they were bound to the lifetime of their star, but the Keeper did not want to wish loneliness on them as well. So with the last of his will, he bid that a soulmate be born for each of them. If the soulmate were found, they could live the way the Keeper had always dreamt: mortal, and loved by one person completely until the end of their days."

"Huh. And they'd be tied to one person forever?"

Ellis nodded and tilted his head. Seeing something in Julian's expression, he leaned into their embrace. "Would you be keen on the idea of waking up next to the same person every morning?"

Julian's breath caught in his throat. The warmth of Ellis's back against his chest stilled him in place, and his heart beat hard in his ears. "The idea has its allures."

"Dare one ask what inducement would be required to make you think kindly on the subject?"

Julian considered the words for a few moments. "The war would have to be over." He frowned. "And they would have to want to stay in space."

"Oh? You wouldn't want someone waiting on some distant world for your return home as you explore the dark recesses of the galaxy?" His voice was still half-laughing, but Julian sensed real curiosity behind the question.

"My father was a Coalition Admiral. For years, all we knew of him were the stories my mother told and the vague memories of his short-lived visits home. I always swore to myself that if I found someone willing to share their life with me, they would have to share the stars as well."

Ellis nodded. "Understandable."

They stood in comfortable silence, until Ellis's breath ghosting over Julian's cheek became too much to bear.

"How does the story end?"

"One by one, the star elves found their soulmates. And one by one, they gave up the immortal part of themselves. The stars remained constant, perhaps comforted by the knowledge that their Keepers would never be lonely. Millennia passed, until finally there was just one elf left."

"That's ironic."

Ellis lifted a curious eyebrow.

"It seems to me that if they hadn't found their soulmate, and all the rest of their kind were dead and gone, they would be just as lonely as the ancient you mentioned earlier."

"Yes. I guess I see the irony." Ellis mustered a smile. "But can you imagine the joy he'd feel when he finally found the man he'd spent his entire lifetime searching for?"

Julian opened his mouth to answer when his communicator buzzed violently at his side. Sighing, he retrieved it from his side. "Yes?"

"Captain, we've picked up a distress signal from a nearby merchant ship. They appear to be having engine troubles."

Julian's lips curled into a smirk. "I'll be right there." He turned to Ellis. "Thank you for the story." He started to leave. Pausing, he glanced back. "I hope that, for his sake, the elf you spoke of eventually found his soulmate."

He was half out of the door when an elusive whisper caught his ear.

"Yes. I believe he did."

Chapter Eight

Bridge of the Maligned Kestrel

Coalition Standard Date 108-512.5

“What’s the designation?” Julian asked.

His communications officer reviewed the information. “The *Bellivere*, sir. Designation Coalition trading vessel.”

Julian stared at the screen. Something felt off. The ship was big for a trader, but during war it was not unheard of to enlist every available resource. He gestured for his officer to relay the distress message again. He was able to discern most of the message, though it was rife with the static crackle of a poorly maintained or interrupted signal.

Engine problems. Unable to send out long-distance calls for assistance.

“Hail them.” The familiar opening chirp of their hail followed, but nothing appeared on the screen before him.

“This is Captain Curtayne of the *Bellivere*. Thank you for responding to our distress call.”

Julian frowned. “This is Captain Julian Gaspar of the *Maligned Kestrel*. We’re not getting any visual, Captain.”

“Our signal transmitters were damaged, along with our engine.” There was a brief pause. “Your reputation precedes you, Captain Gaspar. I’m infinitely pleased that you responded to our call.” The words sent a shiver up Julian’s back. “We must beg your assistance. Our engines are incapable of getting us to the nearby deep-space port and our chief engineer was killed during the accident. We thought we would be trapped here indefinitely.”

Julian considered the words. “What happened to your engines, exactly?”

“Our ion transmitters were badly damaged by a Frenze attack. We managed to fight them off, but it left us in dire straits indeed.”

Julian glanced at his navigator, muting the comm system. “Are we close enough to the Frenze for them to instigate their attack patterns?”

The younger man punched in a few coordinates. “It would put them outside their comfort zone, but it’s not unheard of.”

Julian brought the comm back online. “How can we help you?”

"If we could but borrow your chief engineer to assist our Smews with their repairs, we could be underway within a few days." Julian considered the request. "We would, of course, relay word of your assistance to Admiral Gaston."

That certainly made the offer more tempting. Julian had been on Gaston's blacklist since inadvertently attacking one of his private ships.

"All right. I and a few of my crew will shuttle over to assist with your repairs. Prepare to receive us." He ended the relay and stood. "You have command, Orifian. Hail Barth and ask him to meet me in the shuttle bay."

Orifian nodded and moved to send the message. Julian headed towards the door, surprised when it slid open to reveal Ellis standing on the other side.

He ushered the younger man to the lift before Orifian could notice him. "You know, you're not giving him much reason to disprove his spy theory."

As soon as the doors closed behind them, Ellis pushed Julian against the wall of the lift. He curled his body against Julian's and gently pressed their lips together. Of their own accord, Julian's hands came to rest on Ellis's slim hips and drew him closer. The kiss deepened quickly, leaving Julian breathless and addled.

"I want to come with you," Ellis said, finally pulling away.

"Why?"

"I don't want to be apart from you."

Julian frowned.

"Please?" Ellis finally coaxed a reluctant nod. Smiling, he stepped away just in time for the lift to come to a stop.

The doors slid open on the shuttle bay and Barth patiently awaiting them.

"You're coming along, snippet?" Barth asked Ellis, who nodded and went to claim a seat on the shuttle. Barth hung back and Julian paused in his step.

"What is it?"

"I did some remote scans on their system specs while Orifian was ordering me about. They said they were in a skirmish with the Frenze?"

Julian nodded.

"There's no sign of it. Their shields are still at full strength. Hell, they're better equipped than we are. If they're having engine troubles, it wasn't caused by any firefight."

"You're expecting trouble?"

Barth sniffed. "I always expect trouble."

Julian moved to a nearby weapons locker to retrieve a few items that would potentially come in handy. He tossed Barth an easily concealed laser pistol and clipped one of the bigger blasters to his side.

“If they do decide to attack, our shields won’t last long against what they can dish out.”

“When we pull into the Coalition spaceport next week, maybe I’ll invest in the buffers you keep suggesting.” Julian tamped down the sudden worry that was nagging at his mind. He trusted his instincts, and Barth’s were generally spot-on. If the Cembrian was getting the same sense of foreboding, then he needed to make sure they were prepared to deal with whatever the captain and crew of the *Bellivere* might be planning.

Once Barth had boarded the shuttle, he touched his communicator. “Mr. Orifian? Should you not hear from us within the hour, come and get us.”

“Understood, sir.”

Julian boarded and took the pilot’s seat. The deep-space craft had been provided by the Coalition, but Barth had performed enough modifications to make sure they wouldn’t ask for it back at the end of the war. The *Eyas* was probably capable of going long distances faster than the *Kestrel* herself. Julian checked to make sure the airlock had been engaged and pulled the shuttle out from the bay and headed towards the *Bellivere*.

Ellis scooted up to stand behind him. “That’s strange.”

“What?” Julian asked.

“Their escutcheon has been wiped.” He gestured towards the stern of the spaceship. Where the call sign was usually displayed, dark carbon markings had seared the metal plates.

Julian glanced at Barth. “I thought you said there weren’t any signs of a firefight.”

Barth frowned. “There weren’t.”

Julian pulled the shuttle towards the docking bay. The ship opened but the bad feeling did not dissipate. He hit the comm.

“*Bellivere*, this is the shuttle *Eyas* of the *Maligned Kestrel*. Prepare to receive us for docking.”

There was a quick affirmative from the other side and Julian easily steered the craft into the open bay. As the bay began to close behind them, he swallowed back a nervous bark of laughter.

“All right. Let’s go check out their engines,” he said, more for Ellis’s benefit than anything.

Barth shot him a droll look and moved to open the shuttle’s hatch. Julian kept his hand hovering next to the blaster on his belt and stepped forward to be the first off the ship.

As the plank lowered, he was greeted with the sight of a small army of the ship’s crew, all of their guns directed at him. He grabbed the butt of his blaster. Ellis lunged forward, grabbing his arm and preventing him from drawing. Their eyes met for just a moment and Julian nodded; this was not a fight they could win. He raised his hands away from his sides and gestured for Barth to do the same. He and Barth alone were armed, and the odds weren’t in their favor.

The sound of a hoverboard drew his attention across the bay. A figure huddled aboard the floating disc was slowly inching towards the shuttle. Julian began to distinguish its features as he drew closer. He got an eyeful of skin puckered with age, stretched too tightly over bone. He looked like a corpse.

“Zzesstari,” Ellis whispered from behind him.

Julian stiffened. He’d heard of the corpse-feelers once or twice; enough to know that the aliens dealt in lives. He glanced over his shoulder at Ellis, who’d grown even paler at the sight of the creature.

“Welcome aboard, Captain Gaspar. Thank you for your offer of assistance.”

Julian scowled. “Is it required?”

The alien laughed. “You have no idea.” He waved at his crew and several of them stepped onto the gangway of the shuttle. Julian’s first instinct was to knock them away, but the number of guns aimed at him forced his complicity. They disarmed him and marched the small party off the shuttle. “I’m so eminently pleased that you’ve come aboard the *Ethervold*.”

Julian’s jaw clenched; he knew of this ship and her merciless captain. “You would be Ezvorkian, then?”

“The same.”

“I know what you do to your prisoners.”

“It seems our reputations precede us both.”

“I’m not sure what you’re hoping to gain from the capture of me and mine, but believe me, the *Kestrel* is capable of doing some very real damage to your ship.”

“I doubt the *Kestrel* is capable of doing real damage to so much as an anthill.” Ezvorkian smiled. “Please show our guests to the brig.” A few of his crew jumped to obey. “I’m so sorry that I can’t entertain you properly quite yet. You did arrive a full two hours ahead of schedule.” *Schedule?* Julian’s heart hammered hard and he lunged at the pirate, ready to demand answers. Before he could get any closer, his arms were grabbed and he was forced away. When the others didn’t follow, Julian turned to see Ezvorkian’s withered hand cupping Ellis’s cheek.

His lover tried to pull away, and Ezvorkian replied by widening his grin. “But, then, I hadn’t expected such bounty, either.”

Chapter Nine

Aboard the Ethervold, heading unknown

Coalition Standard Date 108-515.6

It was the silence before the lash of the whip that heightened the agony of its sting. Ezvorkian and his minions were eerily quiet, waiting until the crack of the leather snapping in the air tore the scream from Julian's lungs. His back burned, and he could feel the blood running down his forearms from his wrists, rubbed raw against his restraints. The entire weight of his well-muscled frame hung off his shoulders, his knees barely allowed to touch the ground.

"What are you willing to sacrifice, Captain Gaspar?"

Ezvorkian had asked the same question a dozen times in the past hour, punctuating each iteration with a lash. Today they were using real whips. To a sick mind, it made sense; he had withstood the previous two days of torture with more delicate fiber technology and had not broken. In transgressing to something more primitive, they were trying to upgrade.

Heavy air pressed into his lungs, forcing him to fight for breath past the agony already choking his senses. Ezvorkian's personal chambers were kept damp and humid, like the swamps that defined his homeworld.

"A week's ration of synthetic whiskey."

Ezvorkian's face remained passive, but the whip fell again. Harder.

The breath was knocked out of Julian's lungs and he coughed, struggling to draw in even a half-breath. When he finally managed to breathe through the pain, he forced himself to grin. "Fine. Two weeks'."

Crack.

Julian was unable to hold back the sharp gasp of pain, and smirking victory began crawling across Ezvorkian's face.

"What are you willing to sacrifice?"

What were they after? Julian wracked his brain for a reasonable answer. There'd been no word from the *Kestrel* and Ezvorkian hadn't asked him about her routes or the war.

Slave contracts. They want us to sign ourselves over to slave contracts. That has to be it. A contract for an adult human male could run as high as twenty thousand eiroes—two months of work paid for with a stroke of a pen. It was the only thing that made sense in the senselessness of Ezvorkian's torture.

Crack.

“What are you willing to sacrifice?”

“What the fuck do you want me to say?” Julian finally shouted. “What could you possibly be looking for?”

Ezvorkian smiled. “Honesty. That’s all. I asked a question and I want an answer. What would you be willing to sacrifice in order for my man to lower the whip and send you merrily back along your way?”

Julian sniffed. The whip was still, giving him time to force coherent thought through the hazy cobwebs of pain cozening his mind. His eyes squeezed shut and he tried to focus. There had been no indication that Ellis and Barth were alive, and in the two days they had been captive, there hadn’t been so much as a token rescue attempt. Combined with some of Ezvorkian’s insinuations, Julian was beginning to suspect that they had not just “stumbled across” the distress call. The thought of his best friend and his lover trapped in the same unending cycle of anguish was almost as painful as the whip to his back, but for the life of him he could not bring himself to say what he suspected Ezvorkian wanted of him.

With the last of his strength, he pulled against the manacles binding his wrists, his weak shoulder muscles screaming as he forced his body up. Ezvorkian watched with impassive eyes as Julian managed to drag himself to his feet. Meeting his eyes, Julian spat a combination of blood and spittle. It struck Ezvorkian just below his right eye, and though his face maintained the same neutrality that had marked his expression since he had entered the room, his eyes lit up with silent rage.

“I would rather die than live as your slave.”

Ezvorkian rose from his place on his hoverboard, his withered figure barely strong enough to stand on its own. The alien wiped the spit away from his face and flicked the spittle off his hand.

“Thank you, Captain Gaspar. That can be arranged.” It seemed they were going to take Julian at his word. Ezvorkian nodded at the brute behind him and returned to his place on the hoverboard. His crew member kicked Julian’s knee, efficiently dropping him back to the ground, and began to unbind his wrists.

Julian scowled at Ezvorkian. “And my crew?”

“What? The Cembrian and your catamite? Just because you’re being disagreeable doesn’t mean I won’t have any success with them.”

So they were still alive. Julian wondered if the slip was deliberate to haunt him with images of Barth and Ellis being tortured in a similar manner.

Ezvorkian chuckled. The dry sound, like a wind across sand, rasped against his raw skin like a new abrasion. “You’d be surprised what desperation can do to a weak mind. I have asked what you would be willing to sacrifice. I would be remiss in my duty as your captor if I did not ask them the same.”

“Don’t you dare touch them!” The words wrenched themselves out of Julian’s lungs, the last of his angry energy expelled with the force of the roar.

A rare smile drew itself across Ezvorkian's face. His lips cracked with the strain, and the pallid, dry skin of his face drew into lines reminiscent of a desert floor. "My dear Julian, I don't need to. You've done all of my work for me."

The wide arm of Ezvorkian's underling circled Julian's throat, tightening immediately to prevent him from drawing another breath. Julian ineffectually grabbed at the heavy bicep, trying and failing to tear it away. Black spots danced in front of his eyes and he felt his entire body slump in weakness. A heartbeat away from unconsciousness, the grip lessened just enough for him to draw a line of air into his lungs. It was not enough to let him struggle as the man dragged him out of Ezvorkian's sight.

The hallways of the *Ethervold* were dim and labyrinthine. Before Julian registered their path, he was being tossed back into his cell. He dropped to the ground. His entire back was aflame, and he couldn't gather the necessary strength to stand. The doors closed audibly behind him.

An hour seemed to pass before he was able to shift enough to draw a breath through the pain igniting his senses. He rolled over and pressed his bare back against the cool sheet-metal floor. It was both agonizing and soothing. He loosed a ragged gasp.

The cell was empty. No surprise there: Ezvorkian had separated them the moment they'd come aboard. Thoughts of Ezvorkian's threats came to mind and Julian gagged at the thought of Ellis's death. Combined with the lingering pain, it was almost enough to keep him from moving, but he forced himself to sit up.

The unbearable silence stretched out around him and Julian adjusted his battered body again.

What are you willing to sacrifice?

Outside the cell, the sound of the lock being disengaged drew his attention. This was a break in routine. Before now, they'd waited a few hours before fetching him back to Ezvorkian's cabin.

The doors opened and Ellis stepped inside. His lover's face was pale, but there was no sign of any damage. The sight filled Julian with palpable relief and he just barely managed to stand. Ellis made no effort to help him, his stare cool and unforgiving.

"Ellis? Are you all right?" Some of his strength seemed to be returning. He braced himself on a nearby wall, but was soon capable of standing on his own.

Ellis regarded him with disdain. "I'm fine. Just disappointed."

Julian frowned. "What?"

"The great Julian Gaspar." Ellis sniffed. "I begged my way aboard your ship because I expected you to live up to your reputation. But at the end of the day, you're nothing more than a limp-dicked Coalition lapdog."

Julian stared at him, his face twisting into a frown. “‘Limp-dicked Coalition lapdog?’” He spat out an angry response, unable to bite back the words. “How do you figure? I saved you from being vented when we took over the *Halygast*.”

“If I’d known that going with you would be such a waste of my time, I would have chosen the vent. Here we are, trapped aboard and probably about to die because you were too incompetent to protect us!”

“You wretched little ingrate,” Julian growled. Something inside of him snapped. The pain was already playing havoc with his senses and the condemnation was enough to push his temper to the breaking point. “After all this time, were you just warming my bed waiting for a better offer to come along?”

“If I was, it seems that I won’t be kept waiting much longer.”

“Is that how you played the others you’ve fucked? Or was I a special case?”

“There was nothing special about you, Julian. Ezvorkian is offering me more than you ever could.”

“Whore!” Julian shouted. “Orifian was right about you all along!”

“He was also right about how easy you were to manipulate. Bat my eyes, wet my lips and you were practically mine for the taking. You’re lucky I wasn’t a spy for the Frenze! I could have ended the entire war with the information I managed to wriggle out of you while you were wriggling into me.”

Julian saw red. He shrugged off the pain still stinging his back and lunged at Ellis, grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed him back against the cell doors. The walls practically shook with the force, but Ellis did not break eye contact. He raised his chin, fixing Julian with a haughty expression of contempt.

“What’s Ezvorkian offering you? Or are you just trying to save your own skin?” Julian demanded. Ellis glared at him. “You call me pathetic? When you’re so desperate to save your own life that you’re willing to snuggle up with a corpse-feeler? You make me sick.”

Anger warred with tearing grief in his chest—more painful than the torture had been—and he pushed Ellis again. The younger man winced when his back connected with the wall again. The sight shook Julian enough that he dropped his arms.

Despite the sudden desire to wipe the smug expression of superiority off his face, Julian stepped back. Ellis would *not* make him a monster. “You’re not worth the time I spent on you.”

“Funny. I was just thinking the same thing. Fortunately, I can start making amends to myself.”

Julian grabbed at him again. Before he could get a hit in, Ellis whipped around and pressed his hand against Julian’s bare torso. Pain, lightning-hot and unbearable, whipped across Julian’s senses and sent him toppling to the ground. Through traitorous tears, he spotted a small stun ring seated on Ellis’s hand.

His former lover’s dispassionate gaze lasted only until he knocked on the doors. For a heartbeat, something flickered behind his eyes. A dream of pain that Julian wanted so desperately to see. The phantom was quickly dismissed, leaving him to wonder if it had been there at all. Then the doors slid open and Ellis stepped out.

“We’re done, Julian.”

“I wish you’d never crossed my path.”

Ellis paused in his step. A rueful chuckle shook his shoulders. “That certainly would have saved us both a lot of trouble.”

The doors swished closed behind him, leaving Julian alone once more. The raw rage behind his scowl could have burrowed through the metal. His jaw locked and his hands shook with minute tremors. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek, trying to prevent himself from crying out. The pain still throbbing dully against his back suddenly seemed minor in comparison to the ripping in his heart.

Slowly he rose and limped back to the lone cot in the room. Slumping down, he pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids. Stinging tears began to well behind them, and sickening coils of grief wound through his stomach.

Chapter Ten

Aboard the Ethervold, heading unknown

Coalition Standard Date 108-515.9

Hours passed in a blur of pain. Sitting solitary and still on the cot, Julian fought with himself over Ellis's words. It was impossible to get his thoughts straight through the pain that still whipped across his body. The charred skin at his side throbbed every time his arm so much as brushed it; each time reminded him of the look on Ellis's face after he'd clapped the stun ring against him. Despair warred with anger. Coming aboard the *Ethervold* heralded the end to everything. His tenure as captain. His friendship with Barth. And his relationship with Ellis. The latter two stung the most. Barth had been a loyal friend for years. And Ellis...

He'd loved Ellis more deeply than he had anyone before. And knowing that he'd been so used wrung him out more than the torture had. Had he brought this upon himself? In all their time together, he'd never told Ellis the depth of his feelings. If he'd done so, could this have been avoided?

He snarled and hit his hand against the wall, impotent to do anything more than torment himself with half-formed guilt. Ellis had made his choice. And, perhaps, there was some cold comfort in knowing that he would live if Julian and Barth didn't.

The doors engaged and Julian found himself once again on the wrong end of multiple blasters. He stood slowly, numb to the sight of the weapons aimed his way. One of the crewmen waved at him.

"Is this when I'm executed?" He laughed harshly. "You couldn't have come an hour earlier?" Before Ellis had. At least then he might have died without the sickening heartbreak. Mutely, he followed them out of the brig. He half expected them to lead him towards the incinerator room and fought back growing surprise and misplaced hope when he was escorted to the shuttle bay.

He saw no sign of Ezvorkian, but the *Eyas* seemed to be in perfect condition, untouched by the violence that had defined the past three days. Julian spotted Barth lying unconscious next to the shuttle and broke away from his captors to help the Cembrian.

Once the alien was tucked against his side, Julian faced Ezvorkian's crew. "Am I supposed to believe that you're just letting us leave?"

Julian didn't expect a response and didn't receive one. Ezvorkian's crew never spoke. Not wanting to chance the strange turn of luck, he opened the control panel and punched in the code to open the shuttle hatch. If the plan was to shoot the *Eyas* out of the sky, they were in for a surprise.

Stopping halfway up the gangway, Julian quickly scanned the deck of the *Ethervold*. He wasn't sure whether to feel relief or despair when he didn't see Ellis among the crew. Taking a shaky breath, he boarded the shuttle. The second the hatch closed, he spared a quick minute to examine his engineer and friend. Barth didn't look good. His facial ridges had been cracked, and the stiff gristle of cartilage glistened under the dim overhead lights. Julian propped him up in one of the seats, strapping him in tightly. He took his own place in the pilot's seat, relieved to see the bay doors opening.

He needed no more prompting. He hit the ignition. As soon as the bay doors opened enough for the *Eyas* to squeeze out, he punched it forward. Stars snapped in and out of his field of vision as they slid into their fastest drive and sped away from the damned ship.

Silence reigned aboard the shuttle for over an hour after they had left the *Ethervold* behind them. His scans confirmed that there was no sign of the *Kestrel*. Part of him hoped that Ezvorkian had just told Orifian they were dead, but Orifian was Coalition-bred—he would not have believed such statements without confirmation. And while the *Ethervold* outgunned the *Kestrel*, Orifian could have called upon the Coalition for assistance.

It made far more sense to conclude that his chief mate had betrayed them. He couldn't fathom any other reason for Ezvorkian fixating on him and his small boarding party. Even if all three of them had signed slave contracts, they weren't worth what the *Kestrel* had aboard. Ezvorkian could have easily bested the *Kestrel* in a firefight and taken everything in the cargo bay. What he had done was far more personal.

Julian rubbed a rough hand down his face. He was still in pain and his thoughts were disjointed from the combined physical and mental fatigue. Trying to focus on anything was useless. Ellis's words kept replaying in his mind. He fought back the childish desire to punch the steering column.

There was a space station less than a day's flight from where the *Ethervold* had loosed them. He and Barth could make it that far. Then he would go about hunting his ship down.

A growl behind him alerted the captain to Barth waking. The sound of the alien cursing was a strange balm to Julian's frayed nerves. He engaged the autopilot and slipped out of his seat.

"How are you feeling?"

Barth grimaced, but he managed to check Julian over. "About as terrible as you look. Did we escape, were we rescued or are we dead?"

"They let us go." Julian couldn't muster much enthusiasm for the words.

Barth's nose ridge flared and he straightened in his seat. He tersely glanced around the shuttle. "Where's Ellis?"

"Back on the *Ethervold*." Julian moved away. Focusing on the stars was a bare comfort, but it took him away from Barth's scrutiny. "He got what he wanted."

“What?” Barth clawed at the safety restraints and forced himself up. He swayed on unsteady legs, but stormed up to the pilot’s seat. “You left him?” Julian did not dignify the question with a response. “How could you leave him?”

“He’s a ship-hopper, Barth. Not much better than a Glemisian prostitute. He made it clear that Ezvorkian was offering more than I could.” He couldn’t help the bitter tone.

Barth stood in silence, hovering over Julian’s shoulder. “Wow. They really must have done a number on you to make you believe that steaming pile of shit. How many times did they hit your head, *Captain*?”

“Why do you even care? Or did he worm his way into your bed, too?”

Barth took a steadying breath. “In the interest of our friendship, I’m going to ignore that.” He leaned over, his inhuman features suddenly prominent in Julian’s view. “Let me ask you something, Julian. If you’d had a way to spare us whatever it was that that corpse-feeler had in mind, would you have done it?”

Julian’s hands tightened to a white-knuckled grip on the steering column. “Of course I would have.”

“And if Ellis had a way to do it, would he?” Before Julian could reply, Barth continued. “Ask yourself one better. Knowing how fucking stubborn you are, what would he have seen as the best way to get us the hell off that deathtrap?”

Julian bit back his denial. His mind raced with Barth’s words. Nothing had suggested that had been Ellis’s plan. He had been calm and collected—to the point where the cool regard had seemed alien on his features. Julian’s stomach clenched and his hands began to shake once again. “No. He wouldn’t have. Not for me.”

“Just for you, you stupid bastard. He loves you so fucking much that it humbles me.”

Julian rose, staggering away from his seat. Barth did not step out of his way, and Julian forced his way past his friend as a sudden intense claustrophobia overcame him. He moved to the far end of the shuttle. Staring at the metal walls, he tried to calm his racing heart and too-quickened breath. Barth said nothing.

His knees gave way, depositing him on the deck. A scream of denial tried to tear its way from his throat. Barth was suddenly beside him and Julian grasped the hand the Cembrian offered. Cool talons against his skin steadied him enough that he was able to choke back the scream. It turned into a pained half-sob and Julian swallowed around it, burning his throat.

His chest heaved with the effort to keep in the wracking pain biting at his lungs when he considered his words to Ellis. He should have seen through it, should have found a way to fight through the frozen exterior. Ellis had been trying to save his life, and whatever price Ellis had paid, he would live believing Julian hated him.

“We have to go back for him.”

“There’s nothing we can do without the *Kestrel*.” The Cembrian admitted to the fact with a generous amount of self-loathing. They sat in grim silence, their only comfort the lone point of contact between them.

The space station was a full twenty-four standard hours away. The entire time, Julian found himself replaying Ellis’s words in his head. There had been the one lone chink in Ellis’s armor, towards the end, and Julian found himself wondering over and over again if he’d imagined it. There’d been no other indication that he’d been anything other than sincere, but even so Julian cursed himself for his own failures. He should have seen through it. Should have known that Ellis... Ellis loved him. Should have *told* him. That might have broken through.

Finally pulling up to the spaceport, Julian managed to sound marginally sane when he hailed them for docking. He and Barth slid into a free port and found themselves alongside the *Kestrel*.

Small favors, Julian thought grimly. At least his ship appeared undamaged. That seemed to confirm his suspicions. He spat out a quick greeting, the shocked voice of his communications officer filling the *Eyas*. Engaging the magnetic locks to secure the *Eyas* in the shuttle station, Julian looped his shoulder under Barth’s arms and they staggered off the ship together.

As the hatch opened, Julian caught a glimpse of a pale-faced Orifian standing on the space station’s docking platform. His chief mate stared with horror as they stepped off the shuttle and in a heartbeat, Julian knew that the man had been complicit in their capture.

“You...you’re dead,” Orifian gasped as Julian stepped away from Barth and staggered forward.

“Not yet, I’m not.” He waved to a nearby security officer. “You. Secure this man in the station’s brig.” Orifian began to voice his protest. Julian cut him off with a glare. “Once I’m feeling a bit better, we’re going to have a nice, long chat about how our ‘hosts’ were expecting us.”

He swayed in place, but did not avert his glare as the space station’s security crew raced forward to arrest Orifian.

Chapter Eleven

Border of Glemisian Space

Coalition Standard Date 113-229.7 (Present Day)

Julian hadn't expected to be left alone as long as he was and had anticipated the soft chime on his door hours before it came. The crew aboard the *Kestrel* were a nosy bunch and unfortunately prone to gossip. It was a bad habit that none of them seemed inclined to shake and Julian had long ago stopped wasting his time trying to curb it.

Ellis was sleeping a bit better in Julian's presence, but there had been no change in his condition. Julian released the hand he held and rose, smoothed the damp hair away from Ellis's forehead and laid a kiss on his brow. He briefly stretched out stiff legs before crossing the room to answer the door chime. He was expecting Barth, the only one who could claim any relationship to Ellis since the ship's break from the Coalition.

A willowy figure stood on the other side of the door. Julian frowned. Kaelem, his ship's steward gazed back with serpentine black eyes. He waited for the captain to acknowledge him, not so much as glancing at the man in Julian's bed.

Julian struggled inwardly. Kaelem had not been aboard when Ellis had joined them and could have nothing to say regarding the unconscious man. However it was so rare to see the Airthir anywhere outside his nest in the lower decks, it piqued Julian's curiosity. He stepped back and waved the alien in.

"Thank you." Kaelem's voice whispered in Julian's head and he moved gracefully into Julian's quarters. He continued to ignore Ellis and crossed towards the large plastiglass window.

Julian closed his door and waited for Kaelem to speak. The Airthir were an enigmatic species—he knew less of them now than he had before Kaelem had come on board—but if he had learned anything, it was that they needed to be given time to collect their thoughts before speaking.

Kaelem tended to keep to himself and Julian rarely had the chance to study the alien in private. He stood close to seven feet tall, a foot of which was accounted for by his neck, and small scales covered his body. The similarities between his species and the snakes of Terra Prime ended there. Long golden hair-like fibers cascaded over thin shoulders, framing a face devoid of nose or mouth. Julian had yet to discover how they fed themselves—though with the technology available on Airtha, it probably wasn't as mysterious as he imagined—and like all the members of his species, Kaelem spoke through a soothing telepathic voice. It was from that voice alone that Julian had arbitrarily assigned the being a gender. The

asexuality of the Airthir made them alien even among the many disparate species dotting the planets of the galaxy.

“You have not called to ask for my assistance in reading your lover’s mind.”

Julian considered Kaelem’s words. “I didn’t even think of it.”

“Yes. This is why my people have such fondness for you.”

Julian got the impression of a low chuckle. Kaelem’s empty black gaze—devoid of iris or pupil—had unnerved him the first time he met the Airthir back when his crewmate had been nothing more than another passenger.

“But now that the thought has occurred to you, will you ask it of me?” Kaelem’s stare was inescapable and Julian found himself trapped in place.

His entire body froze. The Airthir was offering him a chance to truly speak to Ellis before his death, instead of whispering hopeless pleas in his ear. Julian considered what he knew of Airthir mindspeaking and shook his head. He might as well have asked the alien to engage in sexual intercourse, and that wasn’t something he would have demanded of anyone. Not even for Ellis. “No. Ellis would never forgive me if I asked it of you for his sake.”

“Fascinating.” Kaelem stepped forward, closer to Julian. The alien’s scent washed over him, reminding Julian of musty leaves and soil. The Airthir lifted a hand. *“May I?”*

Julian stared at the fingertips. He had never been subject to an Airthir’s scrutiny. Though the thought was unnerving, he nodded.

“Thank you.” Kaelem touched his fingertips to his eyelids.

For a painfully short moment, almost every memory of Ellis danced through his mind. Unable to stand the thought of reliving the time aboard the *Ethervold*, Julian tried to withdraw.

Kaelem, an impassive observer to the flood of images, allowed it. His unreadable face betrayed nothing. *“My time here has been building to this moment.”*

Julian frowned. “What?”

“When my people join aboard a human spacecraft, we are often asked to compromise. They are small things, at first. Humans call them ‘trivialities’ and tell us that they are barely worth mention. We are asked for a sense of what path would be the best to take, our impressions of prospective clients and whether they would be agreeable to negotiation. Slowly, it grows until an Airthir becomes little more than a tool to be used at the whim of a ship’s captain. You have never treated me as such, Julian. I therefore offer you two gifts.”

“Gifts?”

“I will facilitate a mindspeak between you and your lover.”

He wanted to resist, thinking of Ellis's respect for the disparate alien species dotting the stars. But surely if Kaelem were offering, instead of being asked, it meant something? A guilty rush of pleasure washed through him. Despite the circumstances, his face broke into a smile.

Kaelem did not remark upon it. *"The second is not a gift, but a sacred duty. Before the Coalition, my people pledged holy war against the Zzesstari."*

Julian blinked, unable to properly process the words. The Airthir were not warlike people. He could not imagine Kaelem raising a hand against anyone.

"Recounting this time gives my people no joy."

"I'm sorry."

"I find your species' predilection for unnecessary apologies endlessly curious. Regardless of your sympathy, believe that while we took no joy in it, we did take bloody satisfaction." Something hard flickered momentarily in Kaelem's thoughts, dark enough that even Julian caught the tail of it, but it was gone so quickly that Julian wondered if it had been there at all. *"You are aware of the Airthir soul bond?"*

"Only what you've said of it." He knew that the bond existed only between Airthir who felt the deepest love, and acted to tie them together. He got the impression that the alien was scanning his thoughts.

"Your knowledge of the soul bond is indeed limited, but there is truth in your impressions. It does tie two of our kind together, but bonds can be forged between those who care nothing for one another. It can be forged in desire for power. For those less scrupulous among us, it can be used to indefinitely prolong one's life."

Julian's thoughts flew to the ring on Ellis's finger.

"We shared our knowledge with the Zzesstari to save a race plagued by inbreeding and high infant mortality. Unlike humankind, who has been able to largely eliminate such defects through genetic therapy, it plagued the Zzesstari with such severity that three of every four offspring died within their first five years. The development of their race was prohibited, and they were on the cusp of extinction when we received their distress call." Kaelem shifted. The movement was so strange to his usual stillness that Julian took a startled step backwards. *"We chose to assist them and shared the knowledge of the soul bond so that their scientists might live long enough to develop a solution."* Kaelem paused. His tone filled with grief. *"We were unfortunately deceived by their character."*

Images born of Kaelem's memories flashed through Julian's mind, leaving him with knowledge of which Kaelem was too pained to speak. He saw millions of people as sick as Ellis while the Zzesstari prospered. The Airthir attacked in horrifying warships to stop the abuse of their technology, turning the swamps of Zzesstar to battered plains of battle and destroying all but a fraction of the inhabitants. Those who remained scattered, the precious few remaining rings hoarded away among them, and gradually became known to Coalition space as "corpse-feelers" due to their shared characteristics with the dead.

The thought of genocide was sickening yet nothing but dark justification curled through Kaelem's mind. The Zzesstari had perverted what should have been a sacred joining. Instead of working towards a long-term solution to their species' ailments, they had killed indiscriminately to ease their suffering and enjoy effective immortality.

"Very few of the soul rings now remain," Kaelem said, abruptly pulling the thoughts away and leaving Julian gasping for breath. "I can only imagine how one came to rest on your lover's finger. Whatever the circumstances, it is our sacred duty to remove it. If we travel to Airtha at the quickest possible speed, we might yet save your Ellis."

Julian stared at the Airthir with disbelief. For a bare moment, he had the impression of a smile.

"I can make no promises, Julian Gaspar. Yet in all my years, I've learned that something broken can be made whole again, if one but knows the means to mend it."

"Thank you, Kaelem," Julian whispered.

Kaelem did not so much as incline his head in acknowledgement. Instead, he started back towards the door in slow, methodic steps. *"You must ready yourself for the mindspeak. It is draining on those who are not versed in our arts."* He paused at the door. *"At least sixteen hours of sleep, Captain, and as much sustenance as your body will accept."*

The thought of eating anything was slightly nauseating, but Julian nodded.

"I shall advise our crew of the change in course. Until tomorrow, Captain." With that, Kaelem dismissed himself from Julian's quarters.

Julian stood rooted to the same spot, barely daring to look at Ellis. For the first time since he'd walked through the door and seen Ellis on his bed, a thread of real hope began to wind through him.

Quickly removing his shirt, he crossed the room and lay down next to his lover's cold body. Reaching out, he brushed a lock of hair out of Ellis's face before forcing his racing mind to rest.

Chapter Twelve

Unclaimed Space Route Designation 486AG, en route to Airtha Prime

Coalition Standard Date 113-231.2

Kaelem returned to Julian's quarters exactly seventeen hours after leaving. The precision was uncanny, but it was something to which Julian had grown accustomed over the years since the Airthir had joined his crew.

Despite his flight crew's assurances that the *Kestrel* was heading towards Airtha Prime as fast as she could take them, they were still more than a week out. Julian wasn't sure if Ellis would be able to hold on that long. The thought left him keyed up and anxious, something even Kaelem's usually calming presence couldn't entirely rectify. The alien silently arranged himself near the foot of the bed.

At length, the steward gestured for him to come closer. "*Please, Captain Gaspar, lie down.*" Julian frowned. If he lay down as Kaelem instructed both he and Ellis would have their feet facing the Airthir instead of their heads. "*I have done this before.*"

Julian followed Kaelem's instructions. Lying down, he twined his fingers with Ellis's. "Should I close my eyes?"

"If you like. It may not help." A cool hand wrapped around his ankle. *"You will feel a sense of vertigo, Captain. It may be somewhat overwhelming, but I ask that you focus on Ellis. The memory of him. The smell. Anything that would draw you to him."*

Everything, Julian thought. Everything drew him to Ellis. He wasn't sure if the Airthir gleaned the idea, but he sensed the alien smile. His skin warmed under Kaelem's palm and small shocks began running up his leg. He lost the fight to keep his knee from twitching in response.

Ellis issued a disturbed groan and drew his attention. Julian's response was choked off by the shocks suddenly increasing in magnitude. For a second, his entire body felt like it had just been hit by a bolt of electricity and jerked away from the bed in response. It never touched back down. He bit back a cry, drowned out by the dull roar suddenly thrumming through his ears. His perspective split. One moment, he was in his body, the next looking down at it. His physical form mimicked every movement he made, but seemed restrained to slower motions. It was enough to make him question his own sanity.

"Remember Ellis."

He quickly moved his gaze to his lover and conjured up what images he recalled most vividly—their first meeting aboard the *Halygast* and the smell of him, the casual sexuality that he exuded and the taste of come and chocolate on his lips. Slowly Ellis materialized before him.

This was the Ellis he remembered, vibrant and full of life. Ellis's name dropped almost silently from Julian's lips. Ellis whipped around and looked at Julian like he was seeing him for the first time.

Absolute silence sat heavily between them. The minutest whisper of disbelief fell from Ellis's lips and Julian suddenly found his arms full of the younger man. He was real—whole—and warm in his arms. Julian squeezed him tightly. The world around them faded as his senses were overwhelmed by the touch of his lover.

Ellis was shaking in his arms. Tears slid down his delicate cheekbones.

"Ellis?"

"Tell me I'm not dead. Tell me I made it back before..."

Julian roughly kissed Ellis's brow. "You made it." The shattered relief in his lover's eyes almost broke him. "You're back aboard the *Kestrel*."

Tears streamed down Ellis's cheeks. Then Ellis crushed his lips against Julian's, hard and desperate all at once. Julian opened his mouth immediately. Tasting Ellis again was like drinking pure water after being parched for years. Nothing existed save the two of them. He stroked Ellis's face with one hand, running his fingers up and down his lover's cheek with infinite care and brushing away the still-falling tears.

They remained still and silent, wrapped in each other's arms until all Julian knew was the sound of Ellis's heart beating. A short eternity later, Julian pulled back and kissed the trails of tears on his face.

"Oh, Ellis, why did you—"

"I *had* to. Julian, he would have killed you. But every day for five years, I thought of you. I hoped...*hoped* that you wouldn't forget me." He did not pull out of Julian's embrace.

"How could I forget half of my soul?" Julian asked. Ellis's breath caught. "I love you, Ellis. I loved you the first moment I saw you. And I'm sorry that I made so many stupid mistakes..."

"I was no better than you. I never let on what this meant to me." He wrapped his arms around Julian's neck and hugged him close. "It means everything." Julian swallowed the lump in his throat, content to hug his lover back. "How long do I have?"

"What?"

"I know better than anyone what the soul ring is doing to me." He pulled back. "I'm dying, Julian." Julian knew, but hearing it made it no easier to bear. "I'm not sure how we have this together, but I'm so glad that we do."

Julian nodded and kissed Ellis again. "We're on our way to Airtha, Ellis. They'll be able to help you. Just focus on holding on until then."

A grim smile chased away a momentary shadow of doubt. “Airtha? He’ll be thrilled.” Ellis chuckled ruefully. “I’ve never known a person to be so filled with hate for any one species.”

Julian thought back to the conversation he’d shared with Kaelem. He could envision that sort of hate quite easily, even with his one side of the story. “Hold on for me, Ellis. I need the chance to tell you in person how much I love you, like I should have that first night and every night afterwards.”

“I’ll try. I promise. I want to, but I can still feel him trying to drag me away. He’s siphoning out pieces of my soul and I can’t stop him.” Ellis rested his head against Julian’s chest. “I heard from one of his crew that the *Kestrel* was docked on Glemisia and I knew it would be my last chance to see you.” Ellis kissed the skin above his heart. “I’m glad I risked it.”

“Ellis...”

Ellis placed a finger against Julian’s lips and hushed his lover. “Let’s just...be here. For as long as we can.”

Julian rested his cheek against the top of Ellis’s head.

Chapter Thirteen

Unclaimed Space Route Designation 486AG, en route to Airtha Prime

Coalition Standard Date 113-231.9

When he woke, Kaelem was gone. He wasn't surprised by the Airthir's absence. The mindspeak must have been draining. Julian extricated himself from Ellis's embrace. He wasn't sure if it was imagination or hope, but it appeared that some of the color had returned to Ellis's face. Reaching out, he ran his fingers down Ellis's cheek before dropping a gentle kiss on his lips and withdrawing from the bed. He made his way to the bathroom adjoining his quarters, heavy thoughts slowing his step.

The mindspeaking had been real. Painfully so—he could still smell Ellis on his skin. He didn't move under the sonic showerheads immediately, relishing the scent of his lover. For five years he'd held tight to the belief that they would find him or avenge his death. He didn't know how, but he'd been faithful. No one had been able to tempt him when he kept his memories so near. Every day, he'd vividly recalled each touch and caress and each day it'd killed him to believe that he would never feel it again.

The thoughts soured his mood and he quickly scrubbed the dead skin cells away. He dressed efficiently. He needed to return to the bridge. His hands tightened into resentful fists, but he'd hidden away long enough. He had a ship to run. Grabbing up his communicator, he called up their medic and asked her to join Ellis in his quarters.

She arrived unnaturally quickly, and Julian wondered if she had been hovering. With a quick scan, she confirmed that Ellis's vitals were a bit better. It should have been a soothing thought, but there wasn't any real comfort. They were still light years away from Airtha Prime.

Donning his uniform jacket, he moved quickly to once more brush his lips across Ellis's brow. It was painful to walk out of the room. His legs were heavier with every step that took him closer to the bridge.

After years of clinging to memories that had faded over time, he was surprised at how vividly they came back to him with Ellis's presence; he had woken with Ellis's body spooned against his.

They had always fit together perfectly.

The lift ground to a halt and the doors slid open. Barth slouched against the far wall, unreadable in his silent regard. They nodded in greeting. He didn't ask how Ellis was and Julian didn't offer anything. Ignorance seemed to be blissful, as far as the Cembrian was concerned. Then again, the entire ship probably knew everything and he appreciated Barth's silence, however temporary.

"I've done a bit of engine modding."

“Oh?”

“I took power away from our nonessentials—no holovids for the next week—but we should have enough of a boost to bring us into Airtha space within the next two days.”

Julian blinked in surprise. “Thank you.”

“I’ve seen more life in you in the past two days than I have in the past few years. I can only imagine what sort of chaos we’ll be able to raise once he’s more solidly back amongst the living.”

Julian’s lips twitched in a weak semblance of a smile.

Barth shifted in his place. “I’ve also checked our weapon upgrades. They’re holding strong.”

Even after years of hunting the *Ethervold*, the modifications to their laser arrays were untested, and Ezvorkian would not sacrifice Ellis without a fight. But Julian had faith in his Smews in general, and Barth in particular. They would not fail.

The lift slowed to a stop and Julian stepped out onto the bridge. Barth remained in place, leaving the captain to wonder how long he’d been riding in wait for him.

The bridge fell silent as he moved to his command post, which his first mate surrendered immediately. Sitting behind the large console, Julian checked the coordinates. Airtha Prime was impossibly close. They were less than a half-day’s journey from the outer rims of their system and he sent a thankful thought to his engineer.

His flight team was trading subtle glances and he stood again, drawing every eye in the room. They all rose in response.

“There’s no profit in going to Airtha Prime,” he said at length. “And I sacrificed a lucrative escort arrangement to go. If anyone wishes to make arrangements regarding their cut of the deal, they can discuss it with me or Kaelem.” No one spoke up. “This is something I want communicated to the remainder of the crew as well, understood?” A few scattered nods were the only answers he received. “When we reach Airtha, I will likely travel to the surface. Mr. Jensen will be left in charge.” The woman in question nodded in acknowledgement. “We may be some time, but I’m asking for everyone’s forbearance with this. If you do get questions—from anyone—apologize on my behalf. This is a personal matter and—”

“Sir?” Jensen interrupted. “We understand. All of us.”

Julian inclined his head. “Thank you.” He seated himself again. “We will probably be hailed in a few hours. Let’s make sure we’re sending out friendship and greeting beacons. We don’t want any misunderstandings once we enter Airtha space.”

His communications team nodded and entered the commands. Julian settled back into his seat, his thoughts focusing on the flight path ahead of them.

Chapter Fourteen

Borders of Orekian Space, en route to Airtha Prime

Coalition Standard Date 113-233.5

Julian's communicator buzzed violently next to him and he forced his eyes open. Disoriented, he blinked rapidly. Ellis's frail body lay still in his arms and Julian gently ran his knuckles down the curve of the man's slender neck. His breathing was a bit easier now than it had been before the mindspeak, but the medic showed no confidence in the longevity of the improvements.

Shifting, Julian reluctantly pulled away and grabbed the comm from the small table beside him. "Gaspar here."

"You'll want to come to the bridge, Captain," Jensen said.

Julian frowned. "Can it wait?"

"We have a tail."

Julian's frown deepened. Turning the communicator off, he leaned over and brushed his lips against Ellis's temple. Underneath the sour smell of sickness, Ellis was still there, albeit faintly. He stood and gathered his clothes.

When he arrived on the bridge a few minutes later, his attention was immediately drawn to the viewing screen. A familiar vessel hovered in the distance. The *Ethervold*. He'd been searching for her since Ellis's disappearance, but the ship had proven impossible to find. He'd bribed a handful of Glemisian spies and gradually collected rumors of stolen nondetection technology. That the *Ethervold* was appearing now told him that Ezvorkian wanted to talk.

"Care to tell me why we haven't shot that bastard out of the sky yet?"

"He's trying to hail us."

"I don't care. Blow him—" Julian paused. *What if killing Ezvorkian resulted in Ellis's death?* "Have we spoken with Kaelem yet?"

"He's on his way," Jensen said. "Our shields are at full and Barth has our entire artillery at the ready. What are your orders with regards to the hail?"

Julian nodded sharply. Moving to his command chair, he waited for the small screen to rise out of the arm. Ezvorkian appeared after a smattering of pixilation, a smug smile plastered on his face. The Zzesstari, far from the desiccated, half-dead thing Julian had encountered five years past, looked disgustingly healthy. His complexion was flush with life, making him appear almost human, even if the skin pulled just a little

too tightly across his head. When Julian thought of Ellis lying half-dead two decks below, his blood roared with rage. And he had to stop himself from putting his fist through the screen.

“Captain Gaspar, how charming to see you again. I wondered where my favorite plaything scuttled off to.” His words were pointed in their meaning and diction. Every syllable that fell from Ezvorkian’s mouth sounded planned and carefully chosen. He was trying to get a rise. “Have you had a joyful reunion?”

“Shall I introduce you to our laser array, Captain Ezvorkian?”

Ezvorkian raised his hands. “There is no need for hostilities, Captain. I’m simply here to collect what is mine. After that, we will allow your ship to be on her way.” The Zzesstari chuckled. “If you’ll recall your time aboard, I’m sure you’ll remember that we have certain advantages.”

He and Barth had slaved away at recreating the specs of the *Ethervold* after their imprisonment. Each free moment for months had been dedicated to determining each possible firearm and shield setting. And each subsequent change to the *Kestrel* had been made with their decisions well in mind.

“We’d be happy to dance.” Julian held up a hand to prevent his bridge crew from firing. He didn’t want to tip their hand so early. “You won’t take him back.”

Ezvorkian’s lips perked up at the corners of his mouth. “But I will.” He leaned forward, as if to whisper something, though he had to know that Julian’s entire bridge crew was listening. “Your little catamite was very pleasing to me, Captain Gaspar. I’m sure that being as acquainted with his talents as you are, you can have little doubt of that.”

“Keep talking, corpse-feeler. You’re not buying yourself any more time.”

“In fact, I remember your time among my crew to be exceedingly satisfactory. I can’t quite recall the last time when I was so well-pleased by any of my guests.” He bared sick yellow teeth and bright red gums. “Of you and your Cembrian, in particular, I have the fondest memories. Your screams were exquisite.”

Julian remembered the Zzesstari’s torture and his hand clenched into a fist.

Some of it must have shown in his expression, because smug satisfaction crept across the corpse-feeler’s face. “Ellis provided me with something very, very valuable. Though I don’t anticipate having the value robbed from me through any inept attempt you may feel is warranted, I would prefer if you would give him over without a struggle. In return, I shall let you and yours continue unmolested and forgive your interference.”

“Your guns may be bigger,” Julian lied, “but I’m willing to bet the *Kestrel* is faster. Why don’t you chase us into Airtha space, Captain Ezvorkian? I’m sure they’d be happy to receive you.” Had he not been so intimately acquainted with the alien, he might have missed the slight twitch to Ezvorkian’s eye at the mention of the Airthir.

A second later, the *Ethervold* fired on them. The lasers refracted brilliantly along the *Kestrel*’s shields, hitting with a patterned one-two-three beat. He glanced at his diagnostics, pleased to see that the new equipment they were using to reinforce their shields was holding in face of the attack.

“Barth, report!” his first mate shouted.

“She’s holding beautifully. Let me introduce the corpse-feeler to the vacuum.”

“Not yet,” Julian said. “Stand by.”

“Consider that a warning, Captain,” Ezvorkian said, sitting back, apparently ignorant of his attack’s ineffectiveness. “You have two minutes to maneuver into a boarding position.”

“Or what?” Julian asked. “If you destroy the ship, you destroy yourself. Isn’t that how the soul ring works?”

“You know nothing of the matter.” There was a hiss to his voice; a snarl from anyone who was not so thoroughly in control of themselves.

“I don’t? Well, let me tell you what I do know. You’ve been eating pieces of his soul for the past five years. I’m betting that as soon as the link between you is severed, you will lose each little chunk that you’ve stolen.” Julian raised an eyebrow and let out a sarcastic sigh. “That sounds painful.”

“Don’t trifle with me, human!” Ezvorkian growled, finally losing his composure. “Return the boy to me.”

Another burst of laser fire shot out towards them. Julian shouted out for evasive maneuvers, hoping to avoid another hit to the section of their shields which had suffered through the first attack. The ship jerked to starboard, giving Ezvorkian a clear shot at their hull as they pulled away.

Julian gripped the arms of his chair hard. One of his pilots was thrown from his seat as three more shots followed in quick succession. Julian jumped to his feet and quickly grabbed the man’s arm to help him up, bracing them both against a nearby console as the corpse-feeler fired on them once more.

“Diagnostics!” The last blast had obviously been charging to compensate for the increased power to their shields.

“Shields are holding.”

Julian glowered at the viewing screen. “Let’s see if our guns are any more effective.” He dropped back into his seat, greeted by the corpse-feeler’s smirk. “Ezvorkian, I’m going to blow out your engines and let you sit here, useless, until I see fit to return for you.”

“And how do you intend to do that? Your rig could hardly support the infantile arrays you boasted last time.”

“Last time we hadn’t had five years to imagine this moment.” He hit the intercom button to his side. “Barth, target their engines and fire at will!”

“With pleasure, Captain.” On screen, they watched six blue beads of light tagging their torpedoes as they darted towards the *Ethervold*. The ship tried to veer aside, but each one connected. The first two shredded the shields into electromagnetic tatters and the rest of the salvo slammed home with devastating force. The other ship barely cleared the blast zone, trailing atmosphere and debris. Ezvorkian began desperately shouting at the crew, all rapidly buzzing into action behind him.

“How?” Ezvorkian screamed.

“We’ve been dealing with private contracts since the end of the war, corpse-feeler. We bought some new toys.” He leaned forward. “I owed you that. And I’m prepared to give you what Ellis owes you as well.”

“Go ahead, then, Captain Gaspar.” Ezvorkian’s voice lowered to a whisper. “I welcome the pain that my death will bring you.”

Julian was about to give the order when the doors to the bridge slid open and Kaelem stepped out. The Airthir moved to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. A wave of calm flooded Julian’s mind, tempering his anger.

“You could destroy him,” Kaelem’s voice whispered. “But it would be the death of your lover.”

Julian’s mind was suddenly at war. They didn’t even know if Ellis was going to make it to Airtha alive, and even the thought of destroying the *Ethervold* was unprecedentedly pleasing. During the war, he had never taken a life pettily and it galled him that he was considering it. But if they left Ezvorkian here and carried on their way, the *Ethervold* might make the necessary repairs and disappear into space, never to be found.

“How sure are you?”

“The soul rings take time to devour a life, and that life is retrievable as long as the bond exists. Destroy the matching ring Ezvorkian wears and Ellis will not survive.”

The Zzesstari continued to scream orders at his crew. They had delivered four crippling shots... The *Ethervold* was as good as done for unless Ezvorkian’s engineering team could work miracles. They could go to Airtha and have Kaelem’s people try to help Ellis, but the chance that Ezvorkian would abandon ship or somehow restore engine functionality remained and Julian risked forever losing his chance for revenge.

Was revenge more important than the meager hope that Ellis might live?

With an angry jerk of his arm, Julian closed the communication relay. “Mark these coordinates for our return course.” He regarded his pilot. “Let’s get to Airtha. Full speed.”

“Aye, Captain.”

They pulled away from the other ship, jumping to their top speed in less than a second. Julian silently vowed that they would return and finish what they started—with Ellis either standing at his side or in his coffin waiting to be put to rest.

Chapter Fifteen

Airtha Space, two hours from planetfall

Coalition Standard Date 113-234.5

Small luxuries disappeared from the ship with increasing frequency, but they reached Airtha space faster than Julian anticipated. All around him, crew members were scurrying to complete their tasks wrapped in thermal blankets because the heating conduits of the ship had been rerouted to engine. It all seemed worth it as the planet came into view from the room he and Ellis shared.

Airtha Prime's beauty was lost on Julian; dangerous gases made the planet purple with wisps of white clouds threading through volatile skies. The surface was inhospitable to human visitors. The gaseous clouds surrounding the volcanic rock were deadly without breathing apparatuses or proper inoculation. To accommodate the Coalition's numerous visitors, a large space station had been set up in the upper stratosphere of the planet. They were escorted past it by the two flagships that had intercepted them upon their entrance to Airtha space. Jensen had conducted the greetings with aplomb and diplomatic flair; far better than Julian could have done in his current state of mind.

Every minute they drew closer to Airtha, Julian spent an increasing amount of time in his cabin. Ellis was wasting away by inches. Barth was in and out, but Kaelem was more persistent. He would stand with a subtle tension in his thin shoulders, gazing out silently at the stars.

Less than two hours from planetfall, Kaelem broke his self-imposed silence. The Airthir's voice in Julian's mind pulled him from his thoughts. "*How did it happen?*" he asked.

"Pardon?"

"*I was not aboard the Maligned Kestrel when you ran afoul of this...Ezvorkian,*" Kaelem said. "*I wish to know the circumstances behind Ellis's current state.*"

"It was ugly." Julian's jaw tensed. "I still don't know everything. It's tormented me."

"*I am sorry for your torment, but I need to know the story.*"

Julian nodded to himself and threaded his fingers through Ellis's. Kaelem waited patiently while he conjured up the memories he had relived every day for five years. It all poured out, everything from the torture to the harsh words that had sent him away. Kaelem listened in silence, absorbing the information.

"To this day, I don't know if Orifian acted on his own or under Coalition orders," Julian finally said. "The war ended a few months after our run-in with Ezvorkian, and there was a general call for ships as fast and useful as the *Kestrel* to help rebuild the Coalition fleet. For all I know, they arranged everything

because they anticipated a use for my ship. I broke all ties with them, but it didn't stop me from losing the brightest and best part of my life."

"Your Ellis sounds very noble."

"He is. And I never knew how noble until he was gone. I spent five years searching for them, but Ezvorkian's use of Coalition nondetection technology prevented me from finding so much as a vapor trail."

They sat in silence, Julian drowning in his memories as Kaelem pondered his words.

"Listen to me, Captain Gaspar," Kaelem finally said. "We must retrieve the ring and take its power away from Zzesstari hands. The soul rings cannot be made anew, but their technology can be duplicated as long as the originals are still at large. Through helping you, we help ourselves. For every one we destroy, a sin of our past is remedied."

"But I do not know if we can save your lover."

Julian's free hand spasmed, automatically closing into a fist as he bit down on the inside of his cheek, stopping a thousand angry words from spilling out. "We can't have come this far and not have some way to save him!" Nausea tore at his stomach and he clenched his jaw to stop it from shaking. It was fruitless. Kaelem must have seen the anger—the crushing despair—in his eyes. Julian forced himself to turn away, ineffectually hiding from the too-calm mind of his steward.

"The tie the ring forged between the Zzesstari and your lover runs deep. If we simply cut it, then all that remains of Ellis will snuff out like a candlewick and Ezvorkian will keep all the power of the soul he has been siphoning."

Julian's mind railed at the words, silently denying what he knew to be true. "Can't we...reverse it, somehow?"

"When we touch down planetside, there are undertakings we might go through to make his passing more bearable and give you the time you need to say goodbye."

"I don't want to say goodbye," Julian said, standing suddenly. Kaelem made no move to step back from the Captain's sudden ire. "Look at the price he paid for me. How could I dishonor him by being unwilling to pay whatever it takes to save him?"

"If there was a way to join the two of you, it might draw his essence back from Ezvorkian, but the Airthir soul bond cannot be recreated by men." Kaelem's head shifted a bit. "Believe that if there were a way, I would share it with you."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but you have to understand that I don't find it all that comforting at the moment." Julian gritted his teeth, trying not to lash out at his steward. All this time, Kaelem had dangled hope before him and made him believe that there had been a way to save Ellis. All for nothing. He forced himself to take a steadying breath. It was done. He was just surprised that Kaelem wasn't already trying to pull the ring from Ellis's hand. "Why did you do it, Kaelem? Why drag us halfway across the galaxy when you knew there was no hope?"

“Julian, the Airthir have learned hard lessons about trust. While I know that you are an honorable man, and my people hold you in high esteem, I had to be certain that you would come to Airtha to allow us to destroy that damned ring.”

“I can’t accept that. I don’t care if the chances of me saving him are one in ten billion, Ellis and I are going through that stupid ceremony.”

“But—”

“How else could I live with myself? When I realized I’d left him behind, it destroyed me. Grasping at straws may be futile, but it’s the sort of futility that will keep me sane.”

Silence stretched out between them until Kaelem finally nodded to himself and moved towards the door. *“I shall prepare the shuttle.”* He stepped out without another word.

Caught in helpless grief, Julian returned to Ellis’s bedside.

“If I lose you, I don’t know how I’ll go on,” Julian told him. There was no response. Julian took Ellis’s hand in his and pressed his forehead against the cool fingers. “I would pay any price, just to be with you.”

The silence was damning and Julian cursed. He cursed Ezvorkian and Orifian for their part in the circumstances that had brought his lover here. He cursed the Airthir for striking their demonic bargain with the Zzesstari. He cursed Kaelem for his false hope and empty words. He even cursed Ellis for not allowing him to die back on the *Ethervold* rather than putting them both through the grief of losing each other all over again.

Most of all, he cursed himself. If he had not let Ellis doubt his love, maybe the other man would have let them meet their fate together, rather than taking the burden of Ezvorkian’s evil upon himself.

Chapter Sixteen

Aboard the Eyas, lower atmosphere of Airtha Prime

Coalition Standard Date 113-234.7

The sight of pristine silver buildings cropping up from Airtha Prime's dark mountains offered Julian little comfort. The *Eyas* was flying perilously close to one of the largest peaks on the planet below, and Julian gritted his teeth as Kaelem drew ever closer to the massive formation of volcanic rock. He fought against his urge to take the helm from Kaelem, increasingly nervous as they winged towards the ground.

Ellis shivered in his arms. His body had been tearing itself between freezing and fevered the last few hours, and Julian could do little more than adjust the man in his embrace. Ellis relaxed his entire body against him as the *Eyas* touched down on Airthan soil.

"The elders await."

Julian inclined his head and stood, lifting Ellis's wasted body. The Airthir opened the hatch and Julian followed him down the plank to the ground below. He and Ellis had both been inoculated against the poisonous gases in the Airthan atmosphere, but Julian couldn't help holding his breath during those first few steps forward. If anything went wrong, he had left ownership of the *Kestrel* to Barth.

A small group of Airthir stood waiting for him at the foot of the shuttle. Without a word, they surrounded him, their heated bodies pressing against him and Ellis. Julian glanced at Kaelem, his frayed temper eased somewhat by the Airthir's calming presence. The too-warm atmosphere of the planet was already beginning to seep into his pores and a sweat broke out across his body.

They stood in heavy silence. All around him, the Airthir communed in silence and he only received the minutest brush of awareness against his consciousness. Cool fingers reached out to Julian's forehead, caressing his skin with feather-light touches. He tried to bear in mind what Kaelem had said about the contact drug that had to be smeared on his skin. It would make him more susceptible to whatever mind-altering technology would accompany his attempt to save Ellis from the ring's effects—a last-ditch effort to save his lover's life, though Kaelem thought it was futile. Each elder drew what felt like a different sigil on his forehead. There was no difference at first, but slowly he began to understand the conversations going on around him. It was scattered and hard to make sense of. Their language seemed to rely more on sensations than words. He got the impression that they weren't hopeful about Ellis's recovery, but the thoughts were cut off when they pulled away.

After what felt like an hour of standing in the cumulatively unbearable heat, the aliens finally backed off, leaving only Kaelem at his side. They retreated from the landing site and Julian shifted Ellis in his arms. Kaelem beckoned him to follow.

Making their way from the *Eyas*, Julian felt his eyes water from the stinging clouds hovering near the ground. The sweat clinging to his shirt occasionally caught a gust of hot air, cooling him slightly before the overbearing heat hit him again. The distance shimmered with an oasis-like effect that made the mountain before them ghostly in appearance, but through the vaporous air he began to make out black dots that he had to assume were the entrances to some sort of cave network.

"In these places, my people created the soul rings," Kaelem said. "And in these places, we damned ourselves."

"I'll save him."

While Kaelem did not pause in step, the subtle movements in his normally too-still body made his hesitation obvious nevertheless. *"Julian, you must understand. Ellis is very far gone—"*

"And you must understand that I haven't come this far to lose him now." Julian took a steadying breath, though the air stung his lungs. *"Even if it means my life for his, I'll take that damn ring off his finger and make sure that Ezvorkian is never able to hurt him again."*

The responding silence spoke volumes. They drew closer to the base of the mountain, the cave entrances ominous before them. Kaelem came to a halt outside the largest one. The sides of the cave were smooth and obviously manufactured, but there was no light within the depths. Julian glanced sidelong at Kaelem.

"This place has a...sense about it; echoes of memories from the days when we were only able to communicate to one other. You may call it magic, if your beliefs run a more holistic route."

Julian swallowed nervously and held Ellis tighter against him.

"I shall wait here for your return. You will see echoes of your past and his. They wait like ghosts for the unprepared, but do not be afraid. You must not be afraid. You will know what to do, when the time comes. If you love this Ellis as much as you claim, then you must rely on that love to bring you both through this."

Julian took a deep breath, the acrid taste of the planet's atmosphere bitter on his tongue. He took his communicator in hand. "Barth?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"We're going in. I'm breaking radio contact."

There was a pause on the other end. "Good luck, Julian."

Julian passed the communicator to Kaelem and took the first few steps into the darkness of the cave. It should have been impossible for the air around him to become hotter, but the cave air pressed oppressively

against him, making it hard to breathe. Ellis's chest shook with rasping breaths and Julian steeled his nerves to continue forward.

The dark swallowed them and the dim light from the world outside disappeared as soon as they moved past the entrance. Julian continued forward without pause, his steps surer than his heart. He focused everything on the man in his arms, trusting that Kaelem had not steered him wrong.

A light appeared in the distance ahead and he continued unerringly towards it. The harsh cast reminded him of the artificial light aboard the *Kestrel*. Somehow, he was seeing the interior of a ship—a room that appeared from nowhere. It was so out of place in the darkness around him that his steps faltered. That was when he heard the voice echo around him.

“...you'd be surprised what desperation can do to a weak mind...”

Julian spun, his hand itching for his blaster only to remember he'd left it on the *Eyas*. If there was someone in the darkness, he would be caught blind and unarmed.

“I have asked what you would be willing to sacrifice.”

He froze. The voice was slimy with contempt and he recognized Ezvorkian's perfectly manicured diction.

Julian's lips drew into a sneer. The room before him was the Captain's quarters aboard the *Ethervold*. He had become intimately acquainted with it when Ezvorkian had captured their boarding party. The air shimmered and projected images appeared. He started when he saw himself—*what had Kaelem said about ghosts?*—standing in front of the corpse-feeler.

He remembered hearing the words—did he have to relive his time aboard the *Ethervold* once again? In his nightmares, he could still hear the whip's crack. Julian glowered at the alien. This was how he remembered him—malformed and slightly shrunken, as if he had not developed properly in the womb.

“I would be remiss in my duty as your captor if I did not ask them the same.” The other captain had been fishing. All along, he had wanted someone to wear the soul ring and prolong his wicked existence. Julian had been blind to it at the time, steadfast in his belief that Ezvorkian had wanted to enslave them.

“Don't you dare touch them!”

“My dear Julian, I don't need to. You've done all of my work for me.” The Zzesstari's lips twitched. Julian watched the goon behind him grab and strangle him almost to unconsciousness before hefting his limp body and dragging him from the room.

He'd thought that would be the end of it, but another door opened and one of Ezvorkian's brutes forced Ellis inside. Julian's stomach gripped in fear. Were these Ellis's memories he was seeing? Had his lover been forced to watch everything? Ellis was pushed to the ground before the captain and glared at him.

“So much defiance,” Ezvorkian said, “when I am prepared to show your friends such compassion.” He smiled, translucent lips pulling visibly across his teeth.

Ellis's face paled. “What do you want?”

Ezvorkian's finger twitched and the alien holding Ellis hit him with a hard backhand. Ellis sagged in his grip and was dropped unceremoniously to the ground.

"I find it intriguing that the last of the Celestial Fae would fall into my grasp. And so easily, too. A matter of chance and I find myself with the singularly fascinating opportunity to extend my life forever. You could grant me immortality."

"I would rather die than wear one of your damned soul rings."

"I shouldn't be hasty, were I you. You see, I know a fair bit about your race." Ezvorkian's hoverboard circled Ellis's prone form. "You're the lone remnant of your kind, doomed to travel the stars until you find that one soul who can free you from your immortality. Centuries pass. Civilizations rise and fall, yet you remain. Everything you care for wastes away. Friends. Lovers. Other elves. Each piece of your life dies, yet you continue on in hope of finding the one soul in trillions that might free you from the shackles of immortality."

"You should consider my offer a gift."

"A gift?"

"The soul ring will mimic that for which you've sought your entire life. You will have your mortality. And you will have the privilege of spending the remainder of your days attached to me."

Ellis stared at him, unmoving.

"Do you know what I can do to your friends, elf?" His voice was still calm. "The anguish I might offer them that would last beyond their deaths?" He hit a button on his chair and the sound of Julian's screams suddenly filled the chamber.

Ellis's hands flew up to his ears to block out the sound, his face twisted in grief and horror.

Ezvorkian cut the connection. "I want to know what you would be willing to offer, to keep them from it." Ellis's head dropped, his shoulders shaking. "To keep *him* from it." Ellis barely withheld a gasp. "Oh, yes. I know exactly what Captain Gaspar is to you. And I know ways of making him suffer beyond what his mind would be able to bear."

Julian held Ellis tighter in his arms.

"Tell me."

"Anything," Ellis whispered.

"Anything," Ezvorkian repeated. A cracked tongue ran across his thin lips. "Yes. I might be amenable to that." He hit a few buttons on his board and a small hatch opened. He withdrew a ring box from inside and cracked it open. "Here it is."

Ellis stared at the contents with horror.

"Submit and I shall release them."

"Let them reach safety first." Ellis took a steadying breath. "And then I'll wear your evil ring."

"No!"

The scene before him shattered like pieces of rough-hewn glass flying out around him. Julian braced himself, bending his body to shield Ellis from the worst of it. When nothing hit, he straightened. The pieces shifted into familiar patterns and soon the entire galaxy stretched out around him, mimicked in stars created from the memories he and Ellis now shared. The cave lit up from their silver-blue light.

In his arms, Ellis appeared translucent and his illness seemed to fade away. A particularly brilliant star formed before him. Brighter than the others, it stood out among the millions that surrounded it.

Ellis shifted in his arms and pulled away from his grasp. "Anything."

Julian started at the voice.

"Anything to keep you safe." Ellis stood at his side, the ring glowing fiercely on his finger and pulsing in time with his heartbeat.

"Why, Ellis?"

"All this time, and you still don't know?" The star began to flicker in and out of existence. Julian shook his head in disbelief. "I love you, Julian. And I've been searching for you a very, very long time."

"I would have died to spare you this." Ellis started to collapse. Julian was there in an instant, catching him and lowering him to the ground gently. "I still would."

The drum of the ring slowed, mimicking his heartbeat. "It was my choice to make. And I would make it again."

"I never wanted this for you, Ellis. I love you." Julian lowered his head to catch Ellis's lips in a kiss. They were cold beneath his.

The star faded out completely.

Chapter Seventeen

Airtha Prime

Coalition Standard Date 113-234.73

“No.” He was torn between Ellis’s body and the new void. The ring was still glowing sickly yellow, but he could feel no heartbeat. “Ellis...you were trying to tell me the whole time, but I didn’t listen.” The words came raw from his throat. He pulled Ellis up from the ground to hold the still form against his body. He nuzzled the cool skin of Ellis’s neck. “Every day you were gone, I felt it. You...you *are* my soulmate, Ellis.”

The cave began to shake around him with hard staccato impacts. The stuttering reminded him of Ezvorkian’s guns hitting the shields of the *Kestrel*. Had the *Ethervold* repaired her engines enough to catch up? He waited and felt the same one-two-three beat of her guns hitting the mountain that housed them. When it came, it confirmed his suspicions. Ezvorkian had found them.

If he’s drained Ellis’s soul completely, why is he still attacking the cave?

Julian leaned over and pressed his forehead against Ellis’s, all thoughts focused on his lover.

Are you still there? Are you alive? There was no response and Julian felt tears welling. *Please, Ellis. I can’t do this without you anymore.*

“You’re never without me.” A specter of his lover appeared before him, a sad smile on his face. His skin seemed to shine with the same light as the stars that surrounded them. “I waited for you for a thousand years, Julian. I was happy to have you even for the short time we shared.”

“This can’t be the end of it!”

Ellis shook his head. “If I could stay with you for eternity, I would. My heart...*my soul* in your keeping. Even now, you call to me.”

Julian reached down and touched the ring on Ellis’s finger. The spectral figure shuddered. “You wore this ring, so that I wouldn’t have to.” He wrapped his fingers around Ellis’s. Where the ring touched him, he felt the last warmth from Ellis’s body thrumming against his skin. The ring wrought such evil, but it felt so warm and reminded him so much of Ellis. Even brushing it was like touching his lover again.

“If things had been different...if we had the time, how would we have formed the bond?”

“Passionately. Whatever else existed between us, there was always passion.”

The ring began to cool, and in his arms Ellis’s body grew lighter, as if his entire being was flowing out from the ring and into the Zzesstari. Julian wanted to pull it off. Ellis was already gone, what could the

harm be? A small voice in the back of his mind whispered deadly temptations—if he put the ring on his own finger, and Ezvorkian fed his lust for immortality from Julian’s soul as well, would he and Ellis finally be together?

Kaelem’s words came back to him. *If there was a way to join the two of you... The Airthir soul bond cannot be recreated by men.* But wasn’t the connection between him and Ellis like a soul bond of itself?

“I love you, Ellis.” He pulled the ring off Ellis’s finger.

“What are you doing?”

Julian ignored his yell of protest as he slid the ring onto his own finger.

“Julian, no!”

Immediately, he felt Ezvorkian’s presence in his mind, like oil and sand rubbed between his fingers, the Zzesstari’s smug satisfaction. Julian felt him begin to feed. It was like he was bleeding out through a small wound, sacrificing his life in inches.

Instead of resisting the pull, he fed into it. He focused on his connection to the alien and charged forward, pulling himself along. Ellis existed on the same line and Julian focused on what parts of him lingered along the thin path that bound them to their bodies. Ellis’s specter became less ethereal and more real. His heartbeat was slowing and Julian forced everything he was into the bond connecting him, Ezvorkian and Ellis.

He felt like he was slowly fading into existence before Ellis and was unsurprised when his lover grabbed and roughly shook his shoulders.

“How could you?” Ellis demanded. “Julian, *why?*”

“I can feel you.”

“You’re going to feel me kicking your—”

Julian pulled Ellis into his arms and pressed a hard kiss against the other man’s lips, cutting off the agonized words. Their naked bodies molded against each other, desperate for contact. Ellis resisted at first before finally surrendering and wrapping his arms around Julian’s shoulders.

When they finally parted, breathless, Ellis met his eyes. “You can’t die, Julian!”

“I’m not going to die, Ellis. And neither are you.”

Ellis frowned in confusion.

“Bond with me. Here. Now. Before Ezvorkian consumes us both.”

“I...I don’t know if...”

“Even if it doesn’t work, at least we won’t be separated again.” Julian kissed Ellis once more, their pressing lips sweet and almost chaste. It seemed to break down the last of Ellis’s resistance and he grabbed Julian, pulling him closer.

“Then let’s make love. One last time.”

It won't be the last time, Julian swore silently. He lowered Ellis to the ground, his hands already roaming over the other man's body. Their bodies fit together perfectly as always and they both gasped when Julian's groin brushed against Ellis's.

They rocked against each other, Ellis running greedy hands down Julian's sides. Visceral memory flowed back between them and Julian easily mapped every spot that had ever made the other man shiver. He made a point of worshipping all of them. Color and life flooded back into each inch on Ellis's body his hands touched. Slowly, Ellis became more real beneath him, more solid.

Ellis grabbed Julian's hips and pulled him close. "Now."

Without waiting, Julian positioned himself before Ellis's puckered opening and thrust inside. Ellis gasped, but his features betrayed no pain. Julian held himself still, savoring Ellis's silky heat around his cock. Waiting for Ellis to adjust, he pressed his lips against Ellis's neck.

hotsweetwantwantwant

The thoughts were not his, but they flowed through him, and his own thoughts twined with Ellis's. Ezvorkian's rage remained muted and impotent in the back of his mind.

Julian moved with gentle thrusts of his hips. Ellis whimpered, the sound escaping from breathy and disbelieving lips. His lover's thoughts—abstract and almost imperceptible—grew in his mind.

"Julian!" The word became a cry and Ellis's body arched beneath him. In their minds, Ezvorkian grew more distant.

"Let this happen," Julian whispered, kissing Ellis's brow. "Bond with me."

"Julian..."

Julian pulled him up, tucking the younger man into his lap and rocking so that his cock slid in and out of his lover with an increasing pace.

"You've been searching for me for centuries, Ellis, and in my heart I know that I've always been waiting for you." A particularly sharp thrust drew a cry from Ellis's lips. "Accept me, Ellis. I want this. I want you."

Ellis wrapped his arms around Julian's neck, wordless cries falling like rain from his lips. Julian increased the pace, anchoring his hands on Ellis's hips. With each second, the link between them seemed to become more defined and the bond tying them to Ezvorkian became less real. He knew the words Ellis couldn't speak. Words of love and devotion poured from his mind as freely as small gasps did from his lips.

Julian started. He could see himself in Ellis's mind; Ellis's vision of him was breathtaking.

"Almost..."

"Yes... Come for me, love."

Everything between them was suddenly sharper and more real. Julian's hips snapped in a hard jerk and he spilled his seed inside the other man. Ellis cried out, and his body tightened and twisted in intense pleasure as his own climax overcame him. Ellis's pleasure clouded his mind, washing over him and

doubling the force of his own orgasm. Ellis slumped in his arms and Julian had to hold him up to stop him from toppling over. Kissing Ellis's temple, he murmured small words of comfort and love in his ear.

Ellis began to fade away, and Julian felt a momentary stab of panic before he realized that the last trace of Ezvorkian's presence was gone from his mind. Ellis dissipated into the darkness around them. Julian's heartbeat quickly became more prominent in his ears. The heaviness of his body slowly surrounded him.

When his eyes opened, he was back in his body, kneeling on the floor of the cave. Ellis had returned to his embrace.

The ring on his finger crumbled into dust that disappeared in the dim light. His heart stopped when he did not see Ellis's chest moving. But the body grew warm in his embrace. Finally—finally—the beautiful sapphire eyes opened.

They stared at each other, all history forgotten in the space between them. Though Ellis's mind pressed against his, Julian felt like he was seeing his lover anew. As one, they adjusted to kiss each other. Ellis's mouth was possessive and searching and Julian deepened the kiss. All touch of sickness was gone. He had fantasized and dreamt of Ellis's taste for the past five years.

They finally pulled apart when a sob of disbelief wrenched itself from Ellis's lips. "I thought I was dead."

He stared into Ellis's eyes. They were no longer the shining sapphires he had known for so long, but a dark blue that shone with memories of starlight. "I love you."

A burst of joy welled in his chest, teasing his senses until he could barely breathe. Ellis's mind responded in kind. Julian's throat tightened. He wasn't sure if his mind could process the raw sensations dancing between them, but he was eased by the very core of them, the core that spoke Ellis's name.

He wanted to remain with his arms wrapped around Ellis forever. But even as he breathed in the scent of the other man, Ezvorkian's weapons struck the mountain again.

Chapter Eighteen

Aboard the Eyas, upper atmosphere of Airtha Prime

Coalition Standard Date 113-234.76

Breaking through the heavy cloudbank of Airtha Prime's volatile atmosphere, Julian just managed to dodge a poorly aimed laser array. He cursed and brought the shuttle up quickly.

When they'd left the cave behind, it had been to the sight of the *Kestrel* chasing the *Ethervold* out of the lower atmosphere. The wreckage of a downed Airthan ship nearby had spurred them both into action, Julian taking point in their sprint back to the shuttle. Kaelem followed quickly, shocked silence straining the air between them. They could only imagine the alien's thoughts at seeing Ellis alive and hale.

"Looks like we didn't do a good enough job on their engines," Julian muttered angrily from the pilot's chair. The *Ethervold* hovered near the *Kestrel* like a specter of doom, its weapons firing on the *Kestrel* without remorse. "Where are the Airthan ships?"

"My people have little in the way of arms, Julian Gaspar. We have no need of them."

Julian shook his head and swung the shuttle around to get a better view of the situation. The *Ethervold* had an imperfect line of sight on them, but guns were trained on the *Kestrel*'s starboard side.

"This is going to be a bit tricky," Julian said. "We'll have to pass directly through their line of fire to make it to the docking bay."

"Didn't they make you pilot at sixteen?" Ellis asked. Julian nodded. "Show us why."

"Both of you buckle up." Julian listened for the click of their safety belts engaging and then threw himself into maneuvering the *Eyas*. He banked to the left, avoiding stray fire. It cut across the starboard delta wing and Kaelem quickly ran diagnostics on the damage.

Tearing left, Julian narrowly avoided another blast from the *Ethervold* and concentrated on nothing but the ship around him and the viewscreen in front of him. The laser fire intensified as they drew closer to the *Kestrel* and Ellis gasped as they narrowly avoided one of the warheads fired straight towards them.

"He knows you're aboard this vessel," Kaelem commented. Julian didn't respond. *"What he's after, I can't say. The soul ring is shattered. It would be impossible for him to forge another."*

"I can tell you why he's after us." Ellis reached forward and placed his hand on Julian's shoulder. Julian automatically reached up to twine their fingers together for a second before returning his focus to the flight. "He's a spiteful, bitter thing. If he can't have me, he wants me dead."

“Well, he’s spent far too long having his wants indulged.” Julian wound his way back around one of the *Kestrel*’s wings, taking them towards the docking bay. Quickly punching in the code to open the hatch door, he gestured for Kaelem to get Barth on the comm. “Barth? We’re coming in.”

“I’ll distract them, shall I?”

Even as Barth spoke, a barrage of fire shot out from the *Kestrel*. In his peripheral vision, Julian saw all five of the shots hit the *Ethervold* straight on. The *Ethervold* returned fire, attention drawn completely away from the *Eyas* and allowing it to pull into the shuttle bay unmolested.

Julian quickly unstrapped himself. Running to the back of the shuttle, he shouted to Ellis and Kaelem. “Stay here.”

Not really expecting either of them to obey, he hit the control panel on the shuttle to open the door and took off across the shuttle bay, pleased to see the lift’s doors open and awaiting him. Ellis followed fast on his heels, just managing to dodge into the lift before the doors closed.

Ellis grabbed Julian’s hands in his. “We’ve spent enough time apart.”

“I agree.” Julian wrapped an arm around Ellis’s waist and swept the younger man into his arms. Pressing his lips against his lover’s, he quickly laid claim to the warm lips beneath his own. When the lift slowed, he reluctantly pulled away.

Laying a second, brief kiss on Ellis’s lips, he stepped away just as the doors slid open and admitted them onto the bridge. Ellis followed, grinning from ear to ear when he saw Barth hastily evacuate the command seat. Barth clasped Ellis in a quick embrace and Julian dropped down into his chair to review the ship’s schematics. She was holding fine.

His lips curled into a half-smile, which disappeared when he turned to his second in command. “Report!”

“We’ve taken a beating, Captain, but our shields are still at forty percent integrity. We haven’t brought out any of the big guns yet.”

“Then let’s bring them out. And hail that son of a bitch.”

He didn’t expect Ezvorkian to respond, but a mere second after his order, the ghastly face appeared on the viewscreen. Every bit of life he’d robbed from Ellis had been stolen away, returning him to the desiccated shell Julian remembered.

“Julian Gaspar, I am going to destroy you.”

“You know that we outgun you, Ezvorkian. Surrender to the Airthir to answer for your crimes or we will have to blow you out of the stars.”

Ezvorkian smirked. “Even should you spontaneously grow a backbone and destroy me, I will always hold sway over your young friend. A soul bond is not so easily destroyed or forgotten. When he wakes up screaming, it will be my name that falls from his lips, not yours.”

“Look at us, Ezvorkian. You say the soul bond is not easily destroyed. Is it easily missed?” Ezvorkian peered at them. Ellis’s hand—deprived of his ring—rested gently on Julian’s shoulder. “You told Ellis you knew what I was to him. Know now that it was me who took him from you. And it will be me who keeps him.”

The communication relay cut out and Julian looked at Ellis. The younger man’s face twisted in pain, but he nodded.

“All weapons at the ready.”

He waited pensively, anxiety tearing at his gut. Though part of him still ached for revenge, he had entertained the hope that the Zzesstari would disappear from their lives completely when they had left him stranded. Julian had never taken a life or destroyed a single ship in spite or anger during his years as a privateer. He braced himself, his hand held aloft above his head. Everything that Ezvorkian had done to him and the people he cared about—did it justify the alien’s destruction?

Another shot impacted against their hull. Could he afford mercy, when Ezvorkian would show them none?

From behind his chair, Ellis took in a slow breath. His lover’s voice curled into his mind. “*Whatever you decide, I’m with you.*”

“Captain, they’re preparing their warheads.”

Julian gritted his teeth. Even the improvements of their shields would be unable to withstand the full brunt of such an attack. “They’re firing in five...four...”

“*I love you, Ellis.*”

“*And I you, Julian.*”

“Fire,” Julian ordered.

A lightning-fast collection of energy beams shot out from the *Kestrel* and hit the *Ethervold* head-on, each bypassing the shields entirely. Julian reached out and grabbed Ellis’s hand. The last beam scored a direct hit on the ship’s engine bay. There was no immediate effect but Julian could imagine the engine superheating. Every second that passed after the last beam hit the ship was another nail in Ezvorkian’s coffin. The sides of the *Ethervold* began to buckle. Ellis hastily averted his eyes at the last minute. The ship collapsed upon itself. Thousands of pinpoints of light exploded out from the ship, brilliantly lighting up the viewscreen before disappearing completely. The remnants of the ship, a million particles of superheated metal, sat suspended in space, shining like the stars surrounding them.

Ellis let out a staggered breath. Julian was unsurprised to see tears running freely down his cheeks. He reached out and wound his arms around Ellis, pulling the unresisting man into his lap. Ellis buried his face against Julian’s neck, whispering nonsensical words into his lover’s skin. After getting his own fast-beating heart under control, Julian had gathered enough presence of mind to understand what Ellis was whispering.

“It’s over.”

He pressed a kiss against the top of Ellis's head. "Yes, love. It's over."

"So, do you two do a floor show?"

"Shut up, Barth."

Epilogue

Orbiting Igrittian IV, "The Ocean Moon"

Coalition Standard Date 114-016.8

Ellis was watching the stars again.

He appeared more human every day, even with the light of the stars lending a pale silver cast to his skin. His eyes were becoming less crystalline and more sincere, and a healthy pink flush was slowly creeping its way into his features, small things that Julian had never missed until he thought of them. Ellis had been afraid that the changes would make him less desirable, but to Julian, his beauty felt less untouchable.

Rising from their bed, Julian crossed the cool floor and wrapped his arms around his lover. Ellis sighed into the embrace and leaned back against Julian. He was warm and heat danced across the bare skin where their bodies touched. They stood in comfortable silence.

"Which one is yours?" Julian finally asked. Ellis pointed. There were a thousand stars of varying brightness clustered in the small area he indicated, but Julian found it peculiarly easy to find it. It glowed strong, brighter than the others. Or maybe, it just seemed so to him. "Do you miss it?"

"Not when I have you." Ellis tilted his head back. Julian accepted the invitation to lay a kiss on the warm lips.

"I remember you telling me the story of the Keeper. Didn't you say that your star would always be comforted by the knowledge that you were happy?"

Ellis nodded. "Yes. Of course, it means you will have to *keep* me happy." Despite the words, he smiled teasingly.

In reply, Julian kissed the sensitive skin behind Ellis's ear. Goose bumps broke across his lover's skin as he trailed a line up the graceful neck with his lips. Ellis shuddered under his mouth.

"Would you consider it cocky if I told you that I felt more than capable of doing so?"

"No. I would consider it to be an accurate assessment of your skills." Ellis looped his arms around Julian's neck, pulling him into a kiss. "I love you, Julian."

"And I you." He smiled. "I'll never grow tired of hearing those words."

"I should hope not. But it's quite the commitment."

Julian placed his hands on Ellis's hips. "Does the rest of our lives seem like enough time?"

Ellis did not respond. Instead, he leaned his body against Julian and allowed himself to be quietly drawn back to their bed.

About the Author

Christine Price lives with her husband, two psychotic cats and a nursery waiting to be filled in Edmonton, AB. Her fascination with the written word began at a young age with a one-page story entitled “My Mother is a Werewolf” and took off from there. In her spare time, she enjoys reading good books, drinking good wine and fine-tuning her mental filters. *Soul Bond* is her first published work.

You can follow Christine through her website www.christinepricewrites.com or on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/CPriceIsWrite](https://twitter.com/CPriceIsWrite).

Two men. One passion. No choice.

Beyond Meridian

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A Men in Space Story

Captain Rick Raine got more than he bargained for when he agreed to take on a brash young man as a crewmember along with contraband cargo. Karl's spirit intrigues him, but he didn't sign up for battling privateers, the United Planetary Alliance—or his traitorous body's response. Especially to a naïve kid who cheats at holo poker and knows a whole lot more than he should.

Deep in the heart of enemy space, Karl's goal, to rescue the woman who saved him from a life of sexual servitude, is finally close enough to touch. Unfortunately, so is Captain Raine, who becomes erotic poetry in motion when he pilots the ship. Raine's an honest thief, but Karl can't trust him with UPA secrets that could get them both killed.

But when Karl signed on for this mission, no one told him to hang on to his heart...

Warning: hot man-on-man sex, talking spaceships, eight-legged robots, space pirates, a potty-mouthed space cowboy, a beautiful woman in distress and a sad lack of laser sword battles.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Beyond Meridian:

Naturally the kid showed up at the crack of the dawn with his damn cargo. Okay, maybe it wasn't dawn exactly, but still, it was way too early for Raine, who hadn't gotten much sleep last night. The lights of the space dock had his eyes watering. Raine blinked at the kid—what was his name again? Kyle? Kasper? Karl? Karl! Karl looked way too smug, standing on the catwalk while Raine leaned against the hull of his ship. He'd opened the hatch when he got the alert that someone had entered his port.

"You serious? You found something that fast?" Raine shook his head.

Karl smiled, and damn, Raine had been right in his assessment the night before. The smile lit up his whole face, made those eyes sparkle. He didn't look like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders anymore. It suited him, turned him from a pretty boy into something special. Raine couldn't help but smile back.

"I'm just that good," the kid said with a wink, and now there was a surprise.

"You picked up that sense of humor I was talking about too."

Before Karl could reply, his mouth snapped shut and the smile drained from his face. At first Raine didn't know why, but then he turned and saw Leah coming out of the ship. She was adjusting the tie on her top, knotting it at the back of her neck. It was designed to show off the blue and lavender tattoo on her lower back, leaving much of the skin bare.

“Mmm, good morning,” she said as she stretched. “Thanks, Captain. I’ll have Madam update your tab.”

If looks could kill, Raine knew he’d be dead ten times over right now. He’d rather have the kid smiling than staring daggers. Course, the kid hadn’t seen anything yet.

As if right on cue, Michael emerged from the ship, his golden hair sticking up in all directions. He gave Raine a sleepy smile. “Thanks, Captain.”

“Stars,” Karl muttered, crossing his arms and looking away as Raine saw the two workers off, a kiss for Leah and a nice ass squeeze for Michael.

Raine ignored the death glare for the moment. “Where’s this cargo of yours, kid?”

“Getting inspected. It’ll need your authorization before it can be sent to your dock.”

“I hope you negotiated a damn good price.” Raine walked along the gangplank toward the wall of the spaceport, where he could access his account and authorize the shipment. “Where are we taking it anyway?”

“Neo Delhi.”

Raine rolled his eyes. It wouldn’t be anything fun, then. Neo Delhi was ridiculously picky about what was and was not let onto the planet.

He punched in his code and skimmed the authorization request. “And how much are we getting paid?”

“It’s twelve grand for the shipment. You can keep the profit. Like I said, I just need transport to Mendhem.”

“And transport back. I didn’t miss that part. Wasn’t that drunk last night.” Twelve grand was more than fair.

“No, you were too busy doing other things last night.”

Raine punched in his approval for the cargo before whirling around. “What’s wrong, kid, you have a problem with sex?”

He was gratified to see a pink blush rise on the kid’s cheeks, pleased at embarrassing him. Karl would really need to relax if he planned on traveling with Raine.

“I have a problem with people paying for it,” Karl said through gritted teeth.

“You are really on the wrong planet, then.” Raine closed out his transaction with the terminal. The cargo would be delivered as soon as it cleared inspection. “I’m a businessman. I don’t have a problem with making a business transaction. It’s not like I didn’t deliver on my part of the bargain. I get what I paid for and they get a little more toward clearing out their contracts.”

Karl snorted. “Right. What doesn’t go to the Madam or Sir for room and board and whatever other fees they can think of. You’re living in a dreamland if you think it’s a fair transaction.”

“Look, kid, I don’t give a shit about saving the solar system and all that. The arrangement is what it is.”

“Right.” But those eyes stayed hard, like two shards of cold blue glass.

It sounded like a damn good time to change the subject. Raine moved back toward his ship. “What the hell is the cargo, anyway?”

“The official version?”

He turned and raised an eyebrow at the kid who hadn’t moved. “What’s the contraband?” Because honestly, you didn’t pay twelve grand to take just anything to Neo Delhi.

Karl smirked again, though this smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Lingerie.”

Raine barked out a laugh. Must be some kinky shit, because they didn’t let that kind of stuff in past customs on Neo Delhi. “Hidden in what?”

“Crates of clothing for sale. There are false bottoms.”

Trust the kid to find some shady deals his first time out. Raine shook his head. “Well, come on. I think it’s about time I show you around my ship.”

It was worth it just to see the kid smile again.

Just when Karl thought he had Rick Raine figured out, the man went and did something else that surprised him. He’d seen the arrogant trader in the bar, the oversexed rogue on the gangplank, and now, as Raine showed off his ship, Karl saw something else, something he couldn’t quite identify. There was affection in his voice, and if Raine had been talking about a person, Karl would have said it was love. He even caressed the hull, showing off strong, well-formed fingers that made Karl wonder what else those hands were good at doing.

He shook himself out of those thoughts, forcing himself to pay attention.

“She’s a modified F2400 series out of Heijing. I had all her engines refitted two years ago, so she’s almost brand new.” Raine spoke as they entered the ship. “Standard crew for a ship of this kind is six. There are two sets of personal quarters—one for the captain and one for the first mate. Berths in the hull for the remaining crew.”

“Yet you run her by yourself?” Karl followed on Raine’s heels, trying to take in all the details, memorizing the way through the cargo hold and past the personal quarters, up toward the bridge.

“I have two maintenance bots,” Raine explained. “They keep the engines going. Fine repairs I do myself. And as for piloting her, well, Dina all but pilots herself.”

Karl opened his mouth to ask about that, but they’d stepped on the bridge at that point and the front wall sparked into life. A woman appeared on the screen, with long chestnut hair and blue eyes. She paid more than a passing resemblance to the ship’s captain and Karl wondered if that wasn’t intentional.

“Good morning, Captain. Unknown individual on the bridge.”

“You have an AI,” Karl breathed. He’d only heard about technology like this. They certainly didn’t have anything like it in the UPA.

“Dina, this is Karl. He will act as first mate on our next cargo run. Karl, this is Dina.”

“Um, nice to meet you.” Karl waved to the image on the screen, unsure how to act toward the ship’s personality.

“A pleasure to meet you as well, First Mate Karl.”

He cringed. “Just Karl is fine. Thanks.”

When he turned back to Raine, the man was giving him an odd look, eyebrows scrunched together as if deep in thought. Karl didn’t quite know what to make of that. He looked around the rest of the bridge, noting the lack of what seemed to him to be standard bridge equipment. There was no navigator’s helm, no other screens except for the large front wall. A few panels took up the places between the two seats welded into the floor, but Karl didn’t see the standard controls for actually piloting. Did Dina really do all the flying herself?

“Captain, you have fifteen messages from the space port taxation authority. You owe twenty-one hundred on the dry dock.”

“Fuck,” Raine muttered. “Your supplier didn’t happen to advance you any of that cash, did they?”

Still a bit caught up in his thoughts, Karl shook his head. “What? Uh. No. Payment upon receipt.”

“Course. How much you got liquid, kid? I need to pay off the port authority and resupply before we head out.”

Karl had managed to get an account for his use on this mission. It wasn’t unlimited however, and he knew he needed to reserve much of it for the rest of his journey, for getting Sam out even if he had to buy her himself. He did plan on paying Raine for the transport, just not right now. He wasn’t that naïve; he knew Raine could take the money and run. “I can front you a grand,” he said carefully, hoping that sounded reasonable.

Raine frowned. “Damn it. Well, kid, looks like we need to raise some capital before we can get the hell out of here. Luckily, the casinos are open.”

Karl blinked at him. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Gambling to earn money?” It sounded like a terrible idea to him.

“It’s the only way, kid. Unless you can magic up the twenty-one hundred in back taxes, the ship ain’t leaving dry dock. And that means you and me both are stuck here. No cargo gets delivered. No trip to Mendhem.”

“I could just find another ship,” Karl said, marveling at the cheek of this guy.

“Cargo is already on its way to my hold, kid. No spacer is gonna want to step on my toes. C’mon.”

Karl wondered when exactly he’d lost control of the situation. Ever since arriving on Meridian it seemed his steps had carried him along, caught up in what he’d set in motion, unable to stop. He couldn’t go back even if he wanted to. Squaring his shoulders, he bit out, “Fine.”

Raine gave him a lazy smile with heavy-lidded eyes. “You’ll see, kid, it’ll be all right.”

Karl wished he could believe him.

Submission isn't an option—it's a full-time job.

Crimson

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A Men in Space Story

Humiliated by the betrayal of his former Master, Lieutenant Benjamin Kraft will do anything to bring the drug czar Tazu to justice—anything but kneel again. Forget passion too. He'd rather risk daily grow-op raids. Then, just when Tazu is finally within reach, an ambush wipes out Ben's entire squad and threatens the life of his partner—a partner he never realized he cared about, much less loved.

As a member of a former slave race known as starlings, Adam's speed and strength make him a valuable asset to the police force even as his blue skin inspires prejudice and derision from the other officers. Ben's always been able to look past that, so what's changed? Suddenly his partner is rude at every turn. Ben may try to get rid of him, but too bad; Adam won't be scared off. He has his own reasons for wanting to bring Tazu in, and he'll do it even if it means putting Ben in his place.

Even if it means acting as Ben's Master on their next mission: an investigation on a planet where sex is everywhere, and where whips and chains are the norm...

Warning: This title may prove addictive. It contains explicit m/m sex, leather chaps, latex shorts, and slippery goodness.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Crimson:

The heat birthed a storm. Beyond the balcony doors, the sky darkened moment by moment, rain-heavy clouds rushing in from the west. Adam shivered as he watched. Two bands of leather hung from his shoulders, just wide enough to cover his pectorals. The Granati might call it a vest, but he called it decoration, and barely that. Worse yet, neither of his wrists bore gauntlets. Even with latex shorts on, he'd rarely felt so naked.

"I'd give anything for a weapon," he said, just loud enough to be heard.

Ben looked over from the birdcage. Tight silk riding pants clung to his legs like a second skin, a perfect match for the riding crop hung from his low-slung, studded belt. Besides boots and a pair of biceps-high, black leather gloves, he wore nothing else. "We can't give our identities away."

Adam met his gaze but didn't reply.

"I said I was sorry," Ben apologized. His eyes lingered on Adam's outfit, on his spiked plumage. Color rose slowly in his face.

"Do you like me this way?" Adam asked. Suddenly being naked didn't seem so vulnerable after all. He leaned back against the balcony door, one hip cocked, and tensed all the muscles in his legs. They rippled all the way down to his combat boots.

Ben's eyebrow quirked in mock annoyance. "Are you *strutting*?"

"Not yet. Are you staring?"

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to answer a question with another question?"

Adam laughed. "Should I get you the leash?"

Ben opened his mouth for a quick retort, but nothing came. An instant later he laughed too, shaking his head. "Only if I'm the one on it."

Neither of them had a snappy comeback for that.

As awkward as strangers, they made their way to the shuttle waiting on the roof. By the time they touched down at the club, rain spattered against the skiff's viewscreen. Ben left its shelter first, guiding Adam through the bluster with an arm wrapped around his waist. Fingers brushed Adam's ribs, and the cold of the storm passed. Heat unfurling in his belly, he could barely stop himself from pushing Ben back against the wall. Ben *would* answer him whether he liked it or not, and soon.

Candelabras stood throughout the main room. Their flames guttered, casting the same shadow over and over again on the red walls. The benches, the stocks—all of them had been cleared away. A single metal cross dominated the floor, its iron arms forming a massive X. Wrist and ankle straps lay slack against its limbs.

Tau emerged from the darkness, Lexa at his side. Others sat in the shadows. Adam could hear them, a subtle shift of weight on leather couches. An eye glinted here and there, fixed on the scene about to begin.

Ben nodded in greeting. "A pleasure, Tau, as always. Is there some special occasion?"

"Only your pleasure," Tau intoned. "You cannot imagine how I have enjoyed watching you grow."

Lexa stepped forward and reached for Ben's belt buckle with ringed fingers.

Adam seized her wrist. He released it an instant later, faking shame, eyes downcast. "Please, Master. Let me prove that I am the one who should be on the cross, not you."

Ben glanced at Tau, seeking permission, and at once a different sort of fire burned in Adam's gut. The thought that Ben would let himself be ordered around by that son of a bitch! Adam choked back his anger. *The mission*, he reminded himself. *Until Ben tells me otherwise, I have to believe it's all for the mission.*

Tau's smile grew frosty. He beckoned, and a servant appeared, handing Tau the crystal decanter. The scarlet within shone like fresh blood in the candlelight.

Tau turned back to Adam, holding the bottle aloft. "Undress."

"Adam," Ben began warily, "*you don't have to do this—*"

Adam slammed his shields shut before he could hear a word more. He slipped free of his clothing and handed the pieces to Ben. Then, naked, he walked to the cross and turned his back on the crowd. Even its cool surface couldn't snuff the furious blaze beneath his skin. Lexa's soft hands trailed down his spine. She pushed his legs farther apart, a finger ghosting between his ass cheeks, and knelt to bind his ankles. His wrists followed, the leather straps cinched tight.

“May I start in with my crop?” Ben asked.

Tau tut-tutted. “So impatient. We must whet his appetite.”

Another set of hands, coarser and wider, smeared wetness from the nape of Adam’s neck to his heels. Within a heartbeat, the heat of his anger seemed glacial. True fire raged along the length of his body, first across his flesh and then beneath it. His bones became live coals.

Tau’s voice grated in his ear. “How does it feel?”

Adam cried out mutely, jerking against his restraints. How much had Tau used? Two, three times what he had used on Ben?

Tau seized his plumage. “Is that how you answer your betters?”

“It feels good.”

Tau spanked him once, hard, and Adam’s hips knocked against the cross. Despite the flare of pain, he longed to rock them. “Say it properly,” Tau snarled.

The room spun. The cross undulated beneath Adam as a lover would.

Tau’s fists slammed into his shoulder blades. As if from a distance, Adam heard himself scream, the sound familiar somehow.

“*Call him sir,*” Ben urged desperately.

Just like on the slave ship.

“Sir,” Adam mumbled. “It feels good, *sir*.” The word tasted of blood. Already his mouth had begun to swell from where it had connected with the cross.

Tau stepped away and in the next moment Ben was there, a silent presence at his back. Adam moaned aloud, straining towards him. Candle flames leapt. When he squeezed shut his eyes, their light continued to dance behind his lids. It grew brighter, sparks whirling.

Sparks. They rained down about Ben, falling from the gauntlet held aloft on Adam’s own wrist. Ben crouched on his hands and knees at Adam’s feet, legs wide, ass turned up for another blow.

“Oh fuck,” Adam muttered, even as the vision claimed him. His symbiot thrashed.

“*I’ll try not to hurt you,*” Ben whispered in his thoughts, but both the sentence and the instrument changing hands behind his back were meaningless compared to his fantasy. As if they had nothing to do with him, Adam felt the sudden rush of air over his skin, heard the low whistle. The whip cracked across his shoulders and his body screamed loud and long.

Diatribes of longing and lust echoed in the chamber. He had not known that he had such words for Ben. He knew only that no matter how hard he hit, Ben remained stubbornly silent, refusing to tell Adam how much he wanted this.

The lash snapped across his skin a second time. Adam arched into it, arms knotted beneath his shackles. The pain paled in comparison to the electricity sizzling in his fist.

Red bloomed across Ben’s back, mocking him. “Tell me, tell me, call my name—”

The whip licked over his spine, and Adam pulled wildly on his bindings.

“Wonderful,” Tau said, so far away. “Absolutely wonderful.”

“Isn’t he?” Ben asked. In Adam’s ears, Ben’s voice was amused. In Adam’s mind, Ben was ice against fire, as immobile and cold as a glacier.

No. Ben had to burn.

Adam’s eyes rolled back in his head as the world exploded in a crimson supernova.

Again the lash. At Adam’s ankle a strap came free, then at his wrist. “Mas...” Adam began, brokenly, but that wasn’t right.

The whip sliced deeper still, and blood poured down his back. “Mas...” he tried again, but still the word would not come. He couldn’t say it again, not now, not ever. He was only meant to hear it.

With a sudden wrench the last of the bindings gave. Adam whirled.

Ben stumbled back, eyes wide, and the whip fell from his fingers.

Adam leapt.

Ben was the one who would beg to be mastered now.

In space, no one will hear them moan.

Moonlust

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A Men in Space Story

The job was supposed to be an easy one for Captain Kar and his two-man crew: land the *Danaus* on the deserted moon, appropriate a few boxes of precious chromore, and jump out of the system before the Guardians could get to them. Even Will and Jay's inability to keep their hands off each other for any length of time should not have been too much of a problem.

They discover too late it's the laineards' mating season. The resulting sexual pheromones begin to affect them as soon as they step off the ship. With Will and Jay losing their minds to lust, and Kar himself blinded by visions of the two men he has wanted for months, things suddenly get much *harder* than expected.

Their only hope for not ending up in jail is to get out of there before the Guardians find them. Except an open loading dock contaminated the air inside the *Danaus*. And Kar will have to resort to drastic measures to keep Jay and Will apart long enough to escape...

Warning: The Lodge does not endorse or otherwise approve of this sexually charged M/M/M rendition of one of its elite members cavorting with the crew of a thieving spaceship while under the influence of pheromones-induced, overwhelming and all-consuming lust.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Moonlust:

With an enraged gesture, Jay lowered the sound of the comm so he wouldn't hear the small gasps and moans rising from the cargo bay anymore.

"Damn you, Kar. You'll pay for this."

Pay for what, Jay didn't really know at that moment. For locking him in the cockpit alone or for taking Will as his own? He couldn't have said which was worse. Frustration burned through his veins like acid, but how much of it was simply denied lust, and how much was pure jealousy?

The sound was gone, but Jay's mind continued to churn out images of what they might be doing. He didn't want to know, not really, and he certainly didn't want to see, and still he heard himself mutter, "Mid quadrant one. Display cargo bay."

The screen directly in front of him blinked to life. Part of him hoped they'd left the bay already and found their way to the living quarters. Or maybe, if he was lucky, they'd be hidden from view by a stack of boxes or—

Jay groaned. No such luck. As chance had it, Kar and Will were in front of the surveillance camera, slightly off-center but close enough Jay could see the tension in Kar's fingers as they cupped the back of

Will's head. They were kissing. Jay licked his lips and leaned forward in his seat. With Will's back to him, he couldn't really see much more than the constantly changing angle of their tilted heads. Kar's eyes were closed, and he looked younger. He held Will to him with both hands, the fingers of the right one threaded in his hair while the left rested chastely at the small of his back. Jay could just guess where Will's hands were: one curled around Kar's neck, strong yet gentle, and the other on his chest, probably, his thumb running back and forth over one nipple, then the other.

A painful jolt radiated from his cock, and he pressed his hand tightly against it. He'd been hard for too long. He craved relief. But not by his own hand, not like this, not alone while—

"Pursuing ships have jumped on our vector."

Jay growled at the computer's announcement, both because he had hoped he had shaken the Guardians and because at that instant, Kar's voice was the very last thing he wanted to hear. Why had it seemed like such a good idea to program the synchro this way?

"Lower quadrant four. Display radar."

The bottom right screen shifted from a view of the sun the Danaus was orbiting as closely as its shields allowed, to the rotating representation of the ship and its immediate vicinity. There were only two other ships on the radar, still at some distance. Jay searched for the third one, but after a few seconds he nodded in satisfaction. He'd lost one of the three ships that had been chasing them. Only two left before he could find a way to open the cockpit door and go kick Kar's ass.

He glanced at the other screen at the thought and winced, immediately realizing his mistake. His hand moved toward the controls that would turn off that camera, but he forgot what he was doing when he watched Kar tug Will's shirt out of his pants and over his head. Kar's hands returned to Will's back at once, sliding over skin that was perfectly smooth, Jay knew, descending lower and under the waistband of Will's pants.

He tore his gaze away and breathed in deeply. The air in the cockpit had to be clean by now. He was not a slave to his dick anymore. Nothing forced him to keep watching them. His hand hesitated toward the shut-off command, but it retreated without erasing the image on the screen.

"Mid quadrant four. Display map of the closest solar systems."

He found what he needed in seconds. It wasn't the closest system, but it would work fine. Keeping his eyes resolutely downcast, he started calculating his next move. Jumping this close to a sun had scared a Guardian. He'd try doing it again and take things from there.

One of the Guardians was accelerating, no doubt to get in front of the Danaus once more and force it to slow down. The second one was approaching on the nexus side for another attempt at grasping the Danaus. If they managed to capture the nexus, there would be no more jumping, and the game would be over.

Jay started a new evasive maneuver, this time rolling down and to the right when the last time he had angled the ship to the left.

He glanced at the cargo bay image even as the familiar warning fell from his lips. “Jump in—” His mouth was dry suddenly, and he didn’t know what he had been about to say anymore.

Will and Kar were on the floor now, both of them bare-chested, Kar propped on his forearm over Will. They lay sideways toward the camera so that Jay could see everything. He could see their tongues dueling as they kissed. He could see Kar’s hand, wrapped over both their cocks, holding them together as he bucked against Will, as Will arched into him. They hadn’t done more than free their cocks, hadn’t even shoved their pants down, and Will’s hands, hidden beneath the fabric, were kneading Kar’s ass and pulling him closer.

Jay took in a shaky breath and muttered, not caring anymore if they heard him, “Jump now.” He pressed the jump control and forced himself to keep his eyes on the computer screen in front of him. Two more jumps would take them to another sun, smaller than the last but with a warmer surface temperature. The Danaus had better heat shields than the Guardians’ ships. Those were made for speed, while the Danaus was a transport and exploration class. As long as they didn’t stay there too long...

His calculations made, he looked at the time. A few more moments before he could coax another jump from the Danaus. His eyes drifted to the cargo chamber view even as two dots appeared on the radar.

“Pursuing ships have—” the computer started, but Jay interrupted it abruptly.

“Acknowledged.”

Jay had to be imagining it, but the computer’s last word sounded reproachful. He knew quite well that tone of voice coming from Kar. He usually didn’t mind it. But right then, he didn’t want to hear it. He didn’t want to hear Kar at all, didn’t want to know what words his lips were forming, so close to Will’s own.

His fingers crept toward the comm controls, and he increased the sound gradually.

“Are you close?”

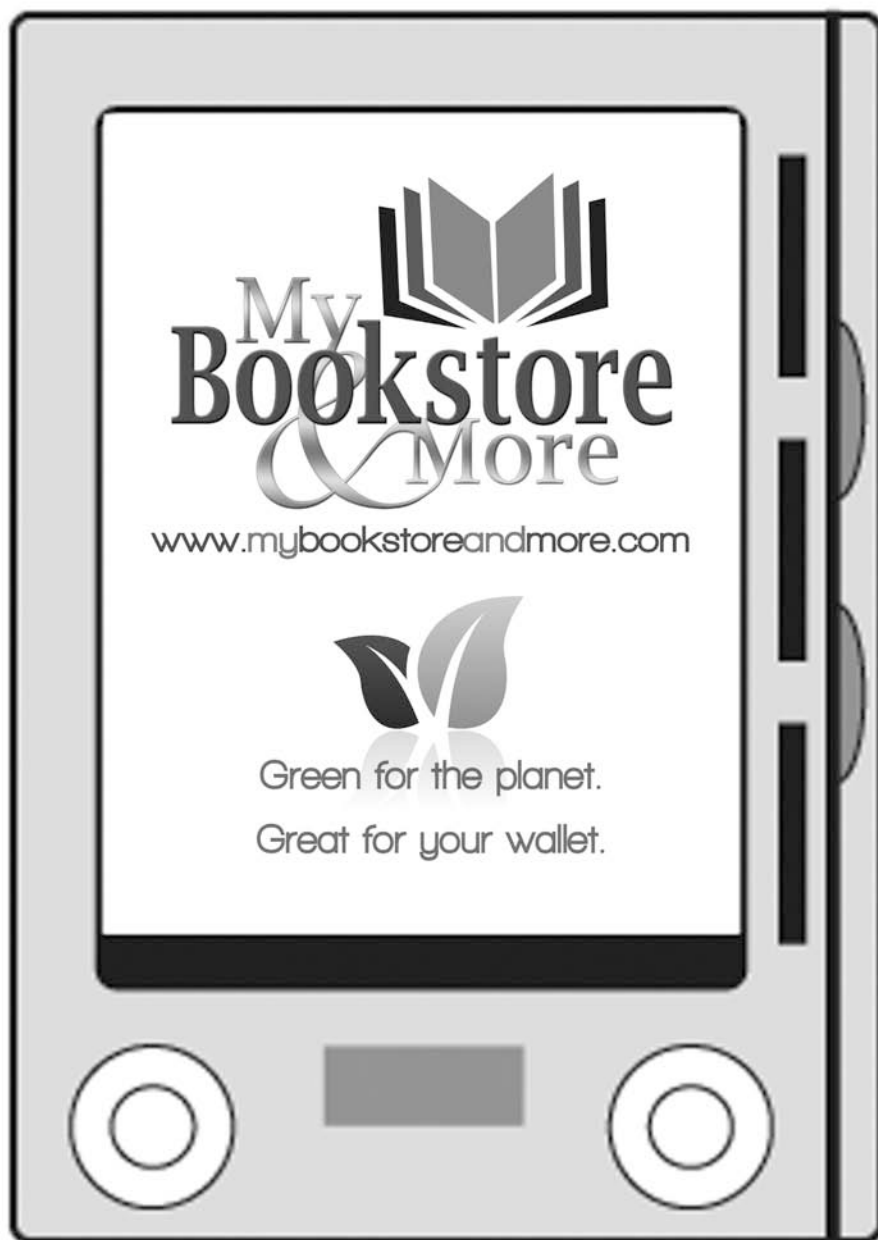
Will made a little grunting noise.

“Talk to me, Will. Is this—” He bucked harder against Will. Jay groaned. “—good?”

“Yes,” Will moaned, even as Jay hissed the same word.

This was what his first time with Will had been like—messy kisses, frottage, him trying to pull more than grunts from Will’s reluctant lips. They had been against a wall rather than the floor, and still fully clothed, but he remembered the desire on Will’s face, recognized the way he kept scrunching his eyes and opening them again as though afraid Kar would disappear if he stopped looking.

They kissed again, their mouths meeting harshly enough to bruise. Jay forced himself to look at the computer display. It was time to jump. He pressed the control without bothering to give a warning. He doubted they’d hear him if he did.



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