

ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



Shrouded
Angel

SHAYLA KERSTEN

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

Because of the Angellum, Patrea, a Virkolan, has spent his life afraid of loss. When darkness descends on his ship in the form of a strange angel, Patrea feels he can't stay on the *Avere*. But departing would mean leaving behind the only light in his life—his bunkmate Hadreal. He needs to find the courage to tell Hadreal how he feels.

Hadreal has always felt more than friendship for his younger bunkmate, but bitter past experience keeps him from acting on his feelings. When a new danger brings them closer, he decides it might be time to live again. But now his chance at happiness may end before he's able to sample it.

Sometimes it takes a brush with death to make life worth living.

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Shrouded Angel

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Chapter One

Unease shuddered down Patrea's spine. No sign of danger. Just his close-cousin Koris draining a *gasa* into a pitcher. The succulent promise of fresh blood after rationing should distract him. But this sense of danger wouldn't let him be.

He'd felt it before, although this time was different. Like a slight variation in tint to a familiar color. The first time, he hadn't recognized the feeling. Now he'd never forget it, different or not.

His memory flashed to the sight of white Angellum feathers splattered with the spray of Virkolan blood. His clan's blood. His family's blood.

As the mealhall erupted with voices and footsteps, he shook his head clear of the vision.

Hadreal poked his head around the doorframe to the galley. "Where's the feast?" His gaze fastened on a clear vessel full of crimson liquid. "Man, that smells good!" His mouth drooped open and his tongue swiped against an extended fang.

Even Patrea's unease couldn't stop him from smiling. Five years as Hadreal's bunkmate, Patrea had come to regard him as a friend, although he'd like to be more.

"Here." Koris handed the pitcher to Hadreal. "Take it out to the table while I put the other bird on to roast."

Hadreal wrapped both hands around the pitcher as if it were more precious than all the credit in the galaxy. His face dipped over the opening then he inhaled deep. With a sharp grunt, he left Patrea alone with Koris.

Patrea's discomfort grew until fear mixed with adrenaline. Angels couldn't be on board. Something else was setting off his internal warning system. The new captain?

Maybe the old one? The Terran—Jenkins—had admitted to colluding with angels. The new captain—his name was Teo—should have killed Jenkins right then and there. Maybe the Terran had sent a signal. His angel friends could be following them right now.

Then again, the feeling had been just as strong—if not stronger—on Captain Teo's old ship. Patrea chalked it up to Jenkins' insistence that Teo was harboring an angel.

A round of cheers came from the mealhall.

Koris, his hands full of feathers and fowl, shouldered Patrea toward the door. "No sense in missing out on the fresh stuff."

Nodding, Patrea wandered into the room where part of the small crew toasted with fresh blood. Snagging a cup, he almost drooled at the sweet aroma.

Since Jenkins had taken over the *Avere*, they'd had few opportunities for celebration or even a decent meal. Now Patrea understood Jenkins' reluctance at allowing blood for meals. Terrans had an aversion to drinking blood.

Captain Teo stood in the middle of the room with his cup raised. "To a profitable venture and a victorious fight!" The toast was familiar.

While most smugglers—freighters of any kind—were in the business for the money, they also dedicated their lives to fighting the Angellum whenever the opportunity arose.

The other two crewmen, Hadreal and Narndo, echoed his words. Missing was Sorin, the captain's mate. Strange he wasn't there to celebrate his lover's acquisition of a new ship.

As he tried to drain the cup, Patrea's uneasiness thickened, clogging his throat. He fought against choking on his drink.

The captain drained his cup then set it on the table. He sucked his top lip under the bottom then released it with a smack. "I hate to put a damper on a good celebration but I have some serious issues to discuss."

The hair on Patrea's neck rose. A flush of heat washed over him. One hand clenched into a fist. The other wrapped tightly around the metal cup. Irrational hate threatened his control.

"I have information about an Angellum project that bodes very ill for our people." Teo motioned toward the seats around the table, but no one moved to sit. "A couple of weeks ago, my mate Sorin was kidnapped by angels."

Patrea sucked in a sharp breath. His nails cut into the palm of his hand. Knuckles whitened on his other hand as he gripped his cup harder.

"He doesn't seem injured." Hadreal echoed Patrea's thoughts.

Teo shook his head. "He was captured. The angel Jenkins was looking for was part of a group of Angellum rebels. They were trying to stop Angellum scientists from experimenting with Virkolan DNA. She was mortally injured defending my mate."

Trembling shook Patrea's arms. He planted one fist against his thigh to hide his shaking. Pressing the cup against his stomach, he pushed hard to stop the roiling unease. Grateful his voice didn't crack, he asked, "Why would they do that?"

Teo's gaze flitted from man to man before locking with Patrea's. "They were trying to design an angel who could inhabit the lowlands."

A collective gasp rocked the room. Voices cried out in various stages of indignation and disbelief.

Angels couldn't survive at lower altitudes for more than short periods of time. They lived on mountain peaks or floating cities hovering over Virkolan territories, dropping to the lowlands only to torment or kill Virkolans and their food beasts.

"They failed." Teo's voice rose above the din as he signaled for silence with an upraised fist. "Mostly."

"What the fuck does 'mostly' mean?" Hadreal's voice growled as he took a step forward.

“They created a hybrid creature, but the Virkolan DNA was evidently dominant. He is loyal to us, not the Angellum.”

“You let it live.” Patrea’s voice wasn’t so steady this time. His nails bit harder as warm liquid seeped into his palm.

Voices rose in fury, each clamoring louder than the next. Questions, accusations belted out like projectiles from a weapon.

“What the fuck...” “Angels...” “Didn’t sign on...”

Teo’s bellow reached above the fray. “Silence!” His dark gaze glittered with a hint of steel. “He’s harmless. He’s newly hatched and his loyalty’s imprinted on Sorin.”

“He’s here. On board.” Patrea wasn’t really asking a question. He knew the answer as his tension ratcheted up to a feverish pitch.

“Yes.” Teo planted his fists on his hips. “As Sorin’s offspring, he’s a member of my family and therefore a member of this crew. You’ve sworn loyalty.”

Hadreal shook his head. “Under false pretense.”

“How so?” Teo’s hard gaze landed on Hadreal.

Some of Patrea’s admiration for his older crewmate seeped out from under his anger.

Hadreal stood his ground and didn’t flinch under the intense scrutiny. “We didn’t know you had an angel in your ranks.”

“He’s more Virkolan than angel. And he’s still young. Mentally anyway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Koris sounded more curious than upset.

“He hatched full grown. Maybe all angels do or it had something to do with being a hybrid. He doesn’t talk much. Though he’s learning fast.”

“I heard something like that.” Narndo had kept his mouth until now. “About angels hatching grown or nearly so.”

“Where is it?” Hadreal asked.

“In the corridor with Sorin, waiting to meet the rest of *my* crew.”

Patrea held his breath as Teo reached for the door panel. The movement appeared in slow motion as Teo's long fingers tapped the open sequence. The door slid open with a loud whoosh.

The captain's mate, maybe the tallest Virkolan Patrea had ever seen, stepped through first. Behind him, a Virkolan male. Dark hair, black eyes, well-muscled, flesh not feathers, and as tall as his supposed sire.

The man ducked as he came through the door. Wings, space black, veed above the creature's head. He was at least three hands taller than any angel Patrea had ever seen.

Two strips of material crisscrossing his upper body served as a shirt of sorts. An open vee revealed a bare chest gleaming with smooth skin. Same with his arms and shoulders. No body feathers. No facial fuzz.

A ripple fluttered through the tight wing feathers. His gaze searched the room as his forehead furrowed, eyebrows hooding his dark eyes. The motion highlighted the slight ridges of an angel's forehead. His nose snuffled the air as he met Patrea's gaze.

Patrea gulped hot breaths as he launched his body at the danger. Wielding his cup as a weapon, he slammed into the creature.

Wings flapped wide then contracted around Patrea. Claws sprang from the angel's wing joints. Razor-sharp talons dug into Patrea's flesh. Screams filled his ears as the copper tang of blood filled his nostrils. Virkolan blood. His blood. The edges of his vision darkened until only pinpoints of light remained.

"Get him to the fucking medstation."

The voice echoed as if from a distance and the last light faded to black.

* * * * *

"I'll tend to him."

Patrea caught the words but wasn't sure who said them.

"I'm a trained healer." Not familiar. Must be one of the new people.

"Don't care. He attacked your..."

“Son?” The captain’s mate. The one with the...

A vision of black wings... A shudder teased down his spine.

“Whatever you want to call it. He’s not going to take kindly to having you close.”

Pain. Burning. His guts roiled as intense heat seared across his skin. He forced his eyes open.

Hadreal stood between the medstation bed and the giant mate of their new captain.

“He’s awake.” The mate nodded at Patrea.

“Then leave.” Hadreal turned toward Patrea as if the argument were over. “I’ll give you something for the pain.” His hand ran across Patrea’s forehead. “I need to mend and bind your cuts.”

“Get him – out –” Each breath ripped new waves of pain through his abdomen.

“I’m going, but I’ll be near if you need assistance.” The door whooshed open then shut.

“What –”

“Shush. You’re hurt.” Hadreal attacked Patrea’s shirt with a pair of scissors.

“Hurts.”

“Damn fool. What kind of idiot attacks a giant angel with a drinking cup?” Hadreal’s hand brushed Patrea’s hair back. “Next time, try using a real weapon.”

“So, they really brought an angel on board.” Patrea sucked in a hard breath.

Hadreal nodded as he pressed a hypospray against Patrea’s neck. “Not like any angel I’ve seen before. Black wings. No body feathers.”

“Yeah.” The pain in his stomach eased and a slight euphoria from the meds slowed his racing heart. “Saw black.”

“Never saw you so irritable. New captain didn’t look very pleased.”

“He brought an angel –” Patrea gritted his teeth as a cold wipe swiped across his wounds, stinging the open flesh. “How bad?”

“Didn’t hit anything important. Mostly just flesh wounds. Doesn’t look like any serious muscle or tendon damage.” Hadreal’s low voice soothed as he dabbed astringent cleaner across Patrea’s abdomen. “You’re lucky. The mate got the creature under control quick. The beast could have gutted you.”

The drugs clouded Patrea’s mind, sending his thoughts off on several tangents. *Need to find another ship... Can’t stay with an angel.* But he couldn’t leave. A single thought clarified. Patrea’s body tensed as he started to sit.

“Hey, hold on.” Hadreal’s hands gripped his shoulders. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“We pledged loyalty. Two years’ service.” His breath caught in his throat. He couldn’t stay, but he was bound by his word.

“Under false pretense.” Hadreal’s words crept in under his panic.

“False...” Patrea relaxed into the thin pad of the bed. “Yeah...” A loyalty pledge made without all the facts known was breakable. “You breaking pledge?”

“Haven’t decided.” His face didn’t give clues.

As always, the older man’s expression was calm, almost to the point of blank. Not that Hadreal was that old. At nearly sixty—less than one-third a Virkolan’s expected lifespan—he was simply the oldest on the *Avere*. He rarely showed emotion of any kind. An occasional grin at a joke. Or grimace, if the joke was a little too off-color.

Usually Patrea was pretty good at reading people once he got to know them. After five years, Hadreal was the exception. He’d like to get to know Hadreal much better, but he couldn’t tell if Hadreal returned Patrea’s interest.

“For now, I’ll keep my peace. And my distance.” Hadreal ran a skin sealer over one of the three long cuts. “And you’d better learn to check your anger.”

“But it’s an angel.” In spite of the mellowing effect of the meds, Patrea’s skin flushed with the heat of rising anger. “Angels are meant for killing. Nothing more.”

“And ships that pay and feed you proper are few between.” A deep frown creased Hadreal’s forehead. His gaze turned hard as stone. “The captain has the right to expel troublemakers. In his eyes, I’d bet you qualify at the moment. Until we can line up something new, keep your tongue civil and your weapons holstered.”

“We?”

“I’d rather be away from the angel, no matter who the sire is or how he was created.” His face softened, easing his frown. Crinkles hinted amusement at the corner of his eyes. “Besides, it’s hard for an old man like me to learn to trust new folks. Keeping you around would mean one less body to watch.” He ran his hand over Patrea’s forehead, pushing strands of hair back.

Patrea’s anger melted into a mush of heat from a different emotion. He’d been attracted to Hadreal almost from the beginning. No one knew him well, except maybe the previous captain, Reekar. Those two had been longest on board when Patrea signed on.

At first, he’d thought Reekar and Hadreal were lovers. If they were, they weren’t bonded. Reekar was a loose one, sniffing around any available ass at each layover. Hadreal didn’t seem the type to stray or want a lover who did. But who knew what had happened in the captain’s private quarters.

“Thanks.” Patrea grinned as one side of Hadreal’s lips lifted.

“You rest.” Hadreal enforced the suggestion with drugs. Another hypospray hissed then clouds chased Patrea’s mind into sleep.

Hadreal leaned against the medstation bulkhead. “Damn fool.” His whisper wasn’t for the benefit of his patient. The man was out cold. Asleep, Patrea looked much younger than his forty-five years. And too pale from blood loss. He’d need extra rations to bring his color back.

He’d developed a fondness for the rash younger man. Although the fifteen years wasn’t a big difference in age, Hadreal thought of Patrea as much younger. A few times

he'd considered seeing if Patrea was open to a closer relationship. Hadreal's sex life consisted mostly of his right hand and occasional pay-to-plays at different stops. Then again, Hadreal knew sexual relationships between non-bonded crewmates could turn sour.

Bonding... Well, he'd thought of that too, but since Patrea had never expressed interest, serious or otherwise, Hadreal kept his thoughts to himself.

Hadreal moved to Patrea's bedside. His fingers caressed the side of Patrea's face. "Damn fool." If he'd managed to get himself killed...

Patrea had a quick temper and a mouth too loud for caution. His attacking the mate's creature was no surprise. He hated angels with a passion so deep, sometimes Hadreal wondered if his mind thought of anything else. Hadreal didn't know the story behind it, but hatred like that didn't come from casual encounters.

Then again, too many Virkolans suffered tragedy and worse at the hands of the Angellum.

With a long sigh, Hadreal turned away from Patrea's bed. He hit the control panel with a hard punch. The doors slid open.

"How is he?" Teo waited in the narrow corridor.

"He'll live." Hadreal appreciated the man's interest in his new crew. But his judgment in other areas was a bit fucked up. "An angel?"

"I told you. Salva's loyalty is to my mate. He wouldn't have attacked if Patrea hadn't first. And he disarmed. Not disemboweled. A true angel would have."

"I know. Seen them in action." A hard swallow and gritted teeth kept his memory from resurrecting that particular scene. "You should have said before."

"Before?"

"Before we pledged our oaths."

Teo stood a little straighter. His full height topped Hadreal's by maybe three fingers. "You'd challenge my right to the *Avere*?"

“Don’t know that I shouldn’t.” The words slipped out. Hadreal had never been good at playing games with authority. Reekar understood that and preferred Hadreal’s sometimes too-honest manner.

“But will you?”

“Have to think on it.” He cocked his head to the side but kept his gaze locked on Teo’s. “Stinks of something false, but I haven’t made up my mind.”

“Are you open to giving Salva a chance?”

“It’s an angel.”

“Only part of him. The rest is Virkolan.”

Hadreal took a deep breath. Unless it involved machines, science wasn’t big on his list of discussion topics. The idea of a half-breed wasn’t something he’d ever dreamed of. Or would have thought possible.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but the evidence is plain for those who’ll look.” Teo didn’t drop his gaze or even blink.

Nodding, Hadreal agreed. The creature’s only feathers were the wings. Angels had feathers all over their bodies, except the face. There only fuzz. And they were white, not black. “I’m not blind. I can see the difference. Nor am I stupid. The creature’s not natural.”

“I know.” The captain’s gaze didn’t waver, but something about his mouth changed. Almost a grimace, a small sigh. Was he hiding something else? “But my mate’s attached to it.”

He almost sounded as if he wasn’t too happy about having the creature around. In this regard, the man must be loyal to his mate – to a fault. That meant something.

Hadreal wasn’t ready to give way on the topic just yet. “Still grounds for false pretense.”

“I accept your misgivings, but will you take some time to get to know Salva before acting? And will you discuss your misgivings with the others?” Teo’s gaze flickered toward the medstation door.

“I mentioned it to Patrea. Yes. Because it calmed him to know he’s not alone in his doubts. But I told him to keep his head for now.”

“And?”

“I don’t plan to talk to the others unless they ask my opinion.” Hadreal was the champion of keeping things to himself, but the captain didn’t have to know that.

Teo dipped his head in a sharp nod. “If you’ve anything to discuss, I’m always available.” He twisted on his heel then marched away, head held high.

“Humph.” The captain seemed confident Hadreal would keep his thoughts to himself. Trusting. The man was either very smart or very stupid. Which one remained to be seen. Or did it? He’d brought an angel aboard.

Nothing good could come from close dealings with angels.

Chapter Two

Teo leaned against the cool metal of his cabin's bulkhead as soon as he entered. The door panel swooshed shut beside him.

"How's Patrea?" Sorin looked up from a data pad.

"Okay. I guess." Teo shrugged then rubbed his fingertips against his temples. "Talking to Hadreal is like talking to this bulkhead. Had to drag every word out of him." Glancing around the room didn't reveal the object of his trouble. "Where's Salva?"

"He's asleep next door." Sorin tilted his head toward the door to the other room of the captain's quarters. "He seems to sleep a lot. I don't know if it's because he's newly hatched or if angels need more sleep than we do."

No one knew much about angels other than their vicious attacks. Most other information had been passed around so many times the truth had probably been excised.

His new ship was much bigger than the *Compensa* but the idea of the captain's quarters having more than one room was almost foreign. The small room had been decked out as an office, but Sorin had a bed moved in for Salva. Came in handy having him close but gave Teo and Sorin some privacy. Not much but a little.

"Does Hadreal suspect something?"

"He's a sharp one. And he's not happy that I didn't mention Salva before they pledged loyalty." Teo shuffled across the room, undoing his holster as he walked. "But I can't believe anyone could come up with the truth. I know I wouldn't have."

"That an angel and a Virkolan can breed?"

“Yeah.” Teo stretched across the bed. The unfamiliar mattress molded against his body. Much better accommodations than the *Compensa*.

Anger bubbled as he dwelled on the circumstances of Salva’s birth. The idea of infidelity was almost unheard of in Virkolan society. Once bonded, straying just wasn’t done. Not that Sorin had had a choice. “I’d prefer no one ever know the truth.”

“Even Salva?” Sorin turned the chair toward the bed. “I think he has a right to know his beginnings.”

“Do you want him to know an angel raped you?” Teo shifted around on the bed until he sat with his back against the wall, facing his lover.

“It wasn’t really like that.”

“You said you didn’t have a choice.” He fought the anger threatening to color his words.

“I didn’t. Her pheromones drugged me, but Hayyot couldn’t control her heat. You know that. If you’d gone to feed her, you’d have ended up with an offspring.”

A so-called renegade angel and a bounty too good to be true got them here. Logic argued Sorin’s point, but nervous energy added to Teo’s anger.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Or even think about it.” Teo scrambled off the bed. A hot shower—one of the perks of a bigger ship—would help ease his irritation at the universe in general. “Maybe we should change course. Head for another base. If Jenkins got off a message about our destination...”

Sorin shook his head. “I think we need to find Hayyot’s people. Let them know what happened.” With a slight smile and a half shrug, he continued. “And maybe they can tell us something about Salva. I have no idea what’s normal for him.”

“Fine.” The larger ship came with more crew, more responsibility. Add an offspring every Virkolan or even angel they ran across would question, his simple life of smuggling was over. “Humph.” As if smuggling could be classified as simple.

Yanking his tunic over his head, he tossed it into a corner. Teo headed into the private washroom. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Want some help?"

For a split second, Teo almost said no, but his cock made the final decision. He hadn't had more than a few minutes alone with Sorin since Salva hatched several days ago. Having an offspring underfoot, no matter if it was a full-grown reasoning one, made private time difficult. "Sure." A little of Teo's aggravation slid off his mood.

Sorin almost knocked the chair over in his haste to follow. "Need to be quick. Might not have too much time. Salva doesn't stay asleep long."

Large hands cupped Teo's shoulders. Sorin's chest warmed Teo's back. When his hips nudged forward, his groin pressed into Teo's body. The growing ridge of Sorin's cock against him lightened Teo's mood even more. "Yeah."

"Love you." Sorin's breath teased the back of Teo's ear. He pushed Teo through the door to the private bathing area. A quick slap of the controls locked the door. "Best against interruptions."

"Yeah. Good thinking." Heat washed through Teo. Desire drove blood to his cock, filling and lengthening. Twisting under Sorin's hands, Teo faced his tall lover. "We could wait on that shower."

A grin twisted Sorin's mouth. "Anything you say." He shuffled forward, pushing Teo back against a full-length mirror. An unusual vanity on a smuggler, but it could prove interesting. Sorin ran his hands down Teo's sides. A glint of evil amusement shone in Sorin's eyes. His normal smile turned into a toothy grin. "Turn around."

Teo whirled around, facing his reflection in the mirror. Sorin's intense gaze focused on Teo's body. Watching his lover sent Teo's desire rampaging through his body. Very interesting.

Sorin's palms cupped the backs of Teo's hands. Strong fingers twined through his. Clasped fast, Sorin ran their hands up the cold metal wall on either side of the mirror, rising until their arms were above Teo's head.

“We need to add a few improvements to our new place. A couple of hooks right here would be perfect.” Sorin flexed his wrists, tapping Teo’s knuckles against the wall. “A little rope...a quick twist...” He dipped his head until his face nuzzled Teo’s ear. “Holding you in place while I do what I want...” His tongue flickered against Teo’s earlobe.

A shudder of desire and need flashed through Teo. “Yeah. Sounds good.” He pushed his hips back, pressing the ridge of Sorin’s cock against his ass.

“Horny, eh?” Sorin pulled back, leaving Teo rubbing against air. “Have an idea...”

Hands tightened around Teo’s wrist, hampering his attempt to follow Sorin’s body. “Anything. Need you.”

“Sweet.” Sorin’s large hand tugged Teo’s head around until his mouth met Teo’s in a bruising kiss.

Before Teo could get into the contact, Sorin pulled away.

“Keep your hands above your head. Pretend that hook is already there.”

Teo obeyed out of frustration and anticipation. Sorin loved to play games, but Teo never complained. Who would? Sorin’s devious ways always ended in coming—usually hard and very satisfying. Their gazes locked in the mirror. “Oh yeah. This has definite possibilities.”

Sorin ran his hands up and down Teo’s back. Large, strong...like everything about his lover. Taller than any Virkolan he’d ever met, Sorin was a giant among their people. Except for Salva...

Angels... He pushed the thought away and let the sensations coursing through his body take over.

Sorin ran his hands around Teo’s waist then up to his chest. Fingers tweaked nipples already aroused. Sharp pinches alternated with flickering touches.

“Going to fuck you just like this.” Sorin’s breath teased Teo’s shoulder. A soft kiss followed.

“Yes.” Teo drew a deep breath. His heart raced, pumping blood to his cock. “Need you.”

Sorin’s hands circled Teo’s waist. Fingers opened his fly. “I love your cock.” His hand pushed inside Teo’s pants.

Warm, calloused skin surrounded his length. Short, tugging strokes pushed Teo to full hardness. His hips joined the quick rhythm, but Sorin pulled his hand away.

Just the touch, the scent of his lover could leave Teo breathless. Sometimes when they made love, Teo had to remember to breathe.

He hadn’t believed in real love until he met Sorin. Just tales of happily ever after to ease rough times. Not something one expected to happen. Then there was Sorin... No matter what happened to them, everything was worth it for one more day with his lover.

“Drop your pants.” Sorin nuzzled Teo’s ear. “I need to get some lube.” He turned to the cabinet then rummaged through it.

Teo obeyed, yanking the material down as fast as he could. His boots kept him from kicking off his pants, but he didn’t care about looking foolish. All he wanted now was his lover’s touch.

With his hands once again on the wall, Teo stood with his ass pushed out for Sorin’s pleasure. And his own. He grinned as Sorin stepped behind him again.

His mate’s flushed face gave away his intense desire. His brow furled in a tight frown as he concentrated.

Slick fingers eased into Teo’s hole. His eyes fluttered shut as he welcomed the intrusion. Spreading his fingers against the wall, he pushed back. “Oh yeah... More.”

“Damn.” Sorin’s sharp whisper puffed against Teo’s ear. The fingers disappeared, replaced by something much larger.

“Yeah, more...” He opened his eyes to find Sorin’s gaze locked on his reflection.

Heat and passion radiated as hot as a sun too close. Sorin's eyes glittered with a hint of moisture as his body moved in slow strokes.

Each motion pushed his length deeper. Without dropping his gaze from Teo's, Sorin wrapped his arm around Teo's waist. His large hand enveloped Teo's cock, pulling to match the rhythm of his body.

"Love you," Sorin whispered. "So glad..."

Teo didn't need to hear the rest of his words. Things had been close this time. The bounty gone bad, angels searching for them. Even Salva could have turned out with the killing mentality of an angel instead of the peaceful inclination of his gentle, giant father.

Now they were both alive. In possession of a bigger, more powerful ship and most of all...still together.

Sorin's movements grew more frantic, less paced. Hard and swift, he plowed Teo's ass, sending shards of pleasure fracturing through Teo's body.

"Yes." Teo pushed back, banging flesh on flesh. "Give me." He needed to feel the intensity of release, the rush that assured him they were both still alive. "Now."

With a loud moan, Sorin slammed his body against Teo's and held tight. His hand stilled on Teo's cock but the fierce squeeze pushed Teo over the edge. Come splattered the mirror, dripping a slow trail down the glass.

Sorin buried his face in Teo's neck. Hot, frantic kisses on Teo's skin accompanied the jerking of his body. "Love you so much."

"You too." Teo reached over his shoulder to cradle Sorin's head.

A sharp rap at the door made them both jump. "Father? Hungry."

"I'm here, Salva. I'll be there in a minute." Sorin muffled a laugh in Teo's neck. "He's always hungry. Good thing the *Avere* is well-stocked."

Chapter Three

Patrea winced as he bent over to yank on his boot. Slight dizziness accompanied a rush of blood. The tough hide tightened around his calf, making it a chore to settle the ache in his stomach from the angel's claws.

Angel. A shudder of rage threatened his calm.

"Let me do that." Hadreal's hands gripped Patrea's shoulders, pulling him upright. His normally gruff expression softened with a half smile as his hands squeezed. "You don't want to mess with the seams. Your wounds were too deep for the mender to heal them completely. You still need a little time."

As Hadreal knelt at Patrea's feet, heat rose from a different source. The blood that had drained from his face found someplace else to pool. His dick thickened under cover of his overtunic.

Not for the first time arousal had rushed his blood when Hadreal was close. Something about his loner attitude attracted Patrea. Almost as if warning him not to touch made his fingers itch to be bad.

"There." Hadreal patted the sides of Patrea's calf before he stood. "All done."

"Thanks."

"You look a little flushed. You sure you're ready to be up?"

"Yeah. Two days of staring at the ceiling is enough." Patrea straightened, tugging his tunic down to hide the real reason for his high color. "Has the...creature... Have you seen it again?"

"No. It stays on the bridge with the captain and his mate, or in their quarters. As usual, I spend most of my time in the engine room or in here, checking on you."

Leaning back against the medbed, Patrea sighed. "I don't know if I can control myself."

"Why?" Hadreal leveled his hazel-eyed gaze at Patrea.

He swallowed hard, torn between memories of blood and the concern in Hadreal's eyes. "My family." Patrea hadn't talked about them since he first boarded the *Avere*.

Captain Reekar had asked about his background when he'd interviewed Patrea. The former captain had been good at drawing out things Patrea would rather have left hidden.

"Angels got 'em?" Hadreal's voice dropped to a low whisper.

Patrea answered with a sharp nod. "My mothers, two siblings and a close-cousin."

As custom had it, his mother and her mate had reared him. He only knew his paternity as part of his pedigree. Each Virkolan kept records of genealogy to avoid mating too close to the same bloodline.

Close-cousins were born of the same father. Siblings were born of the same mother. True brothers and sisters were rare in Virkolan society because of the need to keep the bloodlines diverse in a small population. The idea of the same male and female breeding more than once was unusual, although it happened occasionally.

"What happened?" Hadreal leaned against the medbed. His hand settled on Patrea's lower back.

"They'd been ship dwellers. My foremothers' family had converted a small transport to a generation ship a couple hundred years ago. We hired out to haul goods when we needed cash. The poor old thing was falling apart. When nothing could keep it together and funds weren't available for a new one, we settled on the Grange moon. Small plot of land available for hunting, growing. Few caves for shelter. We survived."

Patrea's throat clenched at the memory. He closed his eyes against the sting of tears, but the vision played out behind his eyelids.

A strong arm tightened around his shoulders. "It's okay. You don't need to explain anything."

"No. I want to. I want you to understand." Of all people, Patrea wanted Hadreal's approval. Always had. "Twenty-two of us stayed. Another dozen left to find work on ships. Koris was one of the ones who left. He sent credits or supplies back when he could. We'd been there for about six months when the attack came.

"Mother fought hard. Took three angels to take her down. Areta, her mate, fell right after. A couple of the hunt leaders kept the young ones hidden. I was one of them. I watched from a hunting blind. One of the leaders held me back, hand over my mouth to keep me silent. I watched them die, unable to do anything to help."

"How old were you?" Warm breath brushed against his ear.

"Almost twenty. Getting ready for my adulthood ceremony." Patrea's voice cracked in spite of his determination. "That's what the hunt was for. Food for the feast." He leaned into the warm comfort of Hadreal's embrace. "I should have done something. Helped. Fought." His hands bunched the coarse material of Hadreal's overtunic. Fingers dug into tight muscles.

"Easy. You were barely more than a child. And the hunt leader was right to hold you back. The young must be protected or we'll die out. That's why children are taught to hide. You can't win in a fair fight with angels." Hadreal rocked him back and forth like a mother did a scared or injured child. His arm held fast as his face leaned against Patrea's hair.

He welcomed the comfort, something he hadn't taken at the time. From anyone.

Hadreal's hand ran up and down Patrea's back. "It was a long time ago. You need to get past it."

Patrea stiffened and started to pull away. "I can't forget."

Tightening his hold, Hadreal met Patrea's gaze. Concern and...something...filled his expression. "Not saying you should. But you have to learn to control it. Getting yourself killed won't help those who died before you."

"I can't stay on a ship with an angel." Patrea pulled away from the warm embrace. Anxiety played on his nerves. The sense of the creature's presence sent him pacing back and forth in the small medstation. "It's like I'm covered in bugs, all nibbling my skin at once. Pinpricks on the edge of pain. I'll go nuts."

Hadreal blocked Patrea's way as he turned around again. His hands settled on Patrea's shoulders, his fingers digging into muscle. "Okay, but you can't get off the ship until we reach a port. And even then, we're headed to Crerange. Not exactly the best place to find a decent haul, much less work."

Crerange was a cesspool of thieves and murderers. Even Reekar, the former captain, normally avoided the place. Too bad he hadn't on his last run. "Why Crerange?"

"Captain says he heard of cargo needing transport. When we boarded his old ship, he said that's where he was headed."

"True." Patrea had forgotten as the intensity of the angel's proximity had become worse.

"I have a question, if you don't mind." Hadreal narrowed his gaze at Patrea, as if what he wanted was likely to be denied.

For a second, Patrea's blood rose in a heat of desire.

"How'd you know the angel was on board?"

The question was far from the intimate one Patrea desired. "I...ah." He shrugged his shoulders. "I just do. Always have. Kind of like my own personal sensor."

"Hmmm..."

"What?"

Hadreal's left eyebrow arched and his lips curled in a half smile. "That'd be a useful trick. Knowing when they're around."

"Yeah." Patrea wasn't sure where Hadreal was going with his thoughts.

"A profitable trick?"

“Oh. Yes.” He’d never thought to barter his ability. But how would he prove it? People usually didn’t have an angel handy to test him.

But they did now. Supposedly a friendly angel. His loyalty oath might not be valid, but he hesitated to spread the word about the captain’s business. And if Hadreal decided not to leave... Mixed emotions gnawed at his gut.

“If I can find another ship, are you coming too?” A lump developed in Patrea’s throat. The idea of leaving Hadreal was more painful than mere feelings of friendship would explain.

“If they need two. As I said.” Hadreal’s hands still rested on Patrea’s shoulders. “I kind of like having you around.” He ran a thumb up and down Patrea’s neck, an almost caress.

A thrill of desire washed through Patrea as he instinctively leaned in. A little closer and he’d feel Hadreal’s breath against his face. Did he imagine Hadreal matching his lean?

The whoop of an alarm slammed adrenaline through Patrea. Hadreal jumped for the door, whacking his hand against the door mechanism.

They bumped arms as they clamored out of the medstation. As the ship’s engineer, Hadreal sprinted toward the engine room.

Patrea turned the opposite direction, running toward the ladder to the bridge as he’d been trained to do for years. As he scrambled up the ladder, the artificial gravity of the ship shifted just enough to let him know the *Avere* was maneuvering at high speed away from something. Or she’d been hit by a low-power beam. Either one wasn’t good.

The *Avere*’s power systems couldn’t handle the strain of full power under battle conditions. The gravity generator and life support tended to scale back in favor of weapons, shields and engines.

The bridge door swooshed open to managed chaos.

Captain Teo stood his ground behind Narndo, their navigator. Teo's fingers white-knuckled the back of the chair.

Koris sat at the shield monitor, one hand clenched at either side of the console. A dark shadow leaned against the back bulkhead not too far from the door.

Narndo gripped the helm controls as if his life depended on it. All their lives. An Angellum long-range scout ship angled toward the *Avere*.

Sorin sat at Patrea's station. His fingers flew over the weapons console. "Weapons at full power."

Patrea dodged across the small bridge. Sorin slid out of the seat, allowing him to slip into his duty station. Everything read green. Patrea pushed aside a niggling tendrill of admiration.

Sorin hadn't been on ship but a few days, but already he'd mastered the more sophisticated weapons control system.

Thoughts of Sorin turned to his...offspring. The creature was close, but adrenaline helped override his irritation. Duty won out over anger.

"Aim for their bridge." Teo's voice was calm, as if they were merely doing target practice.

With a deep breath, Patrea obeyed. His racing heart slowed slightly but adrenaline kept him on the edge of his seat as his fingers flew across the controls.

A beam of high energy swept out across the scout's bridge but bounced off like a stone skipped on water.

"Narndo," Teo's hand settled on the man's shoulder. "Take us under them and come up near their aft cargo hatch."

Jerking his head in a quick nod, Narndo tilted the controls forward, sending the ship into a sharp dive.

“Patreia, sometimes Angellum scout ships have a fault in their shielding on the underside. Just forward of the cargo hatch.” His voice never caught with fear or even the tremble of nerves.

A yellow line streaked across Patrea’s monitor. “Incoming.”

“See it.” Narndo’s voice was tight as he jerked the controls to port. The ship lurched in its struggle to follow at high speed.

An alarm set off on Koris’ station. The ship bucked and bounced. Again, gravity weakened for a few seconds as the lights dimmed briefly. “Starboard aft shield took a hit. Holding,” Koris announced. “For now.”

Teo caught Patrea’s gaze for a split second. “Patreia, you’ll probably only get one shot. Maybe two if you’re quick. Make ‘em count.”

“Aye, Captain.” In spite of the captain’s foolhardiness over the angel, Patrea was impressed. He’d never heard about any weakness in a scout.

The need to do his best made the captain’s comment about two shots a challenge. Of course if one did the trick, but...

Patreia held his breath as the *Avere* shot up beneath the scout. Weapons fire from the enemy increased, as if they knew exactly what the captain was thinking. The angel ship veered away, but the ship’s underside was still vulnerable.

“Keep it steady, Narndo. We need to be just right. Koris, divert all shield power to the upper shields.” Teo’s calm was almost contagious.

The gurgling nerves roiling through Patrea’s stomach eased. A long, deep breath.

The ship rocked with a hit then another.

“Top forward shield almost gone.” Koris’ voice was steady but tight. “Top aft. Down.”

“We’re almost there.” Teo’s gaze never left the screen, as if he trusted everyone to do their job without his needing to confirm.

Patrea's fingers tensed over the controls. His targeting array hovered near the spot on the enemy ship. "Almost," he whispered. "Almost."

"Now!" Teo barked the order.

The system needed a few seconds to reset between shots. He wasn't foolish enough to lose his chance to destroy or disable the scout because he wanted to get two shots off. His first must do the trick. Patrea hit the fire button with a quick punch.

"Fire one away." The beam skittered across the enemy hull as Patrea counted to two. Disappointment welled up as the beam dissipated without any visible damage. "Firing two."

This time, the beam appeared to hiccup. A small spew of something puffed from the enemy ship.

"Looks like an air leak." Sorin's voice came from above Patrea's head. A firm hand squeezed his shoulder. "Good shot."

Patrea didn't understand. Nothing but an air leak? How could he accept praise for so little damage?

As the *Avere* slid past the enemy ship, Patrea turned his attention to the main viewer.

The scout's momentum slowed. A small burst of light erupted from the cargo hold then disappeared.

A fire? With no oxygen to fuel it, how could that do any damage?

As the Angellum ship eased to a stop, escape pod bays opened on the sides of the scout.

"Narndo, give us some distance. About five thousand kilometers should do it." Teo's gaze swept from Koris to Narndo then Patrea. "Great job." He tapped the comm console. "Stand down. Great job, crew. I'll need a damage report as soon as possible."

Patrea's fingers lingered over the weapons console. "Shouldn't we finish them off?"

“No need to waste resources.” Sorin took a deep breath. “The pods won’t get far enough away before the scout’s engines implode.”

“How do you know that?” Patrea turned in his chair to face the captain’s mate.

“Seen it happen – made it happen – a few times before.” Sorin’s gaze was dark with emotion.

“And that makes you sad.”

Sorin’s expression hardened. “I don’t like taking lives.”

His forgotten irritation at the mate’s creature returned as Patrea remembered the beast was on the bridge. Patrea’s gaze darted past Sorin to rest on it.

The creature was frozen in place. His gaze locked on the ship outside the viewer. His eyes nearly glowed with what Patrea would describe as hate. But hate for what? The angels or the people who killed them?

A quick blast of light filled the viewscreen then space returned to black specked with stars.

“Narndo, put us back on course to Crerange,” Teo ordered. “Minimum speed until we assess damages.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The creature turned his gaze toward Patrea. The black wings trembled as if a breeze ruffled the feathers.

Patrea couldn’t pull his gaze away from the dark, hooded eyes. The sensation of his nearness almost paralyzed Patrea instead of sending him into action against the creature.

“Good job.” A slight curve of the hybrid’s lips created a tiny smile. He glanced at Sorin. “Father?”

“Yes, Salva.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Of course you are.” Sorin’s features lit with a soft smile even as he sighed. “He’s always hungry,” he said to Patrea before he walked toward the exit. “Teo, we’ll need to make sure we pick up extra supplies at Crerange.”

“Yes, Sorin.”

Patrea almost smiled at the way the captain’s tone humored his mate.

Teo’s gaze lingered on the giant man’s back as he followed the angel through the door. He winked at Patrea as if nothing unpleasant had ever happened between him and the creature. “Sorin is a rather doting father.”

“He really thinks of that—”

“Salva.” Teo raised one eyebrow.

“Of Salva,” Patrea matched the raised eyebrow as he interjected sarcasm into the name, “as his offspring?”

“Yes. He does. And so do I.” Teo took a deep breath. “Narndo, I can handle the con. Take a break. Koris, I’ll expect a damage report in half an hour.”

The two men glanced between Teo and Patrea a couple of times, but both scurried off the bridge. Koris’ arm snaked around Narndo as they left.

Patrea envied his close-cousin’s bond with Narndo. Until recently, he hadn’t given much thought to serious relationships. But now...

As soon as the door closed, Teo slipped into the navigator’s seat, twirling it until he faced Patrea. “I guess we should get this out of the way.”

Patrea stiffened on the edge of the seat. “I guess.” He didn’t know what to expect from the captain. He hadn’t spoken with him since the incident with Salva.

“The first thing you need to know is I would never do anything to harm my crew. If I thought for one second that Salva was dangerous, I’d have jettisoned him already. Regardless of what my mate wants. However, since the only time he’s showed any aggression was in self-defense, I don’t have any reason to think him a threat.”

“But he’s an angel.”

“No. He isn’t. He’s a Virkolan with wings and a heightened sense of smell. His scans—from his blood and internal organs to his DNA—come back predominantly Virkolan. There are only trace foreign elements that can’t be identified, plus what appears to be an extra olfactory gland. So unless angel and Virkolan DNA are the same, he’s not an angel.”

“DNA couldn’t be the same.”

“I don’t pretend to understand all the science. I just know what my bondmate tells me about DNA. And I trust him with my life. Have for over three years.”

Patrea stiffened his back and tilted his chin higher. “I don’t have to trust either of you.”

“Nope. You don’t. But you could do worse. However, if serving with us makes you so uncomfortable, I’ll release you from your loyalty oath. No questions asked. No prejudice. You’re free to leave when we arrive at Crerange.”

The captain’s offer was not what Patrea expected. Unless he thought Patrea didn’t have the balls to look for work on a cesspit like Crerange.

“Or you can stay on until our next port. Crerange isn’t the greatest place to find a ship. Never know what kind of cutthroats you’ll end up running into.”

Patrea almost narrowed his eyes but caught himself. Could the man read his thoughts? Some said the trait was out there and some Virkolans could.

“I’m just trying to be fair. I did kind of spring the entire winged-Virkolan thing on you without warning.”

“What if more than just me want to leave?” The idea of leaving Hadreal behind made his chest hurt.

“Anyone is welcome to stay or go. Although the ship is a little big to be crewed by just the three of us, we’ll manage. We always do.” Teo shrugged then whirled his seat back to the helm. His fingers pecked over the controls as if he’d been aboard the *Avere* all his life.

Patrea leaned back in his seat and eased out a long silent sigh. If not for the angel, Patrea could see serving this captain for a long time. The man exuded confidence and a manner of authority Reekar had never possessed.

Even during the incident with the scout, Teo hadn't seemed harried or afraid. He knew what to do and how to do it. He also allowed his new crew to do their jobs. He could have taken over the con, left his mate at weapons. His faith, trust in his new crew was either foolish or very shrewd.

His mind turned the situation inside out but he didn't know how to reconcile it. Stay with the angel or leave what might be a great position. What to do? But he knew who he could trust to talk about it.

Chapter Four

Hadreal lay back on his bunk. His thoughts raced with possibilities. He'd seen signs of attraction from Patrea but wrote them off to close proximity and long dry spells. The almost kiss in the medstation felt like more than just sexual attraction.

Something about the look in Patrea's eyes, the softening of his features...

Bad luck the angel scout had showed up.

He'd avoided Patrea for the rest of the day with needed engine repairs, but he couldn't hide forever.

The door chirped a warning before it slid open. Hadreal closed his eyes, knowing it was Patrea. Too bad they shared a cabin out of duty instead of mutual desire. The L-shaped room, with each bunk hidden around a corner, gave them some privacy but not enough to avoid him long term.

Then again, the desire was there. He was sure. He just wasn't sure he wanted to acknowledge it.

His last mate had disappeared nearly ten years ago. Not really a mate, no official bonding. A lover, and one who strayed more than once. Hadreal wanted commitment.

Edwar hadn't. One day Edwar left the ship they'd served on and never returned. No notice to the captain. Just gone. He could have just left or he could have been killed. No way to ever know.

Hadreal eventually took refuge from his memories by signing on to the *Avere*. Now desire led him toward the possibility of another relationship. He wasn't sure he wanted to risk a replay of his last.

"Hadreal?" The soft whisper held a note of uncertainty. A long sigh followed.

"Yes?" Hadreal glanced up.

A furrowed brow gave away Patrea's confusion about something. "Did I wake you?"

"No." Hadreal turned on his side, elbow planted in the mattress, hand propping his head. "What's up?" The covers draped over his groin, hiding the growing results of his thoughts.

"After the attack earlier, Captain wanted to talk."

"Really? What'd he say?" Hadreal wondered how the captain would handle Patrea. The angel was obviously there to stay, no matter who objected.

When Koris brought rations down to the engine room earlier, he relayed the story of the beast being on the bridge during the fight. According to Koris, Patrea didn't have much to say about the situation.

"He said he'd let me out of my oath—without prejudice. Said I could leave at Crerange or the next port after, whatever I wanted." Patrea almost sounded disappointed.

Without prejudice. Interesting. A crewman who left with prejudice would have a hard time finding a good ship or position. Usually it was a sign they were untrustworthy in some way without a direct accusation. "That's good, right?"

"Yes." Patrea's frown grew deeper.

"There's a 'but' in there." Hadreal had a few suspicions of his own, but he'd keep them to himself for now.

"No. Well, yes. Why'd he have to be so reasonable?" Patrea dropped down on the edge of Hadreal's bunk. "If he'd been angry, ready to throw me out the nearest airlock, I'd understand. But no."

"And that's bad?" Hadreal kept a smile to himself. And his hands. Although, Patrea sitting on his bunk sent desire burning a path to his cock. He hoped the covers would keep his interest from showing. Maybe Patrea wouldn't notice his nipples tightening, *gasa* bumps pimplying his skin.

“Yes. It would be easier to walk away.” Patrea took a deep breath. “But he said the same release applies to anyone else who wanted to leave.”

“Really?” Then he’d best take the out while he could. Especially if Patrea did. He didn’t want him wandering off alone. However, they would need to watch their backs.

The captain was being almost too compliant. Suspicion raised hair on the back of Hadreal’s neck, but he didn’t want to confuse Patrea with his doubts. Letting them go with knowledge of Salva and what he was would be dangerous. If anyone believed the story. Maybe that’s what Teo counted on.

“Will you leave?” Patrea shifted a little closer.

“He said we could leave the next port after Crerange?”

“Yes. He agrees that Crerange isn’t the best place to find reputable work.”

“Very few places are.” Hadreal moved his arm, touching Patrea’s hand with the edge of his. A slight shock of heat sparked through the simple touch.

If Patrea didn’t move soon, Hadreal refused to be responsible for his actions.

What’s stopping you?

Hadreal ignored the little voice in his head.

Patrea didn’t seem to be the type to chase any tail that moved. They’d both had a few hookups in different ports, but there was nothing wrong with a man taking a little comfort now and then. But with a shipmate? Especially a bunkmate...

Instead of moving away, Patrea settled a little closer. His hip came very close to discovering what the covers were hiding. The narrow bed didn’t give Hadreal much room to maneuver. He didn’t want to call attention to himself and moving away might.

“I’m just...confused. I hate leaving here.” Patrea locked gazes with Hadreal. “This is the closest I’ve felt to home since my mothers died.” His hand slid a couple of inches closer to Hadreal’s waist.

What the hell.

The ache in his dick banished rational thoughts. Hadreal moved his hand over Patrea's. When he didn't pull away, Hadreal tugged Patrea's hand toward his lips. Brushing a soft kiss over Patrea's knuckles, he watched for the younger man's reaction.

A look of shock and surprise flickered over Patrea's face. Then a curve started at one corner of his mouth. Soon the smile widened, lighting his eyes.

This time, Hadreal teased Patrea's skin with parted lips, his tongue painting a small circle around the center knuckle.

A toothy grin whipped across Patrea's face. He shook Hadreal's hand off as he slid his hand under the blanket, pressing against Hadreal's cock. "Oh yeah." His groan of approval matched Hadreal's. His other hand tugged at the covers, pulling them down past Hadreal's thighs.

The thin undergarment didn't hide much. The material even outlined the thick vein running the length of his cock.

"Finally." Patrea's word was half whisper, half growl.

Some of Hadreal's anxiety bled away as Patrea's hands tugged and pulled. Hadreal rolled from his side to his back. Evidently, he had read Patrea's interest correctly.

The rough and rushed handling only heightened Hadreal's arousal.

Except a tendril of doubt threatened his joy. Once again he questioned the wisdom of a relationship, casual or otherwise, but it was too late.

Patrea's hands seemed to be everywhere at once, mounting sweet pressure against Hadreal's cock, trailing over his chest. Warm lips, slightly chapped and a little damp, pressed against Hadreal's lower stomach.

Kisses ran up to his chest. Patrea paused to suckle a nipple. His tongue flickered teasing blows.

Hadreal gripped Patrea's head in both hands. "Come here."

With a wide grin, Patrea followed Hadreal's urging until his full length lay on top of Hadreal. A gentle tug brought Patrea's mouth against Hadreal's.

An awkward twist and play of heads finally resolved as lips met. Warm and wet, slow kisses slipped deeper. Tongues met and clashed. Hands pulled closer, tighter. Bodies rocked down, lifted up, undulating like a slow-moving sea.

Aching need warmed Hadreal all over. His throat tightened from the sweetness of the lingering kiss. His cock hardened as Patrea's weight and motions pushed him closer to climax. The heat of Patrea's body, the tangling twists of his tongue cemented Hadreal's hidden feelings. Something more than sexual need fueled his passion for the younger man.

Patrea pulled away, gasping for air. Running his fingers across Hadreal's lips, he grinned. "Need to slow down. Don't want this over too soon." He slid off the bunk to his knees, his hands yanking at Hadreal's underwear. "I've wanted to do this for so long..."

Before Hadreal could react, wet heat engulfed his dick. His hands groped for Patrea's head, fingers tightening in the short, wavy hair. His hips jerked to meet the sweet suction. "Oh shit!"

Patrea's mouth worked his cock from tip to base. Fingers rolled his balls, dipping down to tease his anus. Spit dripped down his balls from Patrea's enthusiastic mouthing.

The tip of a wet finger found Hadreal's hole. No one had fucked him since Edwar. Pay-to-plays were for quickies in back rooms. Not the kind of intimacy of making love.

His body reacted with a mixture of desire and alarm. He pushed toward the intrusion, relaxing his muscles to allow easier entry. Seemed desire was taking a lead in the race.

Patrea's groin pumped against the edge of the bunk as he hummed around Hadreal's cock. Only fair Hadreal help him out a little.

Slipping a hand between the bunk and Patrea then into the top of Patrea's pants, he wrapped his fingers around his thick staff.

Patrea gulped for air around Hadreal's flesh. His finger pushed deeper into Hadreal's ass.

"Yes." Hadreal's voice cracked in an almost plea. He met the short strokes, taking the finger deeper. "More." He managed a gruffer tone. No need in embarrassing himself.

Another finger pushed inside, tight with only spit as lube. Pressure knocked against his pleasure gland. His body clenched, muscles tightening. His hand gripped Patrea's thick length but forgot to stroke. Ecstasy whipped through him.

Faster, Patrea stroked his ass. Deeper, his mouth took Hadreal's cock. Each motion brought him closer to the edge. It'd been awhile since he'd done more than jerk off. One hand cradled Patrea's head, fingers clenching his hair. He pulled tight as his body tensed. "Gonna come," he warned, still tugging at Patrea's head.

Patrea ignored him or didn't hear him. Instead, he engulfed Hadreal to the base. His throat tightened on the head of Hadreal's cock. Fingers shoved deep in his ass, slowly fucking him.

"Fuck!" Hadreal let go. His cock spewed deep inside Patrea's mouth. "Oh damn!" His hand stopped pulling Patrea's head and held it still instead. His hips jerked against the younger man's face.

A gagging noise brought him to his senses and he forced his body to pull back, hands to relax. "You're damn good at that." Hadreal's body turned to rubber and sank into the mattress. The wet heat disappeared as did the fingers.

"Good at a few other things too." Patrea's body stretched over Hadreal's, pushing him deeper into the hard bunk. Hot lips met his, snatching his breath away.

The flavor of come teased Hadreal's taste buds. His mouth watered at the idea of returning the favor, but his arms pulled Patrea closer instead. A feeling of loss cut through his gut as Patrea pulled out of his embrace.

"Be right back," Patrea whispered then disappeared around the corner into his bunk area.

Hadreal's throat closed around his protest. His dignity wouldn't let him beg, no matter how much he wanted Patrea to stay.

Then Patrea was back, his clothes gone. The faint sheen of scarring ran across his lean stomach. The mender had done a good job on his wounds. His long cock pointed up, the head thick and swollen, leaking with pre-come.

His hand held a bottle of lube. He tossed it on the bed on the other side of Hadreal, near the wall. With quick efficiency, he rid Hadreal of his undergarment. "Move over."

"If I could move, I'd be happy to accommodate you." Hadreal almost wished he could close his eyes and go to sleep, much like when he'd used the services of the pay-to-play men in some spaceports. But this time, he wanted Patrea's body against him.

Patrea laughed then curled up next to Hadreal.

The narrow bunk wasn't meant to accommodate two adults, but the tight fit was comforting. Patrea's hot cock nestled against Hadreal's thigh. An arm slid over his waist as Patrea nuzzled his neck.

If Hadreal turned his head, Patrea's lips would be within kissing range, but the languid aftereffects of sex kept him still, enjoying the warm embrace.

Patrea took the lead. His hand cupped the side of Hadreal's face, tugging until he turned to face him.

Sweet, pliable lips met Hadreal's. Short kisses, open-mouthed but no tongue, caressed his lips. Hadreal's throat ached at the sensuousness.

He twisted his body until he faced Patrea. Body to body, the kisses deepened. The post-orgasm lethargy eased. The nearness of Patrea, his cock pressing against Hadreal's body renewed his energy.

His arms slid around Patrea's chest, hands moving up his back. Fingers dug into Patrea's shoulders.

Hips met, pressing close then backing away. His half-flaccid cock rubbed against Patrea's hard length. Blood pounded through Hadreal's veins, intensifying the long-seated desire for his bunkmate.

"Yes." Patrea moaned between kisses. His arms wrapped Hadreal in a tight embrace. His body moved faster, pulsing against Hadreal's.

"Don't come yet." Hadreal slipped his hand between their bodies. Gripping Patrea's leaking cock, he applied pressure near the base to stave off his climax. "Thought you were going to fuck me."

Patrea's body stilled. He buried his face in Hadreal's neck. "Keep saying things like that and I won't last long enough."

"Then maybe you'd better get on with it." Hadreal rolled onto his back. Snagging the lube, he then handed it to Patrea. "Use a lot. It's been awhile. And with this," his other hand tugged at Patrea's cock, "it'll probably be a really tight fit."

"Aw, shit." Patrea pulled away, his hand reaching for the lube. He lost his balance near the edge of the bed and scrambled off before he fell.

Hadreal took advantage of Patrea's short absence and turned over. On his hands and knees, he looked over his shoulder. "Like this?"

"Yeah." Patrea climbed back on the bed behind Hadreal. "Oh hell yeah."

Lowering his head, Hadreal expected the sound of the lube cap opening, cold, sticky gel pushing inside him. Instead, hot, wet heat teased the crack of his ass. "Damn!" He almost fell forward but Patrea's hands gripped his hips.

Fingers pried his cheeks apart. A long swipe of hot tongue taunted his hole. Flickering touches circled his anus. The muscle welcomed the teasing, relaxing, flaring open slightly.

Heat shivered through Hadreal. His body ached with desire. Not just sexual. Long-denied feelings for Patrea boiled to the surface. Emotion clogged his throat. Reawakened need rose fast.

Warmth turned to cold. Lube, slick and silky, coated his hole. Thick and hard, Patrea's dick pressed inside him.

"More." Hadreal wanted it all. Every inch. Every aching inch. Looking over his shoulder, he reveled in Patrea's tight frown and sweat-beaded brow. He wanted his lover as needy as he felt. "Fuck me. Hard."

"Getting there," Patrea mumbled between gritted teeth. "So tight. So good."

Short strokes got longer. Slower. Faster. Deeper. Hands tightened on Hadreal's ass.

"Oh yeah." Hadreal pushed back each time Patrea shoved forward. Their rhythm matched pace, increasing with each plunge of Patrea's thick cock.

"Fuck!" Patrea's shout startled Hadreal. The younger man slammed his hips against Hadreal's ass. His fingers dug into already bruised flesh. His body shuddered as hot come filled Hadreal. "Damn!"

Sweat dripped on Hadreal's lower back as Patrea's weight pushed him forward, pressing him into the mattress.

Hadreal was headed for another relationship whether it worked out or not. Part of him rejoiced in the heavy body pressing him into the mattress, in the thick cock still lodged inside him. But another part reminded him of heartache and betrayal.

Chapter Five

The blare of an alarm startled Patrea out of a dreamless sleep. The warm body next to him seemed out of place until last night's events flooded his memory. His stomach ached from the strain of sex. His wounds weren't quite healed enough for the rough ride he gave Hadreal.

Hadreal!

His cock reacted to the memory, filling slowly.

The alarm! No time to think about Hadreal. Or last night.

Patrea rolled out of Hadreal's bunk, followed closely by the man himself.

"Clothes..." Sleep still fogged his senses as Patrea darted around the corner of the room into his bunk area. His dirty clothes from yesterday were piled in the floor near his bunk. He yanked on his underwear and boots.

"Intruder alert!" Teo's voice rang out over the general comm system.

"Shit." Hadreal came around the corner dressed, fastening a holster around his hips. His fingers tapped a sequence on the room's safe and the panel slid up.

Two blasters and a long, slender stun stick were the safe's inventory. Weapons were stowed in each cabin as well as several places on the ship in case of emergency.

Patrea yanked his overtunic on but tossed the pants in favor of a weapon. A wave of panic hit him hard, doubling him over. "Angels!"

"More than Salva?"

"Yes. Not Salva." He gripped his stomach with one hand. "But more than one. And close." Struggling upright, he pointed the blaster toward the door.

Slamming his hand against the wall comm, Hadreal spoke in a low voice. "Angels, Captain. Near our quarters."

“Roger.”

The screeching chitter of angel speak seeped through the closed hatch. The click and clatter of claws tapped through the corridor.

Patrea moved toward the door, but Hadreal blocked him. “Let them pass. We’ll go out behind them,” he whispered.

Gulping past the pain, Patrea nodded.

Hadreal ran his fingers down Patrea’s jaw. “Sure you can do this?” His concern showed in his creased brow and gentle touch.

“Yeah.” Or die trying. “I have it under control.”

“Okay.” With a quick peck of a kiss on Petra’s cheek, Hadreal turned his attention back to the door.

The noise in the hall faded.

Hadreal motioned for Patrea to stand to one side of the door then he took the spot opposite. One hand held a blaster, the other the stunner.

Patrea gripped his blaster with both hands, trying to keep from trembling. The pain was a little less but still as sharp as Salva’s claws had been when they ripped open his skin. For Hadreal’s sake, he couldn’t fuck this up because of a little pain. If anything happened...

The half-formed idea hurt from more than angel presence or his wounds.

The door slid open. The hall was silent except for the normal hiss and click of machinery and life support.

Hadreal stuck his head through the door, glancing in both directions, then stepped through. He motioned Patrea out. “Watch behind, I’ll watch forward.”

With no cover in the corridor, they’d be sitting *gasa* if anyone got the drop on them.

Patrea nodded as he faced the direction the angels had come from. Walking backward, he was so close to Hadreal he could feel his body heat. Something he wanted to feel again, much closer. Under better circumstances.

A loud screech tore through the ship. A blaster sounded – and another.

Hadreal ran toward the noise. Patrea followed on his heels. His heart raced with adrenaline. The pain in his stomach grew less. The pins and needles seemed to fade.

Angel speak filled the hall, ear-piercingly loud, excited.

Weapons fired again.

A man's cry of pain.

"Narndo!" Another's full of fear.

A screech drowned out the frantic cry.

A slight curve in the corridor gave little cover. Peering around the wall, Patrea spotted two angels. Three if he counted Salva.

One of the white ones was blooded, bad, sprawled on the floor. Brilliant crimson spread under it, pooling on the deck. White wing feathers soaked up blood, shining red. The scent of it thick and cloying. Its chest had a gaping hole, charred black on the edges. The odor of burnt flesh mixed with the smell of blood.

Teo stood blocking the corridor opposite the angels. Koris squatted next to Narndo. Both pale, Narndo cradled his left arm against his chest. Both men held weapons ready, but their blasters wavered back and forth in search of a target.

Sorin stood next to Teo, blaster aimed at the angel.

Black feathers spread wide, pushing Teo and Sorin against the wall.

"Salva! Get back!" Sorin's voice rang out full of horror, terror.

Almost too fast to see, Salva charged the only angel still standing.

Salva's wing claws extended, stabbing the creature in the chest with one side. The other claw dug into the angel's arm. Ducking his head, Salva latched on to the enemy's neck with his fangs. With a sudden yank of his head, Salva ripped open the angel's throat.

Another ear-piercing shriek of terror ended abruptly. Arterial sprays of blood splattered the walls, striping the ceiling.

Salva tilted his head, face to the ceiling, and an angel-like cry crowed from his throat. Blood smeared his fanged mouth, dripped from his chin, covered his hands. His black wing claws were extended. His wings were slightly open. Blood covered his bare chest in long, striped patterns.

“Salva!” Sorin’s face was pale and drawn, hands trembling. “Come here.”

Another primal scream pierced the air. Salva’s black wings opened as far as the corridor allowed. Flapping, the feathers whipped a small breeze through the air. As his cry ended, he dropped his face, and his gaze.

Meeting the black-eyed stare, Petra couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Good job.” With a slight shrug of his shoulders, he mimicked Salva’s words from the bridge yesterday.

Salva’s brow ridges puffed like an angel’s, creased then smoothed. His eyes lightened to almost brown. A snort of what Patrea could only call laughter barked from his mouth. His gaze traveled down Patrea’s body then back up. “Forget something?”

“Salva.” Sorin’s tone was calmer, less demanding or panicked, almost amused.

Patrea looked down. His overtunic fell a little past his groin. His boots stopped just below his knees. The rest was bare legs. “Seems so.” A bubble of relief rose with a snort of laughter.

Salva’s low, deep laugh erupted, filling the narrow corridor as Sorin took his arm then led him away. The laughter continued in spite of Sorin’s chiding tone.

Teo leaned against the bulkhead, staring at the mutilated angels. A long sigh accompanied a shake of his head. “We need to make sure they were alone.”

“I don’t think there are any more.” Patrea spoke up before he thought.

“And you know this because?” Teo leveled a hard gaze at him.

Hadreal edged closer to Patrea, nodding. “Tell him.” A comforting hand squeezed Patrea’s shoulder.

Returning his gaze to Teo, Patrea said, "I...ah. I can feel angels. When they're close."

With a slow nod, Teo pushed away from the wall. "Should have known. The way you reacted to Salva the first time was too sudden. You'd been feeling him since you boarded the *Compensa*."

Patrea nodded but kept his surprise at the captain's calm.

"I've heard of others like you. Angel guides. Sorin had one in his dirtside clan—Artu. Once the clan realized his ability, he went with every hunting party. He was an early warning system that never failed."

Patrea's mouth fell open. He hadn't realized others had the same ability.

"Seems it's rare. Good bartering point." Teo slapped him on the shoulder. "Let's get this mess cleaned up and try to find out how they got on the ship. Oh, and," he turned back to Patrea, his stern face contorting into a grin, "you might want to put some pants on." With a short bark of amusement, he headed down the corridor after Sorin and Salva.

Koris, Narndo and Hadreal broke into relieved laughter.

The pain of the angels' presence had faded. Only the lingering touch of Salva remained. No pain. Just knowledge of his existence.

His gaze darted from man to man, ending on Hadreal. Patrea couldn't help join the infectious noise. Relief from pain and the drop in adrenaline made him almost giddy. And horny. Not for the first time, relief from fear left his cock aching with need.

"Well, you heard the captain. I need to find my pants." He tugged at Hadreal's sleeve. Maybe a few minutes alone with Hadreal...

Hadreal glanced over his shoulder at the other two men. His gaze paused on Narndo. "You okay?"

“Yeah. Just singed.” His fingers rubbed the blackened edges of a hole in his shirtsleeve running across his biceps. “Think I lost some hair. Damnedest thing though. Salva knocked me aside and attacked like a wild beast. Never seen anything like it.”

Koris nodded. “Like he’d reverted, back to the way we were tens of thousands of years ago. Ripped the throat right out of that one.” He pointed to one of the fallen angels.

Patrea didn’t bother to mention he’d seen the event. A quick glance showed the throat was a mutilated mess of flesh and bloody feathers.

“Damnedest thing.” Narndo shook his head. “If he hadn’t pushed me, I’d have taken this in the chest.” He held up his ragged sleeve again. His face was pale and his hands trembled. “Damnedest thing...”

Koris ran a hand over Narndo’s arm. “You’re okay though.”

Hadreal nodded. “Okay. You two start cleaning this mess up. We’ll be back in a few. Need to finish dressing.”

“Sure.” Koris elbowed Narndo. “Take your time.” He winked at Patrea.

As if they could keep anything a secret for long on a small ship.

Patrea pushed Hadreal ahead of him toward their quarters. His overtunic hid his erection but the ache wouldn’t be ignored.

As soon as they stumbled through the door, Hadreal slammed Patrea against the wall. His hands closed on Patrea’s wrists, pinning him to the bulkhead. “I could smell you, all hot and bothered. Does fear get you hard?”

“Sometimes.” Patrea craned his neck forward, aiming for a kiss.

“Me too.” Dodging the kiss, Hadreal whirled Patrea around, pushing him toward Hadreal’s bunk. The bottle of lube from last night lay on the floor next to the bed. “Bend over.”

Patrea's body went into overdrive. Need flooded him. His throat tightened with aching desire. His cock grew more rigid as Hadreal pushed him face first toward the mattress. The mussed bedding still smelled of sex.

Fingernails scraped his skin as Hadreal's frantic hands yanked at the thin underwear. "Need you now."

"Yeah. Fast and hard." Patrea used one hand to support his body and one to help get his underwear out of the way.

Cold with lube, Hadreal's fingers shoved in Patrea's hole. Three quick strokes and the fingers were replaced by his hot dick. The head burned as it squeezed past any instinctive resistance.

Patrea took a deep breath then relaxed his anal muscle as he exhaled. The hard cock eased deeper, pushing in short, fast strokes.

"Yeah. Fuck me." Curling his fingers into the bedding, Patrea buried his face in the material. The sheets smelled of Hadreal, fueling his need. "Harder!"

Obeying, Hadreal gripped Patrea's hips and dove in deep. Long, hard strokes slammed into his ass. Balls banged against balls. Burning desire coursed through Patrea's body.

Moaning into the mattress, Patrea rocked his hips, meeting each stroke.

"You feel. So. Good." Hadreal's words came out in spurts. His fingers dug into flesh. "Tight ass. Hot. Tight."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah." Patrea reached for his cock. So close all he needed was a quick jerk. His semen splattered the sheets in long squirts. His ass clenched around the thick invader filling him.

"Shit!" Hadreal groaned then slammed to a halt. His hips pulsed against Patrea's ass. "Damn. Didn't want to end so soon." He leaned over until his face rested on Patrea's back. A flurry of kisses fluttered against Patrea's spine. "Five years of sharing a

room and I've been missing out on this the entire time. Tonight, I plan to make up for lost time. Be prepared."

"Definitely." A shudder of pleasure whipped through Patrea. "I will. I will."

"We'd better get back out there."

"Yeah. Dead angels and all that."

"Yeah."

* * * * *

Patrea stared into the small pod. The thing didn't seem big enough to hold two angels, but it was the only one they'd found.

Attached to the hull of the ship, the pod had burned a hole three feet across through the bulkhead and into the storage room. The pod itself was the only thing keeping the room from opening to space. They'd sealed the surrounding bulkheads and added extra shield power to help hold the pod secure just in case.

Teo shook his head. "We're dead in the water until we get it off. I'm afraid we'll rip the hull wide open if we jump through a pointer with this thing."

The *Avere* wasn't equipped to jump to nearlight speeds without the boost from a pointer, and where they were, they'd need a pointer to get anywhere—station or planet—in less than several hundred years.

The shape of a ship in normal space was unimportant. Aerodynamics didn't mean anything in a vacuum. However, a pointer required a certain symmetry. Something sticking out the side, like the pod, would be bad. Very bad.

"Ever seen anything like it, Captain?" Koris leaned through the doorway. The room was too small for all three of them. Narndo tiptoed to peer over Koris' shoulder but didn't say anything.

"No. Something new. The thing doesn't even appear to be a standard escape pod." Teo let out a long sigh, as if he didn't like surprises. "Or maybe I haven't run across it

yet. Usually even when pods make it off the ship, they don't have the speed to get out of the way of the explosion. I don't see how this one caught up with us."

"So, you think it's from the ship that exploded?" Patrea wasn't convinced. Through the targeting scanners, he should have seen anything approach during the short battle. Nothing got that close to the *Avere* except for weapons fire.

Teo turned toward Patrea. His piercing gaze sent a jitter of nerves down Patrea's spine but he stayed steady, back straight, shoulders back.

"Where else?" Teo's arched eyebrow made the stare even more intimidating.

"I don't know. Just saying what I saw. Or didn't see."

"My scans didn't show anyone getting that close." Koris' words pulled Teo's attention away from Patrea.

Teo nodded slowly as he turned away. "Koris, pull up the records of the shield activity during the battle. Check it from first contact up to the explosion as well as all previous scans since I boarded. I want to go over them. Also, now that we know what we're looking for, do another scan of the hull. Make sure this is the only extra baggage we ended up with."

"Aye, Captain." Koris darted out of the doorway. His footsteps echoed as he ran toward the bridge.

"Narndo?"

"Yes Sir." He replaced Koris in the doorway.

"We need a serious patch. Do we have anything on board we can use? We can't travel through a pointer with that thing attached, and we need to get out of here. We're still too close to where we were attacked. The scout had to have come from a larger ship."

Normally, patches were reserved for smaller holes. Anything larger than an inch and a ship wasn't likely to survive. Patrea had never heard of anything—including a space station—surviving a hole more than three feet across, much less trying to patch it.

"I don't know, Captain. I'll look. This is a new one on me." Narndo leaned through the opening. "I'm not sure how we'll free this thing once we get a patch in place. The metal looks fused."

"We'll deal with that once it's repaired. If we have to, we'll use a piece of the interior bulkhead. Get any help you need and make it fast. I don't know if the scout got a signal off, but if they did, we could have company soon."

"Aye." Narndo hurried out of the storage room.

Instead of following Narndo out, Teo stood chewing his bottom lip, staring at the angel's pod, then he triggered a wrist comm. "Sorin?"

"Yes."

"How's Salva?" The captain whirled on his heel then stepped out of the storage room.

Sorin's voice crackled over the comm. "He's sleeping like he hasn't a care in the world."

"I'll be there in a few minutes." The slight hesitation had Patrea straining to hear the rest of the conversation. "We need to talk."

"Aye," was Sorin's quiet reply.

Patrea leaned against the bulkhead for a minute. The captain seemed worried over more than hull integrity. After the vicious display of angel rage, maybe he wasn't as certain about having Salva on board.

Then again, if Narndo was right, Salva had saved his life, killing an angel in the process. Maybe Salva was more Virkolan than Angellum... Maybe it didn't matter.

What did matter was how the angels got on board. Patrea wanted to see the scans again. All of them. Patrea followed in the captain's wake, heading for the bridge.

Chapter Six

Sorin didn't like Teo's tone. Tight, hard. Command mode. Maybe it was for show for whoever was near. Then again, maybe not.

The door to Salva's room was open. He lay on his bed, curled under his wings, head hidden from view, much like Hayyot. The thought of Salva's mother resurrected the sadness Sorin had felt when she'd died. The same sorrow had hit him on the bridge during the scout ship's attack.

What if some of Hayyot's people—angels friendly to Virkolans—had been on board? Had they destroyed those who might help them?

The soft trill of a snore fluttered the feathers in front of Salva's face. A hand slid out from under a black wing, clutching the bedding as his snore turned to a half growl.

A shudder swept over Sorin as the memory of white feathers splashed with blood flashed through his mind. Salva had been brutal. No attempt to talk, communicate in anyway. Neither angel had had much of a chance.

Sorin jumped as the outer door slid open. Drawing a long breath, he nodded to Teo.

"You okay?" Teo strode across the room. Dropping on the bed next to him, Teo enveloped him in a tight embrace.

"Yeah." Gulping around a lump in his throat, Sorin nodded. "I keep seeing him..." His gaze blurred the peaceful view of his sleeping offspring. His memory inserted the vision of Salva's murderous rage.

"Me too." Teo's hand rubbed up and down Sorin's back. "We need to talk."

"I know." Sorin pulled away. The viciousness of the attack... Even he realized Salva could be a serious danger. Not to himself. He didn't believe Salva would ever harm him or Teo. But the others. Or people they met in their travels. He had no idea what to do.

He was already attached to him. His strange son. "I never thought about having an offspring."

"I know." Teo scooted closer again, leaning his cheek against Sorin's shoulder.

"And even though it's only been a short while, I can't imagine not having him around." Sorin pulled his gaze away from Salva's sleeping form. "What will...you do?"

Teo shook his head. "I don't know."

The idea of killing him was abhorrent. No matter what he was, Salva was his blood. Killing his own offspring... Emotion clogged his throat and stung his eyes. Sorin twisted to face Teo. "I can't harm him. I can't let him be harmed. I'll take him and leave the ship at Crerange."

"I can't let you do that." Teo gripped Sorin's face between his warm hands. "We discussed this when he hatched. I won't let you go off alone."

"I won't let anyone hurt him, but I can't risk you. Or the crew."

"Father?"

Sorin jerked away from Teo. The subject of their discussion stood in the doorway, feathers twitching and a hooded expression darkening his eyes.

"Yes, Salva."

"Why are you upset?" His gaze darted from Sorin to Teo then back.

"I'm a little worried."

"About me?" A frown puffed up his angel-like brow ridges.

Sorin ignored Teo's not-so-subtle pinch. "Yes."

With a long, deep breath, Salva closed his eyes. "I wasn't supposed to kill?"

"Not exactly." Teo stood up, edging a step between Sorin and Salva.

"Be honest, Teo." Sorin shifted to one side so he could see Teo's reactions.

Even at a week old, Salva possessed a sharp intelligence and usually reasoned things out logically. Of course Teo wouldn't know that. He'd not spent much time with Sorin and Salva since they boarded the *Avere*.

Teo threw a warning glance toward Sorin.

Sorin shrugged. "Trust me on this."

"Okay. Fine." Shoulders back, Teo straightened to his full height. "It wasn't that you killed, it was how. And the viciousness of your attack."

"Killing is okay as long as it's civilized?" Salva leveled his gaze at Teo. One eyebrow rose with his question.

Teo's knee flexed as if he were about to step back. "That's not what I meant."

"Father was in danger. As were you and the crew. Is that correct?"

"Yes. But—"

"I had no weapon but those I was born with. Isn't it reasonable to assume I would use them if needed?"

"Yes. But—"

"Angels are bred to kill with their claws. Virkolans once used their fangs to hunt. Shouldn't I reason that both combined would be effective against an attack?"

Sorin couldn't stop a snort of amusement. "Teo, he's been like this since the second day. I don't know if angels are born reasoning creatures or not. Hayyot seemed very logical in her quest."

"Are they?" Teo directed the question at Salva. "Are angels born with reason?"

"I don't know. I only know what I am, what I understand." Salva's lips lifted in a quick smile. "And that I am no danger to you or your crew."

"What if one attacked? Like Patrea. What if he attacked you again, like he did the first day?"

"I only did as much as I needed to stop him."

Sorin kept his silence. If Teo had spent more than a few minutes with him since then, Sorin could have told him the same thing.

Between Teo's responsibilities to the new ship and Sorin's abrupt fatherhood, they hadn't had much time together at all. Unlike their time on the *Compensa*, where they spent almost every moment, waking or not, in each other's company.

"I could feel his turmoil. His true anger wasn't directed at me."

"You could feel him?" Teo asked, his tone sharp.

"Yes."

That was new. Salva hadn't mentioned it before. "What do you mean feel him?" Sorin rose from the bed to stand next to Teo.

"His anger, Father. His pain. And his hate."

"Patre's an angel guide," Teo said. "But I didn't think angels could sense guides. A guide wouldn't be any good if they could."

"Patre's a guide?" Sorin hadn't heard of any other angel guides except Artu in his home clan.

"Yeah," Teo nodded. "Just found out. It's how he knew the intruders were angels before we got there."

"Makes sense." The information certainly changed Sorin's opinion of Patrea. His sixth sense would have been driving him nuts, first with Hayyot's presence on the *Compensa* then Salva. "But I don't think angels could sense Artu. The clan was able to hide from angels every time he felt them near. If they could feel him as well, we'd have been sitting *gasa*."

"Maybe because Salva is part Virkolan? Maybe he inherited something from Artu. Don't you have a common ancestor?"

"Yes. We do. A forefather, three times removed." He met Salva's calm gaze. "Did you sense the angels on board?"

"No, Father. I think I recognized their speech. Then we came down the corridor and I saw them. When they fired at you, nearly hit Narndo, I reacted."

“Violently.” Teo stepped back then sat on the bed with a long sigh. “Salva, how can I know you won’t do the same to others we meet? Where we’re going now, other Virkolans might act aggressive toward us. I can’t have you ripping out throats and gutting people on a regular basis.”

Sorin pressed a hand on Teo’s shoulder. With the new ship came so many more responsibilities. Their life on the *Compensa* was almost carefree until they sought the bounty on Hayyot. How their lives had changed. And it was all Sorin’s fault.

Salva’s feathers fluttered then pulled together in a tight vee over his head. “I give my word. I won’t attack unless I believe Father, you or the crew is in danger.”

“Yeah.” Teo snorted a short laugh. “You’re like a week old, Salva. Where’d you learn judgment?”

“You’ll have to learn to trust me.” Salva’s eyebrow arched. “As I must learn to trust you.”

“Fair enough. However, when we get to Crerange, I want you to stay in your quarters. I don’t think you’re ready to meet the type of people who hang out there.”

“I—”

Sorin interrupted. “He’ll stay out of the way.” So far, the conversation had gone better than he expected.

“But, Father—”

“No buts. I want you safe. Besides, I have no idea how to disguise your wings. Too many questions would not be a good thing.”

“Yes, Father.” Salva’s fierce expression softened into a slight pout. Like that, he went from looking like a young man in his early forties to a youth of barely twenty. Rational or not, he was still just a week old.

Sorin laid a hand on Teo’s shoulder. “Maybe we should change course. Go somewhere other than Crerange.”

Drawing a deep breath, Teo let out a long sigh. "I've thought about it, but Hayyot said she had people there. We need to find out more about this scheme of hers."

Nodding, Sorin let his hand drop. Sorin wanted to find out if any of Hayyot's contacts had more information about Salva or any others like him. Members of her alliance on Crerange was the best place to start.

"I need to check on the repairs." Teo pecked a quick kiss on Sorin's cheek. "We'll talk more later."

"Sure." The issue was far from settled, but at least Salva had a reprieve for now.

* * * * *

Hadreal held his blaster across his stomach with one hand on the hilt and his trigger finger ready. The other hand caressed the barrel.

Look menacing...

Easy enough to do, considering Hadreal held Jenkins responsible for Reekar's death. His friend might not have been the best captain in the galaxy, but Hadreal was loyal to a fault.

Curbing his temptation to put Jenkins out of his miserable existence, Hadreal stood with feet planted shoulder's width apart near the door. The tiny room stank of fear and Jenkins' strange body odor. Weird how Hadreal had never noticed it until Jenkins had been outed as a Terran.

Teo, on the other hand, lounged against the small sink opposite the bunk where Jenkins sat. "Now's the time to talk."

"I've nothing to say." Jenkins seemed to have found his backbone after his cowardly surrender on Teo's ship.

"Well, I think you do. My ship was boarded by angels. You've been working with angels. I want to know what you know." Teo looked up from staring at his fingernails. His gaze hardened. Lips curled back to reveal fangs. "Now."

Jenkins' face paled and he leaned away a fraction of an inch. "I can't tell you anything. They didn't confide in me."

"So, you were just a stupid pawn? Less than a man, less than scum to your angel masters?" Teo's baiting tone got a rise of color back in Jenkins' cheeks.

Hadreal bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. From the secretive way Jenkins had taken over the *Avere*, Hadreal had always considered him a coward.

"I didn't have a choice!"

"Why not?" Teo leaned closer, letting his lips conceal part of his fangs.

"They—" Jenkins' eyes closed and he took a deep breath. "What the hell... She's probably already dead." When his eyes opened, moisture threatened to spill over. "They had my sister—Chloe."

Family? Hadreal hadn't considered why Jenkins would collude with angels. Blackmail never crossed his mind.

Teo's stance eased as he leaned back against the sink. With a long sigh, Teo's fangs receded.

Hadreal shook his head. Of all people, Teo would understand how far someone would go for family.

"How'd they capture her?" Teo asked.

"They didn't. We both agreed to help them." Anguish hooded his eyes. Wrapping his arms across his stomach, he rocked back and forth slightly. "In exchange, they would cure my sister's son."

"And they didn't." Teo's words weren't a question.

"No. They let him die and tossed him into space with their garbage."

Hadreal spoke through gritted teeth. "Can't trust angels. Ever." His anger at Jenkins melted. The idea of using an innocent...

Teo took a deep breath then continued. "What did they want you to do?"

“Infiltrate Virkolan ships and bases. Find out if the renegade angels had contacted them. They taught us the language and customs of the Virkolan. At least the ones they knew.” Jenkins straightened his back and met Teo’s gaze. “We were supposed to report back as soon as possible. Especially if anyone found the traitor Hayyot.”

“Why do you smell different now?” Hadreal was supposed to keep quiet, but the difference in Jenkins’ scent preyed on his curiosity.

“Injections. Mine probably wore off a few days ago. I didn’t have access to my stash. The difference between humans and Virkolans is slight. A couple of internal organs. You have a special one to process the blood you drink. Also humans have a greater variety of coloration—eyes, hair, skin.”

Hadreal stepped forward. “What’d you do with Reekar?”

A fleeting gaze met Hadreal’s then Jenkins lowered his head. “Angels took him. They said there’d been a report of Hayyot’s whereabouts. They wanted me to take immediate action and Reekar would slow things down.”

“Is he dead?” Renewed sadness tugged at his heart. Reekar had been a good friend.

“I don’t know. Probably. They love to kill.” Jenkins closed his eyes. “I just hope my sister...went easy...”

Teo’s forehead crinkled in a deep frown. “How’d you know to look for my ship?”

“Other humans were on Dead End Station.”

“Humans?” The strange word caught Hadreal by surprise.

“What we call ourselves. They suspected the *Compensa* because Maarta and her mate were part of the alliance between Virkolans and the renegades. When Maarta died warning you off—”

“Maarta is dead?” Hadreal hadn’t heard anything. Then again, Jenkins had kept a close eye on communications.

“Yes. Murdered. Takra too.” Teo stood abruptly. “And, Hayyot’s dead now as well. No need to keep looking for her. But I guess they assume Hayyot’s on this ship now.” Teo’s expression darkened with narrowed gaze and a deep frown.

“I guess my sister is dead as well.” Moisture welled up in Jenkins’ eyes. “After my nephew died, she gave up. I guess I should have as well. Now I have no one left.”

Hadreal almost felt sorry for the *human*. Almost. He’d caused too much damage.

* * * * *

While the ship buzzed with the news of Jenkins’ reasons for betrayal, Patrea could only think of Hadreal’s upcoming space walk. “I don’t like it.” Patrea paced the small, open area of their quarters. His heart ached at the idea of Hadreal in the cold of space with only the protection of a flimsy suit. Patrea almost couldn’t breathe thinking of the danger...of losing him.

Hadreal looked up from his inspection of his suit. “What’s the matter with you? It’s not like this is the first time I’ve worked on the outer hull.”

“Things are...different.” How could he say he cared more now? A lot more. “Besides, that pod showed up on its own without setting off any real warnings. Who’s to say there’s not another one out there waiting for us?” Irrational argument, but he couldn’t say what he really wanted.

When Patrea reviewed the scans, the pod had showed up as space debris a day and a half ago. It set off a minor meteoroid alarm when it attached to the ship but no damage registered. The alarm was automatically noted in the log but nothing more.

“Things are different?” A smile curved Hadreal’s lips and a glimmer lit his eyes. “Different how?”

“You know what I mean.” He dragged his gaze away from Hadreal’s amused expression.

Setting aside his suit, Hadreal patted the bed beside him. “Come here.”

“Why?” Patrea didn’t know if he could control his emotions if he got too close. Last thing he needed to do was wrap his arms around Hadreal and beg him not to make the space walk. Hadreal had no choice. He was most qualified, and someone had to cut the pod off the hull.

“Just come here.” A slight frown marred his forehead.

With a deep breath to steel his determination, Patrea plopped down beside his lover. “What?”

A strong arm snaked around his waist, pulling him closer. Warm breath teased his ear. “How are things different?”

Because I love you... Stubborn pride refused to speak the words aloud. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.” Hadreal’s nearness warmed Patrea’s blood. A rush of desire flooded his cock.

“Who says I’m going to get hurt?”

Wet heat circled the shell of Patrea’s ear. Patrea shuddered and made a halfhearted attempt to escape Hadreal’s grip. “You could. It’s dangerous out in the open.”

“No more today than it was six weeks ago when I had to repair a meteoroid puncture.” Hadreal’s lips nuzzled Patrea’s neck. “So what’s different?”

“Nothing.” He leaned his head to the side to give Hadreal better access. “Oh yeah...”

Hadreal’s other arm snuck around Patrea’s front. His hand pressed against Patrea’s cock.

Patrea rocked into the welcome heat. “Good.” Their conversation drifted out of his thoughts. Even his fear for his lover pushed to the side. For now, the only thing he cared about was Hadreal’s nearness.

Twisting around, Patrea pushed Hadreal onto the narrow bunk. The forgotten suit slipped to the floor. Need rose up fast, as did the desire to say more than he should. He

loved Hadreal. That much he was certain. But how did Hadreal feel? Would saying it aloud scare him away?

His thighs straddled Hadreal's hips. The hard ridge of Hadreal's dick pressed against Patrea's groin. "Quick one?" he whispered before attacking Hadreal's mouth.

Kisses full of fire and passion took his breath away. Something more than sexual desire had to be fueling the intensity of Hadreal's kisses. He hoped. But things were moving too fast, too soon. He could wait. See if the flames died down over the next few weeks.

Serious thoughts and worries faded as the heat grew hotter.

"Need you." Hadreal's soft words pulled him closer.

"Yes." He reached between them, pushing his hand into Hadreal's pants. His fingers wrapped around Hadreal's erect cock.

Hadreal's kisses grew deeper, more frantic. Little grunts and groans matched the awkward pace of Patrea's strokes.

Not enough. Patrea wanted to give Hadreal pleasure. Show him what Patrea was afraid to say...

Scrambling down the bunk, Patrea paused to yank open Hadreal's pants. He tugged until he freed Hadreal's cock. After two quick strokes, Patrea let his mouth take over.

Hadreal's hips jolted upward as Patrea wrapped his lips around the crown. The slight musk of come teased his tongue. Suckling rewarded him with a little more pre-come.

A loud groan erupted from Hadreal. "Oh shit!" His hands settled on Patrea's head, fingers scratching through his hair. "Suck me."

Patrea obeyed by swallowing Hadreal's length to almost the base. With lips stretched over his teeth, he bobbed up and down his lover's dick with quick, long strokes.

“Damn!” Hadreal’s hips pumped up to meet him. “Yeah. Suck it good.” He blew his breath out in short puffs. “Keep that up and I’m going to fill your throat with come.”

Humming his permission, Patrea pushed himself harder. Deeper and deeper, he engulfed Hadreal’s hot flesh until his nose pressed against Hadreal’s pubic hairs.

“Yeah.” His body rocked faster, harder. “Oh yes.” Fingers tightened on Patrea’s head, weaving through his hair. The tight hold tugged his hair in short spasms. “Oh yeah. Patrea...”

Hadreal held Patrea’s head tight against his groin as hot come splattered against the back of Patrea’s throat. “Yes! Oh damn!”

Fighting against gagging, Patrea took it all. His need to distract his lover from serious conversation worked but now even more than before, Patrea wanted to tell Hadreal he loved him.

The chirp of the comm saved Patrea from himself.

“Hadreal?” Teo’s voice filled the small room.

Easing off Hadreal, he let his lover answer.

“Yes, Captain?”

“The patch is done. Are you about ready? We need to get moving.”

“Yes Sir. I’ll be there in a minute.” Hadreal’s gaze ran up and down Patrea’s body, pausing briefly at the bulge of his hard-on. He disconnected the comm. “Guess I’ll have to wait to return the favor.” With a sigh, he wrapped Patrea in a tight, quick hug. “Save it for later,” he whispered in Patrea’s ear.

“Yeah.” Patrea didn’t care about his aching dick. His throat caught with the words he needed to say but couldn’t. “When you get back...”

* * * * *

Patrea held his breath as he watched Hadreal on the main viewer. Spacewalks were rare because the few old suits they had weren’t up to standards, but they had no choice

on this one. Even though Hadreal was inside the ship's shields, the smallest chunk of debris could mean death in an instant.

Patrea's heart beat as if he'd just run a race as his gaze darted between the viewer and the console showing Hadreal's vital signs.

Hefting a laser cutter, Hadreal aimed the bright beam at the angel pod about a half-inch from the *Avere's* hull. He'd been out there for nearly two hours. The metal was thick and slow to cut. Almost six inches remained. At the rate of cutting, he needed another twenty minutes or so. Unfortunately, his air was stretching toward the end. He'd have to come back in before he could finish.

Patrea's suggestion of using high-heat explosives was voted down in favor of the slower method. While the pliant explosive didn't have much bang, the intense heat could cut through metal in seconds. However, in the vacuum of space, the explosive was less than reliable. Since they had to cut so close to the hull, the material could flare up, causing more damage than good.

"Captain, we have a faint contact." Narndo flipped a switch, changing the main viewer to the instrument readout. "Just on the edge of our sensor capabilities. Less than two milliparsecs."

"Damn." Teo leaned over the back of Narndo's seat. "Get everything ready to move as soon as Hadreal's back inside. We'll head to the nearest pointer at full speed." Teo glanced at the viewer that showed Hadreal working to free the pod. "And hope our repairs hold. How much air does he have left?"

"Not much." Sorin monitored a readout of Hadreal's vital signs. "Don't push him. His blood pressure is already skyrocketing. He's going as fast as he can. Telling him won't help."

Patrea jerked around to face Sorin. "You have to warn him. Let him know someone's coming."

“Can he work any faster if he knows?” Sorin leveled a somber gaze at him. “Do you think he’ll quit? Scramble into safety knowing the pod could rip the hull open when we try to jump again?”

“Well. No.” Patrea closed his eyes and swallowed against a huge lump in his throat. “No, he wouldn’t put his own safety above his shipmates.”

“So don’t pester him. It won’t do any good.”

A deep breath didn’t help the ache in Patrea’s throat. The idea of losing Hadreal hurt more than the presence of any angel, than even Salva’s claws. He turned back to his console. Fingers shook as they flew over the weapons instruments, prepping the ship for battle again.

A strong hand squeezed his shoulder. Expecting the captain, Patrea was surprised to find Salva behind him.

The dark angel didn’t speak, but his gaze held a soft, knowing look.

Instead of the pins and needles of an angel’s presence, Patrea felt a calming reassurance through the contact. His mind had other things to worry about at the moment.

Should have told him...

Patrea’s gaze flickered between the weapons console and the life signs station. His feelings for his shipmate had his heart beating near as fast as Hadreal’s. He should have said something. Life was too short to let the good parts pass without comment.

He steeled his nerve, pleaded with the old gods for the opportunity to tell Hadreal he loved him.

“Definitely another ship on approach.” Narndo interrupted Patrea’s thoughts. “If it maintains course and speed, I should be able to tell what kind in two minutes.”

Two minutes. They needed at least that long to get everything up to speed.

The threat of death wasn’t new. Patrea had lived his life under the menace of angels, other smugglers, outlaws and thieves. After his mothers died, he hadn’t much

cared whether he lived or died. He'd wandered from one place to another for years, seeking anything to ground him. The *Avere* and its crew had given him a new lease on life. A new will to live.

But if anything happened to Hadreal...

The thought of losing someone close to him again sent a shock of pain through his guts. But it could happen. Any time. Anywhere. Without warning, just like now.

Was investing his heart in a relationship wise? Something could happen as easily as not. Living life as a smuggler was inherently dangerous.

"One minute until contact confirmed." Narndo's words echoed in Patrea's head.

Maybe a relationship of any kind wasn't a good idea. Regret wore at him from two sides—he shouldn't have acted on his attraction, and now common sense said to back off.

Life was never easy. The comfort of another soul would go a long way at easing his loneliness, but at what cost?

The pod snapped loose from the hull.

Teo slammed his hand on the comm. "Hadreal, get inside now. We've got company." Without waiting for a confirmation, he turned to Sorin. "Get down there and make sure he's okay."

Before Teo finished his order, Sorin was already out the door.

Concern had Patrea rising from his seat.

"Patrea, let Sorin handle it. I need you at weapons."

Narndo interrupted any reply. "Definitely Angellum and it's a big one. Possibly the ship the scout came from."

The viewscreen showed the large bubble-like ship approaching at high speed. Larger angel ships were almost spherical in design.

"Fuck." Teo checked the monitor showing the repairs. Slamming a hand on the comm control, he yelled, "Sorin, is he inside?"

"Just a second." Sorin sounded out of breath.

"Hurry, damn it!"

"Okay. Now! Go!"

"Get us the hell out of here. Top speed." Teo's order had barely escaped his mouth when the hum of the engines jumped into full power.

The stars on the monitor stretched into trails of light as the ship accelerated toward escape.

"Incoming!" Narndo yelled. The ship's gravity gave as Narndo pushed the ship into a sharp dive then rolled in an attempt to avoid the blast of energy.

Gripping one side of his console tightly, Patrea used his free hand to key in target coordinates then pressed the fire control. One more shot. Then wait for the system to recharge. Count to five...

His heart raced with each maneuver. His hands did the job required. But his thoughts kept drifting back to Hadreal. Was he okay? Alive? Pain threatened to overwhelm him. *Not now...* His crewmates, his captain, depended on him right now.

With a faint glow, each shot struck into the darkness of space. Two reached the target, although the ship was almost out of range. A shower of light exploded near each hit, but nothing big enough to indicate serious damage.

"Fuck! Still coming," Narndo shouted as a blast rocked the ship.

The *Avere* slowed, the spray of starlight kicked back to pinpoints in the black of space. Another bright line of energy shot out toward the *Avere*.

"Brace for impact!" Teo's shout was almost simultaneous with the hit.

The ship rocked hard to port. The gravity generator gave up power to the shields. A brief second of weightlessness hiccupped, raising Patrea from his seat then dropping him down again. His stomach did a flip-flop as well.

"Damage report," Teo yelled.

Narndo's reply sounded confused. "Not much. Looks like they're targeting propulsion."

"And doing a damn fine job of it." Teo's grumbling words reached the weapons station. "They've knocked us off line."

Patrea's fingers flew over the console, routing power from other systems to beef up the energy weapon. He popped the fire button. Waited then punched again.

Again, minor sparks showered the darkness near the enemy but nothing crippling. "Fuck. I can't get through their shields." His worry for Hadreal seemed futile if they were all about to die.

Strong hands clenched on his shoulders. The sense of Salva behind him grew reassuring as the Angellum ship drew closer.

The pins and needles of angel presence—not Salva but others—hit him in the pit of his stomach like a sledgehammer. Real angels.

His hands gripped his console as he fought pain and nausea. "Need to..."

Salva leaned over him, fingers running across the controls. "Got it." He pushed the fire button, waited a couple of seconds then pushed again.

Impressed, Patrea took a deep breath and forced aside the distraction of pain.

Teo appeared to one side. "It's not enough." As he stormed back toward navigation, he hit his wrist comm. "Sorin, is Hadreal okay? I need him in the engine room right now."

"Fine. Captain." Hadreal's voice came through the comm quiet and breathless. "Headed there now."

Relief flooded Patrea at the sound of Hadreal's voice. He was alive.

"Good." Teo's sigh of relief almost matched Patrea's. "Sorin, they're trying to board us. Be careful."

A shock of pain jolted through Patrea. *Board us?* "How many?"

Teo glanced over, meeting Patrea's gaze. "I don't know. Maybe a dozen. Their ships seemed to be bigger to accommodate internal flight, not large crews." His frown softened slightly. "Will you be okay?"

"Yes Sir."

Salva's strong hands kneaded Patrea's shoulders. The contact seemed to ease some of Patrea's pain.

"Never been around so many at once." Patrea shocked himself by admitting anything to the captain's creature.

"You can do it." Why Salva's words eased his mind Patrea didn't know, but he didn't have a choice. Deal with it or die.

Another sharp pain lanced his chest, tightening his throat. This time, it had nothing to do with the proximity of angels.

Why had he waited so long to do anything about his attraction to Hadreal? So much time lost. And maybe no future to explore.

Chapter Seven

Gasping through an oxygen mask, Hadreal stumbled toward the engine room. His legs and arms tingled with the pinpricks of fading numbness. His life had flashed before him out there. A life of loneliness created by his stubborn unwillingness to take another chance on love. And of course things heated up with Patrea just in time to die.

“Oh well.” At least they had had a little time...

Sharp pain lanced through his head. His stomach roiled from the nausea brought on by lack of oxygen.

“What?” Sorin’s concern warmed him.

In spite of the angel connection, Sorin seemed a good man, loving mate and strangely doting father. All the things Hadreal had aspired to be once in his life. Well, except for the father thing. Most Virkolans were reared by their mothers.

“I’m fine.” Hadreal tapped the access code into the engine room door panel. The door slid open and a blast of heat took what little breath he had.

Fire suppression foam sprayed the interior of the control room to no avail. The fire flared toward the door as Hadreal slammed his hand on the emergency close. “Damn.” Leaning against the bulkhead, Hadreal reached for Sorin’s wrist comm. “Bridge. Fire...out of control. Open engine room outer doors. Vacuum...kill flames.”

His chest hurt as he gasped for breath. The brief exposure to the suppression foam made his breathing problems worse.

A trail of flashing red lights circled the engine room door, indicating the room was open to space.

No need for more words now, Hadreal leaned against the bulkhead, holding the oxygen mask to his face. Short, hard breaths eased into longer, deeper ones. The

tightness in his chest loosened a little. His head settled as the lightheaded dizziness began to fade.

His regret, however, wouldn't ease. If only he'd had a little more time with Patrea...

"Status?" Teo's voice cut through the lifting fog in Hadreal's brain.

The lights turned to yellow. The flashing slowed. With a final drag of oxygen, Hadreal pushed away from the support of the bulkhead. "Just a minute."

As the last lights faded, Hadreal keyed the entry sequence again. This time when the doors opened, a rush of freezing air exited. The icy cold of space had done the trick, but the room held the deep chill of death in spite of environmental systems blasting warm air. Even the foam had evacuated with the flames, leaving the surfaces slick but clear.

Moving cautiously across the slippery deck, Hadreal paused in front of the main control console. "Fire's out. Checking systems now." The fire had melted gauges and readout panels. Even the metal showed scoring from the intense heat. "Main control is a waste."

"Damn!" Teo's normal calm composure seemed to be slipping.

Of course Hadreal couldn't blame him. Looked as if they had reached the end of their luck.

Hadreal used the emergency release to open the main engine compartment. The smell of coolant and hydraulic fluid slammed his senses. His hard-won breath caught in his chest. The acrid fumes filled his lungs. His eyes stung and tears gushed down his cheeks.

Wiping his face on his upper sleeve, he ran toward the backup console. Fire damage wasn't as bad here, but the few readouts didn't give him hope.

"We're dead in the water." Hadreal moved back across the small space toward Sorin. "Tell him we're not going anywhere without serious repairs."

Sorin relayed the message as Hadreal sealed the engine room.

“You two meet us in the cargo bay.” Teo’s tone was somber, less frantic. “Gather every weapon you can on the way.”

The ship rocked to port then back hard to starboard.

“What’s going on?” Sorin asked. His gaze locked with Hadreal’s.

“We’re being boarded. They just hooked on. If we’re lucky, we have about ten minutes until they break through the cargo bay hatch. Maybe less.”

“Teo?” Sorin’s eyes closed as he took a short breath.

“Yes.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Sorin closed the comm then grabbed Hadreal’s arm. “Closest weapons?”

“That way.” Pointing the way, Hadreal let Sorin pull him along. His feet weren’t cooperating very well. Still under the influence of hypoxia, Hadreal wanted to lie down and give up, but he was determined to see Patrea again.

He envied the easy declarations of love between Sorin and Teo. Part of him wanted to tell Patrea the same thing. Then again, they’d probably be dead soon. Why leave Patrea – or himself – with one more regret?

“Stop.” Hadreal leaned forward, hands on his thighs, as he struggled to regain his breath yet again. “Here.” He pointed to a door. “Storage. Has weapons.”

“Right.”

Pulling himself together, Hadreal keyed open the door. Ducking inside, he opened the hidden panel. Three blasters, two long guns and a couple of low-explosive grenades was the bounty. Setting off a grenade inside a ship was asking for trouble, but LE grenades were supposed to damage flesh and not do much to metal.

He tossed a long gun and a blaster toward Sorin. After he pocketed the grenades, he strapped the other long gun over his shoulder. With a blaster in both hands, he left the oxygen tank on the shelf next to the opening.

Sorin hefted the blaster, checking the mechanism like a soldier rather than a healer. "Let's go."

Another explosion rocked the ship. The blast came from the direction of the cargo hold. Maybe the angels had decided cutting through the hatch took too long.

Hadreal led the way, pushing his strength and breath to the limit. Voices clamored inside the bay as they palmed the door open.

A bolt of weapons fire streaked through the open door. Shouted orders rose above the click and screech of angel speak.

"Patrea, get back!" Teo's words resonated fear through Hadreal.

Ducking through the door in a crouch, Hadreal darted for the nearest cover. A large cargo container was kind enough to be close.

Heat of another blaster shot warmed his pants leg in a near miss. Maybe not close enough...

Hadreal tucked and rolled, slamming up against the container with a painful crunch. Stray thoughts distracted him, wondering where Patrea was hiding in the room.

A streak of blaster fire aimed toward the door again. Sorin ducked back into the corridor.

"Stay there!" Fear tinged Teo's command.

Banishing his worry so he could concentrate on the job at hand, Hadreal edged toward the corner of his cover. Leaning his upper body slightly, he peeked around.

Several angels lay blooded and burned near an opening in the hull. Three, maybe four – hard to tell with all the blood-splattered white feathers.

The explosion seemed to be Teo's doing, not the enemy's. The scoring on the walls and the extent of damage to the angels indicated something stronger than LE grenades. Ballsy to set off an explosion inside a ship. His admiration for the new captain raised another notch.

A sharp blast of enemy fire sent him back to cover. Waving his hand toward Teo, he caught the captain's attention. He mouthed the words, "How many?"

Teo raised a hand showing five fingers then closed his fist. Another three fingers shot up.

Eight angels. Shit. Only six Virkolans on the *Avere*. Seven if he counted Salva. And the Angellum had better, more advanced weapons. Not good odds.

Pointing to the left, in front of Hadreal's cover, Teo held up two fingers. Then straight ahead, four fingers and to the right, two more. Waving his hand toward Hadreal's side of the cargo bay, he mouthed, "Give me cover."

Gripping both blasters, Hadreal scrambled to a crouch. With as deep a breath as his aching lungs would allow, he jumped up, shooting over the top of the cargo container with both weapons. His head pounded from the leftover effects of lack of oxygen.

His heart jumped as he saw Patrea's head pop up to the right and forward of the captain. With emotion tight in his chest, he concentrated his attention on the angels ducking for cover instead of his lover.

Teo disappeared. A few seconds later, he stood close to the angels with something in his hand. A shrapnel grenade. Damn ballsy!

Tiny fragments from the explosion would spread in all directions, penetrating anything softer than metal.

Hadreal pulled a few more shots as fast as the old blasters would fire.

When Teo lobbed the grenade, Hadreal counted to three then ducked. Not quick enough. The flash nearly blinded him. The splatter of fragments sounded like a heavy rain dirtside. His ears rang with the aftermath of the explosion.

Sorin's anguished cry pierced Hadreal's fugue. The captain's mate rushed forward, heedless of the enemy, but no angel took advantage of Sorin's haste.

"Don't you fucking die on me, you son of a bitch!" Sorin's anguish bled through the angry words.

Rising slowly, Hadreal peered over the top of the container. No return fire. Nothing stirred. He eased around the protection of his cover toward Sorin's location. The tightness around his heart gave way as he saw Patrea peering around a cargo container.

"Damn." Hadreal's body hurt just looking at the captain.

Teo's body was sprawled on the floor, blood pooling underneath his head. Shrapnel wounds marked exposed skin. Rips in his clothes showed more blood. His left leg bent back in an unnatural pose, kinked in at least three places. Bad breaks all from the look of it.

An arm slipped around Hadreal's waist. Patrea's head leaned against his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Hadreal took his first deep breath since his space walk. Exhaling hard, he forced away tears of relief. He wrapped Patrea in a hard hug. He never wanted to let go, but... "Need to see if I can help."

Nodding, Patrea released him.

Kneeling on the other side of Teo, Hadreal put his healing skills to use, matching Sorin's frantic pace. The worst of the blood appeared to be a head wound. Maybe a good thing. Head wounds bled like crazy even when the injury was superficial. They'd need to check for symptoms of brain damage though.

"Sorin?" Teo whispered between swollen and bloody lips.

"I'm here, asshole."

"Who you calling asshole?"

Both men chuckled a weak laugh, as if the routine was familiar.

"Father?" Salva appeared behind Sorin.

"I'm fine. Teo's managed to get himself banged up again."

Salva's somber dark gaze matched the sad droop of his lips. "He'll be okay..." The slight lift of a question never formed.

"Yes. He'll be okay."

With a squeeze of Sorin's shoulder, Salva stood back, his gaze following each small movement.

"Hadreal!" Patrea's shout penetrated Hadreal's concentration but not fast enough.

Blaster fire hit the back of Sorin's shoulder, knocking him over his lover's chest. One of the downed angels held a blaster in a shaky hand.

"Father!" A screech of anger and the flap of black feathers echoed through the cargo bay.

Salva's wings lifted him upward, grazing the higher ceiling of the cargo bay as he cleared his injured crewmates. Streaking across the short distance, Salva dove toward his father's attacker.

Terror could be the only description for the angel's face as the dark, avenging creature dropped on top of it.

"Abomination!"

Even Hadreal understood the creature's high-pitched screech.

Blood splattered across the cargo bay as Salva's wing claws disemboweled the angel. Its horrified screams reverberated through the bay. Weak, shaking claws reached for Salva but to no avail.

With a blur of motion, Salva dove toward the angel's neck. A final spurt of blood striped Salva's skin as he ripped its throat open.

A shudder rippled through the angel's body then it was still.

Wiping white feathers from his face and chest, Salva rushed to Sorin's side. "Father?"

"I'm okay, Salva." Sorin picked a bloody white feather from Salva's hair. "Help me get Teo to the medstation."

Rocking back on his heels, Hadreal drew a deep breath of relief. Thank the old gods Salva was on their side. A shudder racked down his spine. He'd hate to face him in battle.

Strong arms startled him with a tight hug. "You okay?" Patrea whispered in his ear.

"Yeah. I think."

Salva rose to his feet, his dark gaze surveyed the carnage with remarkable calm. "We need to search the enemy vessel. I don't believe they sent everyone to board us."

"He's right." Teo's voice was barely more than a hoarse whisper. His eyelids fluttered open, revealing bloodshot eyes. He glanced around, pausing to make eye contact with each member of his crew. At last, he stopped at Salva. "Son, you handle it."

Sorin's jaw clenched. His lips parted then shut.

"Yes, Captain." Salva glanced around. His right eyebrow lifted slightly, as if daring someone to say something. "Narndo, help Father get the captain to medstation. The rest of you, arm up. We'll need all the firepower we can get."

"What for? We have you." Patrea's grin gave away the tease of his words.

A half grin quirked Salva's lips as he snorted a laugh. "Do it anyway."

* * * * *

Patrea strained to hear over the rapid thump of his heart. Deep in the bowels of an Angellum ship was not how he expected to spend his afternoon. At least one angel was still on board. The prickly sensation caused by its presence was unmistakable. His sense of Salva had subsided to just knowing he was near.

The cargo bay where they'd entered was at least four times the size of the *Avere's*. As Teo suspected, the corridors of the angel ship were large enough for a full-grown angel to fly.

Relief warred with fear for what little adrenaline was left in his system. The last twenty-four hours had been a definite change from normal life.

At least Hadreal was safe. For now. His chest tightened at the memory of the angel's last shot. That everyone survived was a miracle. Now if they could get off this ship alive.

Reservations over Salva leading them nagged at him. In Virkolan society, property passed between relatives. In the case of males, who usually had no contact with offspring, if they had any, right of ownership went to siblings, close-cousins or mates. With Teo and Sorin injured, the captain was within his rights in handing over command to Salva. But by Teo's own admission, Salva wasn't very old.

Was he capable?

Salva palmed the door controls for yet another room that didn't open. "Locked." His nose crinkled as he sniffed the edges of the opening. Almost like a *carnine* on a trail.

Koris stopped a few feet ahead while Hadreal guarded their rear.

Shaking his head, Patrea whispered, "Don't think it's angels. They seem to be farther away." He wasn't comfortable risking his lover and crewmates because of his ability. Fear kept raising its head, but Patrea couldn't let it stop him.

So far, they hadn't met any resistance. Salva led them silently through empty corridors. Rooms that opened were empty. Locked ones, Salva pronounced safe based on his sense of smell.

While most Virkoleans had a keen sense of smell for the hunt, Patrea didn't notice anything other than a musky smell. Almost like a *gasa* in molting season. Salva's Angellum trait came in handy.

Salva paused in front of the next door. Again, his head tilted back, nose crinkling as he sniffed. His brow ridges puffed up in a frown. "Someone is in here. Not Angellum. Open it."

Patrea nodded. Reaching into his pouch, he pulled out a small ball of high heat explosives. Between his hands, he rolled the pliable material until it was a long thin strand. "Stand back."

Salva motioned Hadreal and Koris back down the corridor several feet then leaned tightly against the wall.

Patrea pressed the strand around the controls on the door panel then attached a small detonator. He jogged to where Salva stood.

With a nod from Salva, Patrea hit a small button on the detonator control. With a hiss of flame and a quiet pop, the control panel fell off, leaving exposed wiring.

Patrea ran back to the door. Ignoring the residual heat, Patrea dug his fingers into the open panel, twisting and pulling wires and contacts.

The door whirled with a low moan-like sound then opened.

Salva motioned Patrea away. With blasters in both hands, Salva peered around the doorframe.

“Help!” A man’s voice cried out. A weak voice. A familiar one. *Not possible.*

Hadreal ran to the doorway. “Reekar!”

Patrea followed on his heels.

Chained to the wall was his former captain. Naked, body marked with cuts, scrapes and a rainbow of bruises. Rust-colored dried blood scabbed some of his wounds. Other cuts had fresh red edges and smeared crimson. The darker marks of older scars marred his body too.

Patrea’s throat closed against the copper scent of Virkolan blood. His former captain’s state caused his jaw to clench and his teeth to grind against a hiccup of nausea in his throat.

Starvation had taken a toll on his normally robust body. Each rib showed through his bruised flesh. His hipbones jutted out with sharp angles.

“Hadreal!” Reekar’s voice cracked. Tears welled up in his eyes then streamed down his face. “Thank the old gods...” His words trailed off as a heaving sob escaped his chest.

“It’s okay. We’ll get you out of here.” Moving around the filth strewn across the floor, Hadreal stepped closer to examine the chains and the ring attached to the wall.

“And the woman.” Reekar’s tears slowed as he gasped for deep breaths. “Save the woman.”

“Where is she?” Salva stepped inside the door, ducking to accommodate his wings.

Reekar’s eyes widened as he shrank back against the wall. “What the fuck...”

Hadreal laid a hand on Reekar’s scarred shoulder. “He’s okay. He’s with us. Just tell him where the woman is and we’ll explain everything later.”

Patrea’s relief at finding Reekar alive faded with a shock of jealousy. Reekar and Hadreal had been close. How close, Patrea didn’t know. Until Jenkins showed up, Hadreal had spent a lot of time in the captain’s quarters. The idea of losing Hadreal to a former lover dashed his hopes for the future.

“Don’t know exactly.” Reekar coughed hard. His voice was hoarse as he continued. “Near here. I can hear her scream sometimes.”

“Virkolan?” Salva’s brow ridges puffed as he scowled.

“I don’t think so.” Reekar’s gaze darted from Salva’s face to the black vee of feathers over his head and back again. “I think she’s Terran.”

“Like Jenkins?” Patrea didn’t like the idea of another Terran in their midst trying to pass as Virkolan. “His sister?”

“Hadreal, get him free and back to the *Avere*.” Salva ended the conversation. “Explanations can wait.” Nodding toward Patrea, he turned toward the door. “We will keep moving.”

With one last quick glance at his lover and Reekar, Patrea turned toward the door. He peeked around the corner before darting into the corridor. Salva and Koris followed close behind.

Across the hall from Reekar’s cell, three doors down, Salva sniffed another locked door. “Smells like the Terran male.” He drew a deeper breath. “Hint of sweet...different musk...” His eyelids drooped closed as his mouth opened in an almost orgasmic expression. “Open it.” Salva backed away quickly.

Patrea used more explosives to pop the controls. His irritation at angel presence continued to grow, making his hands shake.

As the door opened, a sickly sweet smell mixed with the rancid stench of the cell. A woman, definitely not Virkolan or Angellum, curled into the corner of the room. Her hair was as golden as the rays of a warm sun. Virkolan hair varied from shades of brown through black as space, but nothing like this.

Secured to the wall the same as Reekar, her shackle had worn her wrist bloody. Pus and swelling indicated infection. Red streaks ran up her arm like a shaky web.

“Are you okay?” Patrea edged closer, not quite sure what to make of her.

Her eyelids fluttered open. Pale blue eyes, like those of an angel, stared at him but didn’t seem to see him. She was thin but not starved like Reekar. The angels must have had a reason to keep her alive, however poorly a job they’d done.

Kneeling next to her, Patrea touched her arm. “Hey, can you hear me?” Her skin was hot and dry. Fever must have robbed her of her wits. Her chest barely rose and fell.

Her eyelids fluttered open. Her body pulled away then relaxed as a blank gaze met his.

Salva crouched next to them. “Jenkins called her Chloe.”

“Chloe. Can you hear me?” Patrea ran his hand over her forehead then felt for a pulse at her neck. “We should get her back to Sorin as fast as possible.”

“Free her.” Salva practically leapt to his feet. Backing away, he kept his gaze locked on the woman. “Koris, take her to the *Avere*. See if Father can assist her. Patrea and I will check the remainder of the ship.”

Koris nodded with a quick jolt of his head then his gaze darted between Patrea and Salva. “Be careful.”

“Yeah.” Patrea took a deep breath then started forward. The unmistakable sense of angels led him toward who knew what. He pushed regrets aside and dug deep for the

courage to see this mission through to the end. Whatever happened, he could be the difference between life and death for his crewmates and lover.

“How close?” Salva whispered.

Strangely enough, the dark angel’s presence helped ease Patrea’s jitters. Having watched him in action in the *Avere’s* corridor and cargo bay reassured him. If Salva were determined to kill off the crew of the *Avere*, he didn’t need other angels to help.

“Not far.” A sudden shock of pain lanced through his gut. “Fuck.” He gasped for breath. “Very close. Coming this way. Fast!” The only explanation for the sharp increase in pain was the angels were on rapid approach.

The screech and chitter of angel speak grew louder. The terrifying flap of wings pushed Patrea’s adrenaline level to astronomical. His heart raced, pounding in his chest, his ears, throbbing at his temples. His breath caught.

“Get behind me.” Salva’s command seemed in slow motion.

Too late.

Two angels flew around a curve in the wide corridor, one just behind the other. The draft of their wings blew their musty odor in front of them. Claws extended from their wing joints, the creatures screamed as they spotted Salva. Both dived toward him.

Patrea dropped then rolled across the floor from one wall to the other, clearing Salva’s line of sight. His blaster blazed as he twisted onto his stomach. The first shot put a black-edged hole through the right wing of the first angel.

The creature fell from the air, landing in a trembling, screeching tangle.

Patrea’s second shot hit the angel in the head. Blood and brain matter splattered the pure white feathers as they fluttered in the last death throes.

Salva ran forward, rushing the second angel. His wings lifted him to meet the creature’s dive.

The two beings met mid-flight, black and white feathers showered the corridor. Bright red blood spotted the white ones. Bloodcurdling screams issued like challenges from the two opponents.

Patrea scrambled backward, blaster raised, but as long as they were tangled in a hissing ball of fury, he didn't have a clear shot.

Dropping hard to the deck, their bodies landed with a thud. The angel had the advantage of being on top, but Salva was much larger, hopefully stronger.

With a quick roll, Salva reversed their positions.

Aiming at the angel's head, Patrea hesitated. One slight move and he'd hit Salva. From deep inside, a hatred of a lifetime, a nagging voice told him to shoot. Both of them. Kill the angel and Salva. Blame the angel for the hybrid's death.

But Salva wasn't an angel. Teo was right. Salva was Virkolan. With wings.

Patrea gripped his blaster harder, waiting for a better shot. One that wouldn't endanger Salva.

Salva caught the creature by the throat with his left hand. His knuckles whitened, his grip tightened. His right hand snagged his blaster from his holster then stuck the tip against the creature's chest. Salva's wings hovered open, his wing joint claws exposed.

White feathers flew as the angel flapped its wings upward, batting at Salva. Its wing joint claws scratched a bloody path down Salva's arm, but he didn't flinch. Its claws moved to Salva's shoulders, ripping through Salva's makeshift shirt. Blood stained the tan material.

Still Salva didn't flinch. "If you wish to live, cease your struggle."

The angel chattered in angel speak as it continued to fight against Salva's hold.

Salva's jaw clenched as he drew a deep breath. Blood trickled down his arm and across his shoulders. His nostrils flared. His hand tightened on the blaster.

"I surrender." The creature's wings drooped, falling to the floor beside it.

“How many more are on the ship?” Salva didn’t relax his stance or his trigger finger.

“We were the last. Left behind. Where are the others?”

Patrea’s gut seemed to confirm the angel’s words but he wasn’t sure he wanted to trust it.

Salva took a deep breath before he answered. “Dead.”

The creature’s sharp array of teeth showed as it let out a long, low cry. The mournful sound filled the hallways, rising to a high-pitched keen. “My brethren...” The words were half moaned, half choked.

Sympathy welled up from somewhere deep within Patrea’s gut. Sympathy for a murderous angel? Maybe he was feeling its grief as well as the prickly sense of its presence?

“You attacked us. Why?” Salva’s wing-joint claws retracted as his wings tucked neatly behind him.

“The traitor – Hayyot – we found her body. We were searching for her offspring.”

With a grimace and a sigh, Salva replied, “You found him.”

Patrea inhaled a long deep breath. Hayyot must be the angel who saved Sorin. Her DNA was used to create Salva? And the angel called her traitor. Maybe some angels really were interested in peace with the Virkolans.

As the immediate danger passed, relief twisted into another concern. Did Reekar’s return signal the end of his relationship with Hadreal?

Chapter Eight

Patrea stood just inside the door to the medstation. The crowded room held all the injured. A flush of jealousy rushed through Patrea as Hadreal hovered over Reekar.

Teo lay unconscious in one of the two narrow medstation beds with a blanket covering his lower body. His exposed skin was pale except for the dozens of red welts, cuts and bruises.

Propped in a chair in the corner, Reekar stretched out with another chair elevating his feet. Clutching a cup of blood in both hands, he shook as he raised it to his lips.

“Teo and Reekar will recover.” Sorin spoke as he worked on Chloe. A haphazard bandage covered his wounded shoulder. “Not so sure about her.” Chloe occupied the other bed. Her thinness didn’t take away the curve of her breasts, the dip of her waist and the flare of her hips. Much like the build of many Virkolan women.

Narndo was on the bridge, monitoring the area for more intruders. Koris was in the engine room, repairing the damage.

Their newest guest, the angel, was locked in the brig.

Jenkins had sobbed like a child when Patrea’s description seemed to confirm the Terran woman was his sister Chloe. Still not to be trusted, he’d been moved to a spare room and locked inside.

“Hell, I’m not sure if I’m even helping her.” Sorin kept moving a medscanner over the woman’s body. “I’m having trouble identifying her internal organs. She has some we don’t and the reverse. Her fever should be a snap to break with the right meds, but for all I know, I could poison her.” He lifted her mangled wrist. “The red marks probably indicate infection of some kind, but I just don’t know what’s safe to give her.”

Reekar shifted his position with a groan. “Jenkins took some of our med. Seemed to help him pretty quick.”

“Right. I remember that.” Hadreal moved the few steps to a console then punched a string of code into the med computer. “This.” He pointed to the screen.

Sorin’s gaze followed his motion. “Good. That’s a strong general antibiotic. Should help.” Reaching into med storage, he then pulled out a vial. “Here goes.” He snapped it into the hypospray.

The woman’s eyelids flickered as Sorin injected her.

“We should know something soon.” Sorin’s gaze locked on the medical scanner.

Patrea wanted to push aside everyone and wrap his arms around Hadreal. Unfortunately, with Reekar’s return, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get that close again. His throat caught with the idea of what they’d had ending so soon.

Dropping his gaze, he didn’t want to watch the reunion. All he wanted was a hot shower and the solitude of his bunk. Except his quarters were Hadreal’s.

At least the *Avere* had one more set of quarters. The idea of Reekar sleeping in Hadreal’s bed, in the same room, made his blood run cold.

He had to get out of there. “I’m going to go clean up a little then see if I can help with the engine repairs.” He flushed warm as his voice cracked slightly. His clothes still held the stink and remnants of blood from the battle.

Salva turned his gaze on Patrea. An eyebrow asked an unspoken question.

Ducking through the door, he rushed down the corridor, his heart aching as sharply as when his mothers died.

Unable to follow right now, Hadreal watched Patrea go. Although he didn’t have as much training as Sorin, Hadreal was a medic. The only one the *Avere* had had in the last seven or eight years. With three injured, two serious, he couldn’t run after his lover.

Shaking his head, Sorin exhaled a sharp breath. “I think I’m going to have to use a stimulant. Her heartbeat is too low. And getting lower.”

“No idea what it’ll do to her.” Even as he spoke, Hadreal keyed the unlock code on a different cabinet. The stronger meds were kept locked. Not that he didn’t trust anyone, but grabbing the wrong thing could mean serious injury or death. Better to safeguard the meds and the crew. He handed Sorin a cardiac stimulant.

“I’m going to give her the lowest dosage.” Sorin twisted the dosage meter down as far as it would go. “I’ll give her more if the first doesn’t kill her.”

“Is there any other way, Father? Perhaps if we speak to her brother?” Salva hadn’t said much since he’d returned with Patrea.

Both had been blood-splattered and covered with bits of white feathers and fuzz. Neither volunteered information on what had happened.

Although Patrea had insisted he was uninjured, Hadreal wanted to take inventory. Reassure himself.

“Father?” Voice weak and hoarse, Reekar managed to be heard.

Turning his head, Salva met Reekar’s gaze. One eyebrow lifted, scrunching up his angel-like brow ridges. “Yes. Sorin is my father. And since *Captain* Teo is his bonded mate, by Virkolan custom, he too is my father.”

Hadreal had to give Reekar credit. The former captain met Salva’s gaze and refused to look away.

“I think it’s working.” Sorin’s voice interrupted the stare down. “Her heartbeat is a little stronger, but not enough.” He glanced at the dosage meter again. “One more.”

Salva moved closer. He seemed fascinated by the Terran woman.

Checking out an enemy? A potential friend? Simple curiosity? Hadreal shook his head then dropped his gaze back to the medical readouts streaming to the monitor.

Again her heart rate sped up. Almost Virkolan normal. A little flush of color touched her cheeks.

Sorin leaned back against the counter. “I think that did the trick.”

“Great.” Reekar shifted in his makeshift bunk. “Now would someone please explain what the fuck is going on? And who do I have to fight to get my ship back?”

While Hadreal knew Reekar was serious, he couldn’t help but laugh. “Long story. And I really don’t think you want to fight any of them in your condition. Especially not him.” Hadreal pointed toward Salva.

The hybrid glanced at Reekar. “You would not win.” One eyebrow rose and a smile curved his lips. “Unless you want to play dirty.” Salva’s smile widened into almost a leer.

“I gotta hear this story. And what the fuck are you?”

“He’s my son.” Sorin’s gaze flickered between his offspring and Reekar. “His mother was an angel. Maybe someday you’ll get to hear the entire story. However, right now, you need a real bunk, a lot more blood, a little solid food and rest. Definitely no fighting.” Sorin glared at his son. “Or anything else.” He ran his hand over his wounded shoulder. “Hadreal, take care of Reekar, would you? Get him to some quarters and settled.”

“Aye.” Hadreal faced the frown of his former captain. “Come on. We’ll talk.”

“Damn straight we will.” Reekar stood then sank back into the chair. “Too fast.”

Salva’s chuckle garnered a glare from Reekar.

The man lifted out of the chair again, slower but with a defiant tilt to his chin. “Let’s go.”

Hadreal followed his slow, steady steps out of the medstation.

As soon as the door closed, Reekar leaned against the bulkhead with a thud. “Who the fuck does he think he is?”

“Acting captain of this ship.” Hadreal needed to drill the facts into Reekar. “Teo took over the ship lawfully by our customs. That Jenkins didn’t doesn’t change the fact Teo is captain and he gave charge to his nearest relation, Salva, until he’s well.”

Reekar pushed away from the wall. "It's my fucking ship. Jenkins fucking drugged me and turned me over to angels."

"Did you know he was Terran?"

"No." The wind seemed to go out of his anger. "I can't believe he tricked me."

"How? What did he promise you to get so close?" Hadreal's first thought was sex. Reekar had always been easily led by his dick, but not to the point of endangering the ship or crew.

Hadreal slipped an arm around Reekar's waist and led him down the corridor.

"Credits. More than I'd ever seen." He leaned heavily on Hadreal as they walked the few steps to the next door. "He had them on him. Said if we found this renegade angel, we'd double our credit. I could have had the *Avere* completely refit, stocked for years... And weapons. We could have armed so many against the angels. With their own credits."

"Too good to be true." Hadreal wondered if Patrea was too good to be true...

"Yeah."

"Well, as far as I can figure, Salva's mother is the same angel everyone was looking for. Teo said she died defending Sorin. Supposedly she'd sided with Virkolans."

"Of course she had. Why else would the angels want her..." Reekar shook his head. "I should have thought it through. And I should have trusted the crew with what I knew."

"No use crying over spilled blood. But for what it's worth, I trust Teo and his people. Even Salva." He startled himself with his words, but he grudgingly admitted it was true. Salva had defended the ship and her crew with honor. And efficiency.

Hadreal keyed the open sequence for the door.

By the time he half carried Reekar to the bed, the man was nearly asleep. Tucking a blanket over him, Hadreal would let him rest first. Sorin's orders for food and blood wouldn't do much good while he was unconscious.

“Sleep well, old friend.” And while he slept, Hadreal needed to find Patrea.

* * * * *

“Patrea?” Hadreal’s voice carried through the hall as Patrea reached his cabin door.
“Wait up!”

Footsteps bore down on him as he tried to ignore his lover...former lover.

“What’s up?” Hadreal caught his sleeve, tugging Patrea to a stop.

“Just going to see if I can help.”

“Are you okay?” Hadreal pulled him into a tight embrace. “You don’t look so well.”

“Worn out. Need to catch my breath.” His arms wanted to return the hug, but he wasn’t sure he could keep his emotions under control. The urge to beg Hadreal to stay with him was too strong.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Hadreal’s eyelids drooped with exhaustion. Lines dug deep in his brow and around his eyes, aging him more than his sixty years.

Patrea’s hands settled lightly on Hadreal’s waist. “Me too. I mean, glad you’re okay.”

“Hell of a day, huh?” Warm breath brushed Patrea’s ear.

“Yeah.” Pulling back, he met Hadreal’s gaze. “Who would have thought we’d find Reekar a prisoner on an angel ship.” He searched for any sign of feelings for their former captain.

Nothing but a slight frown and quizzical gaze. “Yeah. Glad he’s okay though.”

“I know you two were close *friends*.” He didn’t mean to put an emphasis on the last word but it came out that way.

“Yeah. Friends. Nothing more.” A smile played with the corners of Hadreal’s mouth. “Definitely not lovers.” Hadreal pushed Patrea back toward the door to their quarters. “I prefer my lovers loyal. Reekar likes to chase ass wherever he goes.”

Hadreal slapped the open control just before Patrea hit the door. Stumbling backward, Patrea swallowed hard against the rush of emotion. He exhaled hard then gasped for air. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath.

"Are you planning on being loyal?" Hadreal maneuvered Patrea across the room until the back of his legs hit the bunk.

"Definitely." Patrea couldn't think of ever wanting more than he had right here. His arms wrapped tightly around Hadreal. Leaning closer, he stopped with his lips almost touching Hadreal's. "I love you."

A wide grin spread across Hadreal's face, clearing his weary expression. "I love you too."

Hadreal's words flooded Patrea with relief. Falling backward, Patrea pulled his lover down on top of him as he hit the hard mattress. "Show me how much."

Hadreal met his mouth hard. The kiss was rough, full of teeth and tongue.

Need and desire rushed through Patrea, but the release of anxiety overwhelmed both. His eyes stung with tears of relief. Hadreal was safe. They all were. And Hadreal was his.

Hadreal's hard body weighed him down, adding to the intense sense of security overwhelming him.

Patrea wrapped his arms around Hadreal. He needed him closer. As close as possible. "Fuck me."

"Whatever you want." Hadreal sat up, straddling Patrea's hips. "Anything you want. Probably should be quick. They may come looking for us to finish repairs." His eyes shone with the grin on his face. Sliding off Patrea, Hadreal made quick work of Patrea's pants and undergarment. "Roll over."

Lying flat on his stomach, Patrea took a deep breath. They really did need to work on repairs, but quick worked. Anything worked as long as Hadreal was his for good.

Hadreal's hands ran up Patrea's back, pushing his shirt up. Kisses fluttered down his spine. The snap of a cap warned Patrea before Hadreal's fingers pressed the cold lube into his crack. Fingertips brushed his hole then pushed inside.

More kisses flickered across Patrea's ass as Hadreal's fingers drilled deeper inside his anus. "Feels good."

"Gonna feel better." Hadreal shifted on the bunk. The kisses faded, the fingers disappeared.

The thick head of his cock pushed past the initial resistance. Patrea exhaled hard, relaxing his muscles to allow his lover access.

Slow but steady, Hadreal's length invaded until his dick filled Patrea's ass.

Hadreal lay forward, pressing his body against Patrea's back. His legs stretched out, one on either side of Patrea's. The rough cut of his shirt scratched Patrea's skin, but he welcomed the feel of it, the weight of him.

Hadreal's hips moved in short strokes, too slow when they needed to be quick.

Lifting upward to meet Hadreal's motions, Patrea matched his push and pull. Skin met skin a little quicker, and the warm puff of Hadreal's breath grew quicker.

The pulse of his heartbeat thrummed through his body, pushing his cock to greater need. Rubbing against the coarse bedding, the pressure edged him a little closer to climax.

"Together." Hadreal's grunted words matched his quickening pace. "Forever?"

A permanent bond? His head questioned the suddenness but his heart could only come up with one word. "Yes."

His body flooded with joy, pushing him to the limit. Warm come pulsed from his cock, dampening the bedding. His ass clenched around Hadreal's dick.

With a soft chuckle, Hadreal paused. His full weight pressed Patrea into the sudden wet spot. "Seems like you *really* like the idea."

“I guess so.” Patrea reached over his shoulder, patting Hadreal’s head with an awkward motion. “I can’t imagine life without you.”

Hadreal’s hand met Patrea’s, fingers intertwined.

But Patrea had worried about life without Hadreal. “Actually, I did and I didn’t like it at all.”

“Well, we’ll have to make sure that never happens.” Fingers still locked, Hadreal began to move again, quicker, longer strokes.

“Fill me,” Patrea whispered. “Give me everything you’ve got.”

“Always—” A sharp groan cut short his words. His body tensed, stilled as wet warmth filled Patrea’s ass.

A sense of fulfillment greater than just sex warmed Patrea’s body, soothed his soul. Danger was a part of life for all Virkolans. If they died tomorrow, at least they had now, and no matter what the future wrought, he was no longer alone.

About the Author

By day, Shayla Kersten is a mild-mannered accountant. By night, she's a writer of sexy romances. Torn between genres, Shayla writes erotic stories about hot heroes and their sexy women as well as hot men and their passionate heroes.

A native of Arkansas, Shayla spent four years in the Army as a missile specialist, stationed in Germany and Oklahoma. After her enlistment was up, she spent eleven years in New York City taking a bite out of the Big Apple. Even her love of theater and the nightlife of the big city couldn't cure terminal homesickness for the Natural State. In 1995 she returned to her roots in Arkansas.

Shayla now divides her time between her mother, her spoiled-rotten dogs, her dratted day job and her obsession – writing. And no, her mother doesn't know what she writes. That's between Shayla, her dogs and her readers!

Shayla welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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