

FROM HELL

(A LOVE STORY)

Mayumi Hirtzel

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For my Wednesday girl.

CHAPTER ONE

Far From Home

Axton really should have known better than to stick his nose in somebody else's business, especially when that somebody was outnumbered six to one, by a circle of dirty, rough-edged scavenger rats, all of whom Axton's NCO instincts screamed as "hostile." But knowing better had never been his strong suit, and that was a Dahl Army uniform on that groaning form in the Andromedan dirt, of the same style and cut as the one Axton had ditched less than three days ago, when he'd snuck off that hauler freighter from Euboea. He might be a deserter, now, but camaraderie counted for a lot. And, he'd never liked bullies.

The alpha leader of the rats - a big, gray-haired veteran with more scars than actual face - kicked the trooper in the belly, his heavy boot making a dull thudding sound Axton could hear from ten meters away.

"Hey!" Axton shouted. "Didn't your momma ever teach you to play nice?"

Scarface swung his attention Axton's way, along with

the business end of his scattergun. “Do yourself a favor, hero, and keep walkin’.”

“Or what?” Axton sneered. “You’ll knock me out with your face?”

As Scarface curled his lip in a snarl, one of the lesser pups – a compact rat in mismatched clothes that looked like they’d been picked from too many bodies – crouched next to the bloody-nosed trooper and poked the muzzle of his sawn-off into the soldier’s loosened ruck. “Let’s see what you got, baby Dahl.”

The trooper struck out one wobbling hand. “No. Don’t-!”

“Shuddup,” another rat told him, punctuating the statement with a cracking smack of his stock to the trooper’s blond head.

“Hey!” Axton shouted again.

Scarface tightened his grip around his double barrels. “I said, step back, stranger. This is a private party.”

“Hey, boss!” The mismatched rat pulled some sort of brick from the trooper’s ruck. “Take a look at this!”

As the old grunt turned toward Mismatch, Axton grabbed the Jakobs revolver from his back holster. He leveled his sights at the vet’s face and pulled back the hammer with a click. “Consider this my invitation, asshole.”

Scarface answered with a pump of his shotgun, rumbling, “You asked for it,” just as Mismatch let out a strangled cry. Scarface glanced his pup’s way again. “What the hell-?”

It was bad form in a potential firefight, but Axton looked to the noise, too...and promptly felt his grip go slack. That formerly compact brick bounced, building

upright with pads, support struts, and a heavy trunk. A cylindrical gun barrel swung up from between the spread legs, locking into place with a click. The thing whirred, and Axton could only echo Scarface – “What the hell?” – before that barrel started spitting rounds.

Axton fell back, the breath knocked from his lungs. For a nanosecond, he thought he’d been hit, but it was the trooper on his chest, covering him with body and hands as, around them, the clatter of rapid heavy ammunitions fire started a rash of screams and the unmistakable *splutch* of perforated flesh, followed by silence.

The chaos had lasted less than ten seconds. Axton counted another five in his head before he started wondering if anybody else was alive, when the trooper pushed himself up and blinked his eyes. Blue, they were, clear as virgin sky, and wide, but without panic. “You all right?” he asked, in one of those upper-crust Central Core accents.

“I think so.” Axton started to rise, but the trooper stopped him with a hand on his chest.

“Stay there. I need to power her down, first.”

Axton did as told but craned his head to follow him. His gaze stopped halfway, upon Scarface’s twisted mug. Or, what was left of it: that automatic weapon had blown away the top third of the geezer’s head, leaving only bloodied nose and beard, the mouth within forever frozen in red.

A series of chattering clicks and the blow of forced air grabbed Axton’s attention at the same time the trooper said, “You can get up, now. It’s safe.”

Axton tiptoed his way through the riddled bodies until he reached the trooper’s side. He kept a wary stare on the

compact block of metal in the younger man's hands, in case it popped to vicious life again. "What is that thing?"

With a distinct ruffle of pride, the youth announced, "A Fernbedienbare Drehlafette."

Axton squinted at the mouthful. "Sorry. A what?"

The younger soldier beamed a smile kinked by one crooked eyetooth. "Touch-activated, remote sensor, nano-controlled autocannon." He hefted the brick in his hands, like showing off a prized puppy. "One of a kind, with self-replicating ammunition. Modeled after the sabre-type turrets on deep-space battle frigates. Smaller, of course, and lots more customizable." His smile fell as he turned serious. "Sorry about the tackle, but she'll target any bio- or mech-signature she doesn't recognize."

"*She*?" Axton echoed, cocking one brow.

The trooper chuckled. "She's too clever to be called an it."

Axton grunted. "Has *she* got a name?"

The soldier regarded his Drehlafette with a thoughtful tilt of his head. "Never really considered that." He shifted the brick to one hand and struck out the other. "But, I'm Harald. Friends call me Hal."

Axton took his hand, gripping it with a firm pump. "Axton."

"Nice to meet you, Axton."

"Same here. Hal," he added with a teasing smirk, and the younger man's white, crooked smile beamed again. Axton let his hand drift back to his side, fighting down his sudden inexplicable embarrassment at such genuineness. He glanced away from Hal's face, his gaze finding the Dahl insignia at his shoulder. "Materiel Command, huh? That's in Central Core."

“Phaestus,” Hal agreed with a short nod. “I was born there.”

Axton sniffed. “You’re far from home, boyo.”

Hal’s relaxed humor fell, replaced by a grim dullness in his eyes. “Not far enough,” he muttered as he looked around at the corpses, his Drehlafette’s murderous handiwork.

Axton tweaked his pierced brow. “You runnin’ from something?”

Hal looked up again and returned a wry blow of breath. “Isn’t everybody, out here?”

That sobering sentiment reminded Axton of his own problematic predicament. “So we are.” He pushed his shoulders back with a sharp inhalation. “Best get our asses movin’, then.” He took a step but Hal didn’t fall in beside, so he prompted, “What are you waitin’ for?”

Hal stood there, blinking at him with his Drehlafette brick clutched close to his chest. “You want to travel together?”

Axton snorted. “Well, I sure as hell ain’t waitin’ around here for the law to show up. Neither should you,” he said, and inclined his head toward the Drehlafette. “Considering your girlfriend’s the one who made this mess.”

“Listen,” Hal said, and shifted in a step. He lowered his voice, even though there was no one else alive in sight. “Axton. Not that I don’t appreciate what you did – standing up for me back there, and all; no one’s ever done that for me, before.” He flicked his focus across the bodies strewn around their feet, as if to prove a point. “But, I’m not exactly safe to be around.”

“Neither am I,” Axton quipped. He twirled his revolver

around one finger before slipping it into its holster, to the smooth whistle of gunmetal against leather. “But didn’t anybody ever tell you two guns are better than one? Even your one.” Hal only blinked again, so Axton grinned and assured him, “I’m a soldier. We eat, we fuck, and we kill.” He snorted again, this time over the bodies. “Especially rats like these.”

Hal gave a rough shake of his head, loose blond fringe scattering into his eyes. “These weren’t rats,” he muttered. “They were hunters.”

Axton shot another wary look at the Drehlafette brick. “Did you steal that thing?”

He expected some indignation or shock at this accusation, but Hal said, “Of course, I did. She’s mine.” The proud smile returned. “I built her.”

CHAPTER TWO

Fifty-Fifty

They scavenged what they could from the hunters before double-timing it out of there to Autochthe, where Hal told Axton he had a convenient hidey-hole set up. He was willing to share, but the town stood most of a solid afternoon's walk away. With little else to do, they talked as they hoofed, side-by-side, along the winding dirt trail.

"So," Axton said, kicking a stone out of the way of their path. "What brought you out this way?"

"Supplies," Hal said. "Autochthe's got law, but they don't allow civilians to own ordnance. Figured it would be safer for me to make the run than the girls." He wiped at the dried blood at the corner of his mouth, appending in a mumble, "So much for that idea."

Axton felt the familiar itch of lusty excitement. "You got girls? As in, plural?"

Hal shook his head. "It's not what you're thinking," he said, and Axton snickered.

"How do you know what I'm thinkin'?"

"It's just odd jobs and stuff." Hal shrugged both wide

shoulders with a sheepish half-smile. “I don’t exactly fit the criteria for Miss Cin’s bevy of entrepreneurs.”

“You work for a brothel?” Axton guessed.

“Cin’s Deadly Seven,” Hal confirmed with a short nod.

Another twitching smile came on. “Any house benefits?”

“The jobs aren’t *that* odd. But, I can’t get out-system without a ride. That takes cash.”

Axton glanced at the ruck the engineer shifted higher. “Bet you could get a decent wad for that autocannon o’ yours.”

Hal’s demeanor flopped with a blink. “No way!” He gave a fast, firm shake of his head. “Nobody’s taking her away from me, not after I spent four years of my life perfecting her.” He squinted his eyes, pupils contracting in the blue. “Do you know what those idiots in Requisition were going to do? Butcher her, that’s what! Bastardize everything that makes her special, just for mass production: reprogram her nano-mites, pump her full of chems, clutter up her insides.” He snorted. “I wasn’t going to let that happen.”

“You beat feet all the way from Dahl Central R&D over one gun?” Axton popped his brows. “I mean, she’s a hell of a gun, but even so...!”

“Fuck Dahl,” Hal spat, voice ripe with spite. “Every Drehlafette they tried building before this failed. Targeting system, ammo reconstitution, self-construction – there was always something that didn’t work. Until this one. And, she’s mine,” he added again, quietly fierce.

Axton smiled. The kid was passionate about his work, if nothing else. It was kind of cute. “Well, we got one thing in common.”

Hal looked over at him, once more conversational. “What’s that?”

Axton cocked his head close. “Dahl wasn’t in my future anymore, either.”

“Really?” Hal flicked his gaze to the service piercing at Axton’s left brow. “Those sergeant’s bars look permanent, to me.”

Axton sniffed. “Nothing’s permanent.”

“What happened?” Hal asked after a minute. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“My CO and I had a falling out,” Axton said, and sniffed again. “I wanted to get the job done, and she wanted a husband who’d follow orders.”

Hal eased away a bit. “You were married to your commanding officer?”

Axton lifted his dog tags and the woman’s diamond ring clinking beside them. “Operative tense being past,” he said, and grinned humorlessly.

The shallow lines around Hal’s eyes and mouth showed some detached remorse, but Axton didn’t allow himself to be affected by it. Sarah might not have been the one to put his dishonorable discharge into motion, but she also hadn’t stopped it from happening. Her only piece of advice had been to get himself gone from the platoon as fast as he could walk, before the MPs dragged him away. She hadn’t even blinked when she’d pushed her ring into his hand. And even though she’d wished him luck when he’d left – not “well,” just “luck” – he’d heard the grim finality in her tone: *You’ll never make it. You’ll slip up and blow someone’s brains out, or you’ll blow out your own.* He’d been too busy scrambling together what few personal possessions he’d had and could easily carry – the wooden-stock Jakobs

revolver from his old man, two days' worth of water and rations, and a meager exchange of clothes so he could ditch his uniform – to tell her to fuck off.

“So, you went AWOL?” Hal asked.

“It was that, or face a firing squad.” Axton shrugged without regret. “Whatever. It’s like you said: fuck Dahl.”

“Yeah! Fuck ‘em,” Hal agreed, and they laughed together, with easy camaraderie. A lot came easily with this young engineer on the run the same as him, and Axton knew from his ten years doing Dahl Army’s dirty work how rare that kind of effortless fellowship was.

“Okay,” he said, and pointed expressly at Hal’s dirtied uniform. “The first thing we need to do is get you outta those clothes.”

Hal stopped short, boots scuffing in the dirt. “Pardon?”

“They’re a dead giveaway you’re Dahl.” Axton lapsed into ops mode, swinging a measuring glance over the younger man. Hal was thinner and taller than he was, though not by much. “I’ve probably got somethin’ that’ll fit you.” He snickered. “The most important part of this job is lookin’ good, after all.”

Hal narrowed his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

Axton held his grin as he leaned in. “I’m talkin’ about getting our asses off this rock. We’re not gonna do that being go-fers. The real money’s in skiptrace work.”

“Do you mean bounty hunting?”

“Why not? It pays.” Axton jerked his head the way they’d come. “And, if those jokers back there are any indication of our competition, you and me’ll clean up!”

“You and I,” Hal corrected.

“We,” Axton said. “You. Me. And whatever you decide to name that autocannon o’ yours.”

The edges of Hal's mouth twitched, cautious but hopeful. "I've never had a partner before."

"Me, neither. But, there's a first time for everything." Axton struck out his hand. "What do you say? You in? Fifty-fifty?"

Hal agreed with a smile, and clapped his palm into Axton's waiting hand. "Fifty-fifty."

"Partners," Axton said, and smiled, too, before he set them on their path again, with a sense of good things to come.

CHAPTER THREE

Only the Beginning

They didn't run into any trouble on the way or when they arrived at Cin's Deadly Seven, on the outskirts of Autochthe. Though, once there, Axton found it difficult to keep to walking a straight line, with all the tits and asses on ready and welcoming display. He was no stranger to such establishments, but it had been a while since he'd enjoyed the pleasure of a woman's company. Sarah certainly hadn't obliged him with any fuck before he'd left, farewell or otherwise.

"Well, hello, big man."

Axton turned at the purr, tossing his best roguish smile at a pretty filly with strawberry-blonde hair coming to stand in a doorway off the corridor. Her gold robe hung open, exposing a wide strip of pale, naked flesh beneath. The rug didn't match the drapes, though: he noticed the dark swatch of coarse hair between her thighs-

He walked into another woman - a gorgeous brunette whose cocoa-colored skin gave off the scent of the same - and flashed her a smile for his roving attention. The

brunette just moved around him while the blonde chuckled, making her little round of belly bounce.

Hal gave an audible sigh. "It's this way," he said, jerking his head toward the end of the corridor.

Axton followed, glancing back every few steps. "I dunno 'bout you," he said, as his gaze returned to the brunette's swinging hips and the silver chain draping around them, its pendulum-like clasp nestled in the cleft of her dark-skinned ass. "But, I could go for some pussy."

Hal hummed under his breath. "I'm a bit more concerned about those hunters."

"My point exactly," Axton said, his mouth watering at thought of that ass bumping against his hips. "A brush with death should make you appreciate life that much more." He faced forward again and snickered. "Besides, you gearheads don't get out nearly enough."

"I've gotten out," Hal said, a touch of protest in his voice. They made it to the far room, which was tight enough to be a closet with its singles cot and the small trunk that Hal had converted to a makeshift work table, based on the tools laid out there. He set his ruck on the floor and pulled out a wraparound of tools, muttering, "Don't care to eat where I fuck, is all."

"That's the best part. Just thinkin' about it...!" Axton clenched his fingers in the air, like grabbing a woman's hips, and gave a lascivious growl. But Hal didn't react, his focus still on his tools.

Axton crossed his arms and snorted. "Listen, boyo. If we're gonna run together, you're gonna have to learn how to lighten up. Nobody likes a killjoy." He glanced out the doorway, where a lusciously curvaceous woman with artful snakes drawn over her arms and thighs shot him a sultry

smile. He waggled his fingers at her, adding, “Keeps the dick from gettin’ hard.”

Now, Hal looked his way, one nostril wrinkling with disdain. “That doesn’t appear to be an issue for you.”

“I admit, it’s been a while. All the more reason to let loose now.” Axton sneered in his direction. “What are you, scared?”

Hal’s face flushed, a violent contrast to his lab jockey pallor. “No! I’d just rather spend my cash getting off-world than just...getting off.”

Axton felt a brief pang of regret for causing that dejected look. He shrugged again, more cajoling, this time. “I got money, I’ll buy. So long as I get to go first,” he was quick to add.

Hal squinted at him. “You mean, together?”

“Fifty-fifty, remember?” Axton smirked. “I’ll even show you how it’s done.”

Hal’s focus roved over him, though not with any envy or aggro Axton could feel. “Okay,” he said, at last.

“All right!” Axton clapped his hands together for a fast rub. “You’re familiar with the local crop, you choose. I’m up for anything.” He showed his teeth in a wide and leading grin. “And I do mean, *anything*.”

His new partner might have been a bit of a stiff, but he had an eye for aesthetics, of which Axton enthusiastically approved: for their hour’s purchased companionship, Hal chose the tattooed mistress, the titular Cin whose name adorned the sign above the front door. She was professionally accommodating for their cash, as well she should have been, seeing as how they were likely the most chivalrous men to set foot in the establishment in some time. She also didn’t say no to the prospect of both of

them, a treat Axton hadn't enjoyed since a bachelor party double-up with a juicy Nysian whore game for the challenge of a horny groom-to-be and his best man.

Thoughts of that night brought memories of Sarah, briefly. She'd been a great screw, especially when they'd first started going at it. But the demands of her command position had quickly tempered her rollercoaster sex drive, leaving him to crave her. "*Sometimes, I just want to fuck,*" he'd lament to her. "*Is that too much to ask?*" This Cin understood a man's baser needs, though, her mouth, her hands, her whole body working tirelessly into a steaming sweat to bring him to release. Which he did, with an impressive spurt of spunk he let go onto the sheet.

"Why'd you do that for?" she asked, cocking one preened eyebrow at him from where he'd pushed her off his lap.

"That was great," Axton assured her, before swinging his gaze over to Hal. "But my partner deserves a clean canvas."

Cin followed his look to the foot of the bed. She crawled forward on hands and knees, her colorful snakes slithering with each shift of her hips. "It's okay, baby," she said, taking hold of Hal's shirt to tug him closer. "I'll be gentle."

"Not too gentle, now." Axton settled against the pillows on the opposite end of the bed. "He's a big boy. He can handle it."

Cin purred as she folded Hal's buttons loose with precise care. "You certainly are." She pushed the shirt open, revealing a bruising stripe of flesh just over Hal's belly: the hunters' handiwork from that morning. "You poor thing," she cooed, while the muscles beneath his skin

contracted at her touch. “Let me make that better.”

As she pressed her face to his torso, Hal closed his eyes and let out a stilted moan of pain or pleasure, Axton couldn’t easily tell. The sighing expression on his face didn’t give any clue, either. Though, the stutter of his lips – turning wet from a flick of his tongue and quickly dry again in the room’s dim heat – made Axton stare, as he left his focus from Cin’s decorated curves to Hal’s flushing face.

In his ears, Axton recognized the *pok* of a releasing button and the *klick-klick* of a lowering zipper. But he kept his attention trained on Hal, desperate to see this moment as he whispered to himself, “Take it.” The words hadn’t been loud enough to be heard over the rustling struggle of pants, but the whore did as he said anyway, and he sucked a breath of excited anticipation at the same time Hal did, when she put her mouth on him.

Hal’s eyes snapped open, but they didn’t go to Cin. Instead, they locked onto Axton’s, so clear and bright and piercing in the room’s dull gloom, Axton couldn’t look away. He also couldn’t stop his hand from going to his own dick, stroking at the sticky mess. It had only been a few minutes, so he should have been still limp, but he found himself already at half-mast, and growing harder by the heartbeat.

Hal’s breath quickened, mouth dropping open to give a soundless gasp. Axton stayed fast to him, stroking until he was full and thick and aching. He’d wanted Hal to have his go, but, Jesus, his dick wouldn’t wait.

He pitched onto his knees and went for the whore again, taking her by her hips. He pushed into her, starting a steady thrusting that made her groan. Or maybe that

was Hal, the tendons in his neck straining as he started to buck his hips, too. That blue gaze didn't falter, though, not for a single blink, and Axton matched the challenge with his own snorting, grunting stare, going harder, faster, balls tightening as he tracked a line of sweat from between Hal's eyes, down the side of his nose to the wet curve of his lip, when the familiar flare of endorphins from a second coming made his sight go dim even as his hips gave a reflexive final jerk.

He was aware, at some level, of slipping out again and falling back upon the bed. But clearer in his ears and head was the echo of Hal hitting the same peak, a breathy sound to which Axton could only assign the description "sweet."

Cin might have found Hal sweet, too, but it was a point of trade to spit. She caught his spunk in a delicate handkerchief and slid away to clean up. Without her there to support him, Hal started to crumple, and Axton jumped from the pillow to get his arms around him before he fell.

"Whoa, there, cowboy!" Axton leaned back with him, hauling him further up the mattress, like pulling a drowning man from water; Hal even gave a gasping heave beside him as they fell to the pillows. The slick sheen of sweat between them started to cool and dry, too quickly, but Axton grinned anyway. "How's that for a first job together?" he asked through a lingering chuckle.

"Wicked." Hal blinked his gaze clear again and smiled: mellow, languorous, almost dreamy. "But, I liked it."

Axton grabbed the short hairs on the back of Hal's head and pulled it close for a light bump of skulls. "What'd I tell ya, partner? And this is just the beginning."

CHAPTER FOUR

Near Miss

Their real first job together didn't go quite so smoothly as the one at the brothel....

"Shit! He's made us."

"I'm on him-"

"Stay there," Axton ordered, but their runner was already kicking up dust in a chase after Razorback's powerbike. The pluming dirt and debris in the vehicles' wake made targeting pointless, and Axton slung his rifle up with a curse as he bolted for the ladder. Nearly a week of tracking this skip to this old ghost town, and Hal was going to blow it because he couldn't keep it in his pants.

By the time Axton made it from the roof to the street below, the billowing dust had changed direction, back through town. The powerbike could maneuver, but the runner had speed. Razorback wouldn't be able to outrun them in open terrain, though in a narrow town street....

"He's circling back," Hal said in his ear.

Axton planted his feet in the dirt. "I see him." He exchanged the rifle for the scattergun, bringing it to bear

on the approaching biker.

Maybe Razorback snickered or grinned to himself under his spiked helmet – Axton liked to think so – but he sure didn't laugh when the scattergun spit a coning spray of buckshot. The first blast spattered the bike's chassis, while the second shot blew Razorback out from his seat.

The bike fell to its side, coming to a skidding stop not far from Axton's feet. He stepped over it with a forceful pump of a reload and strode toward Razorback, both barrels trained on the hunter's motionless form.

The runner curved to a stop and Hal jumped out, crossing over and crouching down for a look. "You get him?"

"Hal!" Axton warned, when Razorback lunged up from playing possum.

The hunter grabbed Hal around the neck and pressed the big serrated blades on his wristband to the engineer's temple. "Drop your gun, and maybe I won't skewer this pretty boy's brains."

The scattergun landed in the dirt with a dull thud. At Razorback's prompting for the rifle, too, Axton tossed it from his shoulder and snarled. "You won't get away."

Razorback sneered as he struggled up with Hal. "I ain't goin' back to prison!"

Axton gauged the bandit's stance. He let his hand drift to his thigh. "You're right. You're not," he said, and when Razorback snickered in triumph, Axton grabbed his revolver from his back holster. The Jakobs clapped beside his hip, and Razorback's head jerked with a splatter of blood.

Hal shoved himself out from under the skip's arm. "Jesus! That was fast."

“That’s the game,” Axton muttered, thumb ready on the hammer of the Jakobs as he checked their quarry: a clean shot, nearly dead-on through Razorback’s left eye; the intact right one stared up lifelessly. He slipped the Jakobs back into its holster and extended his hand to Hal. “Now, on your feet, soldier.”

“Thanks,” Hal said, as he pulled himself up.

“You know how you can thank me?” Axton frowned. “Quit being a dumbass.”

Hal blinked. “What?”

“When I tell you to stay put, you *stay put*.”

“Ax-”

“Don’t Ax me,” Axton growled, silently cursing the nickname’s easygoing familiarity. “You do something stupid like that again, I’ll shoot *you*.”

“He was rabbiting-”

“I had him! If you hadn’t taken off like some cocky teenager, I could’ve picked him off, no trouble.” Axton picked up his rifle with a furious rattle. “What the hell ya think these telescopic sights are for?” He shook his head and stooped to collect the other gun.

“I’m sorry,” Hal muttered behind him.

Axton scowled as he reset the shotgun’s tang safety. “I need to know I can count on you. Out here, it’s both our asses.” He turned to Hal again, barking, “You’re lucky that shitbird used blades instead of guns, or you’d be dead right now!”

“Okay, I get it.” Hal matched Axton’s ire with a snarl. “And, I’m sorry. What more do you want?”

“I want you to be careful.” Axton slung both rifle and scattergun over his shoulder with a clatter. “And, if you really have to get in the shit, send out that autocannon

first, for God's sake."

"Who's the partner, here? Me, or the Drehlafette?"

"Far as I'm concerned, you're a package deal."

The answer didn't impress Hal, who blew a faint, disgruntled humph.

Axton relaxed his shoulders. "We're a team. But, I've been doin' this a lot longer'n you, so you gotta listen to me." He smiled, in a more coercive effort to soothe the engineer's miff. "I just wanna keep you alive, darlin'," he said...and felt his mouth pucker a beat too late.

Hal's expression went from stung to curious in less than a blink. He stayed silent, though, leaving Axton to mutter stupidly in the awkward pause, "Uh. Why'd I say that?"

"If you don't know, how should I?"

"I didn't-!" Axton dropped his focus to his boots. "I don't know where that came from."

Hal sniffed a chuckle. "You certain?"

Axton nodded furiously at his feet. "Yeah. Let's- let's just get this skip back to town."

"Okay," Hal said, still chuckling under his breath as he wandered back to the runner.

After a moment, Axton lifted his head, to watch him go.

Maybe he wasn't giving the engineer enough credit. They were partners, after all, and, for a gearhead, Hal was built: no imposing bulk like the hard-headed infantrymen he'd served with in Army, but muscly enough to take some damage. Dish it out, too, probably, if the strength and dexterity he'd shown with lugging and tweaking tech was any indication. He'd just need to train that ass a bit more....

Axton blinked, realizing of a sudden he was staring at

Hal's ass. He shook his head and turned instead to Razorback, to rifle through his pockets while Hal hooked up the powerbike for a tow. The dead skip had some light cash reserves – less than a thousand dollars – and a few curious data clips marked in red. Axton took a second to shove those into his own pockets before they dumped the body in the boot and climbed back into the runner.

On the drive back to Autochthe, Hal didn't talk. Neither did Axton, for the nagging thoughts running through his head.

He hadn't called anyone darling since...well, since never. Sarah had condemned the use of any term of endearment, tender or otherwise. Too much obvious fraternization among troopers wasn't good for dividing lines of authority, even after everyone in the platoon knew they were fucking. Of course, she hadn't had much of a sense of humor about anything. After scoffing at his use of the term sweetheart, he'd teased, "*How about I just call you tits?*" and she'd punched him so hard, he'd had to make up an excuse of a barroom brawl to keep his soldierly dignity intact with the rest of the squad.

He glanced at Hal, whose focus stayed steady on the road. Nothing odd about his profile: he just drove, as though nothing had happened. Which, now that Axton considered it, nothing had, save for an inexplicable slip of the tongue. So, turning his attention back to the desolate road ahead, Axton decided to forget the gaffe, too.

Back in Autochthe, Hal took the powerbike to the scrapyard for parts money, while Axton collected the reward for Razorback, less eight grand for the damaged goods.

"You can still tell who he is," Axton argued, and to

which Sheriff Quay grudgingly handed over the remainder of their reward.

“Next time,” the sheriff warned, “don’t aim for the face.”

Axton smirked. “Ugly mug like that, I think he looks better that way.”

“Wiseass bounty hunters,” Quay muttered through his bushy beard. “It comes around for all o’ ya, one day, y’know. Less’n two days ago, my deputy tells me, this idiot was spotted checkin’ out some skips for himself.”

Axton felt the hard edges of the mystery data clips in his pocket. “Was he, now?”

He got back to the converted store room at the brothel a half-hour later, feeling smug with himself. Hal seemed less confident, as he thumbed his way through the smaller-than-expected stack of cash:

“This reward barely covers our expenses, let alone gets us off-world.”

Axton frowned. “What expenses?”

“The runner, for one. Not to mention, the shotgun, shells, grenades – which I told you we wouldn’t need-”

“Hey, always be prepared.”

Hal dropped any argument with a dismissive wave. “Regardless, we’re going to need another job.”

Axton smirked. “Already done.”

Hal blinked at him. “That was quick.”

“What can I say? Galaxy’s full of bastards. Or, in this case, bitches.” Axton tossed the engineer a wanted poster, as well as the data clips from Razorback’s pocket.

“Red Widow,” Hal read, before the blue of his eyes almost disappeared around the black. “One million?”

“Richest of the lot,” Axton confirmed. “And hot off the

‘net.’”

Hal chuckled, wryly. “Well, now, all we need to do is find her.”

“Already done that, too,” Axton said, doubly proud. “She’s here. On Andromeda.”

This time, Hal seemed more dubious. “How’d you figure that out?”

“I didn’t. Our buddy Razorback did.” Axton smiled. “Idiot didn’t even bother to encrypt his data. I pulled it right off, no problem.”

Hal gave another chuckle, this one pleased. “I’ll make a tech out of you, yet.”

Axton grinned wider, so wide with pride, now, it started to hurt. “So. You ready to track this bitch down and make ourselves a million bucks?”

Hal grinned back. “You bet I am...darling.”

Axton heard his own laugh, even as he glanced away. “Oh, shut up.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Come Get Some

“The *Princess Eve*,” Hal said, focus fixed on the scrolling details on his datapad. “Twenty-four hundred passengers, plus almost five hundred crew.” He glanced at Axton. “Not exactly an empty street.”

“We’ll just have to be careful. Think you can handle that?” Axton said, subtly mocking.

“I’ll keep the Drehlafette on safety,” Hal said around a sneer. He dropped the contempt a moment later, and waved one hand at the screen. “But what makes you so certain Red Widow’s going to be on this one? There’s dozens – probably hundreds! – of ships leaving Andromeda, this week alone.”

Axton shook his head. “Razorback tracked her to Aletheia, and that ship’s the richest one.”

Hal scoffed. “So, now, we’re trusting Razorback’s judgment? You do recall he tried to kill us?”

“He was a bush league bandit cocksucker,” Axton said, and Hal frowned. “But, his notes make sense. The dame buried five husbands. That’s not bad luck; it’s

premeditation.” He shook his head again. “A taste for money like she’s got? The most expensive ship is the only one worth her time. And that’s the *Princess Eve*,” he said, tapping one finger upon the screen.

“So, how do we get aboard? Widow might be able to afford passage, but we certainly can’t.”

“We’ll figure that out later.” Axton straightened up, clenching and relaxing the muscles in his back. “Right now, we got somethin’ else to take care of.”

He strode away from their parked runner to a clear patch of grass. They’d driven out past Autochthe’s limits to the deserted plainlands, to make plans in private. The notion seemed hilarious, at first: privacy in open air. But the brothel was subject to snooping eyes and ears, the same as every other establishment in town. Plus, Autochthe’s rules against personal ordnance didn’t exactly coincide with the needs of two skiptraces.

“Come on,” Axton called. “Get yer nose outta that geek stuff and get over here. This is important.”

Hal slumped his shoulders but laid the datapad in the runner and did as told, coming to stand an arm’s length away. “What?”

Axton shifted his frame into a combat stance. “Come at me, bro.”

Hal squinted at him. “What?” he said again.

Axton shook his head. “I don’t want another situation like Razorback. I wanna know you can take care of yourself, if it comes down to it.”

“I had CQC at basic,” Hal started, when Axton shut him up with a snapping jab to the nose. Hal stared back at him, mouth agape. He brushed his face, eyes going wider at the trickle of blood staining his fingertips. “What the

fuck was that?”

“That,” Axton said, showing off his curled fingers, “was my fist, hitting your face.”

“What the hell for?”

“You’ve been in a lab too long,” Axton said sharply. “And, in case you hadn’t noticed, this ain’t a controlled environment, out here. Out here, you’re in the shit. And, when you’re in the shit, you better know how to fight, or you’re dead.”

“You don’t have to keep reminding me.” Hal’s blue eyes went narrow. “I’m not an idiot.”

Axton smirked as he settled into his stance once more. “Okay, then. Show me what you got.”

Hal blew a rough snort and raised his fists in front of his face. As he shifted one foot back and started a slow, subtle bob, Axton gave a beleaguered groan. “Are we gonna dance, or we gonna fight- oh!” he said, leaning out the way of Hal’s fist. “Puppy’s got fangs!” He snickered. “Itty bitty ones, but they’re there.”

The bridge of Hal’s nose pinched above his knuckles. He mumbled something – “*I’ll show you fangs,*” – and lunged, throwing a long punch straight from his shoulder.

Axton grabbed his wrist and tossed him to the ground. He swung one leg over the engineer and sat down on his hips, sucking two tsk-ing breaths between his teeth. “Sloppy. Slow.” He tapped Hal between his brows. “I expect more out of a partner.”

“I’m just warming up,” Hal growled.

Axton growled back at him. “You think a Razorback’s gonna wait for you to get warmed up?”

“I told you, that wouldn’t happen again.” Hal gave a rough buck of his hips, bouncing Axton into a bridge

position. He hooked his arm around him and flipped him over, reversing the mount. "And, it won't," he finished, a cocky smirk rounding one cheek.

Axton let out a sudden laugh. "Not bad! Not graceful, but not bad. Now, let me up. I wanna see what else you got."

Hal stood up and struck out a helping hand. Axton grabbed his firm leverage, pulled himself up, then rolled back again, throwing Hal over him with his leg. The engineer landed hard on the grass, grimacing. "I should have known that would happen," he said, and Axton laughed again.

Their rough practice went back and forth for another few rounds, during which Axton took a hit to his side that would probably bruise, a blow to his cheek that tangled blood around his teeth, and several swings to his arms that tingled when he clenched his fists. He might not have spent his Dahl career on the front lines, but, with some serious-minded sweat and effort, Hal's strikes came harder, sharper, faster. He just wasn't faster than a gun, as Axton proved when he snapped his long-barreled Jakobs revolver into Hal's face, just as he pulled back for a punch. The engineer froze, terror shining in his blue eyes.

"How, now?" Axton said, waving his thumb up from the closed hammer.

Hal scowled and shoved the barrel out of his face. "That's not fair."

Axton left his gun hand to the side but scowled back. "You're in the shit, remember? No referees out here in the shit. You need to take me out before you get to this situation. 'Cause if this were a real fight, you can be damn sure I'm pullin' my gun the first chance I get."

Hal gave a helpless shrug. “So, what do I do, this time?”

Axton shook his head. “Oh, you don’t do anything, this time. This time, you’re dead.” Though, as Hal slumped in silent defeat, Axton snickered. “On second thought, I take it back. This time, you pack us up for Aletheia, while I get myself some pussy and a bath.”

Hal rolled his eyes but gave no extra reproach. A good thing, since chidings tended to ruin Axton’s enjoyment of both luxurious girls and languorous baths. Not that it mattered, in the end. His whore gave a decent showing, but she got him off only fleetingly. Axton enjoyed a better stimulation washing himself afterward, as he’d rewound in his head the day’s sparring. Just thinking about Hal’s quick, strong strikes gave him a full-blooded rush of eager anticipation for the job ahead.

Being horny sharpened his senses, but it was a long ride to the port city on the other side of the sector. So in the swirls of his oily bath, Axton jerked himself off, to the prospect of what he and Hal could do with a glorious million-dollar payout.

By the time Axton had dressed, Hal had finished packing their supplies. The engineer had wanted to say goodbye to Cin, too, so Axton let him do, watching them talk in low tones from the side mirror of the runner. Hal stepped close to her, and Axton sniffed. If the younger man had wanted a quickie, he should’ve said something earlier. But Hal only put his arms around Cin, in an oddly familial gesture for a madame who’d sucked him off a little over a week ago, and over which Axton questioned him when they pulled out of Autochthe:

“What was that back there?”

Hal didn't look off from the road. "What?"

"You and Cin. You sweet on her or somethin'?"

"I wanted to thank her." Hal turned to face him a moment. "I left her the guns from the Razorback job."

"You did what?" Axton reached for his Jakobs. The touch of the familiar wooden stock under his fingers made his breath come again.

"We won't be able to get on that cruise ship carrying ordnance. And, we can always get new ones." Hal faced the road again, squinting even though they were driving away from the dusk horizon. "She helped me," he said. "She helped us. She needs those guns more than we do."

Axton studied his profile, all sharp outlines and smooth curves, hair swaying in the rush of wind. Unsoured. Impressionable. Young. So young, it made him feel wounded and blessed at the same time. He snickered at the dichotomy, and reached out to ruffle his hand in the engineer's hair. "You're a real softie, aren't you, boyo?"

Hal cringed away. "Don't call me boyo," he said, and gunned the engine to a steady rumble for speed.

Axton just leaned back into his seat, laughing in the wind.

CHAPTER SIX

Knot

“There she is,” Hal said, indicating the ship with a shallow nod. Five hundred meters long and shaped like a decorated metallic whale, the moored luxury cruiser *Princess Eve* loomed over the Aletheian dock. Over Axton and Hal, too, crouched at their observation perch behind the stowage loading barricades, from where they watched the queue of passengers shuffle into her hull like worker insects on a march. And, at the top of the launch, the porters in goofy outfits checking passes for everyone.

Those porters made Axton’s brow furrow most, despite his next question: “Remind me what security’s like, again?”

“A joke,” Hal said. “Less than a platoon’s worth of militia has-beens or never-wases.”

“Rent-a-cops.”

“Yeah. So, nothing to worry over, once we’re aboard. The problem’s getting there.”

Axton agreed with a grunt. He turned about, to scan the promenade of ready travelers: a geriatric couple in

vacation clothes, a quartet of chatty tarts in skimpy dresses, a mom and dad with their fidgety progeny of three in tow.

“We could try to make our way as crew,” Hal said, when Axton’s gaze found a pair of posh gents headed toward the *Princess Eve*, both of them about the right size and decked in expensive-looking suits, with travel cases trailing behind.

Axton jerked his head in the gents’ direction and grinned. “I got a better idea.”

They eased from their hiding place and quick-timed their strides to catch up to the unsuspecting pair, pacing the two men until they came to a sizable niche between some supply crates due for freight. Axton signaled to Hal to take the one on the left, while he cleared his throat for the one on the right, speaking in his most polite voice, “Excuse me, sir?”

The fancy man turned, and Axton punched him dead-on in the face. Glassjaw fell to the dock without a fight, leaving Axton to snicker. “That was easy.”

“Little help?” Hal growled, from where he was struggling to choke out the second traveler.

“Seriously?” Another sucker-punch took care of mook number two, and Axton clicked his tongue at Hal. “Quit worryin’ so much about your precious hands. They’re good for more than just tinkering in machinery, y’know.”

Hal pulled a face. “I do a lot more than just tinker.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Axton started to go through the first gent’s pockets. “You’re a genius.” He glanced at the boarding pass and began to tug at the man’s jacket. “Gimme a hand, here, will ya?”

“We’re already stealing their passes. We’re taking their

clothes, now, too?”

“Squeamish?”

“No.” Hal sniffed. “It’s just so undignified.”

Axton shot him a lopsided grin as he waggled the ticket in the air. “Well, we can’t go First Class in these rags.”

“First Class?” Hal dropped to Axton’s side, pulling off the traveler’s shoes with a grin of his own. “Why didn’t you say so? One percent, here we come!”

They left the unlucky saps with a littering of clothes pulled from the luggage cases in favor of their more conspicuous gear – the Drehlafette, of course, and Hal’s set of tools – as well as their own work clothes. Axton kept his Jakobs with him, though, tucked tight into the back of his trousers.

Hal glanced at the jut of the revolver. “That does nothing for your arse.”

Axton shifted his big shoulders in the tight-fitting suit jacket and snorted. “Nobody’s gonna be lookin’ at my ass.”

“You certain about that?”

At Hal’s teasing smirk, Axton sneered. “Let’s just get on with it.”

They met no resistance or questioning at embarkation, not even a second glance’s worth. Their cabin assignment, though, made the blood drain from Axton’s face:

“The Honeymoon Suite!” Their porter followed his announcement with an overly salacious smile at both of them. “Congratulations.”

“The Honeymoon Suite?” Hal echoed, sweeping close with an exaggerated grin. “Darling, I had no idea!”

“Neither did I,” Axton grumbled out one side of his mouth, feeling his muscles clench as he looked around the

room. A double-wide bed spread with ruby red rose petals dominated the main cabin, but it was accompanied by a similarly dubious open-air heart-shaped bathing tub, a velvety chaise draped with matching dressing gowns, and a white powder-puff rug in the shape of a clam or something. Votive candles glowed from one bedside table, and, from another, some rubbers – *rubbers*, for God’s sake! – arranged in showy display around a chilling wine bucket.

The porter shot Axton another smarmy leer as he closed the door after him, though not before adding, “Enjoy your stay!”

As Hal hopped onto the bed, Axton could only glower. “I don’t believe this.”

“Don’t be so grim,” Hal chided amid a flutter of displaced flower petals. He rolled onto one side, cocked his cheek on his fist, and grinned. “Now, git yer ass over here,” he said in a mocking drawl, “and let’s get this honeymoon started!”

Axton fixed him with a glare. “You’re loving this, aren’t you?”

“Never say no to free,” Hal said, once more in his regular voice. He ran his hand over the fold of sheet near the pillow. “I mean, this is authentic gossypian weave. And, look!” He slid toward the wine bucket, pulling the bottle from the ice with a shift of cubes. “A real Glera Brut, not that prosthecco shit you usually find. We need to drink this,” he said, and glanced about like a prairie dog popping its head from its burrow. “You see a bottle opener anywheres-”

“This is not a real honeymoon!” Axton seethed.

Hal blinked before settling the bottle back into the

crinkling ice. He got up from the bed, muttering, "I was just having a laugh. We deserve a break, yeah? After everything we've been through?"

Axton drew a noisy drag of air through his nostrils, trying to unwind the tightening knot in his belly. He managed it a bit, though the equally tight clench at the base of his spine remained more resilient to these efforts. "Let's just do the job," he said, letting go his breath as a more mellowed sigh. "The sooner we find Widow, the sooner she's in custody. And the sooner we get our reward."

Hal straightened up with an easygoing breath. "Fair enough."

They headed from their stateroom to the recreational decks, the most open and inconspicuous place to do some intelligence gathering. Hal had walked calmly beside him from their suite, but, standing alone with Axton in the cruiser's passenger lift, he started to fidget, as though uncomfortable in his pants.

"How do you feel about women?" he asked, the pitch of his voice low but curious.

"You mean to fuck?" Axton said, distracted by the too-tight fit of his own trousers; he'd have to find another pair that suit him better, if this hunt turned out to be a long one. "Or, in general?"

Hal shrugged. "Both, I suppose."

Axton did the same. "Some of 'em are all right." He tried shifting himself to one side, adding, "Some are cunts, though."

"Yes, but you could say that about any species."

The engineer was pretty bad at guiding a conversation – typical geek gearhead – but Axton could guess what had

prompted this topic, all the same. “Look,” he said, grateful they were alone in the lift for where this discussion needed to go. “Just ‘cause Widow’s a dame don’t mean she ain’t dangerous. She’s a skip, like any other. She’ll kill you or me without blinkin’ twice.” He did, though, before fixing Hal with a stern stare. “Got it?”

The engineer gave no argument. Thankfully, because the lift doors opened then, onto a casino busy with blinking lights and chattering noises. Beyond that, Axton spied a bar already bustling with patrons, and a sign overhead directing passengers left to POOL and right to BALLROOM.

Axton stepped from the lift and leaned his head close to Hal. “We’ll cover more territory if we split up. Keep your eyes and ears open, but don’t make any moves without me. We’ll meet back here in two hours.”

Hal gazed out over the whirring machines, giving a half-nod of distraction.

Axton grabbed him by the arm to make their eyes meet. “I’m serious. Do *not* engage her.”

“Don’t worry.” Hal eased his arm free and grinned. “I’m already married to you, remember?”

Axton watched the engineer wander off through the maze of betting tables and slot machines, muttering, “Smartass,” before he turned around toward the bar.

He whittled away the first hour with three nursed ales and twice as many flirtatious conversations that went nowhere: one woman too young, two too old, and three who likely didn’t know how to spell their own names, they were so dense. Had this been a pleasure cruise for him, too, he probably could have convinced one of them to come back to the stateroom to wile away the afternoon.

But this was a hunt, and – as much as it might have tempted – he didn't need the distraction of sex. At least, not until after Widow was in custody.

He downed the last swig of his last ale that tasted more like his own spit than anything and stood, to migrate from the bar to the ballroom. But nothing going on there, not until that evening, when the *Princess Eve* would have its Welcome Aboard Dance.

"Shit," Axton mumbled to himself.

He was ready to go looking for Hal, see if maybe they could scare up some action together, when he turned and found the engineer standing not fifty meters away, where a waifish blonde in a tight little gold-and-red dress and matching stiletto heels was chatting him up. She laid her hand on his arm, red fingernails drifting over his sleeve, and smiled, her crimson lips shining and stunning. She hadn't had that smile on her wanted poster, but this was definitely Widow, come cruising on a hunt of her own, from the looks of it.

Just like the fist at his side, Axton felt the knot at the base of his spine clench tight. "Shit."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ape

As soon as that murderous bitch had stepped away, Axton stalked up to Hal, grabbed him by the arm, and hustled him into the casino, between two noisy one-armed bandits, and hissed, "What the fuck was that?"

"What?" Hal asked, expression smooth with innocence.

Axton shook his arm. "What did I say about not engaging her?"

"I didn't."

"This was supposed to be a recon walkout. You tryin' to get yourself skewered?"

"I didn't engage her," Hal said, quickly and sternly. In the short silence, he pulled his arm free and relaxed some, to explain, "She came up to me. Bought me a drink and said I looked like I could use some company."

Axton blew a derisive sniff. "And you fell for that?"

"Of course not." Hal smirked. "But, I did get a ticket to dance."

"Huh?"

"The ball tonight?" Hal said with a leading tweak of his

brows.

“Oh.” Axton released the stiffness in his shoulders. “That shit.”

“Yeah, that shit,” Hal repeated with a quick eye-roll.

“I dunno. It’ll be awfully crowded.”

“So you know she won’t try anything.” As though in answer to Axton’s dubiousness, Hal pressed, “At least, this way, one of us can stay close to her. And, nothing like a tango to get a lady’s guard down,” he added, leaning close with another grin that Axton didn’t like at all.

“Maybe we should find you some matching rings.”

Hal ignored the admittedly pettish jeer, instead moving out from between the slot machines toward the lift. “What we really need are some new suits.”

“Suits?” Axton said as he followed. “For what?”

“For what?” Hal echoed, incredulous. “We need to make an impression! We show up in these, she’s going to think we’re skint.”

Axton scowled. “We are skint. Or, have you forgotten the whole reason we’re on this hunt?”

“I haven’t forgotten. But, you need to spend money to make money. Now, come on,” Hal said, waving one hand toward the lift. “Let’s find something that’ll fit you proper.”

That, Axton couldn’t debate; his borrowed trousers were starting to chafe. Luckily, Hal was as good at stealing clothes as he was at appropriating proprietary tech. Less than two hours later, Axton found himself in a formally black, form-fitting, single-breasted suit that made Hal declare:

“You scrub up nice!”

Without knowing whether he was teasing or serious,

Axton only smiled at their reflections. It was short-lived, though, as the mystery of the bowtie flummoxed him. He dropped his hands to his sides and sighed hard against the roof of his mouth.

“I can't figure out this shit,” he said, reminded of another suit and another reflection, the last time he'd felt so entirely out of his league. While Sarah had clucked and smiled, calling him *debonair* in his mess dress, all he'd really wanted at the time was to run off with his not-so-blushing bride and fuck their way to eternity. No such luck; she'd married him that afternoon. The rest was history, in more ways than one.

“Here.” Hal reached around Axton's shoulders, to handle winding the tie with knowing aplomb. “Didn't you learn anything from being married?”

Axton lifted his chin. “She wasn't that kinda woman.”

“Pity,” Hal said close to his ear, as he gave a final tug on the bow.

Axton paused to look at himself in the mirror: big-shouldered, heavy browed, scarred chin from a wicked close quarters fight on Leda. He pulled his lips together. “I look like a gorilla in this thing.”

Mirror-Hal chuckled from within the silver. “No, you don't! You look dashing.”

Axton glanced sidelong at him, making sure to keep said dashing reflection in his peripheral vision. “Ya think?”

“A perfect mark for our lady killer.” Hal stepped away, spreading his arms to show. “What about me?”

With his blond hair slicked back and standing slender and tall in that black suit that fit him like a sheath, Hal looked a lot less conspicuous than Axton felt, and a lot

classier than any ex-Army geek should have had any right to be. Though, Axton felt neither envy nor contempt for this fact. Instead, he gave the best compliment he could think of:

“Debonair,” he said, letting the word roll from his tongue with a drawling smile.

Hal dropped his gaze away but grinned all the same. When he raised his head again, Axton recognized a faint burn darkening the engineer's normal pallor, one he'd failed to notice before.

“So,” Hal said. “We ready for this?”

“One last thing.” Axton grabbed his Jakobs revolver and slipped it into his back holster. He fixed the drape of his jacket and turned, to glance over his shoulder with a smirk. “How's my ass?”

Hal grinned again. “No complaints.”

Axton nodded. “All right, then. Let's find our bad girl and give her the spanking she deserves.”

They swept from their decorated cabin up to the even more decorated and brightly-lit ballroom. There, a similarly-costumed parade of singles and couples alike changed positions on the dance floor and at the tables arranged around the outskirts of the busy room.

They split up at the main entrance, where Axton took silent stock of their surroundings: the points of exit and how much each of them would or wouldn't raise levels of suspicion, the flow of the staff, how drunk or dizzy the crowd of guests. They couldn't risk a firefight in this mess, but maybe little Red Riding Ho would do them a favor and make their job easy.

The sway of the crowd shifted, and Axton turned his head. Their pretty filly target was click-clacking her way

across the dance floor in a tight scarlet dress and matching heels, parting the partygoers in a beeline toward Hal. Axton watched her as she went past, when the tickle of her perfume stopped everything around him, and he looked - really looked - at her, with suddenly hungry eyes.

He'd gotten a glimpse before, but that glimpse hadn't done her justice. Wavy blonde hair, skin like a porcelain doll, piercing emerald eyes and luscious red lips. Small but built like a brick shithouse, with tits and legs to make any soldier go weak in the knees...and jump to attention in his pants. And her smell-! It pricked at his nostrils: an intoxicating, aromatic mix of cigarillo smoke, strawberry wine, and the promise of wanton sex.

Hal sidled his way toward her, and Widow's smile turned wider as the slit of her dress swished open nearly to the top of her pale thigh. She reached out, her hand touching his as they met on the dance floor. There, she seemed to caress him, with an over-and-around slip of fingertips that was as much seduction as it was greeting.

As Hal took Widow's hand and pulled her close enough to change the shine of light on his lapels and shift the depth of her cleavage, Axton felt the blood in his temples throb. It beat its way all the way down to his groin, where a rush of desire made his dick go hard. It also made something bright flare behind his eyes, dulling his senses. He barely noticed his feet taking one step, and another, and a third toward the sashaying couple, and his hand seemed to reach of its own accord for Widow's slender arm, pulling her from Hal's dancer's embrace to face him.

Her green eyes went wide, but only for a second. She smiled, ruby lips tweaking in a perfect tease. "Oh," she

said, her voice a melodious, entrancing purr. “Cutting in, are we?”

The human, hunter part of Axton’s brain called it stupid, careless, and against the plan...but the ape in him wouldn’t let this woman go. Not until he’d had her, and to hell with anyone who got in his way.

Hal stepped in, playing his part of proper gentleman. “Excuse me,” he said, when Axton swung his fist, a swift cross to Hal’s jaw that sent him to the floor.

The other dancers rippled out from them, gasping and muttering under their breath as Axton yanked Widow to his side. She didn’t protest, curling both hands around his arm. “If you insist,” she said, and turned them to the main doors.

Some urging in his gut made Axton glance back toward Hal. His partner was rising from the floor, at last, looking befuddled and alarmed, and Axton felt a catch of breath. *Help me*, he thought, when a waft of breeze from the opening doors made his nostrils tickle once more with the scent of smoke and lust, and he hustled Widow out from under the glaring lights.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What Lay Beneath

She tasted the same as she smelled: rich, smoky, tart. Her lips, anyway; Axton hadn't yet gotten a taste of anything else. Though, in the close and empty quarters of the corridor outside the First Class berths, he reached under her dress, fingers sliding over her inner thigh on the way to the flush heat between her legs.

He didn't question why she made him hard, but why he couldn't even think straight around her-! She was a skip, a target, yet every snort of her perfumed skin – from behind her ear where he nuzzled his nose to the curve of her neck where he dragged his mouth – clouded his brain with a constant prodding mantra of *want, fuck, mine, obey*.

The rational side of him struggled up out of their kiss, though he barely got the words out, his tongue thick like with an allergic shock: “What’re you doin’ t’me?”

She wound her hand around his wrist and guided it against her most delicate flesh. “The real question is, what do *you* want to do to *me*?”

-want-

Axton closed his eyes with a forceful blink. "I-"

"Or, maybe that should be, what do you want to do *for* me?"

He wanted to stop listening, stop breathing, just so he could think again. But the reverb of her voice beat down deep along the canal of his ear like the pulse of a slithering snake, and her slit beckoned his fingers: warm, soft, wet.

He forced his eyes open again with a long drag of air. The scent of her filled his sinuses, his head, his lungs. "I- I want-"

-fuck-

He wanted her, wanted to shove her up against the wall and tear off her clothes and fuck her right there in the corridor, show her what kind of man he was, the kind of man to make her scream and come over and over again the way Sarah never could because Sarah always needed to be on top, in control, in command-

He gave another hard blink. She wasn't Sarah. She was a job. He and Hal were in this together. Hal. Where the fuck was Hal?

"I'm Elsbeth," she said, and laid her hand upon her chest, stroking over the tempting curve of one breast to the chromatic pendant nestled in her cleavage. He followed the trail of her fingers, a trickle of sweat stinging his eye.

-mine-

"Now, what should I call you?" she said, and, though he struggled against the pounding in his head, he felt his mouth fall open for her.

"Axton!"

At the shout of his name, Axton swayed his woozy focus

up from Widow's cleavage and down the corridor. Hal was there, approaching slowly, his form a haze in his vision save for those bright blue eyes. He locked on to them, like he'd done once before, but Widow's voice came again, sticky like spider's silk in his ears:

"Axton," she echoed. "Very macho. How appropriate." She lifted her mouth to his ear. "Get rid of him," she hissed, and the prodding clamored.

-obey-

Axton lurched toward Hal, his knuckles straining in a fist. "Get out," he rumbled, but Hal didn't move.

"She's controlling you. But, you can fight her."

"Get out...!" Axton growled again, as he took another step. His blood throbbed in his head, and, beneath that, Widow's voice, her command doubly pounding:

"Axton!"

"*Get out!*" he shouted, and lunged with both fists clamped.

Hal dodged the first punch, but his jaw cracked under the second. He stumbled back to the wall and Axton grabbed him by the front of his jacket, yanking him in for a swift bash of skulls. He tipped, and Axton brought his knee up, sharp to the gut. Hal doubled over but countered with a fist to Axton's belly, winding him with a grunt. His follow-up unlocked their grapple, as Axton fought against his instincts: *Not the gun not the gun* **not the gun-**

Hal threw an uppercut to his chin that snapped Axton's head up. A jab to his cheek burst a metallic-tasting bubble of blood around his teeth. And a roundhouse bounced him to the wall, with a crack of plaster and a rattle of gilded lamps.

Axton let himself slump, all the way to the floor.

“For fuck’s sake,” Widow muttered from somewhere above him. “Do I have to do everything myself?”

She kicked her leg up and her stiletto flew off, glancing Hal in the shoulder. She ripped the pendant from around her neck and threw it at Hal’s feet, where it didn’t bounce but popped, belching a murky, purplish smoke whose intense odor made Axton’s head swim and Hal retch.

Widow kicked off her other heel to run. “Later, boys.”

Axton raised his arm, to grab her foot, her dress, anything to stop her, when something rushed past his head: Hal, body-slamming Widow into the corridor wall.

She’d saved her head with her hands, and pushed back against the wall to shove him off. One leg flew out behind her, connecting with Hal’s gut. She spun, another kick catching him in the ear. He stumbled but didn’t fall. One hand struck out, snatching at her hair, and the other balled into a fist.

Axton heard a cracking *pok!* A moment later, Widow fell to the floor, a drifting tendril of her cornsilk hair sticking to the fresh red bloom beneath her nose. Despite his lingering haze, Axton smiled at the sight.

Hal appeared in his vision, a bit bloodied and red-eyed himself, but not much else worse for events. “You all right?”

Axton took his offered hand and pulled himself to sitting. “I think so.” He shifted back against the wall. “What the hell happened? She a psi, or somethin’?”

“Synthetic pheromones,” Hal said as he squatted beside. “They’re illegal. Didn’t you read her dossier?”

Axton blinked up at him. “There was a dossier?”

“Yeah.” Hal chuckled. “Don’t tell me you only paid attention to all those zeroes on her reward poster?”

“I just looked at Razorback’s notes,” Axton said, tapping his hand against his face, to dab at the blood oozing from one nostril.

Hal shrugged off his jacket and crumpled the end of one sleeve into a bundle, which he pressed to Axton’s face. “Dahl Biochem did some research into them, back on Phaestus. They work like hyper-suggestive catalysts. Real high-end espionage stuff. And, lots easier to fight if you know it’s coming.”

Axton wiped the sleeve under his nose. “Shit hits like a hammer.” He sniffed, the dribble of blood barely evident anymore, and frowned at Widow’s prone form. “Better call Security. Get her isolated ’til we make planetfall. Don’t want any other sap fallin’ under her spell.”

Hal frowned back. “You sure you’re all right?”

“I can handle a hangover.”

“Okay, then. Let’s get you up.” Hal grabbed Axton beneath his armpits and hauled him to his feet, easing him against the wall where they stood, chest-to-chest and eye-to-eye.

His head didn’t feel nearly so swimmy anymore, and that sickly sweet smell was gone from his nostrils and the back of his mouth. *Something* still itched at Axton’s nerves, though, making his spine cringe. He gave a slow, woozy blink before glancing away. “I need a minute.”

“Wait here,” Hal said. “I’ll sort this.”

Axton just bobbed his head, grateful for the relief. Whatever Widow had used on him, he still seemed to be feeling the effects, muscles tingling with a nervous energy and his skin flushing warm in blotches.

Ship Security arrived to take Widow to confined quarters below decks, as soon as Hal explained her wanted

status. She had some groggy choice words for all of them, but she reserved a distinctly unladylike huck of spit for Hal as she was escorted away.

He scowled at her back before turning to Axton with a look of concern. "You look like you could use a lie-down," he said, and took Axton by the arm, to lurch their way to their borrowed berth and bed.

The ship's med team would have had stim-heals, but that would have required ident checks, and too many extra questions. Instead, Axton opted for a simple pack of ice wrapped in a towel, which Hal handed to him as he sat beside him on the bed.

"This should help." The engineer smiled. "Got to keep that pretty face intact."

With the pack against his cheek, Axton couldn't quite smirk. "Thanks."

"I ought to be thanking you," Hal said. "For going easy on me."

The odd knotting in his guts tightened again as Axton's gaze fell to the Jakobs, tucked in its holster and sitting on the table beside the bed. "Maybe I pulled a few punches." He looked back to Hal. "You did good."

The words sounded lame, insufficient, but Hal chuckled anyway. "I couldn't let her just get away. Not with my partner," he said, and broke into a smile, uneven for the red split at the edge of his bottom lip.

Axton paused again. He'd thought Widow's chems responsible for the churn of his insides and the flush of his skin, but they had nothing to do with the pounding in his chest or the shortness of his breath. It was that smile, so honest and trusting and beautiful for that, that made him let the icepack drift to his lap in a shift of cubes he didn't

even hear.

Hal blinked. “Axton? Are you-” he began, when Axton hooked his hand behind Hal’s head and silenced them both, with a firm and purposeful kiss.

CHAPTER NINE

Sword and Stone

They kissed for neither heartbeat nor eternity, just a marvelously warming while that made Axton wonder why in hell it had taken him so long to make this move. When they broke for air, Hal agreed:

“I was starting to think you were never going to do that.”

Axton chuckled under his breath, unwilling to pull away too far. “It’s fraternization,” he said, thinking of the cautionary words Sarah had muttered to him the first time he’d pulled her into a temporary bed not unlike this one, during their first assignment together on Leda.

Hal’s eyes went heavy-lidded as he swung his blue gaze down the center of Axton’s chest in quiet admiration. “It might be, if we were still with Dahl. But, we’re not. And we can do whatever we want.” He brushed his lips close again but didn’t kiss, only whispering, “What do you want?”

“What’re you offering?” Axton said, and snickered again, at how sudden, crazy, and *right* this felt.

Hal just smiled, half-rising on one knee. He cupped Axton's face with his hands, tilting both their heads for a deeper kiss that sent Axton's synapses into a sparking frenzy. A flush of warmth bloomed between them, but Axton felt a chill rush along his spine, popping gooseflesh over his arms as Hal plucked open his shirt button by button. The engineer's long fingers strayed over the hard, naked points of his nipples, making them ache.

Axton hummed at his feather-light touch, almost like a woman's. Until Hal brought their chests together, to push them down to the bed. That was the insistent strength of a man, the same as the assertive pull on his belt and trousers belonged to a man, too.

Hal reached between their groins and slid his hand into Axton's shorts, to circle his dick with his fingers. He stroked, once, and Axton drew a sharp breath through his nose. That steady, knowing grip *definitely* belonged to a man. Another earnest stroke made Axton unwind his tongue and mutter, "Fuck, you know what you're doing."

Hal gave a short laugh. "You sound surprised."

"Yeah, well," Axton drawled, as he felt a different sort of heat burn. "I've never done this with a guy before."

Hal cocked one blond brow. "Really? Well, then this is a first for both of us." He broke into a teasing smile. "I've never done this with a guy who's never done this with a guy before."

Despite the almost desperate rush of blood to his face, Axton laughed. Hal did, too. The sound eased the tangled tension in the air between them, and, as they quieted again, Axton lifted his chin, seeking a fresh start of kisses. Hal obliged, with three noiseless pecks of his lips whose tininess was designed to assuage. They did so, urging

Axton to put his arms around the other man more firmly. Hal answered this the same, too, sealing their mouths together and smothering any troubled protests with his tongue.

Another groan rumbled up from Axton's chest, though he couldn't have said if it were for any residual doubt or shame, or for the skilful squeeze of Hal's hand between his legs. When that delightful grip went loose, though, he hummed a lament.

Hal left off him only a moment. "Don't worry," he said between their wet lips. He smiled again, adding, "I'll be gentle."

The words recalled the whore's room at the brothel, where they'd had their first fleeting taste of sex together, and Axton smiled for the memory. "Not too gentle. I can handle it."

Hal's gaze glinted in reply. "We'll see." He crawled away, down Axton's neck and chest and belly, teasing his way along the route with lips and tongue.

Axton let go a sigh of tortured delight for every suckle and lick, until Hal reached his hips, where he pulled with surgical precision at the remaining hold of trouser waist and zipper. He practiced the same sort of careful exactness with his briefs, struggling the shorts past his hips.

Axton sucked a breath, not looking for fear it might ruin the thrill of eager anticipation. He felt the blow of the younger man's sigh over his skin, followed by the renewed stroke of his fingers. Then, Hal told him, in a voice quiet for its appreciation:

"You have a handsome cock."

Axton's belly cringed with a short laugh, as he recalled Sarah's comparisons between him and other men she'd

had. "About average."

"For size, maybe." Hal played his fingertips over the shaft and circled the head in a barely-there caress. "But, size isn't everything."

Axton swallowed, as another flush of warmth made his brow break with a sweat. "Is that your experience?"

Hal chuckled. "Everybody knows, it's what you do with it that matters."

Axton raised his head. He had to look, now: to gaze into those blue eyes and see for himself the depths of the other man's desire. "What do you want to do with it?"

"I want to suck it," Hal said, all playful humor gone from his face.

Axton's pulse jumped, with a new excitement not for any taboo but for the sweet joy of matching lust. Though, he could only think to say, "Yeah?"

Hal nodded. "I've wanted to, since Cin."

"What stopped you?" The pounding of his blood created a *tump-tump* rhythm in Axton's chest and head, and his dick gave an enthusiastic bounce toward Hal's mouth.

The engineer's focus didn't stray; he kept their gazes locked together. "Didn't think you were ready."

Axton laid his hand on Hal's face, just a faint press of his fingertips to the younger man's temple. "I'm ready, now."

"Me, too," Hal said, and wound his grip around Axton's cock once more. He did look away at that moment, dipping his head to press a series of light kisses to the bulging shaft, working his way to the top with each one. There, he paused, just staring, for a patter of rapid heartbeats that came so fast for Axton, they flowed into a thudding blur in his chest. At last, Hal closed his eyes, as

though readying for another kiss. But he gave no simple press of lips. Instead, he put his mouth over Axton's member, not inch by cautious inch but with a sheer, unhesitating audacity that swallowed him nearly whole.

"Oh," Axton said, amazed, anxious, and ashamed in the same second. Hal's hand possessed a knowing, bold dexterity, but it paled in comparison to what he could do with his mouth. With his lips closed firmly around the shaft, he employed an eager, swirling play of his tongue around the tender head and hummed, low in his throat, thrilling the already sensitive nerves in Axton's dick.

"Oh, darlin'," Axton said, letting his head fall back between his shoulders as he closed his eyes, too, in a sighing swoon. He shifted his legs open, to give Hal more room to play. Which he did, palming the underside of Axton's sac in a delicate massage while he groaned another reverberant thrum. Axton pushed himself higher off the bed, to send himself deeper, when Hal slipped his finger into his ass – not far, just enough to make him wheeze.

"Oh, fuck," Axton said, the muscles in his belly and legs clenching from this subtle penetration. He grabbed a fistful of Hal's hair and jerked his hips, for an inelegant but oh-so thrilling hump of his partner's face. "Oh, Jesus!"

As though spurred by this rougher sport, Hal answered with another guttural groan. His head bobbed faster, his finger probed deeper, each action matching the other with a see-saw rhythm that set Axton's nerves on fire as the mated tempo of lips and hands and hips all spiraled together. Maybe because Widow had already gotten him so hot and bothered, or maybe because the wet warmth of Hal's mouth felt so Goddamned luscious, but Axton

came, all too quickly, before he was ready, with a brief constriction of his muscles and a low, eked, “Oh, God, *yes...!*”

For a long minute afterward, he could only lie there, the taut knot of his former inhibitions unraveling from the base of his spine as Hal finished sucking him off. Axton let him take his time. His dick tingled tender, but the hollow of Hal’s mouth was too wonderful to leave. So, with a relaxed and satisfied sigh, Axton dropped his shoulders to the bed, to revel in the dreamy, floating sensation of his desires set free. He drifted into a doze for a spell, but a sharp *pop!* of pressurized air made him open his eyes again, to find Hal beside him, taking a gulp from the bottle of champagne. With his neck long and smooth, and his lips shining with sweat or booze or both, he looked delicious.

Axton pushed himself to sitting, flashing Hal a lazy smile of desire as the engineer swung down the bottle and passed it over with a backhanded wipe of his mouth. But Axton grabbed him, instead, for a kiss that tasted like bitter ale, a faint echo of his own spit and sweat mixed with rich champagne. It revved the engine of his lust anew, and their teeth clicked as he invaded Hal’s mouth with his tongue in a show of ready vigor.

They broke for a moment, allowing Hal’s breath to blow warm between their lips. “Axton-”

“Call me Ax.” He smiled. “I like when you call me Ax.”

“Ax,” Hal repeated, sounding pleased. “What else do you want?”

“I want it all,” Axton said, and gave a forceful yank on Hal’s belt. It jingled in his grip, and brought Hal nearly

into his lap.

The engineer put out his arm with the bottle but didn't look away from Axton's face. "Can you fuck?" He set the bottle on the table but it tipped from the edge, spilling bubbly fizz to the floor. Neither of them went for it.

"Yeah. I can fuck," Axton assured him. He moved his face close, so their lashes fluttered together with every blink. "As much as you want, darlin'."

Hal took hold of him with both hands. "Then, fuck me," he said, and his fierce and crushing kiss blew from Axton's mind everything that had brought them to this point. He wanted this. He needed now. To hell with all the rest.

CHAPTER TEN

Hot for Teacher (Eat. Fuck. Kill.)

Cool sheets slipped loose around him as Axton shifted in the cruise ship bed. A chill ran up his naked back, and he put out one hand, seeking another's skin to warm him. Finding only empty space, he flickered his eyes open with a sticky smack, sleep-crust blurring his vision before he wiped it away. He sniffed and rose from the pillows, voice hoarse as he called, "Hal?"

He looked around the suite, but there was no one. Aside from his own discarded suit laying rumpled on the floor beside the bed, nothing in the suite seemed out of place, and, for a second, Axton wondered if maybe he'd only dreamed last night, the product of too much chems and heady feeling. That wouldn't explain his nakedness, though, or why he felt so...satisfied.

The cabin door gave a click and Hal walked in, dressed in his clothes from the evening previous. "You're awake," he said, pleasantly polite.

Axton sat up, watching him. "Where'd you go?"

"Checking up on our meal ticket. She is not pleased, let

me tell you! Threatened to do something extremely unsavory to both our bollocks.” Hal sat down on the bed to unlace his shoes, as though this were all perfectly mundane: just two hunters waiting on the next step of the job. Axton debated on how to broach the subject of what did – or didn’t – happen between them last night, when Hal shifted halfway around, smiling in profile. “First Officer says we’ll make planetfall on Pasandra in a few hours. I asked him to radio the local constabulary there, to let them know we’re bringing in a prisoner.”

Axton stroked the silk sheet, not quite reaching for Hal’s hand. “And the reward?”

Hal turned and shifted close, with a smile that almost growled. “Soon as we hand her over, Widow is out of our hair. And we are a million dollars richer.”

“Nice,” Axton said, though, in all honesty, money was the furthest thing from his mind, for once. Instead, he touched Hal’s wrist, slipping his fingers beneath his cuff. “What d’you wanna do in the meantime?”

Hal hummed. “I’m certain we can come up with something.” He circled his hand behind Axton’s head, to pull them together for a slow, lapping kiss.

Axton answered him with a low moan. Not a dream then, nor some chemical-induced fantasy, but reality. Hot, horny, hard-bodied reality rolling on top of him for a deeper exchange of tongues, as they kicked away sheets for another energetic romp that put the last one to shame.

Still feeling the flush of their afterglow when they arrived on Pasandra, Axton decided they should give up their luxurious berth in favor of their reward, as well as avoiding any unwanted questions when the *Princess Eve* arrived at its final disembarkation point on Anteia, where

their stolen identents were sure to raise flags.

The administering Pasandran law was a marshal by the name of Kotonou, a woman with short black hair and long legs made for walking. Decked out in thick, curve-confining leather that creaked with every shift under her duster, she lowered her hand to the long-barreled shotgun at her side when she saw them coming.

“One Red Widow,” Hal announced. “We have her documents right here.”

“I don’ need documents,” Kotonou said, her voice thick with a Malan accent. She tipped her hat in Widow’s direction. “I been waitin’ fer dis one.”

Axton pushed Widow forward. “Hear that, princess? Your reputation precedes you.”

Kotonou’s glare stayed on Widow. “At’erton was a friend o’ mine. One o’ de best men I ever had de privilege o’ workin’ wit’.” She gave the other woman’s shoulder a rough shake before shoving her over the threshold of the cell. “Til dis little parasite got into his head.”

“She did it with this.” Hal passed over the handheld aerosol cylinder from Widow’s effects. “Synthetic pheromones.”

“Pheromones?” the marshal echoed.

“It’s a specialized chem compound. Overrides the logic centers of the brain.” Hal spared a glance at Axton. “Some men are just...more susceptible than others.”

The lines around Kotonou’s mouth deepened in disgust. “He deserved better dan dis.”

Widow sneered. “All men deserve what they get.”

Kotonou’s gloved fist connected with Widow’s nose, and blood spurted. As the skip staggered backward to the lone bunk, Kotonou punched the control panel for the cell’s

electrical containment wall. "Shut yer hole. Or I'll have dem shut for ya. All o' dem," she added with a snarl.

Axton snickered. "I think I'm in love. What d'you say, Marshal? You the marrying kind?"

"To de law," Kotonou replied, as she moved to the desk.

Axton followed, grinning at her back. "How 'bout just a drink, then?"

The marshal smiled as she organized their payout. "Not while I'm on duty. But, de Soused Dodger's open for business. You can have a drink dere, if you like."

"Sounds like a plan." Axton winked in Kotonou's direction. "Maybe we'll see you there?"

"Don' count on it. But, come back after you sober up," the marshal suggested, to which Axton gave a knowing chuckle. "We might be outside de Ring, but we got plenty o' work for good skiptraces."

Hal tucked their reward into his ruck with a nod. "We'll do that."

Out on the street, Axton let his chuckle become a full-fledged laugh, as he hooked his arm around Hal's shoulders. "A million bucks!" he said, blowing the words between his teeth. "You know what that makes us, partner?"

"Good at our jobs?" Hal guessed.

"Rich," Axton corrected with a grin. He pulled Hal in with the crook of his elbow, lifting his mouth to the engineer's ear. "We should celebrate."

"Isn't that what we're doing?" Hal said, nodding toward the saloon across the street.

"Not like that." Axton yanked them three steps to the left, into a dark alleyway between the jail and the building

beside, where he pinned the engineer to the wall and swooped in for a delving kiss. Hal let out a muffled *unf*, shrugging off his ruck to put his arms around Axton. A wide bin and a pile of construction materials gave them some cover, so Axton took the opportunity to rub his hand over the front of Hal's trousers.

The engineer broke from their kiss to laugh. "You're insatiable!"

"Eat, fuck, kill," Axton reminded. He licked and nipped at Hal's lips in another playful kiss, and started a backwards fumble of the younger man's belt and zipper.

Hal jerked back. "What are you doing?"

Axton coughed a snicker. "Oh, now, you play hard to get?"

"Not here," Hal said, even as his belt and trousers dangled open. "Let's go someplace else. Someplace safe-"

"I don't want safe," Axton said, and he dropped to his haunches, pulling Hal's clothes with him.

"Ax!" Hal yelped in protest, following with a gasp when Axton shoved his bare ass to the wall.

He'd never gone down on a man before, but when that thick, fleshy rod bounced up, flaunting for attention, Axton captured it in a greedy, ravishing kiss. The tip slipped silk-smooth over his tongue, and it shared the same bittersweet horehound candy taste as Hal's sweat. So did the rest of his cock, as Axton pulled it deeper into his mouth.

Despite his earlier reluctance, Hal slipped his fingers into Axton's hair, equally stroking and clutching. "Oh," he sighed, and Axton answered with a growl, a grab, and a devouring gulp. After that, Hal gave up any pretense of modest inhibition and started thrusting against Axton's

face, his shaft slip-sliding with each jerk of his hips. The flesh over his balls went taut and he came, with an abrupt burst of spunk Axton took down in a single swallow of concentration.

He knew even a half-skilled blow job could make a man come, but Axton still allowed himself some pride for his first time. "Pretty good, huh?" he said as he rose with a ginger tug of the engineer's clothes. He didn't give Hal time to offer thanks or praise, though, busying his mouth with a quelling kiss. A strand of lingering spit broke between their lips when they parted, and Axton fixed him with a challenging look. "Still want to go someplace safe?"

"I want to do what you do," Hal said, and Axton felt another tickle of satisfaction for his prowess. But his partner answered a different way:

"Eat," Hal said, and bit back against Axton's lips. "Fuck." He flicked his tongue between Axton's teeth, and one side of his mouth twisted in a subtle snarl. "Kill."

Axton breathed deep, catching the smell of Hal's want: so desperate to be, so desperate to please. But a better thief than hunter, and by far a better engineer than thief. His brains were better kept intact, not splattered on a field or across a wall.

"Later," he said, as he brought their mouths together once more. "Right now, I want to fuck you again."

Hal pulled his chin away. "I want you to teach me."

"Later," Axton repeated, but Hal kept up his protest.

"I want to have your back--"

"You do. You're the one who took down Widow, remember?"

"She wasn't Razorback," Hal said, quietly insistent.

Axton rubbed his thumb over the still-red slit in Hal's bottom lip. "You run with me, darlin', and there won't be any shortage of things to kill, trust me on that. But, you never know what's gonna come next. So, fuck first," he said, pulling their faces close again. "Always fuck first." And he stoked their passion with a new kiss, one Hal matched him for measure.

When they came up for air, Axton drew him from their shadowy space but skipped the saloon, instead heading straight for the local hotel, The Jewel. There, he blew a full stack of cash on the best room in the house, complete with en suite facilities so they could indulge in each other's naked company as much as they'd done on the cruise ship. He ordered them a decadent supply of food and drink, too, but didn't wait for its arrival, tearing at Hal's shirt and trousers with the same fervor his partner did to him the second after they'd closed the door.

They wrestled each other to the bed in a controlled tumble, throwing aside the last of their clothes as they did any lingering restraint. Axton had learned fast how to excite Hal to a point of mutual ready arousal, and they fucked with mouths and hands and finally dicks, the most liberated and adventurous yet: like zealots come to spread their missionary word, and arachnids swaying back and forth on all eight legs, and rutting mammals desperate on their heat. They came so quickly and so close together that way, Axton thought it mostly luck. But, after they'd cleaned up with a pair of towels from their sink, and he pulled Hal back into his arms and to their bed, the steady rhythm of their pulses still beat in-time to each other, as though they'd always done.

As they lay together, Axton nuzzled the top of Hal's

spine. The smell of blue electricity, like static before a storm, came off his skin in waves with every breath. If Axton hadn't already spent himself to exhaustion, it would have aroused him again. But he only planted one kiss to Hal's skin before that warm electric blue smell lulled him into a calm and quiet sleep, where he dreamed, of all things, of his wedding day.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Past the Red Veil

Pasandra might have been on the ass-end of the galaxy, but it had work, a full bounty board's worth.

"Takes time for warrants to transmit all de way out here," Kotonou explained, as Axton scrolled through one dossier after another. "But, karma catches up to everyone."

"She is a bitch." Axton nodded toward Widow, still sulking in her cell in the back of the station. "Speakin' o' which, when's checkout time for your guest over there?"

Kotonou followed his look. "T'ree days," she said with some disgust.

"Three days?" Axton echoed. "I thought Calliope would be a lot more eager'n that to see her stand trial."

"Pasandra's a long way from de Inner Ring," Kotonou answered with a wry smile.

Axton leaned forward on one arm. "You stuck babysitting 'til then?"

"Someone's got to keep de law in dis town."

"No deputies?"

“You volunteering?”

“No, ma’am!” Axton stood straight again. “Just asking if you could do with a quick break.” He shot her a friendly leer. “All work and no play makes Marshal a dull girl. Am I right?”

Kotonou had just started to smirk when Widow called from her cell: “Shouldn’t you be packing Parian ass?”

Axton snarled at her. “You got a mouth on you, missy.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining.”

He took a step to the edge of the desk and made a not-so-subtle grab for his crotch. “You wanna see if it’s big enough for my dick?”

Kotonou glared at him. “Stand down.”

“He wouldn’t know what to do with a woman, Marshal,” Widow said. She kept her green gaze on Axton and lowered her voice. Not to a purr, but to a growl. “He’s too busy sucking pretty boy cock in dark alleys. You let him put it up your ass, too?” She wrinkled her nose, the action twisting her mouth to a snarl. “I’d bet you do. I bet you *love* it. You macho grunts act like you’re king of the world, but what you really crave is a nice, deep ass-fucking.”

The Jakobs flew up from Axton’s side before he knew it, but the *cha-thunk* of a readied shotgun stayed his hand. He looked to the sound, and found the black eyes of Kotonou’s double shotgun barrels staring at his chest.

“Dis is my house, soldier,” the marshal rumbled at him. “My town. You do as you please out dere on de rest o’ de Edge, but not here. Here, you do as I say.” She gripped the shotgun with a whistling rub of leather from her gloves. “And, I say, stand down.”

Axton eased the revolver back into its holster.

“Apologies, ma’am. Just a reflex.” He showed her both open hands. “No harm, no foul?”

Kotonou lowered her gun behind the desk. “Let’s keep it dat way.”

Widow snickered. “He likes taking orders, Marshal. Like every other closet shirtlifter.”

“I’d advise you to keep yer mout’ shut,” Kotonou told Widow with a subtle turn of her cheek. “Yer warrant says *alive*. It don’ say anyt’ing ‘bout *intact*.”

That shut Widow up, long enough for Axton to get the hell out of there before his anger got the better of him again. Not that the galaxy would miss one more traitorous cunt, but he didn’t need Kotonou dragging him into a cell, too, running ident and record inquiries on him. That would have brought Dahl out of the woodwork, for sure. Though, it wasn’t Dahl’s potential wrath that set his tread to stomping.

Widow was guessing, goading. Her whole MO was reading men and lying to them and turning them into something they weren’t. Something she could control. Something weak. And, she was trying to do it to him. Again.

Axton clenched a fist. Fuck that. He was a fighter: fresh off the transport from Hieronymus, his first sergeant had nicknamed him Aggroculture, for the heavy swing of his farmhand fists. He’d been a soldier; he was a hunter; he could kill without blinking. He was a *man*. He liked women and tits and pussy, and they *loved* his dick, and, by God, he was going to use it.

He shoved open the hotel room door to find Hal sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by a collection of tools and guns in various stages of disassembly. At the

moment, he was consumed in cleaning the barrel of what could have been the broken-down carbine to his left side or the rifle to his right.

“Never thought I’d miss Dahl,” Hal mumbled. “Just fill out a req form and, the next day, whatever you need.” He blew firmly into the cylinder, looked down the shaft with one eye, and resumed cleaning. “Not like this. I mean, I know S&S doesn’t have the budget we did, but this is substandard, even for them. I could build weapons twice as good for half the price, if I just had some decent materials.”

Axton stayed in the doorway, watching him pump the brush up and down the cylinder. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

Hal grunted. More swift pumping, like a mime of a frantic fucking. “Did you get us a job?”

Axton’s armpits started to sweat. “No.”

“And, why not?”

“Got distracted.”

“Well, we’re going to need something soon,” Hal said, while Axton tried his best not to watch and not to think: of Hal and of fucking and of fucking Hal, and what that made him. “I spent half our cash on this lot-”

“You wanna get some pussy?”

The engineer froze. The question had simply flown from Axton’s mouth, but he let it stand, and waited until Hal looked up, blue eyes blinking. “Why would I do that?”

Axton flared his nostrils. “Why wouldn’t you?”

Hal raised the cylinder and brush in his hands. “For one, I’m in the middle of something. And, for the second, I thought-”

“You thought, *what?*”

“I thought you wanted me to restock us for the next job,” Hal said, with faint accusation. “Which you were supposed to get, I might add.”

“I’m nobody’s bitch,” Axton snapped.

Hal’s face went slack. “I never said you were.”

“I give the orders around here,” Axton said, and jabbed his finger into his chest. “And, what I do with my dick is my business, nobody else’s. I got where I am ‘cause I fucking earned it. And I don’t need you tellin’ me what I am when you don’t know a Goddamned thing about me.”

Hal shook his head. “I didn’t-”

“You’re not my old man, you’re not my wife-”

“What are you-”

“I’m not a homo!” Axton shouted, and Hal froze again, not blinking, barely breathing. The only sound Axton heard came from his own chest, heartbeat thudding.

Finally, Hal broke his stare and drew a breath that pushed back his shoulders. He set his tools on the floor and rose, looking down the straight line of his nose. “Fine,” he said, and Axton felt his chest constrict.

“What d’you mean? What’s fine?”

Hal’s face took on a stony stiffness. “You’re a free agent, you can do what you like. So, go on. Get your cock wet,” he said, the mask cracking with a faint sneer around the words. That half-snarl faded a second later, replaced by more cool aloofness. “Just do me the courtesy of not bringing your whores back here. I don’t need the noise while I work.” He turned around to the table, picked up a narrow-tipped borer, and sat down among his gun parts again in tight-lipped silence.

Axton grimaced at him a moment before stalking out to

the hall, wrenching the door shut behind him.

Fuck Hal. He was a gearhead, a dollar a dozen. Axton could get guns. He could drive, shoot, fight. What did he need with a partner, anyway? Just another mouth to feed, a back to watch. A liability. A hunter sure as shit didn't need that in his life.

He burst open both saloon doors of the Soused Dodger with a dramatic flourish worthy of a gunslinger vid, announcing, "One at a time, ladies!"

The bar had a scattering of patrons drinking and playing cards, and a longer dice table at the far end of the room where a few less savory types paused in their gambling long enough to look up. But his only acknowledgment was the sound of the moustachioed bartender squeegeeing a shot glass.

Axton made his way to the bar with a snort. This planet could have used a lesson in proper hospitality, especially for a hunter willing to share his time and cash.

The barkeep's moustache moved more than his mouth: "What's your poison, stranger?"

"Pussy," Axton replied. "Preferably in the plural."

Handlebars didn't blink. "That'll cost you."

Axton dipped two fingers into his pocket and raised them again, a rolled-up wad of bills tucked between his knuckles. He made to pass the cash over but quickly pulled it back, close to his ear. "I want clean, fit, and nothin' missing." Handlebars went for the cash, but Axton drew it back again, adding with a sniff, "And, no backtalk."

"You're just gonna spend a few hours. You're not gonna marry 'em."

"Maybe you'd care for me to take my business elsewhere?"

The barkeep swiped the bills from Axton's fingers and jerked his head toward the other end of the bar, where a curtain separated the front area from another section. The heavy red cloth had been drawn to one side, and, while it was too dark to see much past it, the hand holding it open was distinctly feminine.

"Lucy'll see to your needs," Handlebars said, and Axton slid from the barstool to the curtain.

The woman who met him in the short, dark corridor past the red veil came to just under his nose, her bleached-blond tumble of curls smelling of salty toffee. She smiled unevenly at him, though through no fault of facial structure: while maybe not as perfect a physical specimen as Widow, she had a look of good breeding about her. Axton wished he had a hat, just so he could tip it at her. "Miss Lucy, I presume?"

She snickered. "It's been a long time since anyone's called me miss."

Axton did his best not to accost her too much with his frame, but, in a pale dress more dangling fringe than actual cloth, with tits and hips ample enough to strain seams, she made for a difficult obstacle to pass. "You should have a word with your marshal." He smiled. "'Cause that's a crime."

She gave another snicker. "Easy on the charm, soldier. Your money's good enough for a screw."

"You wound me, ma'am. I'm just looking for a comfortable place to rest my head a while." He grinned. "If that happens to be between the legs of a pretty lady, all the better."

"Just one?" she said, one side of her mouth quirking again.

“Well, there’s more than enough of me to go around a few times.” He swung his gaze up and down her curves. “But, if you think you’re up to the solo challenge...!”

She took a moment to do the same, offering him a long, gauging perusal.

He let her drink it in, because the flattery felt nice. But, after a few seconds of waiting, he bent his mouth close to her ear. “I hope I’m gonna get more than a look for my money.”

She snorted. “You sure know how to make a gal feel special.”

“Well, I could,” he said, and shot her a friendly leer. “But, you’re the one who wants to stand here jawing.”

Lucy answered his wolfish grin with a kittenish smile. “You talk a good game. Let’s see what else you can do with that pretty mouth,” she said, and took gentle but definite hold of his shirt, to lead him in the direction of the first half-open door.

He got his money’s worth, and then some: his tongue went nearly numb from having her grind upon his face, and he bucked so hard against her hips, he could feel the tingling burn of exertion in his muscles. He almost laughed at how good she felt sitting on top of him, holding his dick inside even after he started to wane. He did laugh a little, cupping one full and hefty breast in his hand as he told her, “Goddamn! You are all woman.”

“Nothing gets past you army boys,” she said, tossing her curls from her forehead with a flick of one hand. She slipped off him with a wet sound and pulled a slip of silk over her head, giving a wiggle of shoulders and hips to let the faded but well-kept undergarment settle.

He followed her with his eyes but didn’t sit up. “Don’t

tell me you're gettin' dressed already?"

"I can't lie around with you all day." She didn't turn around, which nettled his nerves; he was getting tired of people not paying attention to him. "Time's money."

"I got money," Axton said, and frowned at how pathetic that sounded. He tried again, stretching the fingers of one hand upon the sheet: "Come on back. Just for a bit."

"You need to reload, soldier." She shot an amused, over-the-shoulder glance at his spent and tired member. "Looks like that'll take a while."

His smile fell. "I don't mean to fuck."

Now, she turned back to him fully, lips pursed for a coo. "Oh, what do you want, a cuddle?" She shook her head and sniffed, not cruelly, but with a suitably professional detachment. "I'm not your wife."

His nipples perked at a sudden chill. "There's no wife. Not anymore."

Lucy's focus snapped to the chain around his neck, the one looped through his old Dahl dog tags and Sarah's diamond ring. "You sure about that? A man doesn't screw the way you do unless he's got something to prove."

He shrugged off the jibe and swung his gaze around the room, with its assortment of feminine trinkets, remnants of a life lost or could have been. "Don't you ever get lonely this far out on the Edge? Pretty lady like you?"

Her composed expression cracked, a twitch at the corners of her eyes. She had subtle crow's feet there, likely from too many years of hard sun and masking makeup. "Let's see it," she muttered, and he grabbed his trousers from the floor and rummaged into the front pocket for another wad of go-to cash. She took it without looking or counting and tucked it into her slip, tight against one

breast. “You get an hour,” she said, slipping beside him again.

Axton nodded as they settled down together. He put his arm over her and closed his eyes, pulling a long drag of the smell of her hair. Salty toffee.

He’d expected electric blue.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lost Boys

Axton slumped at the Soused Dodger's bar, watching the residue of his beer's head creep down the inside of the glass by degrees. He'd been nursing this one for the better part of an hour, trying to make it last. Mostly because he was almost out of cash, and the thought of going back to the hotel for more made his fingers twitch.

"I thought you'd be long gone."

He cracked a half-smile at pretty, tousled Lucy. "When I can buy you a drink?"

She snickered. "I don't think you can afford my taste."

He knocked his head to one side, toward the red curtain behind the bar. "How 'bout a quick tumble, then?"

A snort, this time. "I know you can't afford that, right now."

"C'mon," he said, with a sway and a smile. "After everything we've been through, you can't find it in your bonny bosom to toss me a bone?"

She shook her head. "There's no heart of gold, here." A moment later, her eyes turned a sort of tender he'd

glimpsed only once, when she'd laid herself down with him without sex. "Go home to your wife, sport. She's cooled off, by now."

Axton frowned and took hold of his glass. "I told you, there's no wife, anymore," he said, before gulping down the last of his drink.

Lucy blew another snort. "Then either make up with or get over whoever it was who put that lost puppy look on your face," she said, as she started away down the bar. "Your gloom's ruining my business."

Without anyone to impress, Axton returned to his sullen slump. If making up or getting over were his only choices, he was fucked. Because he hadn't seen Hal in nearly two days, and he didn't know what he was going to say when he did.

That wasn't the exact truth. He'd been *avoiding* Hal for almost two days, *because* he didn't know what he'd say when they spoke again. Instead, he'd sat at this bar, and drunk, and paid for Lucy's time when he could get it, all the while wondering how in hell he was going to get out of this particularly deep shithole he'd dug himself into.

The honest fact was, he needed Hal. Not like those metro-homos in the tawdry vids sent out on sub-band pirate frequencies, the ones who registered as males of the species only because of their genitalia. Hal was sharp. He had skills and knowledge Axton couldn't have learned in a decade even if he'd had the inclination to do so. And, while most lab jockeys turned weak and soft in their clean environments, Hal was willing and able to get dirty and rough. Like any good trooper, he was quick and cool under pressure, and, like any tech worth his salt, good with his hands.

Axton's focus went a little blurry. God damn, he was good with his hands.

"Didn't t'ink I'd find you here."

Axton blinked, clearing his vision, and sat up straight. "Marshal," he said, as Kotonou slid into the seat beside him.

She bowed her wide-brimmed hat toward Lucy before turning to Axton again. "T'ought you were goin' after Lohengrin."

He squinted at her. "Who?"

"De Swan Knight," she said, as though prompting to remind, though the name didn't mean anything. "Yer partner requested de data yesterday."

Axton's stomach plummeted. "Hal?" he said, but he didn't wait for the marshal to answer. Instead, he shot up from his seat and bolted for the door.

"Shit," he said under his breath as he ran for the hotel. He took the stairs two and three at a time, and he nearly splintered the door under his arm as he shoved it open. A clutter of gun parts, tools, and supplies littered every flat surface larger than a sitting space. Even the bed had only a sliver of cleared sheet, just enough for one body to sleep. But there were no data cards, no ruck of funds. And, no Drehlafette.

"Shit!" he hissed again.

He scrambled over the collection of arms scattered around the room and blew another curse. "Goddammit, Hal!" All the guns were in pieces, and, while Axton could have put one together under more controlled circumstances, his partner had apparently spent the last two days trading this for that, leaving him with a mishmash of parts where who the hell knew what fit what.

He still had his Jakobs, though, and its full cylinder.

He flew out the door again, but, as he got to the street, he realized he had no fucking clue where this new skip was, or where Hal would go to track him.

“Dossier,” Axton reminded himself, and ran for the jail, boots scraping in the dirt.

Kotonou must have pounded her drink because she was already back behind her desk when he burst in, demanding, “Where is this guy? Grey Goose or whatever.”

The marshal piqued one black brow. “Lohengrin?”

Widow chortled from her cell. “You mean the Swan Knight, genius?”

Axton ignored her. He slapped his hands on the marshal’s desk. “I need his data.”

“Yer partner has it-”

“Yeah, well, he didn’t share it with me.”

Kotonou didn’t react to the snap, just swiped her way to the correct file. Widow, though, jeered from across the room: “What happened? He smelled some other cock on your breath?”

Now, Axton glared at her. “I hope Calliope gives you the needle.”

“Dis is what we got,” Kotonou said, and turned the datapad around, indicating a scroll of this Lohengrin’s history, *modus operandi*, and victims’ idents and details.

Axton squinted over the last set of names and numbers. “They were all kids,” he said, glancing at the marshal to confirm.

She did, with a clipped, grim nod. “Runaways, mostly. De Lost Boys, he calls dem.”

“He’s a chicken-hawk?” Axton guessed.

“You should get on fine,” Widow said, but Axton ignored her again, in favor of the reports in front of him.

He scanned the scroll as quickly as he could, until his gaze dead-stopped on the glaring words of the victims’ wound assessments: bruises, burns, and severed genitalia. “Jesus!” he said, as he fought down a roll of bile that lurched to the top of his gorge.

“Yes.” Kotonou’s voice broke him from his staring match with the coroner reports. A brewing cloud in her eyes made them twitch. “Den, he drowns dem.”

Axton’s nerves jumped. “Where?”

“In de Kokyotos, a river ‘bout twenty klicks nort’west o’ here.”

“Can you take me?”

The marshal shook her head. “It’s in De Nine. Out o’ my jurisdiction.”

Axton pulled his mouth taut. “I need a runner.”

“Gunnar ’n Helix,” Kotonou said, inclining her hat toward the door.

Axton pushed off the desk and jogged out to the street again, looking left and right until he spied the blink of a neon “lix” around the side of the town’s clock tower. He pumped his arms and ran, biting back a grimace.

He’d seen and committed his fair share of pain during ten years with Dahl, no doubt. Twisted arms, shattered kneecaps, and bullets to the head, all delivered with cool precision. But the zealous torture and mutilation of kids took a completely different sort of monster. One Hal had gone after alone.

Axton wheezed in the wind, his brain jumping hurdles from bad scenario to worse, each full of blood and horror. If he hadn’t let Widow get to him, if he’d just

stopped to cool off, if he hadn't been so fucking full of blustering pride, he'd still have Hal. Smart, slick Hal, who deserved better than a psycho's gutting blade-

Gears screeched as something hit him hard, bouncing him from his feet onto his side. Ground rolled over sky to the sound of cracking plexi, and Axton tumbled down to the dirt. Exhaust fumes stung his nostrils, and his spit took on a faint tang of blood, but what registered first after that was Hal's voice, clear in his ears:

"Ax? What the hell-?"

Axton rolled over, face-up to the glaring sun. His hissed breath burned in his side, but not enough to signify anything broken or bleeding. "Fuck," he groaned, pressing one hand to his ribs. "Did you hit me?"

The bright daylight dimmed in his eyes as Hal leaned over him. "I'm sorry! But, you ran right out in front of me." He slipped an arm around Axton's shoulders, easing him up from the ground. "Are you all right?" he said, as he settled them on the hood of the runner.

Axton rubbed his head and chanced his best roguish smile. "Y'know, you don't need to try so hard to get my attention. A beer would've done just fine."

The runner shifted beneath them as Hal straightened up, one side of his face pinching in a twisted, disgusted snarl. "You think this is a joke?"

Axton's smile fell the same as his hand. "Wh-? No...!"

"Because, if that's your idea of an apology, it's a shit one."

"Apologize?" Axton snarled. "What the hell do I need to apologize for? You hit me!"

"And you've spent the last day-and-a-half drunk on prozzie snatch, leaving me to do all the work. What sort of

partnership is that?"

"Hey, I'm not the one who decided to run off on his own after this swan nut!"

Hal wrinkled his nose. "What are you talking about?"

"I went back to the hotel, and you'd cleared out without me!" Axton gestured toward The Jewel. "The cash, the autogun, everything."

"Of course, I took everything!" Hal shot back. "You weren't anywheres about, and I wasn't going to just leave my life's work and half a million dollars in an unsecured hotel room."

Axton opened his mouth, but he had no comeback. He closed his lips again and rubbed one hand over his face. "Shit," he muttered down his wrist. "I thought you'd-"

"Taken off like a whinging little bitch?" Hal finished.

Axton looked up through his fingers to shoot him a short glare. It didn't last, though, for reminder of the real reason for his mad dash from the jail to the garage. Still, he let the silence hold for another minute, unable to voice the words to make right this wrong.

The runner shifted again. "You said you need to know you can count on me," Hal reminded. "That goes both ways."

Axton let his hand fall to his lap again. "I know. I just-! I don't-"

"I know." Hal sneered, if subtly. "You're not a *homo*."

Axton sucked in his belly. The engineer had twisted those words to make them hurt. "No. I mean, yeah, but-! What I meant was-"

"I know what you meant." While Hal seemed to snap, the cutting edge to his tone had already begun to dull. He rolled his eyes away, rattling off rote answers as though

from a dozen similar conversations: “What happened was a fluke, it didn’t mean anything, that’s not who you are. But, it’s who I am,” he said, without any reluctance or remorse. “Now, I can be professional, keep things platonic, if that’s what you want. But, I won’t try to change who I am. It doesn’t work.” He shook his head. “And, it’s not who I want to be.”

“I understand,” Axton muttered. And, a part of him did. The part that wanted more than a soldier’s paycheck and pension, something exciting and new. The part that had turned his back on Sarah and Dahl, the devils he’d known but that hadn’t satisfied the burning desires in him to be great. The part that was only just beginning to comprehend all the crazy possibilities open to a man willing to take risks, in everything. And, to spite what he’d said, he couldn’t imagine his engineer partner any different from the first day he’d set eyes on him.

“So, do we start over?” Hal said, his tone more curious than weary. “Clean slate and all?”

Axton swallowed back the first answer from his gut. “Is that what you want?”

“I want this partnership. I think we make a good team. And, I can’t do this alone.” Hal pitched his voice quiet. “I don’t want to do this alone.”

Axton looked into his face: tried, tested, true. He moved his head back and forth, too, in a slow, definitive swing. “I don’t, either.”

Hal’s gaze stayed steady, as though searching. “We’re good, then?”

“We’re good,” Axton told him. He held out his hand. “Partner.”

A decisive smile bloomed on Hal’s face, and he took

Axton's fingers with a firm, comforting squeeze. "Partner," he agreed.

Axton smiled, too, but held on an extra moment, if only to make the warm and tingling sensation in his hand last as long as possible.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

What Men Do

With a crack of joints kept stiff for too long, Hal hissed and arched up, rubbing one fist against the small of his back. “My arse...!”

Axton sniffed. “I told you it’d be a waiting game.” Just like yesterday and the day before, they sat here in this runner, keeping watch on the bank of the Kotykos River while the sun drifted from apex to horizon.

Hal settled back into his seat with a rustle of cloth on leather. “We’ve been waiting for two days! How much longer before Lohengrin decides to show?”

Axton pulled another sniff. “How should I know? The guy’s a psychopath-”

“Sociopath,” Hal corrected.

“Whatever. The point is, we can’t guess how he thinks.” Axton gestured toward the body of water ahead of them. “The river’s the only thing common to all his targets. It’s our best bet to catching him.”

Hal dropped his chin to his chest. “Bored.”

“Welcome to the stakeout,” Axton replied flatly.

“You could have warned me it would take this long. I would have brought the guns from the hotel, done some work while we sit here.”

“Hey, you’re the one who said we should take this job, Mister Humanitarian.” Axton snarled in saccharine mockery, to quote his partner, “We can help these people.”

“Well, you’re the one who wanted a challenge,” Hal snapped back. “You think Quagmire Charlie or Darling River were going to give you that?”

The answer to that was a flat no, and both of them knew it, but Axton didn’t give Hal the satisfaction of being told he was right. He’d been right about a few too many things, lately. “Whatever. We’re here. Better make the best of it.”

Hal gave a wordless and restless wriggling in his seat. Axton was reminded suddenly of a similar assignment with Sarah, when they’d been stuck in a runner not unlike this one, trading jabs and complaints to pass the time. Until he’d said during a lull in their observation:

“If something doesn’t happen soon, I’m gonna explode!”

“Don’t do it in here,” Sarah quipped. “Dahl’s liable to dock you the cleaning cost from your pay.”

“Cheap bastards,” Axton said. “Can’t even spring for a decent transport.”

“At least we got a two-fer.” She scratched at the rough-edged stubble he’d been growing. “No sharing with Reilly and Bixler, this time.”

Axton smiled. “Be nicer if it had a backseat.”

“We don’t need a backseat,” she said, and started an awkward shimmying. He didn’t know what she was trying

to do, until she pulled one leg free from her trousers and climbed up out of her seat and into his lap, latching their mouths together for a kiss to steam their windshield.

He hummed around her tongue. "Oh, baby!"

"Don't call me baby," she ordered, as she pulled her shirt over her head. The full rounds of her breasts, bunched together in her tight bra, made him blow a low breath of appreciation that she smothered by pulling his face between them. He didn't mind. She had the most kissable, suckable, fuckable tits his twenty-year-old eyes had ever seen. They made his dick snap to, eager to be let loose. Suddenly, he was loose: without missing a beat or bounce, she'd wrenched open his trousers and had his dick in her hand. She gave just one guiding stroke of direction and he filled her readily, clenching his muscles to buck his hips so she hopped in his lap, her tits bobbing against his face.

"You some kind of faggot, soldier?" she said, voice crisp and gasping as she snatched at his hair and held his head to her chest. "Give me what you've got."

"Jesus, Sarah," he said, his groaning breaths muffled in her cleavage.

"Show some respect," she growled, plunging down on him. "I'm your superior officer. You jump when I say jump, and you fuck when I say fuck."

"Ma'am," he said, snarling at the sharp pain of his twisted hair. He answered it with a more assertive thrust that made the runner rock. "Yes, ma'am!"

"That's better," she said, spitting through her teeth at every buck. "Oh, that's *good*...! Keep going," she ordered, and he did, unable to do anything else, as his vision started to cloud and his blood rushed from heart to groin, until

finally his muscles went taut, for one climactic stab of his hips that rendered him shuddering and mute for several seconds.

Sarah froze on top of him, no longer the brazen dominatrix. "Did you just come?"

Axton looked into her wide and staring eyes. "Uh...yeah...?"

Her slackened lips curled up in a snarl, and she shoved herself off him. "Jesus, Axton!"

"What? I'm sorry, but you felt really good. Look, I can do something for you, too-"

"I don't believe this," she groaned, sliding back to her seat.

He glanced at his leg. "Shit, you got it on my pants...!"

"On your pants? You got it *inside* me, you idiot!"

He blinked. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Hold it. Pull out. Anything but come inside me!"

"Well, you didn't tell me that. Fuck, Sarah, I'm not a fucking mind reader! If you didn't want me to come, you shoulda said something before you pulled my dick out."

"You know my career comes first! What happens if I get pregnant?"

"Then we'll get married," he said, barely thinking them before the words came out.

A heartbeat of silence as she froze again, brown eyes big and staring. "...Married?"

Having his dick limp in his lap didn't make it the most romantic moment for a proposal, but he didn't look away from her face. "Isn't that what guys are supposed to do, when they're in love with a gal? Put a ring on her finger and take care of her for always?" A smile cracked. "I don't have a ring, but I can get you one, soon as we're back at

base.”

Her lashes gave a quick flicker. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” he said. Then, with breezy ease: “I love you.”

“Oh.” She exhaled his name and reached across the gear stick, to lay her palm upon his cheek. “I love you, too.”

He grinned against her hand. “So. You want to get married?”

She laughed. “You're crazy!”

“Is that a yes?”

Her laughter faded to a sinful chuckling as she lounged back against her door. “I’ll give you your answer,” she said, as she lifted one foot onto the dash. “As soon as you take care of me.”

He rose up from his seat and perched over her, slipping his hand between both their groins in a safer practice for sex as he crooned, “Yes, ma'am.”

She clutched his hair again to bring his face close for a biting kiss. “*Now, there’s a good boy...!*”

Her teeth had cut, sharp as the edge of a diamond, like the one he scratched against his lips. Beside him, Hal gave another itching fidget, and Axton dropped the combo of ring and dog tags to his chest. “Why don’t you try and catch some sleep?”

“You certain?”

“No point in both of us staying awake. Go on. I’ll take first watch.”

Hal pushed his seat back with a creaking *thunk* of lock springs. “Don’t let me doze too long. I don’t want you doing everything.”

Axton tugged down the engineer’s cap. “Just keep the snoring to a minimum.”

Hal didn't bother resetting his brim. "Thanks, mate."

"Sure." Axton smiled, adding quietly, "Mate." He watched Hal settle into his seat, though not without some fidgeting. Not like Sarah, who'd taken every opportunity to catch some winks whenever it arose. Even on their wedding night, when Axton had leaned over in their brand new marital bed and said:

"You're not tapping out on me already?"

Sarah rustled into her pillow, the unwound tendrils of her dark hair floating around her head as she grumbled, "I've got a meeting with command in the morning."

Axton snuck his hand under her silken slip, to fondle the cool flesh of her ass. "Well, I got a bet with the platoon that says we can fuck all night and still beat 'em to reveille." He placed a kiss to her shoulder. "We've done it before."

She shrugged it away. "Not tonight."

"It's our wedding night. Don't you wanna enjoy it?"

"We did enjoy it," she said, still talking into the pillow. "And, you were great." A long sigh smoothed her back, still glistening with a light sheen of sweat. "But, it's also been our wedding *day*. A long, tiring wedding day."

Axton scooted down in the bed, to try a different tactic. The edge of her slip was still up near her waist, and he positioned his once-again eager member to her naked cleft.

"Don't even," Sarah told him.

"What?" He put his arm around her and settled close. "All I'm doing is enjoying a cuddle with my new missus."

She gave another rejecting shrug, groaning, "Axton!"

"Sarah!" he mocked, jiggling her with a full-bodied shake.

She coughed, sharp and phlegmatic in the otherwise quiet room. "Stop it."

The hairs on the back of his neck cringed at her snap. His dick, too, as though hit by a chill. "Sorry."

She sighed. "I just don't know the next time I'm going to be able to sleep like this."

"We don't know the next time we're gonna be able to fuck like this, either."

"We've always had time for sex," she said, though her tone told him this wasn't one of them. "Right now, I just want to sleep."

"Okay. So, we'll sleep." He cuddled up to her again, and, in place of a goodnight kiss, he bowed his head and suckled at a spot of tender flesh under her ear.

She bounced her arm against his chest one more time. "Go over to your side of the bed, please? You're hot."

He scooted back with a snort, leaving a space of already-cooling sheet between them. "I thought that's why you married me," he muttered, and fluffed his pillow with a light punch of his fist.

Sarah didn't riposte, instead mumbling, "*Shut up and go to sleep, Sergeant. That's an order.*"

Sitting in a powered-down runner while watching a distant river bank in the dark didn't feel all that different from lying next to his wife. They both itched his nerves, as Axton waited for something to go wrong.

A subtle snorting breath made him glance at Hal, who cleared his throat and slid deeper into his seat, the edge of his shirt pulling free from his trousers.

Axton let his gaze linger on the strip of skin at Hal's waist: a triangle of pale, smooth flesh from ribs to hip. He only looked, though, however close it was. And, it was, less

than an arm's length if he stretched his fingers. With a subtle gnaw on his lower lip, Axton forced his gaze forward again.

They'd promised to keep things between them platonic. He couldn't go back on that, now, not when he'd been the one to open his stupid mouth with that stupid *I'm not a homo* comment. Even if he'd never had much luck at keeping his relationships platonic, especially when they had any kind of real intensity, pleasurable or otherwise....

"*Goddammit, Sarah!*" Axton slammed the door of their quarters behind him, causing the single framed photo on the wall to fall to the floor. It was the one from their wedding, with him in his mess dress and Sarah in her ivory gown. He didn't look to the photo but kept his eyes on her, snarling, "You're supposed to be my wife!"

She stooped to pick up the frame, dusting her fingers over the plexiglass cover; they'd broken too many of the standard glass ones to make their continuous replacement an exercise in futility. "I'm still your wife." Even if he hadn't heard the underlying anger in the strain of her pitch, he'd have seen its evidence when she rose, in the narrowing of her dark eyes. "But, I'm also your commanding officer."

"Cut the shit. You should have backed me up in there."

"You countermanded a direct order."

"It was a bad one."

"It was *my* order! How am I supposed to get any respect from my squad if my sergeant is constantly doing whatever the hell he wants and I don't call him on it?"

He swung his arm toward the hall. "You didn't need to haul me in front of the disciplinary committee! You know what this'll do to me? To my career?"

She snorted. "Since when have you ever cared about your career?"

"Well, you obviously don't."

"Don't turn this around on me. You're the one who won't toe the line."

"I get the job done."

"At maximum risk." Her scolding frown carved deep lines around her mouth and between her tweezed brows. "Reilly could have been killed, today."

Axton sneered. "Reilly should know better than to take cover behind a transport full of gas."

She scowled. "You're getting reckless. You used to be a good soldier-"

"You mean, I used to follow orders," he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Sarah's eyes shimmered. "These are our *lives*. Don't you care about that?"

"Of course, I do!" He opened his arms again, to cringe his fingers in the empty air between them. "But, we can have so much *more*. More than trudging through the muck, or the chain of command. More than Dahl."

"Don't say that," she told him, shaking her head. "Dahl's given us standards, a purpose-"

"You sound like a recruitment vid."

"And you're talking treason." She stepped close, to keep her voice low. "You swore an oath to the Elite. If you turn your back on that, now-"

"What? They'll shoot me?" He snorted. "I'm worth more than a whole platoon of their brainwashed rookies."

"Stop," Sarah said, eyes going wide in alarm. "Just stop." She laid her hand on his chest, the band of her ring

clinking against his metal dog tags. The sound aroused, faintly, for reminder of the way their tags would click against each other sometimes when they'd fuck. "You can't go around saying things like that. I won't be able to protect you!"

Despite the eager twitching of his dick, he felt his hackles rise. "I don't need your protection."

She sighed, her voice wheezing with a familiar frustration. "Axton...!"

"I'm an Elite, remember? I don't need anything." He grabbed her around her waist and yanked her against his chest. "Except to fuck you," he said, and smirked with wicked humor.

She didn't argue his desires as she sometimes did, but rose up to meet his kiss. With a step between his legs, she pushed him toward the sofa, but he turned them about, so when they tumbled to the cushions, he landed on top of her. It wouldn't be the first time she'd say it, but, this time, she smiled when she told him, *"You're a bastard."*

At the time, he'd thought such reconciliations worth the fights, because Sarah could fuck with the intensity of a blitzkrieg. He'd come to associate the best parts of their relationship with the fights, actually, going so far as to take crazy and risky missions just to feel the spark flare between them, until he hadn't known how to relate to her any other way, except to anger or frustrate, both in the field and behind closed doors.

A rustle of flora off the right side of the runner jolted him back to the present. He scanned the river bank, gaze darting from gnarly tree to bushy undergrowth, when he saw it: the loping shadow of a man, half-hunched beneath the weight of a swinging sack. A sack with arms, dangling

down behind.

Axton slapped Hal's bicep. "Get up."

Hal snuffled awake, rubbing his fingers under the brim of his cap. "What?"

"Keep quiet," Axton warned. "We've got movement."

Hal leaned forward in his seat, abruptly wide-eyed and aware. "You think it's Lohengrin?"

Axton eased his Jakobs free. "Seems likely." He glanced away from the river bank to check the revolver's cylinder. "Unless somebody else decided this was a good place to drop a body."

Hal dipped his hand into the ruck at his feet and pulled out a rifle scope. He lifted it to one eye before dropping it to his lap again. "Too dark. Should have bought the infrared."

"Too late for that, now." Axton spared another quick glance to the ruck. "You programmed your girlfriend not to shoot me, right?"

Hal nodded as he traded the scope for an old S&S pistol and the Drehlafette. "She's got both our bio-signatures locked in." His brow creased. "You think we'll need her?"

"Never hurts to have backup." Axton raised his revolver with one hand and went for the door with the other. "I'll get his attention while you flank him. Try not to spook him, but, if he draws on you, you drop your little lady for all she's got."

"He's not worth anything dead," Hal reminded, but Axton didn't leave room for argument.

"Neither are you." He took hold on his door again. "On three," he said, and prepped for a run, nerves jumping with adrenaline. "One," he said, and both of them unhitched their doors. "Two," and their seats

creaked with a shift of balance. “Three!”

Together, they bolted, charging almost as mirror images: Axton with his Jakobs and Hal with the S&S and his Drehlafette brick. Together, they cornered Lohengrin at the river’s edge, shouting at him to step away from his quarry and drop his weapons. And, together, they hit the dirt, as Lohengrin spun, spraying fire from his hands.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Justice in Murder

Axton's teeth snapped as his chin hit the ground. An arc of pyrophoric flame hissed above his head, and he smelled singeing hair and swore. A flamethrower. The so-called Swan Knight's dossier could have mentioned *that* important tidbit.

"Hal!" he shouted above the whoosh of igniting fuel. "Drop him!"

The comm in his ear didn't answer, but Axton heard the distinctive *ka-thunk* of locking metal gears. He risked a glance at Lohengrin, who swung his flame toward the popping Drehlafette, and licking fire met stoic metal as the autocannon's barrel slid into place. The muzzle spit its first round, and its second, when Lohengrin gave a strangled gasp. The flamethrower hit the dirt, sputtering dead as Lohengrin clutched the severed stump of his arm with a wail.

Axton blew the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, a mix of relief and admiration. "God damn," he said, flashing a smile at the Drehlafette. "I love that

thing.”

Hal rushed to power down the autocannon, while Axton pushed himself up and approached Lohengrin. He kept him in his revolver sights, sliding the flamethrower out of reach with his boot. Such precaution seemed redundant, with Lohengrin’s severed gun arm laying in the dirt next to it, but they’d underestimated Widow, as well, and that wouldn’t happen again.

Lohengrin’s lips dribbled with whitish sputter. “Forsake not your servant, my lord,” he moaned. “I have done as you commanded, protecting your children-”

Axton swung his boot hard into Lohengrin’s mouth. “Oh, shut up.” He hefted the flamethrower from the ground, detaching its fuel line as he turned toward Hal. “How’s the kid?”

“Looks like he was drugged with something, but he’s intact. Should we radio for med-evac?”

“Nah. It’s a short ride. We’ll squeeze him between us.”

Hal looked down at Lohengrin’s prone form. “What about him?”

Axton curled one nostril in a snarl. “Stick him in the trunk,” he said, punctuating his words with another swift kick to Lohengrin’s face.

The ride back to town banged up their skip, but Axton didn’t feel bad about it. After they dropped off the kid with the local doctor, they headed straight to the jail, where, at sight of them, Kotonou looked up in surprise.

Axton shoved Lohengrin a staggering step into the jail. “Here ya go, Marshal. One seriously sick fuck, straight off your most wanted list. Sorry about the arm,” he said, as he settled the skip’s flamer and blade upon the counter. He craned his head, to sneer into Lohengrin’s bloody face.

“But, he doesn’t need both of ‘em to stand trial.”

Leather creaked as Kotonou rose from her seat and came around her desk, face dark under the brim of her hat. “He’s not meant to stand trial,” she said, and her hand came up from her side, holding a long-barreled revolver straight at Lohengrin.

Axton put one hand in front of Hal, easing him back a step. He raised the other, slowly, toward Kotonou. “Easy, Marshal. We need him alive.”

“You’ll get yer payout.” Kotonou kept her eyes and gunsight trained on Lohengrin. “Now. You tell me why.”

“They were lost,” Lohengrin said. “I saved them.”

“Dey were *boys*,” Kotonou spat through her teeth. “Nephews. Bro’ders.” She leveled the barrel between Lohengrin’s eyes and grimaced. “*Sons*.”

The Swan Knight didn’t flinch from that black hole. “Annabelle-”

“Don’t you say dat name!” she ordered, and Axton tensed at her tone. This was getting ugly, fast. He could grab Hal and bolt for the door, leaving these two to make their peace with bullets and blood. But a rush might spook Kotonou, and the last thing anybody needed was that pistol going off in accidental surprise.

“Men who lie with their brothers are diseased,” Lohengrin went on. “Floundering in the darkness of their sins.” He raised his chin, as though proud. “But, I led them back to the light. Cleansed of their sullied flesh, they were made pure once again. Without me, the Lost would have suffered for eternity.”

“You have no idea of sufferin’,” Kotonou said, her voice a splintering, hollow rasp. She cocked the hammer, a deceptively quiet click.

Axton's fingers grazed Hal's shirt. *Shit*, was all he thought, when Hal blurted:

"Don't." Neither Kotonou nor Lohengrin seemed to notice him, but Hal kept going, anyway. "Marshal, don't do this. You're law," he said, with bitter desperation. "Give him justice."

"Dis is justice," Kotonou snarled.

The shimmer of helplessness in Hal's blue gaze pulled at something deep in Axton's guts, something he couldn't define but couldn't ignore, either. "This is easy," he told the marshal. "Too easy, for him."

"You know what he did. De butcherin'." Kotonou's fingers screamed around her pistol grip. "Dey were just *boys*!"

"And you know no inmate's gonna let him sleep peacefully for that." Her gun barrel shuddered, and Axton dropped his pitch to press, "That suffering's what he deserves."

Kotonou blinked, the lines around her eyes, nose, and mouth turning smooth with the kind of mediated composure common to her profession. As she let her gun hand drift down, Axton felt his muscles start to relax...until Lohengrin opened his mouth:

"Our boys are better off, now-"

A shot exploded, freezing everyone in the room. For a second, Axton expected Lohengrin to fall back dead. He didn't, just belched a broken shriek as he crumpled to his knees, his phantom arm swinging for his bloodied groin.

Kotonou sniffed. "Don' need one o' dose to stand trial, neider." She holstered her pistol and moved around them to the desk. "I need time to sort yer reward."

"We'll get it later," Axton said, as two men rushed in

from the street. One was the doc from the clinic where they'd left the boy, the other a simple burly type, maybe a deputy wannabe. Both grabbed Lohengrin and dragged him into the cell. Axton looked away from the impromptu triage and faced the marshal again with a forced smirk. "Just tell me how to keep off your bad side."

Kotonou didn't return his smile. "Don' fuck wit' my house."

Axton nodded and put his hand on Hal's shoulder, steering him toward the door. Once outside, he let himself breathe more easily. "What a day, huh?" He slipped his arm around Hal's shoulders and jerked his head toward the Soused Dodger. "You want a drink? Let's get a drink."

Hal shirked away, in the direction of The Jewel. "I think I'll just do some work."

"Come on," Axton cajoled. "Have a drink with me. It'll help you relax."

"Work helps me relax."

"We've been sitting in a fucking runner for two days," Axton said, his voice half-groan. "One drink, then I promise I'll let you go." He smiled. "You're not gonna make me walk into that bar alone, are you?"

This time, Hal offered a small smile in return. "Just one," he said, before falling into step beside.

The bar bustled with patrons, but, moving to the edge of the counter near the back wall, they managed to find a more or less private space for both of them to drink. Handy, that, because Hal's distracted, pensive moroseness was worrisome.

Axton didn't let his concern show overmuch. He flagged Lucy down the bar for two drinks, before casually bumping Hal in the arm. "Why so quiet, boyo?"

“What’s wrong with quiet?”

“Don’t like it,” Axton said, as he rummaged in his pockets for some cash. “You got something to say, say it. Part of being partners, right?”

Hal held his gaze on the nondescript counter. “Did we do the right thing? I mean, he deserves to die for what he did, but...!”

Axton slapped a bill on the counter and flashed Lucy a smile as she left them their drinks. He followed her down the bar a second with his gaze before returning to Hal, to offer him his glass. “If it makes you feel better, he probably will.”

A deep frown tugged at the corners of Hal’s mouth. “I don’t know. It just didn’t seem right.”

Axton shrugged. “Most folk aren’t built for murder.” He took two deep, full swallows before setting his beer down again.

Hal left his drink on the counter, the glass sweating under his fingers. “So, what does that make us?”

“What d’you mean?”

“The men we’ve killed,” Hal said, watching the bubbles of his beer’s head pop and disintegrate one by one. “Those hunters, back on Andromeda. And Razorback. We murdered them.”

Axton frowned, struck by a sudden desire to pull Hal into his arms, to kiss his fears away and hold him safe. He didn’t – he couldn’t – but, reaching up with one hand, he laced his fingers into the hairs at the nape of Hal’s neck. “That was different.”

Hal looked up, his blue gaze crystal-sharp. “The end result’s the same.”

“No,” Axton said, but Hal grimaced.

“The Drehlafette’s not a constructor mech. It’s *designed* to kill people. So is your revolver.” He narrowed his eyes. “How are the things we’ve done any different from what she was going to do to Lohengrin?”

“That was about survival. Those rat scavengers wouldn’t have thought twice about shooting us. And Razorback was ready to kill you.” Axton squeezed the short hairs in his hand and shook his head. “I wasn’t gonna let that happen. When it comes down to us or them,” he said, the muscles in his throat trembling from the growling pitch of his voice, “I’m going to choose us. Every single time.”

Hal’s gaze stayed locked to his, even around the rapid flutter of his blinking. For a full minute, he held that look, unflinching, unafraid, and totally exposed. “So am I,” he whispered.

Without realizing it, Axton had let his touch turn to caress, a tender stroke upon Hal’s warm flesh that set his whole body to wanting.

Damn this crowded bar. Damn their stupid agreement. Damn this shithole of a border world where he’d let someone else’s jealous prejudices worm his way into his head, when his lips and his skin and his gut knew the truth.

“Fuck it,” he muttered, and stepped up to Hal, their belts clinking together. The shatter of glass stopped him, mid-lean, and something wet hit him in the cheek. He brushed his face with his hand, staring as it came away red.

Someone screamed as the barkeep fell backward into the shelf of bottles, a shock of blood spreading across his white shirt. Axton didn’t look around to see who. He just

grabbed Hal and tumbled them over the bar together with another clatter of broken glass, because, unless somebody *really* didn't like the service, that bullet had been meant for them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Us or Them

“Who’s shooting at us?” Hal cried over the chaos of everyone trying to get out of the bar. He righted his skewed cap when another shot went off, making him crouch lower behind the counter.

“How the fuck should I know?” Axton wiped at the rest of the blood on his cheek. “You hit?”

“No. You?”

“I’m okay.” He turned at a scraping rustle against the floor. Lucy crawled her way toward them, her curls flopping around her grimace as she put her arms around the barkeep’s shoulders.

“He’s dead,” Axton began.

“I can fucking see that.” She shoved the body to its side with a heaving groan and smacked her fist against a dark panel under the broken liquor shelf. It popped ajar with a click, and a rickety but functional rifle slid free. She grabbed it and a supply of rounds from the same cubbyhole. “You boys want to tell me who the hell it is that’s shooting up my bar?”

Axton sniffed. "I'd like to know the answer to that, myself."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than he heard the crackle of electronic speakers, followed by an amplified voice: "No use hiding, Sarge. I know you're in there."

Axton's heart stopped a second, enough to make his hands go cold. He didn't dare peek up over the counter, but half-called over his shoulder, "*Reilly?*"

"Hey!" the voice replied in its twitchy boom. "You remember. I'm not surprised, though. Seeing as how you were the one who almost got me killed."

"Friend of yours?" Hal guessed with icy sarcasm.

"Not exactly." Axton reached for Lucy and her rifle just as she finished locking three rounds into the magazine. "Mind if we borrow that?"

Lucy pulled the gun to her chest. "The only way anyone's getting this baby is out of my dead fingers."

Axton rolled his eyes, when a new volley of semi-automatic fire shattered the remaining bottles above their heads, making all three of them cringe anew.

"Don't make this harder on yourself, Sarge," Reilly called. "Come out, and we'll talk."

"If you wanted to talk, you should've bought me a beer," Axton called back, as he eased the Jakobs from its holster with an effortful grimace. "Getting all shooty-in-the-face ain't the best way to start a dialogue, Private."

"Just needed to get your attention. And, it's not private, anymore," Reilly said. "See, Dahl didn't have any use for half a soldier. I mean, after what happened on Tantalus..."

While Reilly yammered, Axton turned to Hal. "He's

gonna close on us, might be already. Can you cover me?"

Hal scoffed. "You're not going out there?"

"I ain't hiding behind a bar the rest of my life!"

"All I've got is that S&S pistol," Hal said, gesturing to the ruck.

Axton glanced that way, too. "And the autocannon."

Hal's face fell, and he gave a juddering shake of his head. "N-No. Ax, there are- there are *people* out there!"

"Yeah. And at least one of them is shooting at us." He lifted his Jakobs for emphasis. "Now, I've only got six shots. We gotta make 'em count." The engineer didn't move, so Axton fixed him with a pointed, piercing look, and reminded: "Us or them."

Hal's pupils contracted and his mouth became a set line. He reached into the ruck but held Axton's stare. "You've got thirty seconds' worth of ammunition. Then, she'll have to shut down for reconstitution."

"Thirty seconds is all I'll need," Axton said.

Reilly was still rambling his sob story: "I spent six months in that recovery ward, Sarge! After all that, Dahl still dumped me. Twelve years in the corps, and all of it down the shitter, 'cause of you. Do you know what it's like to be half a man?!"

"That's being generous," Axton muttered. He eased up into a ready crouch, one hand around his Jakobs and the other on the edge of the bar.

Hal shifted onto his haunches, too, the compacted Drehlafette in his hand. He glanced at it, then at Axton, and muttered, "I really hope this isn't a bad idea."

Axton turned away, as much not to have to look at Hal as to psych himself up. "We're about to find out."

"Dahl didn't see my potential," Reilly went on. "But

Hyperion did. You want to see it, Sarge? You want to see what a real soldier looks like?"

Axton snarled and barked to Hal, "Go!"

From the edge of his vision, he saw Hal back up, stand, and hurl the Drehlafette brick over the counter. Three clanking thunks, a belch of compressed air, and the autocannon started firing.

Axton jumped over the bar, counting down his time.

Twenty-eight seconds.

He raced to the door, shoulder thudding hard against the wall as the Drehlafette kept spitting rounds, two feet away. She'd already destroyed the double swinging doors, her laser sight tracking something beyond.

"You think that little mech's gonna stop me?" Reilly shouted above the autocannon's suppressive fire.

Twenty-five seconds.

Axton peeked around the wreckage of his wall. "Jesus," he wheezed, forgetting his countdown at sight of Reilly: a gleaming, golden horror of a man, almost seven feet tall with pylons for limbs and black enhancement goggles pressed deep into the puckered flesh of his face. In front of his left eye glowed a red targeting reticle, blazing in the dark. Sparking holes and indentations from the Drehlafette's ammo bursts pockmarked his chest, but none of them slowed him down.

Reilly raised one giant metal arm and the long gun barrel attached there.

Axton ducked back behind the wall, cursing at both too-close shot and shooter. "What the fuck did they do to you?"

"The superiority of Hyperion engineering," Reilly answered. "Not like Dahl's old school shit."

The Drehlafette responded with more bullets, while Axton traded walls in an aiming run, firing four shots above the belching autocannon. One spanged against Reilly's shoulder, two hit him in the chest. The last glanced through a mass of flesh that had been an ear.

Reilly's misshapen face twisted, and he fired again. His shot klanged against the Drehlafette, making her barrel flinch.

Twelve seconds.

Hal dropped into Axton's vacated cover across the door. He ducked low and fired off three shots from his semi-automatic. "Shoot the input orb!"

"The what?"

"The big red eye!" Hal shouted, offering more fire.

Axton popped up behind the Drehlafette and aimed at Reilly's head.

Three seconds.

He saw the red eye.

Two.

He squeezed the trigger, twice.

One.

The eye shattered.

Zero.

The Drehlafette clanked and gave a hiss of compression as it collapsed into compacted mode. Axton didn't notice it more than the noise, his gaze fixed on Reilly. Sparks flew from the jagged red remnants of his left eye, and his rubbery mouth fell open with a choke of inarticulate sound. With a wheeze of gears, he toppled into the dirt.

"God *damn*," Axton crowed. "I'm awesome!" He looked to Hal, whose face was white and slack. Not in amazement, though, but with horror.

The engineer staggered in a rise, boots tripping over each other as he threw aside that ratty S&S pistol and raced into the street, past both the Drehlafette and Reilly's sparking corpse. He fell to his hands and knees in the dirt beside another fallen form: a long-legged, leather-clad body with a duster billowing out to one side.

"Fuck." Axton didn't tell his legs to run, they just did, and dropped him beside Kotonou a moment later. Red stained his hands as he assessed damage: one shot clean through the shoulder, and a sucking wound in the top of her chest that bubbled blood for every breath. "This is bad," he told Hal. "Get the doc."

Hal let out a gasping groan. "He's dead."

Axton looked up, to where the town's sawbones lay sprawled on the ground, one side of his face blown away. He grimaced, mind racing for triage steps, when Kotonou's voice gurgled up at him:

"He was huntin' you."

Axton met her fierce, staring gaze. "Don't try to talk--"

"You brought him here." She bared her teeth in a snarl, blood seeping in the spaces between. "To my town," she growled, and her gun hand twitched, sliding in the dirt toward her dropped revolver.

Axton picked it up, slowly. "I like you, Marshal. So, I'm gonna give you a choice--"

"Fuck yer choice." Kotonou's spit could have been only from circumstance, but Axton doubted it. "Dere won't be any place in de galaxy you can hide from me. I'll come for you." She flicked her razor-sharp gaze from Axton to Hal. "Bot' o' you."

Axton set his jaw with a creak. "Now, why'd you have to say that?" And, before some softer, more hopeful side of

him made any excuses or arguments for what might happen next, he squeezed a shot from her revolver into her chest.

“Jesus!” Hal shouted, a half-second too late.

“Get the Drehlafette,” Axton said, as Kotonou stopped twitching.

Hal’s voice warbled. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“You heard her: she would have come after us.”

“You don’t know that!”

Axton spun on him with a snarl. “I sure as shit wasn’t gonna give her the chance! Dahl will *execute* me. And, if I’m gonna go, it’s gonna be my way, with a gun in my hand, not against a wall with a hood over my head.” He grabbed Hal by the back of the skull and swallowed against the pounding in his chest. “Now. Do you trust me?” Hal only blinked, so Axton repeated with a clench of his hair: “*Do you trust me?*”

“Yes,” the engineer said.

“Then grab the Drehlafette, and get the runner.” Axton pushed Kotonou’s pistol – a lovely old Atlas Chimera – into his hands. “I’ll get the pack, and the money.”

“What then?” Hal asked, bright eyes wavering a little. “What do we do then?”

Axton swallowed again, and told him, “Run.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Anywhere but Here

Light flashed and dimmed in Axton's vision as daylight broke over the eastern horizon and their runner sped through the cabalistic shadows cast by the cruisers stationed in drydock. He chanced a glance behind them and grimaced. Even through the hanging cloud of dust kicked up by their runner, he could make out the glint of slender silver wings: Hyperion drone backup.

He faced front again, muttering, "Faster."

Hal's knuckles already clenched white around the wheel. "We're running on fumes."

"We're almost there," Axton said, as pay booths, reservation stations, and single-car vendors started to pop along the plain around them. "We can lose 'em on a ship."

"How? For all we know, they've radioed all the passenger liners in the sector about us."

Axton read the large black-and-yellow directional sign looming to the side of the road. "We're not going passenger." He grabbed the wheel, wrenching it hard to

the right. "We're going freight."

The runner's axle gave protest, and Hal righted her wheels. He followed the ground-down dirt path of this less-traveled road but didn't stop, while smaller independent ships sped by on either side. "Where to, now?"

Axton scanned the ships, finding a small gray bullet of a transport at the end of the road. "There."

Hal's gaze ricocheted to Axton before facing front again. "Ax, that's not a ship. That's a fuel tanker."

"That's right!" Axton said, and pulled the ruck sitting between them into his lap.

"Oh," Hal wheezed. "I can't believe I'm doing this." But he floored the gas pedal and hollered a psych-up yell into the wind as the runner vibrated beneath them, adding its own screech of wheels and gears.

The tanker loomed ahead. Axton shouted, "Now!" as he jumped from his seat and tumbled into the dirt, wrenching his shoulder with a crack. He bit back a wince and looked up to see Hal rolling to a stop a few meters on the other side of the road, just before the runner slammed into the tanker with a crunching crash and spit of fuel. The overheated and sparking metal of the runner caused the ruptured fuel to ignite. Not with any spectacular explosion, but blazing, and fucking *hot*. And, enough to scramble safety crews and lollygaggers every which way, creating a messy mass of running bodies.

Axton somehow made it to Hal without either of them getting trampled. "You're good," he said, helping the engineer to his feet. "I gotcha."

Hal had lost his cap in the ruckus but otherwise looked untouched. "Drehlafette?"

“Right here.” Axton shot him a quick glare. “I’m fine, too, by the way.”

“I never doubted that,” Hal said, cracking a tiny smile.

Axton managed one, too. “Come on,” he said, pushing Hal ahead of him as a crew of shouting dock workers ran past.

He glanced left and right before settling his gaze on a set of open bay doors three slips down. Sleek and skimmer-built with a smooth, oblong chassis, the ship was compact and common enough not to attract too much attention, but her twin engines looked powerful enough to have seen more than the odd long darkspace run. Plus, she couldn't have a standing crew of more than two or three, which meant fewer curious noses.

What looked to be one of those crew stood on the lower bay door: a short, skinny kid in dingy gray coveralls with the sleeves cinched around the waist, and a pair of dark steamer goggles in front of his eyes. He watched the fracas around the fuel tanker, his attention barely straying Axton and Hal's way as they hustled up.

“You think it'll explode?” The kid grinned, showing off the space of a missing maxillary pre-molar. “Cause that'd be awesome.”

“Maybe,” Axton said, without looking. “But you probably don't wanna be here when it does.”

The kid half-turned over his shoulder, glancing into the bay of the ship. “Probably not.”

Axton spared a look skyward, catching the shine of a circling drone. He took a step onto the lower bay door. “This your ship?”

The kid turned back, curling his lip. “What's it to you?”

“We need transport off Pasandra,” Hal said, coming to stand beside Axton. “Sooner the better, and no questions asked. Can you take us?”

The curl became a sniffing sneer. “Give me one good reason why I should.”

“I’ll give you six reasons.” Axton reached for his back holster, but Hal stayed his hand.

“We’ve got money. One hundred thousand. That should be enough to compensate you for any inconvenience.”

The kid paused, one nostril going wide. Axton felt the drift of a measuring stare from behind the tint of those goggles. “You for real? Or you just blowing smoke up my exhaust?”

Hal grabbed the ruck from Axton and shoved his hand inside. He pulled it out again, a clutch of bills crumpled in his fist. “Does this look like we’re joking?”

The kid grabbed his downpayment and said, “Welcome aboard the *Siren’s Song*, gentlemen.”

Hal glanced at Axton, who answered with an urging nod. They followed the kid into the interior of the hold, a standard boxy berth packed with crates held in place along the walls by military-type netting.

“What’s in the boxes?” Hal asked, swinging his gaze over the crates.

“Questions cost extra for you, too,” the kid told him.

“Forget it.” Axton gave Hal a push in the back. “How soon ’til we’re off this rock?”

The kid shrugged as he moved over to a panel beside a closed interior door. “Depends where you want to go.” He punched a code into the panel, followed by a press of the red button beneath. The bay doors started to close with a

groan of hydraulics. “We’ve got a drop due on Theia. That far enough for you?”

Axton watched the last sliver of outside light disappear between the locking metal. “Anywhere but here.”

“Sounds familiar.” The kid waved one arm in a follow-me gesture. “Come on, I’ll show you around- uh, what did you say your names were?”

“Kiss my ass,” Axton said, and jerked a thumb at Hal. “And, None of your fuckin’ business.”

“Fair enough.” The kid pressed his palm to the green button below the panel. “But, just to make things easy, you can call me Twitch.”

The interior door slid open on a long, dim corridor with tubing and metal slats along the sides and under the floorplates. The far end was blocked by a sealed hatch, but this corridor looked to run the length of the ship, from stern to bow. Twitch stepped inside and Hal moved to follow, though not before muttering back at Axton:

“Was that necessary?”

“The less he knows, the better.” Axton stepped over the port seal into the corridor, too, but pulled Hal to a full stop with a tug on his arm. “And what the hell?” he hissed. “A hundred thousand? Why not just give him everything?”

“It was the first number I could think of.” Hal gave a shake of his arm and scowled. “And, it’s a lot better than you shooting him!”

“I didn’t have a choice back there,” Axton began, but Hal shook his head.

“Let’s not rehash. I just want off this world.”

“Fine.” Axton let Hal go, but a sudden, fierce rocking of the ship sent the engineer tumbling back again, into his chest.

“What the hell?” Hal said, looking around them.

Axton settled him back on his feet. “Somethin’ hit us,” he said, just before the ship rocked again.

They both went pale at the same moment. “Hyperion,” they guessed together.

“Hyperion?” Twitch echoed from halfway up the corridor. “Why would Hyperion be blasting us?”

“They’re tracking drones,” Hal said. “Short-range combat assist.”

The kid opened his mouth, but Axton cut him off: “Don’t ask. We need to hit darkspace, now.”

Twitch snorted. “You don’t just break atmo, ground-pounder. It takes time: nav calculations, thruster plots-”

“Then you need to get your shields up,” Hal said.

“And your guns!” Axton barked.

Twitch’s nose went ridgy. “We don’t have guns.”

A third impact made them stagger, and Axton snarled, “What the hell kinda ship doesn’t have guns?”

A panel near Axton’s head crackled, and a female voice came through, lilting but unsteady. “Twitch? We’re taking laser-fire.”

“Just get us airborne!” Twitch shouted up the corridor.

“Priming engines,” the voice answered.

“Jesus,” Axton growled. “We’ll be perforated by then!”

“That’s what you think,” Twitch said, and showed off that missing tooth in another chuffed grin as *Siren’s Song’s* floorplates rumbled. The ship gave a shudder, and the normal gravitation equilibrium shifted as she took to the air with a surprisingly quiet murmur. But she rocked again, violently this time and with a massive sparking from one wall that sent all three men into the opposite.

“Shit,” Twitch muttered. “That was a power router.”

The female voice announced, "Stern shields at fifty percent. We won't make it to meso, at this rate."

"Open the bay doors," Hal said. Axton and Twitch stared at him, but Hal met their looks with a determined stare of his own. "We'll shoot them down."

"You're gonna need a hell of a lot more than pistols to do that!" Twitch told him.

Hal grabbed the Drehlafette from the ruck. "A hell of a lot more is what we've got," he said, and ran for the aft.

Axton followed hot on his heels. "Hal, this is crazy!"

The engineer stopped near the bay doors and stared at the brick. "Only if the mag-locks don't work."

"I don't know what you're planning," Twitch said, hanging by the hold's control panel. "But, when those doors open, you'd better hold on to something."

Axton swung his gaze around the hold. "Hal...!" he warned again through his teeth.

The engineer stayed near the bay doors, bouncing the brick as though prepping for a throw. "She can do this."

Axton blew a hard breath and thrust both arms through two holes of sturdy crate netting. He grabbed Hal, locking his arms around him as he shouted to Twitch, "Go!"

The metal doors gave a groan and grumbled open again. The speeding atmosphere whipped Hal's hair into Axton's face, but he held fast as the engineer flung the Drehlafette brick toward the upper bay door. She snapped and locked to her upside-down base, clanking to life with an eager fury of ammunition before the path was fully open.

Two drones swerved after them, firing against the ship's hull. Axton squeezed Hal tighter, watching over his shoulder as the Drehlafette tracked one drone with her

laser, chain gun screaming. The drone rocked with a hit and screeched with a second. A third made it explode with a burst of sparks.

“Hell, yeah!” Twitch hollered, but the second drone still weaved through the open air, a second faster than the Drehlafette’s main gun.

“Come on,” Axton heard Hal wheeze. Beneath his arms, he felt the engineer’s belly contract.

The drone rolled, trailing stream. The Drehlafette paused, resuming a moment after with a fresh belch of projectiles auto-corrected for position.

“Atta girl!” Axton shouted, when the cannon stopped again...and started its collapse sequence.

The female voice boomed from a speaker grill over Axton’s shoulder: “Twitch. Doors,” she said, just as the escape thrusters erupted with a flash of super-heated fuel, immolating the drone in their wake.

Twitch hooted wild laughter before the doors had finished locking. As soon as they’d done, he bounded onto the main floor. “That was *awesome!*”

Axton laughed with quiet relief into Hal’s shoulder, too, when the other man looked back at him with an uneven smile, muttering, “I’m good, now, thanks.”

Axton unclasped his arms and pressed his lips together behind a light burn. “Right,” he said, as the Drehlafette clattered to the floor of the hold, once more a compacted deck.

Twitch hopped a little out of the way but didn’t lose his grin. “Hey, Kiss my ass,” he said, looking from the brick Hal lifted in his hands over to Axton. “What do you call that thing?”

“The missus,” Axton quipped, fully recovered, now. He

offered the kid one open hand as he strode up, the other thumb hooked into his belt. "And, it's Axton."

Hal followed with his own name. He showed off the brick, adding, "And, she's a Fernbedienbare Drehlafette."

Twitch twisted his mouth into an amused smile. "I think I'll stick with missus," he said, and all three of them chuckled.

The overhead speakers crackled, and the female voice announced, "Breaking thermosphere in one minute. Twitch, you've got some explaining to do."

Twitch scratched at the crown of his head. "Ah. Yeah." The jocular smile returned. "Come on up. Time you met Ivory."

Axton shared a look with Hal. "Who's Ivory?"

"My sister," Twitch said.

"She's the pilot?" Hal guessed.

Twitch pushed up his goggles, to reveal a glint of mischief in his brown eyes. "She's a lot more than that."

Another shared look before Axton eased himself in front of Hal, one hand ready at his back holster. These kids had done all right to get them off Pasandra, but something was off about *Siren's Song*. She was more than just a transport ship. The "no guns" point suggested a concentration of efforts into engines and shields, common to contraband runners. But, that wasn't quite it...

Twitch led them up the length of the corridor, to the heavy security door at the end. He eased his hand into an activation scanner, a faint light moving beneath his palm. The locks gave a snorting release of pressure and the door swished open, bathing the corridor in glowing blue.

Twitch stepped through and extended his arm. "Gentlemen," he said, his face half-lit by that chromatic

luminosity. “I’d like to introduce you to Ivory.”

Axton looked past the boy’s hand, to see the outline of a girl rise to standing in the middle of the room. She was slender and small, like her brother, clad in a comfort-fit jumpsuit, with silvery-white hair fallen around her shoulders. She turned with a slow grace, her fair skin nearly aglow. She did glow, he could see, now, from a series of bluish markings etched at the edges of her face and extending beneath the collar of her suit. And her eyes...! Not brown like Twitch’s, but gray, pale. So pale. When she looked at him, she blinked without seeing, and Axton cringed a little, in the presence of such preternatural beauty.

He stared back at her, barely making enough spit to mutter, “Are you a...*Siren*?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Simply Irresistible

Ivory laughed, her peals ringing around *Siren's Song's* sparse bridge. Her wide smile had the same space of missing pre-molar as her brother's, the detail of which made Axton pause. "I'm not a Siren. But, thank you for the compliment."

"What'd I tell ya, sis." Twitch leaned against the rounded metal signal bank along the wall and grinned, showing off his own black space between canine and molar. "Nothing spooks folks like the unknown."

The surprise that had gripped Axton's chest and genitals at thought of standing within arm's reach of an actual Siren abruptly dissipated at their mockery. "So, what's with the glowy lights?"

"Cybernetic ley lines," Hal said at his shoulder, and the kids fell quiet. At Axton's quizzical glance, the engineer added, "Cutaneous interface nodes."

Axton shot him a brief sneer. "Pretend for a second I haven't had my nose in a tech manual the last five years."

Hal drew a tiny breath and licked at his lips, as though

to order his thoughts. “Well, most sensitives are strictly psionic in nature: telepathy, telekinesis, even psychokinesis. But, a cyber-sensitive requires a physical interface, to jump the boundaries between the mental and material.” He nodded toward Ivory. “That’s what you are, right? A sensitive?”

Ivory bowed her chin. “Yes.”

Axton watched her gaze: how it moved in relation to her head, but without locking or focusing. “You’re blind.”

“A compensatory loss,” Ivory said, even-voiced. “But, I assure you, while you’re on *Siren’s Song*, I can see every move you make.”

Something clicked above their heads, and Axton flicked his gaze to a security camera swiveling his way. A gauging glance around the bridge showed at least three more: different vantage points to cover the entire room.

“The ship’s her conduit,” Hal said, and Axton looked to him, now. Hal didn’t return his attention, though: those blue eyes stared at the girl the same way her gray ones stared at him. But, where her gaze had no discernible reaction, Hal’s glinted as he said, “She’s part of it.”

A tiny smile came to Ivory’s lips. “More like, she’s a part of me.”

“How long did it take you?” Hal asked.

“Almost two years.” Her body gave a quick shudder, as though chilled. Or, aroused. “But, it was worth it.”

Hal’s eyes never left her. “I can only imagine.”

Axton frowned between them before jostling Hal with an arm. “This is all real interesting, but can we save the circle jerk ’til later? Right now, I’m more interested in a shower and some shut-eye.”

“Of course.” Ivory bowed her chin again. “Twitch can

show you to the berths.”

“You’ll have to share one,” Twitch warned as he beckoned them off the bridge. “The other two belong to us.”

“Just so long as I can get outta these clothes,” Axton said, “I’ll be happy.”

“We’ll all be happy,” Hal quipped from a few paces behind. “You’ve been wearing those so long, I’d be worried they’re starting to graft.”

Axton shot him a glare. “You’re no bed o’ roses, either, smartass,” he said, and Hal stopped to pull a self-conscious sniff down his shirt.

“Here,” Twitch said, lifting the lock of an access hatch with his foot. He swung it open and indicated a ladder attached to the wall, leading down. “You’ve got a toilet, sink, and recycler shower. Sheets and stuff are under the bed.” He nodded to another access hatch farther down the corridor. “That’s the galley, if you get hungry. There’s a processor, but it’s kinda wonky. Can’t do eggs, and I wouldn’t risk the kaffe, if I were you.”

“That’s fine,” Axton said, and gestured Hal toward the ladder, when the engineer spoke up.

“Where do you and your sister sleep?”

“Other side,” Twitch said, indicating an identical set of hatch doors across the width of the corridor. His nose pinched up again, this time in a faint snarl. “But, we’ll knock for you, not the other way around. Got it?”

Hal stepped onto the ladder with a shrug. “Just curious.”

Axton followed him down, closing the hatch from below with a locking thunk of metal. Just as Twitch had said, the single-service berth had a long, narrow bunk built out

from the wall, with storage bins tucked under the frame, to maximize use of space. An open doorway opposite led to a visible commode-and-sink unit and shower stall with a closed door of its own. Neither looked very well-used. The walls and floor were stark metal, without personality or sign of regular habitation. A cool, dry, dull smell floated around the room, scratching the hairs in Axton's nostrils.

In contrast, Hal gave off an odor of warm electric funk as he stripped off his shirt and dropped it on the floor near the bathroom door. "A sensitive," he mused as he pulled his undershirt over his head. "A cyber one, at that. What are the odds?"

"I don't see what the big deal is. She's basically a walkin'-around remote control, right?"

"She's a lot more than that! This ship is part of her. Everything it does, everything it perceives, from the smallest circuit cut to the fire of the engines: she knows it, feels it, controls it. Like you or I would pick up a pen or pull a button," he said, and did, the one on his trousers.

Axton half-expected him to be sporting a semi. He didn't get to see it, though, as Hal left his trousers up, in favor of more enamored babbling:

"Did you know sensitives naturally occur in less than ten percent of any generation? Cybers are even rarer. The human brain's had millennia to develop rudimentary psionic sensitivity, but for it to grow a link into the technological-!" He drifted off, gazing into some unseeable distance, like the blind girl on the level above.

Axton's skin itched at that dreamy look. "Do you want to fuck her?"

Hal's focus came back with a blink. "What?"

"You heard me." The thought cringed his nerves, but

Axton couldn't let it go. "You want to fuck her."

"I don't-! What would even make you think that?"

"You were practically droolin' all over her, up there. What the hell else am I supposed to think?"

"I admit, I'm intrigued by the possibilities--"

"Of sticking your dick into her cyborg pussy. Am I right?"

"She's not a cyborg," Hal corrected sharply. "And, I'm not you! Don't you understand?" He pointed one finger to the floor plates. "This ship? She is linked to it, and not by programming or hardwire, but with her mind. Can you imagine what that level of psionic convergence would mean with something like the Drehlafette?" He swung his finger toward their ruck and shook his head. "No more haphazard targeting, no more countdowns. No more *accidents*. The things she knows, the things she's capable of...! I could learn so much from her." A faint sigh escaped his lips, one that blurred the edges of Axton's vision.

"Oh, just fuck her and get it over with," he grumbled, and pushed his way into the bathroom, cutting off any of Hal's backtalk with the shut of the door.

He tossed his clothes to the floor in a heap and stepped into the shower, scrubbing and scratching the soap into a harsh lather. At first, the runoff of days' worth of dinge and sweat whittled the tension from his muscles and stresses from his head, and he relaxed a little as he recalled the last time he'd had a proper wash: with Lucy, a soapy stroke of his dick for the last of his cash. It would have been nice to feel that again, the caress of tender fingers up and down his flesh, making him mellow and hard in the same motion. Of course, Lucy wasn't the only one to make him feel that way.

He closed his eyes and grasped himself, grip firm and knowing. He struck out one arm against the wall and bowed his head, snorting water as his hand moved back and forth in a steady, squelching jerk. But, it wasn't enough. He wanted lips and tongue and a fuller press of skin. The deliberate caress of his balls and suck of his kiss. Ropy sinews and a clench of muscled ass. God damn it all, he wanted *Hal*, to hold and kiss and cuddle and fuck while they still had life in them.

He didn't come there, standing in the shower, instead wilting under the pelting water at thought of the engineer sitting sulky and agitated in the adjacent room.

"Shit," he mumbled, and stepped from the shower, tracking watery footprints from the stall to the main room.

Hal wasn't there. He hadn't redressed, his shirts still discarded in their pile beside the door. No sign of the rest of his clothes, though, which likely meant he'd gone clomping around the deck above, maybe to satisfy some curiosity.

Axton rummaged in the bottom of their ruck for some clean clothes of his own, finding a set of Army drab skivvies. He pulled them on and climbed up out of the berth, glancing left and right for Hal. No one was in the corridor, and both the bridge and the aft bay looked dark. The berth beside – the galley – was open and alight, but it was a crack in the seam of one of the berths across the way that stole his attention, with a sliver of light, and a girl's gasping breath.

Ivory. Fucking Ivory. Or, more accurately, Ivory fucking. With eager spirit, from the sound of both her voice and the guttural male one keeping time.

Axton sighed.

He thought about barging in on the engineer and his pseudo-Siren fascination, but reconsidered a second after. Axton had said it himself: Hal wasn't his wife. They didn't owe each other anything. Still, he cursed himself as he climbed through the hatch to the galley...where he pulled up straight, at sight of Hal kneeling next to the unpacked Drehlafette.

"Hey," Axton said from the base of the ladder.

Hal kept his attention on the autocannon, twisting one of his precision tools in her guts. "Hey."

Axton padded over. "Whatcha doin' with the missus?"

"Recalibrating her sensor array. I want her to be able to recognize non-hostiles without a bio-signature file."

"I thought you were gonna get your cyber-supergirl to do that."

Hal let out a tiny humph. "I think she's a tad busy, at the moment."

Despite his needier musings of the last few minutes, Axton sneered. "You jealous?"

Hal turned and shot him a look of disgust. "You're unbelievable."

"*I'm* unbelievable? *You're* the one poppin' stiff for that hot-wired prima donna. How d'ya think that makes me feel?"

"It's always about you, isn't it? Well, what about me? What about what I want, what I need?"

"You *need* to stop sniffin' after cyber-cherry-"

The spanner clattered to the floor, and Hal bolted up into Axton's face, growling, "I. Don't. Want. To fuck her! Christ! Why can't you get it through your skull that the only one I want to fuck is-!" He bit off the rest with a

silencing clamp of his lips and turned away. “Fuck,” he said, his muscles knotting between his shoulders and down his naked back.

Axton traced the path of lines around them with his eyes, from the base of his neck to the shift of his hips, sucking mental gulps of the sight until he couldn’t hold back any longer. He reached for Hal, touching his shoulder with one hand.

“Don’t,” Hal said, shirking away.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t do this.”

“Why?” Axton asked again.

“Because,” Hal said, echoing the same. “I can’t be with you and not...*be* with you.”

Axton pulled them together, pressing his face to the curve of Hal’s neck. Just like in their berth, the familiar smell of his skin warmed his nostrils. It aroused, too, more acutely than any girl’s moan, and Axton closed his eyes and paused for a count of five, to fill his lungs with it. “So, be with me.”

Hal’s body tightened under his arms and he turned his head, to blow against Axton’s cheek, “What about our deal? I thought you wanted to keep things platonic.”

Axton stroked a hand down to Hal’s groin, where he found him already hard in his trousers. He gave that bulge a firm rub and craned his head to find Hal’s mouth. “I want this more, darlin’,” he whispered, licking the last syllable between his partner’s lips.

“So do I,” Hal said, though that was all before they met for a kiss that fanned their desire anew.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The One Who Knows

He'd spent time on ships before, but those had been big Army frigates for platoon transport, not single-crew vessels like *Siren's Song*. The close quarters on this ship threatened claustrophobia. Or, they might have done, in any circumstance besides the one Axton currently enjoyed: Hal in his lap and the two of them locked in a rollicking embrace, hair and bodies slick from the sweat of their sex as well as from their shared shower. He grunted with the effort of a thrust that lifted them both off the narrow bed, hoping to make Hal do the same, but the engineer smothered any vocal evidence with a teeth-scraping kiss. Axton knew he came, though, and well, spurting hard between their bellies as he did inside a minute after.

Despite the slide of sticky spunk, Hal kept their kiss unbroken through the wane of thumping heartbeats. Axton held him, too, patting his lips in a trail from Hal's mouth to the muscled round of his shoulder, where he pressed his brow with a low, satisfied groan.

Hal echoed the sentiment by blowing over the ridge of

Axton's ear, "You are fantastic. Thank you."

Axton craned his head up. "You wanna go again?" He tongued his teeth in a wicked grin as he shot a glance to one side. "Show those snotty-nosed kids across the hall how the big boys do it?"

"Tempting," Hal said around a soft chuckle. He lifted himself off from Axton's lap with a slippery squelch and wobbled to his feet. "But, I think I want to clean up, first."

Axton let him do, drifting back to the cot and stretching his legs straight upon the sheet. He closed his eyes and settled into the relative comfort of the bed, rewinding his memory to the last time they'd enjoyed such a free and spirited romp: on Pasandra, before all that shit with Lohengrin and Reilly and-

A touch of warm, wet cloth against his belly made him jerk up. Hal had come back to the bed with a cleaning rag, which he now lifted away with an apologetic smile. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay." Axton closed his eyes as he eased to the pillows again. "It feels good." After a minute, the rag's warmth slipped from his belly to his groin, where Hal slid the cloth up and down in a tender cleansing stroke of his dick. "That feels even better," he said, and smiled.

The cot shifted again as Hal settled down beside him, his grip staying slow and gentle. It still coaxed, though. Not enough to prep, but enough to prod Axton from his creeping doze. He reached for Hal's face, their lips coming together without him looking, and they traded kisses for a minute before Hal wound his arms around him and rolled to his side, pulling Axton on top of him. They didn't stay that way for long, though, for the restless grumbling of first Axton's belly, followed by Hal's.

The engineer blushed beneath Axton's fingers, showing a faint smattering of freckles near the bridge of his nose that Axton had never noticed before but suddenly found adorable. "Shall I find us something to eat?"

"Let me do that," Axton said, and smiled as he pushed himself to his feet. He pulled on some trousers and grabbed his slightly-worn undershirt, while Hal gave a stretch and a groan.

"I'll make the bed, then."

"Don't you dare!" The fine, clean lines of his partner's long, naked body invited, and Axton bowed over it, nuzzling the faint hairs on Hal's belly. "I want you just like this when I come back."

Hal rubbed at Axton's scalp a moment, when his stomach gave another grumbling protest, causing them both to laugh. "Go!"

"Just like this," Axton said before diving his tongue into Hal's navel for one last sucking kiss. He stood up and pulled on his shirt, leaving his partner as giddy as he felt.

The corridor above stood empty, and silent. Amid such quiet, Axton climbed down into the galley and headed straight for the processor built into the far wall. He swiped through its command and options menus until he found some suitable grub: sandwiches made of crisped nightshade tubers and some protein slabs that could only dream of being pork but at least looked and smelled the part. He processed some tsai, too, setting both cups on the table to give them a stiff steeping.

"I thought I smelled food."

Axton looked up, to find Twitch hanging upside-down at the hatch opening, his goggles perched on his head. "Hope you don't mind us helping ourselves."

Twitch disappeared a second before dropping down feet first, boots clattering on the floor plate. “You’re paying customers.” He moved to the processor, too, and swiped through the screens to order some kind of agaric soup. He didn’t bother with a spoon, just brought the bowl to his lips and sipped, staring at Axton over the edge before declaring, “You’re fucking your partner.”

“You’re fucking your sister,” Axton replied. “So, maybe we’re all goin’ to hell, but you two’re takin’ the express elevator down.”

“I’m not judging.” Twitch’s unwavering tone made the sentiment sound honest. “She knows me better than anyone. Why shouldn’t I be with her?”

“Maybe ‘cause it’ll fuck up your kids,” Axton said, as he glanced around for a tray.

Twitch stepped around him to the recycler, where he dropped his bowl. It made an audible crunch, but not enough to cover his mutter: “We were sterilized.”

Axton paused, and frowned. On his own home planet of Hieronymus, boys and girls got busy early in life. Sometimes, that meant babies too young, and sometimes, that led to problems. But sterilization of minors was universally upheld as illegal, save for the government-run orphanage system and its unwanted wards, products of sexual crimes. “Sorry.”

“Don’t see why you should care.” Twitch started up the ladder without looking back. “It’s not like you and your partner can make babies, either.”

Axton just blinked after him, when his belly growled again, and he remembered the food, and Hal. It took him a few extra minutes to navigate the ladder balancing two mugs and two sandwiches, but not as much for the return

to the sleeping berth, where he found Hal up and about in a pair of nicely-tight shorts.

“Hey,” Axton said, grinning down from the hatch opening. “Didn’t I say to keep that pretty ass where it was?”

Hal glanced his way, pressing his mouth to one side. “I’m not your damsel.”

“Just my slick gearhead.”

“Well, this gearhead got restless.”

Axton hummed with lascivious interest. “Guess I’ll have to find somethin’ to occupy your time.”

Hal snickered. “That shouldn’t be too hard.” He accepted the mugs, followed by the sandwiches, bowing his nose close to the latter for a sniff. “Mm. Processed swill.”

“It’s better than starving,” Axton said, hopping down into the room.

“We’ll see.”

Axton ignored that last and changed the subject as he took his sandwich. “Did you know our hosts are products of the orphanage system? I’m guessin’ Hebe.”

Hal paused, mid-motion of a bite. “That explains the missing teeth.”

“You noticed that, too.”

Hal nodded. “Wasn’t certain about him, but it made sense for her. GD likes to keep tabs on sensitives without necessarily locking them up.”

“So, transmit chips installed in the teeth.” Axton nodded back. “We used to keep track of gaurus on the farm the same way.” At Hal’s quirked brow, Axton said, “Hieronymus,” hoping that would be enough to explain.

The engineer let a tiny smirk show through. “I suppose

the comparison to livestock isn't an altogether inaccurate one to the Tragic Ward system. A bit unkind, though."

"Yeah, it sucks," Axton said, and took a bite of half his sandwich.

Hal's brief humor faded with a frown. "It's slavery," he said, as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

Axton regarded him a moment, chewing with nagging thought. "How d'joo know fo much?"

"Please, don't talk with your mouth full."

"Forry." Axton swallowed and sucked a piece of protein through his teeth before continuing. "How do you know so much about this sensitive stuff?"

"My brother was an empath." At Axton's quizzical look, Hal explained, "They're a kind of rudimentary telepath, more about feelings and emotions than actual thoughts."

Axton set beside him on the bed in a show of quiet sympathy. He'd grown up around a slew of hired farmhand boys but had been blessed only with four sisters. "I didn't know you had a brother."

"I don't, anymore," Hal said bluntly.

The weight of his tone pressed a silence between them, until Axton muttered, "What happened?"

"My father sent us to Dahl. He thought it would *fix* us," Hal said, flaring one nostril in subtle anger. "But, he didn't understand, especially not what Ethan could do. Nobody did. Dahl put him in R&D, to try and develop his psionics into something they could use." He shook his head and grimaced into the past. "But, you can't develop a person the way you can do a machine. So, after fourteen months of submodal drugs and sendep chambers and having needles stuck into his brain, my little brother wrapped his

belt around his neck, and that was the end of it.”

Axton’s spit tasted thick of a sudden, making his voice croak. “I’m sorry.”

Hal sighed, not weepy but still sad. “I can’t judge them, you know,” he said, nodding toward the other side of the ship. “Those kids. I didn’t love Ethan that way, but, I did love him. If I’d run with him, like they did, maybe he’d still be alive.”

Axton shook his head. “You can’t spend your life always lookin’ back. You’ll get stuck in all the should’ve, would’ve, could’ve’s.” He eased his hand to the base of Hal’s neck, massaging the taut muscles with his fingers. They fell a little looser under his grip, and Axton pulled him close, to bump their heads together. “And, I want you here. Now. With me.”

Hal said nothing, just blinked his eyes, once. Before his lashes flickered again, he pressed his lips to Axton’s mouth. The simplicity of that mellow kiss fulfilled as well as any vigorous fuck, so Axton held him for more of the same, until their whole bodies came together once more on the top of the bed. They didn’t have sex again, instead indulging in a tender embrace so naked and trusting, they didn’t have to. As they lay there, Axton recalled once again the last time he’d felt so much himself, and decided:

“I’m a moron.”

Hal shuddered with sudden laughter. “No, you’re not! Why would you say that?”

“Widow,” Axton said, the name tasting rancid on his tongue. “She made me think I should be...*ashamed*, about this.” He traced the edge of his partner’s fine face, from cheek to jaw, with his fingertips and gaze. “About us.”

Hal hummed. “Why would you ever believe anything

that manipulative bitch had to say?”

“I dunno.” Axton stared into those clear blue eyes, muttering again, “I’m sorry.”

Their cot creaked as Hal hugged them with his tucked-under arm. He raised the other to rub his thumb at Axton’s brow and the sergeant’s bars pierced there. “It’s all right. You’re here, now, with me. That’s what matters,” he said, and kissed him.

Axton returned the favor with a wind of both arms around him. A deeper kiss flared their passions again, and they shifted together into a position that would eventually lead them to sex. This time, Axton kept them hushed, too. The sound and sense of his coming was for Hal alone, this one who knew him best.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

End of the Line

Long-haul runs through darkspace were good for three things: sleeping, talking, and fucking. Axton had gotten his fill of even that last on this trip, based on the click of his joints from too many post-coital drowzes in a narrow service cot. So, when Theia's bright curve of surface rose into the main viewport, his stomach did an eager, restless flip.

"God damn, that's beautiful."

Beside him, Hal stared at the massive blue orb with its scattered strips of land masses, and agreed with equal awe: "I've only seen vids of water worlds. Never thought I'd actually set foot on one."

"She's a resource world," Ivory said from her chair. Around her, lights and screens flickered with calculations and readouts while the sparkling planet loomed ever larger ahead of the ship's bow. "But, her remoteness makes the trade of specialty goods impractical."

"The big corporations make supply runs out here about every six standard months or so," Twitch explained. "So,

you can imagine how itchy the locals get for the more... exotic flavors of the Inner Ring.”

“Which is where you two come in?” Hal guessed.

“For a tidy buck, I’ll bet,” Axton said.

Twitch shrugged. “An economy is built on supply and demand. They demand, we supply.”

“It’s a mutually-beneficial arrangement.” Ivory didn’t turn in her seat, but the camera above her chair swiveled in Axton’s direction with a flare of reflected light upon the lens. “Speaking of which, we’d like to make you an offer.”

Hal glanced at Axton before looking to Ivory. “What sort of offer?”

Twitch smirked. “After seeing what you two did on Pasandra-”

“-we figured it might be worth both our whiles to invest in some security,” Ivory finished.

“We don’t carry guns,” Twitch began, and, again, Ivory completed his thought.

“And we don’t want to. But, the job isn’t without its risks-”

“-and we’re not running peanuts. What do you say? You want in?”

Axton swung his gaze to Hal, but the engineer only shrugged. For Axton, though, the prize of fortune and glory beckoned brightly, and he tipped his head toward the cargo bay for their answer. “First, let’s see what we’re guarding.”

Twitch nodded and bounced to his feet, slinging a crowbar up from his side. He led them to the hold, where, without preamble, he wrenched the lip of one crate’s top, pried it up, and popped it open. Axton and Hal peered over the edge, taking in the sight of the tightly-wrapped

molds of weed.

“Now, that’s what I call beautiful,” Axton said, feeling a grin split.

That grin held steady all the way to the planet’s surface, where Ivory parked *Siren’s Song* in a narrow green valley bookended by two looming rises of craggy rock. The sandstone mountains blocked the view of the surrounding terrain but not that of the beaming sun, which beat down bright across the flora. Axton didn’t waste time enjoying the scenery, though. They had work to do, and plans to make.

He took two steps onto the lowered cargo bay door to look around the empty valley, taking quick stock of the entry and exit points, defensible positions, and potential ambush spots. All the while, his hands tingled with pent-up aggression.

“This trip might turn out to be worth it, after all,” he said.

Hal swayed his focus around the terrain the same. “You mean, aside from saving our necks from Hyperion?”

“Yeah,” Axton said, shooting him a sneer. “Besides that.” He bumped Hal in the chest with one hand. “Help me lock this place down.” Under ordinary circumstances, he’d send Hal in one direction and take the other, but, this time, Axton stayed near the engineer’s shoulder, leaning close once they were out of earshot of the ship to mutter, “You think that delivery’s worth as much as the kid says?”

Hal thought a moment but didn’t stop his perusal of one rock outcropping and the next, the Atlas Chimera at a loose ready. “Malan chamba’s top of the grade. Three-quarters of a million sounds steep, but, you heard him: supply and demand.”

“We could do a lot with that kind of cash.”

Hal chuckled. “Except, it’s not all ours to spend.”

Axton managed to control the greedy glint of his smile, but only just. “It could be.”

That stopped Hal’s easy chuckling, and his stride. “What are you saying?”

“We’re the ones taking the risks, here. I think it’s only reasonable we take the reward, too.”

Hal scoffed. “We haven’t even set foot on the bridge, and you’re ready to burn it. Doesn’t their offer of partnership mean anything to you?”

“What partnership? We’re hired muscle.” Even though they were far enough not to be heard at the ship, Axton leaned nearly into Hal’s neck. “You know once this job’s done, they’re gonna turn around and screw us.”

“We don’t know that, actually.”

“Come on! They’re in it for the money, like everybody else.”

“That’s not true.” One side of Hal’s mouth twitched up in an affectionate smile. “Some of us are in it for each other.”

Axton mirrored his expression, with sarcasm. “You’re breakin’ my heart, darlin’.”

The fondness on the engineer’s face fell away, replaced by a stern disappointment. “You know, you’re not doing yourself any favors by not trusting people.”

“Hey, I trust people.”

“When it suits you. But, there is such a thing as faith in common human decency.”

“Ain’t nothin’ about your common human that’s decent,” Axton said, spinning the Jakobs three times on his finger in a show of blasé detachment. “You should

know that, by now.”

“And you should know that not everyone’s a mercenary prick.”

“Just me, right? Is that what you’re sayin’?”

Hal let go a short breath along with the touchy-feely. “All I’m saying is, it wouldn’t hurt to have backup. Not to mention, a ship. So, let’s keep things simple and do the job as planned, yeah? We’ll still come out of this with more than we started.”

Axton snorted, but he couldn’t argue with that math. Once they’d secured the drop area to his liking, he scuttled his hijack idea and focused on the job. Less than an hour into his settling, a rumble of car engine resounded around the valley, signaling the approach of their buyers, three burly working-men types who didn’t openly appreciate Axton’s revising of their regular agreement to a handover of all of their cash...until Hal stepped out behind them and popped the Drehlafette to ready activation. Nobody argued after that.

As they watched the trio of goons hustle back to their harvesters, penniless and with their metaphorical tails tucked between their balls, Twitch came to Axton’s side. “Your missus sure comes in handy.”

“Most loyal little lady I’ve ever known,” Axton said, as Hal powered her down. He turned to Twitch. “So. What now?”

“Now, we celebrate a job well done.” Twitch started up the cargo ramp, but Axton gave a grousing groan.

“Seriously? We just made planetfall, and you’re packin’ us into that sardine tin again already?”

“Only for a short jaunt,” Ivory’s voice replied from within.

“Yeah, you’ll like this place,” Twitch said, half-turning back to grin. “Everything you need for a pleasant stay.”

“How long is that gonna be?” Axton asked, to which Twitch gave a shrug.

“That all depends on you,” he said, as he closed the ramp behind them.

Ivory didn't lie: the trip was just over one rise of rock and a flow of dune, to a short stretch of beach bracketed by another sheer cliff to the east and the ocean to the west. To the north, the sand changed to wide rocks buffeting the waves, while to the south, the beach stretched into the distance a few clicks, toward what they were told was the closest town, Dero.

Axton didn't have much interest in the locals, but this hideaway intrigued: a low-roofed bungalow tucked on a remote beach, easily defensible, and stocked with enough supplies to last a week, at least. He tested the boards of the ocean-facing gallery with a scuffing shift of his boot. The wood held steady without give, a good make and job. “Cozy.”

“If a bit cramped for four,” Hal added, swinging his gaze about. He set the Drehlafette on the ground and pressed its activation pad, causing her to bounce to the ready again. There, he crouched, returning to his favored pastime of tinkering in his girlfriend's guts.

Ivory settled onto the sand in front of the bungalow, carefully. “We won't be staying long.”

“Just long enough to settle up,” Twitch said as he went about making a fire ring.

Axton went back over to the kids. “How'd you find this place?”

“*Siren's Song's* previous captain brought us here,” Ivory

said. "After we left the orphanage. He called this place The Wolffe's Den."

"His name was Wolffe," Twitch explained between unsuccessful smacks of flintrock.

Axton pushed him to one side and snapped his fingers at Hal, who answered with a wordless toss of striking steel plucked from his toolkit. "He left it to you?" Axton asked, eyes downcast on the catching embers but ears trained to the kids.

"Something like that," Ivory said. Axton heard in her voice a distinct warning to drop the subject of the bungalow's former owner.

No matter, since Twitch, relieved of fire duty, had taken it upon himself to pull a stash of drink and weed from his carry-all. "Forget about that ancient history. Let's drink!"

"That's the best suggestion I've heard all day," Axton said, smiling with triumph as the sparks from his steel took light upon the fire ring's tinder. He accepted the half-full bottle Twitch pushed his way and pulled at the cork, grinning wider at the harsh but inviting smell of heady booze. "What are we drinkin' to?"

"Easy profit," Twitch replied, eyes glinting in the light of the fire.

"The best kind," Axton agreed, and took a hefty swig. It went down warm and sharp, leaving a syrupy film along his tongue that was unexpected but not unpleasant. It also made his nerves tingle, in a way of dull excitement that sparked a sense-memory of his first time with Hal. He waved at the engineer. "Hey, Tinkerbell. Leave the missus alone a bit and join us."

Ivory's blank eyes glowed the same as her brother's, but with a shine of concern. "You're activating your

weapon?”

“Sentry mode,” Hal informed her. “But, don’t worry, she won’t start shooting unless someone tries to mess with her. Or us.” He set down beside Axton and took the offered bottle, pulling his own high-tipped gulp. He grimaced and hissed in the same breath, while Axton spit a giddy laugh that suddenly made the horizon wobble.

“Damn,” he said, swaying close to Hal, who shrugged him off, still grimacing. “This shit packs a punch.”

“It should.” Twitch rose from his place halfway around the fire. His tread waved over the sand, and Axton shook his head. A leaden clunking rattled in his ears. Was the ground shifting?

“Ax...!” Hal had turned a sickly shade of green. “I think they-!” he started, but he didn’t get to say any more before he dropped to the sand, blue eyes rolling back into his head.

Axton suddenly felt the pull of too many Gs, himself. As his shoulder hit the ground, he looked up at Twitch, who’d come all the way around the fire ring. His tongue felt thick, useless, but he managed to slur, “*Whuthehellis this?*”

Twitch crouched over him. “Easy profit.” He grinned again, and the last thing Axton saw was that annoying space of black in the kid’s row of teeth, before everything else went to black, too.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Beggars and Choosers

“God *damn* it!” Axton kicked at the wet sand, sending a hunk into the foaming ocean. It did nothing to soothe his fury, just made him feel more impotent, and he gave another seething shout: “Those thieving, backstabbing, incestuous little *fucks*!”

Hal gave a low moan from where he sat further up the beach. “Please, stop shouting.”

“They took everything! From this job and everything we had before.” Axton stalked back to the engineer, jabbing one accusatory finger into his face. “All because *you* said we should trust them.”

Hal glowered up from behind his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“That is the last time I trust anybody!”

“I said, I was sorry,” Hal repeated, still glaring. “Yelling about it won’t change anything.”

“I know!” Axton dropped onto the sand beside Hal, face pinched in an angry pout. After a long second of silence, he half-turned his head and said, “But, it makes me feel better. Okay?”

Another long beat followed, where neither man moved...until Hal cracked a tiny smile. Something about that look made Axton snap, "What?"

"It could be worse."

"Enlighten me."

"They could have slit our throats while we were out. Then we wouldn't even be having this conversation."

Axton kicked at a divot of beach with his boot. "Fucking ingrates. Probably halfway back to the Inner Ring, by now."

Hal blew a chiding breath. "You know, they only did what you were planning to do."

That irony hadn't escaped him, but it didn't lessen the sharpness of the blow. So Axton stared out over the ocean, clamping his lips shut in another brood.

"At least they didn't take the Drehlafette," Hal said. "Or our guns."

Axton touched the grip of his Jakobs revolver, taking some comfort in the familiarity of its slender, hand-carved build. Worth more to a discerning buyer than a kilo of Malan chamba, it was a good thing the kids hadn't had a knowledge of or interest in guns, or he'd be sitting here effectively naked, right now. "Probably only 'cause I was lying on it." He swung his gaze toward the standing autogun, its barrel still swinging left to right, keeping time like a metronome. "And the only reason they didn't grab your girlfriend is 'cause she wasn't tucked in her bag."

Hal looked to the Drehlafette, as well, humming with thoughtful intent. "I need to sort out a way to keep her accessible. Belt brace, maybe, or a shoulder harness...."

"Worry about that later. Right now, we gotta take stock." Axton dropped his gaze to the sand, where he

sifted a handful of grains between his fingers. They fell away easily, like everything else. “And figure out what the hell we’re gonna do next.”

Hal gave another shrug. “We could always go back to tracing skips. There’s money in that.” He nudged Axton with his shoulder. “And, you know we’re good at it. Razorback, Widow, Lohengrin – none of them stood up to us.”

Axton blew a freeing sigh and tossed the rest of the sand in his palm toward the water. “We better start walking, then. No telling how far the nearest town is, and we need a new home base.”

Hal looked at the bungalow. “What about this place?”

“What? Here?”

“Why not? It’s removed, defensible. We could even rig a sat-feed to stay on top of the warrant listings.” Hal’s mouth broke into a wicked grin. “And, if those kids ever come back, we can give them the surprise of their felonious little lives.”

The delicious prospect of payback made Axton grin, too. “You’re gettin’ more mercenary every day, darlin’. I like it,” he said, and pulled Hal in for a swift, firm kiss, the click of their teeth an instigating spark to put their fresh plans into action.

“We’re gonna need a runner,” Axton announced as they trudged from their sandy beach to the road. “And definitely more guns.”

“Cheaper to make the guns,” Hal said as he fiddled with the Drehlafette brick. He’d wrapped a spare shirt into a makeshift sling and looped the top over his head, the brick bouncing near his hip.

“That’s too clunky,” Axton said under his breath. “You

wanna be able to toss her quick.”

Hal agreed, pulling the brick into his hands again. “Hip would be good, though, right? Like a holster.” He mimed grabbing and tossing as they walked, as though calculating the efficiency of movement.

Axton shrugged. “You’re the one who uses her.”

Hal dropped his head, looking at the Drehlafette. “You need to learn to use her, too.”

“Why?”

“In case something happens to me,” Hal said into his chest.

Axton brought them to a halt. “What are you talkin’ about?”

Hal looked up but sighed. “We both know you’re the real hunter in this team-”

“We’re *partners*,” Axton said with emphasis. “Without you, who knows what kind of stupid shit I’d be neck-deep in, by now.” He reached out to grasp and shake the younger man’s scruff with an easygoing smile. “Nothin’s gonna happen to you. I won’t let it. Now, come on,” he said, as he pushed them to pace again. “We’re the best on the Edge, and that’s what these backwater jokers gotta see when we walk into town.”

Their sandy path led to a slightly less sandy road, which led them to dusty Dero, a mid-sized survivalist town that seemed like it had been built around its bounty board, there were so many scavenger types leaning against rails and dangling cigarillos off balconies. One rough-edged mammoth of a man leered at them as they walked past, making Hal clutch the Drehlafette tight.

“Stay frosty,” Axton muttered to him. “And, keep your eyes peeled for someplace we can restock.”

After a minute, Hal nodded up the street. "There," he said, indicating a two-storey building with a sign proclaiming, *Strenk's Goods*, and, beneath that, in a more heavily-bolded scrawl, *AND GUN SUPPLY*.

Axton smirked. "See? What would I do without you?" he said, and steered them toward the shop.

They walked through the open door, and a tall, lanky lad looked up at them through a floppy mop of sun-bleached hair. He rose from a seat behind the main counter to ask, "Can I help you?"

This kid seemed too fresh-faced to deal in border world trade, especially armament, but Axton nodded his interest anyway. "You Strenk?"

A second, older man stepped out from a blindspot behind the door. This one was all swagger and sneer, with an empty shell casing clenched between his teeth like a cigar, and an old school bayoneted rifle hanging from his shoulder. He shifted the rifle to his front, a smooth and silent motion likely meant to be casual, but Axton recognized the too-steady readiness of an expert trigger hand. "Who's asking?"

This tall, steely-eyed bit of bad news couldn't not be Strenk, so Axton gave him his full attention. "The sign says you trade in guns. We're lookin' to do some business."

Strenk lifted his chin, to look down his nose at them. "Picking up or dropping off?"

"Dropping off," Axton said, and laid the Atlas on the glass counter.

The lad's eyes widened in impressed surprise. "A Chimera! Where did you get her?"

Strenk rolled the casing from one side of his mouth to

the other with a click of metal against teeth. “Vesper,” he addressed the lad, and jerked his head toward the dark doorway behind the counter. “Get your ass upstairs.”

Vesper sloped his shoulders, ducking his head like a cowed pup. He shot a pitiful look at the gun before swinging his gaze toward Axton and Hal, when Strenk gave another cautionary growl:

“Before I clip you, boy!”

As Vesper slunk away, Strenk moved to his place behind the counter. He laid his rifle onto the glass and admired the Atlas with a well-trained sense of appraisal. “Don’t get many like this around here.”

“How much will you give us for her?”

The casing clicked as it passed between Strenk’s teeth again. “Eighty-five.”

“Hundred?” Axton said, letting his jaw hang open.

Strenk fixed him with a challenging glare. “You don’t like that number?”

“No, I don’t like that number,” Axton said, snarling back. “She’s worth at least three times that!”

“Maybe where you come from, sugar britches. But, in case you hadn’t noticed, this isn’t the Inner Ring. Now,” he drawled, as he eyed Axton up and down, “unless there’s something else you ladies want to put on the table, I suggest you accept my generous offer.” His upper lip curled with a snarl. “And, count your lucky blessings I’m making it under the auspices of fair trade and not out in the wild.”

Axton felt Hal shift beside him, brushing him in a nudge. This shop was a last stop and Strenk knew it, but even that fact didn’t settle the itching hairs on the back of Axton’s neck. He swiped the Atlas off the glass and

headed to the door. "We'll take our business elsewhere, thanks."

"Hope you know how to swim," Strenk called after them, his snicker rankling.

"Asshole," Axton muttered, forcing himself not to look back. "Y'know, I hate these resellers. Bunch of greedy fucks just looking for a fast buck."

"Give me the gun."

Axton turned, finding Hal at a dead-stop, one arm out and fingers twitching. "What?"

"You said I'm supposed to keep you from doing stupid shit," Hal told him. "Letting your pride get in the way of us getting supplies is stupid. Now, give me the gun."

"No way! This Chimera's worth way more than what he's offering. Besides, all we need is one job, and--"

"How are we going to catch a skip without transport? Or reserves? Or with nothing more than a thirty-second countdown timer and a dozen pistol bullets between us?"

Axton shrugged. "I'll think of something."

Hal stepped close, his hand still held out between them. "Let me handle this. You just grab us a drink."

Axton looked at him sidelong. "You know somethin' I don't?"

Hal sighed, his gaze weary. "Just trust me?"

After a long moment, Axton slapped the Atlas into Hal's waiting palm. But not without making clear, "You're the only one I do trust."

A wry smile broke across Hal's lips. "Same here." He nodded toward the saloon across the way. "I'll meet you over there in a bit."

Axton nodded back, if reluctantly. Hal going in alone anywhere didn't sit right with him, but the engineer did

have a softer touch. And, they needed the cash: the small fold of cash Axton had stashed in his boot wouldn't get them much past a few drinks.

As Hal went back to Strenk's, Axton ambled over to the sheriff's office, to check out the local bounty board. Dero's wanted list was populated mostly by robbers and scavenger types, but he picked up data on the top three payouts, to study while he waited for Hal at the saloon, where a rosy-cheeked, bubbly little thing offered him the most inviting welcome he'd had yet on this backwater:

"Howdy, mister! What can I get you?"

Axton snickered. Did this chippy just say, howdy?

"Shot and a beer," he said, and followed her with his eyes as she pulled his drinks. She was a far cry from sassy, sultry Lucy, but the bounce of her pretty tits was too nice not to reward her with some friendly conversation. "I'm Axton, by the way." He extended one hand over the bar with a wolfish smile. "And you're beautiful."

She took his hand with a little laugh. "Kaija," she corrected. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mister Axton. Welcome to The Swan."

"Pleasure's all mine." He turned her hand knuckles-up to offer it a genteel bow of his head, adding, "But, I'm afraid I don't warrant the mister."

Kaija drew her hand away, though not quickly. "Not many around here do." Her eyes sparkled from behind her fluttering lashes. "But, I like your smile."

"I like yours, too." It wasn't a lie; it had been too long since he'd indulged in the simple joy of a young woman's company. Plus, this girl seemed willing to share, and, with their finances as low as they were, they could do with a cheap informant. "You been here long?"

“Long enough to know you’re not from around these parts.” She twitched her nose. “You’re cuter than the others.”

He chuckled for the flattery before jerking his head in the direction of the street. “You’re talkin’ about the hunters out there, I take it. You see a lot of their type?”

She shrugged, one side of her smile wilting. “It’s not like some intergalactic hero’s going to come all the way out here just to rescue me.”

Before Axton could ask what that was supposed to mean, Hal swung into the space next to him, slapped a rolled bag on the counter with one hand and grabbed Axton’s shot with the other.

“Twelve-five,” he said, and pounded the drink behind a grimace.

Axton pulled the bag into his lap and peered inside, where a mishmash of bills tumbled over each other in haphazard array. “Jesus,” he muttered. “Did you suck his dick or something?”

Hal set down the shot glass and reached for the beer. He grasped it but didn’t lift, and Axton could see his fingers trembling. “I got the money. That’s all that matters.”

Axton felt his face go slack even as he clenched the bag in a tightening fist. He rose from his seat with an uneasy wobble. “No.”

Hal let go of the glass and half-raised his hand, to wave Axton down. “It’s fine.”

“No,” Axton said again, his vision going dim. He shoved the bag into Hal’s chest to right himself, but the engineer grabbed his arm, pulling him close to hiss:

“Let it go.” He squeezed his hand around Axton’s wrist,

his grip shaking but strong.

Axton still shoved him off, turning on his heel toward the door with one more guttural, “No.”

“Ax!” Hal called, following him to the street. He grabbed Axton’s arm, nearly wrenching the shoulder from its socket as he whirled them about. “It’s not worth it,” he said, his voice pleading, desperate, and furious all in the same breath.

Axton leaned in to his face, spittle spraying from his lips. “How can you say that?”

“It’s no worse than what I did to get off Phaestus.” Hal set his jaw to a straight line, but the blue of his eyes wavered at the edges as he muttered, “And, better me than you.”

Axton blinked against Hal’s stare, his gut churning. He’d done awful things. For Dahl, for survival, for money, and for himself. He’d killed, men under his command and others who’d simply gotten in his way. And one who hadn’t deserved the bullet from his gun at all, but for the fear of getting caught. But not even that terrible choice twisted his innards so tight and hard as this.

“Please,” Hal said, pumping his hand around Axton’s arm again. “It was just a trade, and no one got hurt. I don’t even *care*,” he said, but the telling swing of his pitch cut Axton to his core, deep and sharp enough to turn his vision red.

“I do,” he said, and stomped to the gun seller’s, kicking open the door with his boot.

Behind the counter, Strenk turned, his belt dangling loose and his hand clenched in Vesper’s hair. “Well, well,” he said, sneering at sight of Axton. He rolled that stupid shell casing over his teeth, the clicking ticking in Axton’s

ear like a bomb timer. “You come to suck up what your girlfriend left behind?”

Axton yanked the Jakobs free. It trembled in his grip but he squeezed the sights level, right between Strenk’s eyes. “I came to put you out of your misery.”

Strenk shoved Vesper against the wall and moved out from behind the counter, arms free at his sides. “And, how do you plan on doing that? Eh, Fräulein?”

Axton inclined his head toward the rifle laid on the glass. “You’d better pick up that gun while you’re still able. ‘Cause I don’t wanna shoot an unarmed man.”

Strenk shifted the casing again between his teeth: clickety-clack. “I don’t need a gun to deal with you, princess,” he said, and charged, throwing them both against the wall as the Jakobs clattered to the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Helpless

His vision went black a second when he hit the wall, followed by the monstrous crush of a forearm against his throat. Still, Axton managed to croak, “Hal...!”

Strenk’s gaze filled his focus, cold and damning. “Open those pretty petals, tulip.” He dropped his free hand to his crotch. “I want to see if I’ll fit.”

“*Hal!*” Axton gurgled, when something hard snapped Strenk’s head. Beyond the big man’s shoulder, Hal held the Drehlafette like a brick. But it drifted down as Strenk half-turned his way, blood trickling from the base of his skull.

Hal blanched. “Oh, shit.”

Strenk’s arm shot out, his fist whacking Hal in the head. The engineer screamed along the floor, coming to a hard stop against the counter. The Drehlafette tumbled, too, until a just-right bounce activated its pressure pad and it clanked upright in all its death-dealing glory.

Axton braced himself for the first volley...but the Drehlafette only whirred, its laser sight scanning dumbly

for an armed hostile.

“Fuck,” Axton wheezed, as Strenk turned back, his scowl dark under his brows.

“Me, first,” he said, when Axton made a desperate clawing thrust into his face. His trigger finger found Strenk’s eye, and the big man howled, the empty shell casing falling from between his teeth. Axton clawed again, but Strenk grabbed both his wrists, arms bulging as he caught Axton against the wall. His reddened gaze screamed murder but his voice stayed gravel-low: “I’m going to fuck every hole in your head-”

A contained bang exploded in the shop, and a splutch of gore shot from Strenk’s temple.

Axton looked to his right, where Vesper stood behind the counter, rifle raised to his shoulder. He almost smiled, when the Drehlafette whirled around on its base. It locked on and spit its first rounds, catching stone wall, metal rifle, and blameless flesh as Vesper went down.

Hal scrambled to the Drehlafette but Axton rushed past him, jump-sliding over the counter to the other side. Strenk’s shattered rifle lay on the floor, right beside Vesper. A red splotch already stretched across the top of the kid’s shirt, but the grimace on his face was too tight and gasping to signify anything less than full, pounding life.

Axton let himself breathe again.

Hal joined him a second later. “How bad?”

“Just a shoulder wound,” Axton told him, and Hal relaxed, too.

“It hurts,” Vesper hissed.

Axton nodded as he pulled Vesper up from the floor, being careful of the blood. “Pain’s good. It means you’re not dead.” He took his dropped revolver from Hal’s hand

and glanced toward the door and back again. "Though, I can't say the same for your boss."

Vesper had just eased back against the wall when his eyes blinked wide and he gasped, "Kaija!" before grabbing his bloody shoulder with another hiss.

Hal laid a steadying hand on his good arm. "Easy, now. Who's Kaija?"

"You mean, your girlfriend at the bar?" Axton said.

"She's not... But, he...!" Vesper's lips and voice trembled with every syllable. "He would...he'd look at her, and I knew he'd... So, I...!" He forced a thick, locking swallow that made his Adam's apple jerk. "I mean, I...I couldn't just *let* him...!" he said, but nothing more as his chest hitched and he grimaced, a fall of broken, boyish tears tumbling free.

Hal flicked his gaze to Axton before putting his arms around Vesper's torso. "Let's get you to a medic," he said, helping the boy stagger to his feet.

Axton got his other side, and the three of them rose together behind the counter, into the sight line of a graying, sun-baked pole of a man wearing a crooked-set Stetson pinchfront and a frontier lawman's ensemble to match. He had his thumbs hooked in his belt, looking for all the galaxy unconcerned over the dead body at the tip of his boot.

Vesper paused mid-limp. "Sheriff Dearborn."

The lawman bowed his head. "You boys want to tell me what went down, here?"

Axton didn't blink. "Self-defense."

The lawman's moustache twitched, but he didn't get the chance to say anything before Kaija came rushing around his knobby shoulder, crying:

“Vesper!” She pushed Axton out of the way to take his place at Vesper’s side, her arms tucked firmly around him. “I’m taking you to Doc Graves,” she said, taking Vesper’s weight from Hal, too, and blanking right past all of them as she helped the young man wobble to the street.

Axton hung back, in case the sheriff decided to pick at their story. But Dearborn just poked his boot into Strenk’s shoulder, gave it a testing nudge, and grunted:

“Looks like self-defense to me.”

Axton sniffed. “You don’t seem too broken-up about it.”

Dearborn raised his head, fixing Axton with a steady, stoic look. “Strenk was a nasty piece of work. Not even his mother’s gonna miss him.”

“So, why didn’t you take care of him before now?” Axton said, for the first time rubbing at his sore collarbone. The pain started an uneasy clenching in his guts, one that made him frown.

The sheriff’s steely eyes went narrow. “I got enough misery trying to keep the drifters around here in line. Strenk was a bastard, but he kept his head down and didn’t make trouble.”

“Except for that boy,” Hal said, and Axton grimaced harder, at thought of what other supposedly-unmade trouble went unnoticed beneath the sheriff’s nose.

The crow’s feet lines around Dearborn’s gaze relaxed a bit. “Vesper’s a good lad,” he said, before the tanned squint returned. “But, he never said a word about any wrongdoing. Now, I don’t know how the law works where you come from, but, unless I’m forced to draw my gun, I’ve learned it’s best to leave it holstered.” His hand shifted ever-so-slightly to the grip of said gun at his hip. “I expect

folks around here do the same. Strenk knew that. I'd advise you learn it, too."

Axton sniffed at the sheriff's subtle warning. "If you're not pressing charges, we'll be on our way." He didn't wait for Dearborn to stop him but strode to the street, taking a long drag of air that made him cough.

Hal glanced back over his shoulder. "The law feels less like law the farther out we get."

"Doesn't matter, anyway." That bilious discomfort had wormed its way from Axton's bowels to his stomach to his throat, making him cough again. "Law's just High Command under a different name. Bunch of self-righteous fucks who think they know best." He croaked the last, as another retching cough burst from his chest, sending spittle flying over his fist.

Hal braced him with a hand. "Are you all right?" he said, when Axton lurched to the nearest alley and doubled over, a tide of wretched vomit spewing from his lips. Hal grabbed him around the chest, holding him mostly upright as his stomach revolted against its contents. There wasn't much there, so the surge didn't last. But Hal stayed at his side, massaging one hand up and down his spine. "Take it easy. Deep breaths, now."

Axton did as told, holding the last breath while he rolled enough spit for a cleansing.

"You need some water, or-?"

Axton shook his head, fighting against the threat of shakes and a shuddering tongue. "I need a drink," he burbled, and squeezed his eyes shut at the sound of his wavering voice.

Hal moved his arm around him, but Axton shoved his elbow into the engineer's chest, jerking away with a

bubbling spit of warning: “Don’t! Don’t do that. Just- Just get me a drink.”

Hal blinked at him. “Do you think that’s a good-”

“I don’t want to think. Jesus, if there is one thing I do *not* want to do, right now, it is fucking *think*! Now, can you just shut up and let me get a fucking drink? Please?”

Hal lifted his hands in slow release. “Okay.” He shifted to the side and let Axton pass from the alley to The Swan bar across the way, where the first thing Axton did was order himself a double shot of the very strongest whisky they had on cask.

One drink flowed into another, and another, until Axton couldn’t keep his focus fixed on anything for longer than a millisecond without swaying on. But what difference did it make? A steady hand hadn’t done him any good against Strenk-

“Gimme ‘nother,” he slurred to no one in particular, and pitched back another shot that sent him tumbling, to the hard wooden floor first, followed by the thick pitch of the unknown.

He should have woken on the floor, but he found himself in a bed, instead. Not a particularly comfy one – his legs tangled in rough-worn sheets and his face mashed into a pillow more flat than fluff – but definitely a bed. And in daylight: bright, streaming daylight that threatened to blind him even through his eyelids.

It was cliché as hell, but he muttered from around his cotton-thick tongue, “Where am I?”

Hal answered from somewhere close by. “Flat above the gun shop.”

“Gun shop?” Axton echoed, blinking his eyes open. The blinks, sticky with crust, made a dull clicking sound in

his head, like the sound of a shell casing against teeth-

The burn of bilious puke rolled to the top of his throat. Axton held it down, but an involuntary belch kept behind his lips made him grimace.

"Vesper insisted," Hal said, and Axton looked his way, to find him sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the bed with several rifle pieces laid around him. "And, you were in no condition to travel back to the bungalow, so I took him up on the offer."

Axton frowned. "Did I black out or somethin'?"

"Oh, you were in rare form. First, you tried to start a brawl with a barstool. Then, you proceeded to proposition no less than three bartenders, one of whom was actually a robotic, that did not care at all for your choice of foreplay technique." Hal snorted, adding, "You're lucky you didn't lose that finger, considering how far you put it up that 'bot's data port."

Axton started to shake his head but the pain of even that simple motion made him groan. He arched up and grimaced again, this time for a sharp pain in his backside. "Why does my ass hurt?"

"Probably because you fell down the stairs."

"I fell down the stairs?"

"You're not as graceful as you think," Hal scolded. "Especially when you're dead drunk."

Axton gave another groan and pushed his face back into the pillow. After a long minute of breathing into fabric, he mumbled, "I'm sorry."

Hal paused for a sigh before replying. "You had a shit night. It happens." Another short pause, and he muttered, "I'm sorry I let you fall down the stairs."

Axton turned his head to look at the wall tracing a

splintering crack with his eyes. He stared it into wavering ambiguity, unlocking his jaw to ask, "Does it hurt you?"

"When I fall?"

"When we fuck."

Startled silence hung between them another long moment. Then, Hal said, "No," his voice dulcet-soft but steady.

Axton's fingers scratched the pillowcase as he clenched it, hard. "I don't want to be like him."

"You're not," Hal said, still quiet but also firm.

"Sex is sex," Axton told him, still staring at the wall.

"No," Hal said again. A low clink of metal and scrape of boot sole preceded the faint shift of the mattress, and, while the engineer didn't reach out to touch, Axton could feel him there, a subtle brush of comforting aura warming his clammy flesh. "What he did," Hal murmured; "it wasn't about sex. He might have used his cock, but it was never about sex. It was about power," he said, his voice turning guttural. "And control. Not...Not like what you do." In the oppressive stillness of the room, even his tender whisper rattled in Axton's head. "It wasn't anything like what you do."

"He was so *fast*..." Axton hissed, from between lips he tried to keep clamped shut.

"I know. I'm sorry." Now, Hal's fingers did touch, the barest stroke of the short hairs at the top of Axton's neck. "But, he's not going to hurt anyone ever again."

That splinter in the plaster snapped to sharp definition as Axton narrowed his gaze. This time, there was no uneasy roll of his bowels or rawness in his throat. "It's not good enough. This planet is full of trash," he rumbled, and clenched the fist he hadn't been able to make since

stepping into the way of a brutal psychopath whose gray matter he should have splattered at first sight with his Jakobs. “And we’re gonna clean it up.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Going Commando

Axton lifted his glass, making a show of drinking as he passed his gaze over the midday bar crowd.

He hadn't quite believed Hal when the engineer had said work relaxed him, but this last week spent studying and tracking down the resident scum of this border world had felt great, making him all but forget his experience with Strenk. The man's name didn't even bring pause any longer. If anything, memory of Strenk's guttural voice and vicious sneer set Axton's blood pumping, in fierce determination to clean up and set right at least this tiny sector of the galaxy.

Their current lack of resources kept them from going after any big game, but they could tackle the smaller local targets. Like the wiry skin-flick dealer in the corner, the one with the short nails painted black and the lips and brows shining with metal piercings.

Axton faced front again, murmuring into his glass, "I hope you're still with me, darlin'." He glanced up, making certain he could see the skip in the mirror behind the rows

of bottles. “‘Cause unless there’s a freak convention in town, that’s our dealer at the table in the back, five o’clock.”

Hal’s voice gave a faint crackle in the comm link in his ear: “I see him.”

“Any sign of our buyer?”

“Not that I can tell from up here. But, I’m sure he’ll show. Vesper’s intel’s been good, so far.”

“You’d better not be getting sweet on that beanpole.”

Hal blew a teasing hum through the comm. “He does have those nice lips.”

Axton sniffed. “Maybe you should ask him to be your partner.”

“You’re one to talk. Eying that bouncy barmaid of yours all afternoon.”

Axton shot a wink down the bar to the girl in question, and Kaija answered with a smile fetching enough to distract. “My interest in that filly is purely sentimental.”

Even the comm processors couldn’t keep the sneer from the engineer’s tone: “Right.”

“She’s got a pretty smile,” Axton told him, admiring the tempting shift of Kaija’s cleavage as she poured off a rise of foam from a beer. “I like the way it makes me feel.”

“Like a paedophile?”

Axton returned his façade-focus to his drink and grumbled, “Just keep your eyes on Gothier.”

“Jesus,” Hal muttered. “Why is it that every skip we run into insists on having some ridiculous name?”

“You tell me.” Axton tipped his glass up, smirking into his ale as he added, “*Harald*.”

“My mother gave me that name. This idiot, on the other hand, made the conscious decision to go around

calling himself *Gothier*.” Hal snorted. “More like, Wankenstein.”

Axton laughed a line of bubbles into his drink when the saloon doors squawked open. He tensed a second before looking into the mirror, where he saw Vesper walk in and ease up to the bar, four seats down.

Kaija bounced over, all light and smiles, and Vesper smiled back and gave her an order. But, as she moved to get his drink, he lowered his head and whispered three words meant more for Axton than her:

“Right behind me.”

Axton loosed his hold on his glass and watched the doors again. A muscly young jock type, heavily browned from long days on an open-air sea rig, loped in, head swinging back and forth in anxious preoccupation. His stride faltered in the middle of the room before he corrected his course with a nod of identification, and he moved to the shaded table in the back, exchanging a few words with pale-faced Gothier. The skip nodded at him and Jocko sat, reaching into the back of his trousers for a wad of cash.

Axton’s eye caught the start of that exchange, but it steadied on the metallic wheel of a compact submachine gun tucked into the buyer’s drawers. He slid from his barstool, making no noise save a low, “I’m going in,” to Hal.

“On my way,” the engineer said, all business. “Watch yourself.”

Axton decided to ignore that last – he neither wanted nor needed the coddling, especially for two-bit dealers and wheelers. It would take a minute for Hal to make it to street level, though, so he took his time with his approach,

using an overstated drunken sway to mask his readiness. He stumbled up to Gothier's table and slapped a hand on the buyer's shoulder, exclaiming, "Pisser!"

The jock jerked up in his seat, but Axton settled him down again. Across the table, Gothier narrowed his eyes.

Axton leaned in among them, blathering in his best affected slur, "Where you been, bro? I been waitin' fer yer ass all day!"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," Jocko stammered.

"Lemme buy a drink for you and your friend." Axton leaned across the table toward Gothier. "What's yer name, pal?"

"What's going on?" the skip grumbled, painted lips parting in a menacing sneer.

Jocko started to panic. "I don't know this guy!" He tried to shake off Axton's hold. "I don't know you, man!"

"Sorry, bro, my bad. I thought you were Pisser." Axton moved his hand to the back of Jocko's neck. "But I guess you look more like a shitface," he growled, as he crashed the buyer's face into the table with a crunch of cartilage against wood.

Gothier bolted from the table while Axton was still pulling the SMG from Jocko's pants. Vesper tried stepping into the skip's way, but Gothier gave him a slippery shove, sending him stumbling against the bar, where Kaija gave a shout.

Axton tossed the SMG to Vesper as he ran for the door. "Secure that fuck!" he ordered, before barking another command into his comm. "Hal, incoming!"

"On him," Hal said.

Axton flew through the saloon doors after Gothier,

pumping his arms for speed. Fuck, but that spry bastard could move: the edge of his black duster was already whipping into the alley between the Wayward's Order Chapel and the Leviathan's Hole casino. Hal was right behind him, though, his hand clutching the Drehlafette at the ready.

Axton rounded the corner as Gothier spun from the high blocking wall at the end of the alley. The skip reached behind his back for some unseen weapon, but before Axton could pull his Jakobs from its holster, the autocannon clanked up, its red targeting laser bearing straight at Gothier's face.

Hal smirked. "Don't bother. Mine's bigger."

Gothier slumped in defeat, but not without spitting, "Fuck you, assholes."

Axton stepped around the whirring Drehlafette and grabbed one of Gothier's hands, swinging his arm into a lock. "Ya hear that?" he said back to Hal. "This shitbag's the one dealing in kiddie porn, and he's got the nerve to call us the assholes." He shoved the skip to the wall. "Wait 'til the sheriff puts you in his communal jail cell. Then, you'll meet some real assholes."

Gothier's pale face went even paler, leaving Axton to snicker as he locked the skip's wrists together with a zip-tie. They wrangled the pornographer back to the street, where they met Vesper hustling the buyer in the direction of the sheriff's office. Jocko's arms were bound with heavy leather back shackles attached to a belted collar, whose bondage-like intricacy made Axton pause.

"You don't mess around," he told Vesper, duly impressed.

Vesper's face flushed as he kept his gaze forward.

“They’re not mine.”

“They’re mine,” Kaija announced from Vesper’s side. “So, I’ll need them back.”

Hal’s step stuttered, but he flashed Axton a smile. “And I thought tracing skips was dangerous.”

Axton gave said skip a shove. “Not this kind.”

True to that, Gothier’s reward didn’t amount to much, for money or result – some other of his kind was bound to be crowding the cyber-pathways in less than a week – but it provided enough to get Axton and Hal started in real business again. They offered a substantial portion to Vesper, both for his help and for a list of gun-making supplies Hal had only begun to rattle off when Vesper interrupted:

“I don’t care about the money. But, there is something I’d like to ask,” he said, as his smooth face pinched with puppy dog longing. “A favor.”

Axton shared a wary glance with Hal before shaking his head. “Look, kid. I’ll admit, your intel was good, and you stepped up back at the bar. I’m grateful for that. But, hunting ain’t the life for you-”

“I don’t want to be a bounty hunter,” Vesper interrupted again.

Axton cocked a brow at him. “So, uh, what’re you-”

“It’s Kaija,” Vesper said, his tone oddly desperate.

“What about her?”

“She likes you.”

A sudden swell of masculine pride made Axton grin. “Does she, now?” he said, and Hal gave a silent chide with his elbow.

Vesper nodded, with that same urging anxiety as before. “I want you to take her away.”

Axton stopped short, so it was Hal who said, “What do you mean? Where?”

“Anywhere,” Vesper said. “Just not here. They don’t treat her poorly at The Swan, but.... This town – this planet! It’s no place for her. She should be with someone who can take care of her, treat her right. Someplace safe and...away from here.”

Axton had never heard that sort of selflessness in anyone’s voice before. He certainly hadn’t expected to hear it so far out on the Edge, where the lost souls of the galaxy went to scabble and scrape and make their fortune – or find their grave – among their fellow damned. But here was this boy ready to give them everything in the universe that meant anything at all to him, for the sake of a pretty girl’s virtue.

A slow, drawling smile came to Axton’s lips. “Shit, son, you got more here to keep her safe than anybody. There’s an arsenal on these four walls!”

“And, you protected her from your boss all that time,” Hal added.

Vesper swung his gaze away shyly. “She’d never want to be with me.”

“Well, not if you keep being a dumbass and don’t do anything about it!” Axton blew a cool and knowing sniff. “Show her some sweetness. See if she bites.”

Vesper’s face fell. “You think she bites?”

“Jesus,” Axton groaned, but Hal shut him up with a stern look.

“Just talk to her,” the engineer advised. “And, be nice. Nice blokes finish first more often than you’d think.”

A romantic notion, though Axton wasn’t entirely certain it held true. He said so later that evening, as they

had a drink at the saloon while keeping surreptitious watch on their would-be lovebirds. “You really believe that?”

“Believe what?” Hal said, his attention glued to Vesper and Kaija making hushed conversation at the other end of the bar.

“About nice guys finishing first.”

Hal turned to him, a smirk firmly in place. “You usually finish first.”

Axton sneered. “You’re funny.”

Hal turned back to Vesper and Kaija again. As he did, the diverted curl of his smile faded a bit in his profile. “You were right when you said the galaxy’s full of bastards. Crazy, bloody, evil bastards. But, it’s got some good people, too. So, if you’re lucky enough to find someone you want to be with....” He shrugged, as Vesper reached across the bar to take Kaija’s hand. “You should be with them. No games, no ultimatums. Just...honesty,” he said, as Kaija bounced higher on her toes to reach back across the counter and squeeze her other hand over Vesper’s.

Axton smiled for their simple affection. As he glanced at Hal, he blanked at the engineer’s curiously tender look. “What?”

“That was a good thing you did, for them.” Hal smiled with his own affection. “Nice.”

Axton felt a welcome flutter at his favor but tried not to let it show. “Don’t go spreadin’ it around. It’d ruin my reputation as a hardcase.”

“Heaven forfend!” Hal said, and laughed.

Axton did, too. It felt...*good*, to do something for somebody else, for a change. Of course, Vesper’s offer of

their choice of gear still applied. But, for this one night, Axton didn't mind putting on hold thoughts of fortune and adventure.

"So, Mister Hunter Hardcase," Hal said, startling his thoughts. "Who's next on our list? The Bone Brothers? Calamity Jayce? Or someone closer to the top of the most wanted?"

"I was thinkin' we should regroup a while. Set you up with a workshop, maybe, where you can get back to making guns."

Hal's face lit up with a grin that showed off that crooked eyetooth. "I can get behind that!"

His bright smile started an excited tumbling in Axton's belly, that made him chuckle and drawl, "Figured I owed you somethin' nice, too. And, who knows?" He swayed to his feet, bending close to Hal with a wolfish grin. "Maybe you'll finish first, this time."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

No Contest

He woke to kisses faint as a fading dream: brief, soundless strokes of lips across his skin from shoulder to breast to belly. A flicking dip of tongue into his navel made him stretch and tighten the muscles in his thighs, rolling his hips in urging rhythm, and he hummed, sliding his feet over the sheets and spreading his knees apart, to offer invitation. Two knowing fingers stroked the underside of his balls, and his half-ready dick bounced up, naked and free. Only for a second, though, as the traveling mouth captured the head, and the witting fingers gripped the shaft, and Axton enjoyed the finest wake-up call known to man.

He'd spent the last almost-two weeks with only his right hand for sexual company, so it didn't take long for Hal's mouth to bring him off, especially when he started in with the ass-teasing. Still, it took a few minutes for Axton to come down – or was it up? – enough from his luxury to mumble, “Hell, darlin’, you oughtta write a manual.”

Hal chuckled as he crawled up beside him in the bed. “I

hadn't intended that, at the start. But," he said, blowing a low, desirous hum as he laid his fingertips upon Axton's belly; "this body has a way of changing a man's mind."

"I'm glad it does. That's a nice way to wake up." He opened his eyes and shot Hal a lazy smile. "It's nice any time."

"Well, I didn't want you thinking I'd lost interest." Hal drew his hand up and down the center of Axton's chest in light, errant design. "What with the new workshop and all."

"I like watchin' you work," Axton said, mostly to appease but also because it was true. "Especially when you do it in these tight little shorts!" He slid his hand over the familiar bulge between the engineer's legs, pleased to find it already more than a little bit hard.

Hal's chuckle became a hum. "I know you like a bit of a show," he said, playing his fingers over the trail of short hairs that led down to the brush between Axton's legs. He didn't venture too far south but brought his stroke up again, circling the navel with his nail.

Axton cringed his belly for the tickling but said, "You sure that show's just for me?"

Hal stopped and blinked at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Axton played up a shrug. "You've been spending an awful lot of time with Vesper, lately."

"He's interested to learn." Hal jabbed a finger into Axton's chest. "Which is more than I can say for some!"

Axton shook his head. "Don't start that again. The autocannon's your job, not mine."

"It should be both our jobs. Fifty-fifty partners, remember? For work and reward."

“I do my job. Besides, you like the tinkerin’. That ain’t work, for you.”

“Your problem is that you think anything that involves effort is work. But, learning about the Drehlafette can be fun!”

Axton remained stoic against Hal’s goofy enthusiasm. “You do know you’re a nerd, right?”

Hal slumped under a low groan. “Oh, come on. You got to play drill sergeant with me. Let me school you in something, for a change.”

Axton snorted. “I didn’t leave Dahl just to go back into training.”

“Don’t think of it as training. Think of it as broadening your horizons.”

“My horizons are broad enough, thanks.” The engineer looked at him but said nothing, and Axton scolded, “No. Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Hal shrugged. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Don’t pull that blue-blooded, stiff upper lip shit on me. You got a problem, you say it to my face.”

Hal swung his gaze away. “I’m not saying there’s anything *wrong* with having grown up on a farm, but....” He trailed off and clamped his mouth shut, leaving Axton to stare after him a long second, eyes narrowing with suspicious focus.

“Are you callin’ me a hick?”

“No.” The blue gaze flicked back his way. “I mean, just because you have some provincial attitudes-”

“Provincial?” Axton didn’t exactly know what that meant, but from the snooty sniff of Hal’s nostrils, he assumed it wasn’t flattering. “About what?”

“You have to admit,” Hal said, in a hushed, thoughtful

voice, “your sexual technique doesn’t involve much nuance. There’s an awful lot of rutting, in there.”

Axton waggled his finger under Hal’s nose. “Now, wait a second! If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s fuck.” He pointed the same finger to the chain around his neck, the one with the diamond ring and dog tags. “Or, did you forget I was married for five years?”

“How could I? I’m reminded of that fact every time that bloody ring swings into my face.”

Axton stiffened at his partner’s faint snarl of resentment. They’d never spoken of Sarah since that first introduction on Andromeda, yet here she was, looming between them in their bed, a bed that should have been for just the two of them.

He didn’t like using Sarah’s memory to antagonize, but Axton couldn’t let that last jab go without a rejoinder: “I bet I’ve satisfied more women than you, in my time.”

“That’s hardly a worthy comparison. Besides,” Hal said, as he rolled on top into a straddle position. He bent low, to put them nearly nose-to-nose with a wicked snicker. “It’s about quality, not quantity.”

Axton slipped his hands from Hal’s thighs to his hips, which rolled in an easy glide that rubbed their groins together. He smiled. “Can’t I have both?”

“Maybe,” Hal replied in a pleasant teasing tone. “If you’re nice.”

“I can be nice,” Axton said, tilting his head to let them kiss.

He might have enjoyed looking at Hal in his tight shorts, but Axton preferred the bump and rub of their naked dicks, so, holding the suck of their lips, he shoved down the skivvies as far as he could with his hands and

used the hook of his toes to do the rest. Hal laughed around his captured tongue, the cringe of his belly making his cock bounce. Axton replied with a delighted rumble from his core, squeezing that firm ass again as he rolled his hips, too. They didn't fuck then, but the intent lay clear between them, with each stroke, lick, and groan.

His partner's cock strained sweaty and thick against him, and Axton challenged, "Still think I'm a no-talent hick?"

Hal shook his head. "I never said that. Primitive, yes. Prosaic, perhaps. But, never not talented."

Despite his words and the eager drip of ready pre-cum, Hal managed a slow, tempered kiss that nonetheless set Axton to wanting even more. He raised his lips to Hal's ear, flicking his tongue over the helix. "Let's fuck."

"Don't be an animal," Hal said, equally breathy in Axton's ear. "You're better than that."

He wasn't – not when Hal got all his pistons firing. Still, Axton sucked a steady inhalation and murmured, "Tell me what to do?"

The younger man rose up from their twining clutch. "I'll do one better," he said, and grinned as he shifted from top to side. He scooted below sight then, rolling Axton up onto one shoulder as he marked a slow path of kneading touches and nuzzling kisses over his back, to the valley of his spine.

Axton closed his eyes and let out a cooling sigh. "You realize, all this does is relax a guy."

"That is the idea," Hal told him between light, languid pecks.

Another indolent sigh, and Axton let himself drift nearly to doze under his partner's gentle massage. "Don't

really get how this is s'posed to be foreplay," he mumbled...when Hal's tongue dipped below his tailbone into the cleft of his ass.

A more jittery him might have flinched or jerked away, but the Axton-of-now only sucked a breath through his nostrils, letting it go from his dropped-open lips as a low, "Oh. Okay." Hal's tongue answered with a flutter of pointy strokes as he dug his fingers into Axton's more giving ass flesh and worked his wet probe deeper, rolling his spit around and over and into the sensitive hole of his opening.

"Ah, God," Axton said, more grunt than words, and pushed back against Hal's stiff tongue. As the engineer's nose rustled against his tailbone, one tiny part of Axton's brain still concerned with thought wondered why this felt so much better than a simple finger. For the wet, maybe, or the sin, or- oh, fuck, what did it matter?

He pushed backward with his hips again, grunting another half-prayer, and squeezed his eyes shut, to hold at bay everything except Hal's delving exploration: his wheezing breath, his clenching belly, even his aching dick straining for attention. He scratched at the bed, matching the rough rustle of his nails over the sheet with an "*ah-ah-ah*" gasping he didn't even recognize as his own voice until it blurted, "Give me your cock."

Hal's murmur kissed the base of his spine. "Are you sure?"

"Jesus," Axton sputtered. "Would you just fuck me?"

"All right," Hal said, his voice close to Axton's ear of a sudden. Something cool and slick and big – much bigger than the point of Hal's tongue – pressed to his opening, teasing the nerves, stretching the skin.

“Oh, God,” Axton growled, over and over, as Hal slipped into him, little by little. He bucked in reverse, to make him go faster, harder, deeper-

“Slow down,” Hal warned, but Axton threw one arm behind him, found Hal’s thigh, and clenched his fingers there, muscling the younger man to play along. It made Hal pray, too: “God, you feel good,” he said, and reached around, to stroke Axton’s thickening dick with his hand.

Axton gasped. “Don’t stop-”

“I’m going to come-”

“Oh, fuck, *yes!*” No sooner had Axton said it than he felt the spurt of Hal’s spunk in his ass, bathing his excited nerves in slick relief. It gave him a swift second orgasm, less than half of the first in release but far more draining.

He slumped onto his belly as Hal pulled himself out, more easily than Axton had expected him to do. “You weren’t in much,” he guessed.

“Just the tip.” Hal snuggled against him once more and chuckled. “It’s enough, though, yeah?”

“Amazing,” Axton agreed, as their oil-thick sweat started to cool under a drift of sea breeze from the open window. It chilled, but he didn’t move.

“We need to clean these sheets,” Hal said, though he didn’t move, either, just kissed at the nape of Axton’s neck.

“Later.” Axton stroked his hand behind, finding the small of Hal’s back, this time. He pulled himself tight against that warm, naked firmness, and craned his head over one shoulder to ask, “Whattaya got for round two?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

To the Wind

Guns, guns, guns: all manner of them littered the bungalow, in varying stages of de-, re-, even initial construction. As he looked around the collection, Axton sighed. He liked guns, of course, because it was a point of his chosen occupation to like guns; a hunter had to know how to hold his own hand to hand and behind a wheel, but he could only be so effective without a gun. But this-! He had to shove aside a pile of slides and stops just to make the kaffe.

He went over to the small second room off the main one, pausing to lean against the doorway and sip at his kaffe as he watched Hal. The engineer stood at his table, head down, long fingers plucking this locking mechanism, that trigger assembly. As he picked up a slide lock and glanced at it before trading it for another upon the table, Axton finally let go his low complaint:

“Y’know, I set you up with this workshop so you could keep your work *in the workshop*. It looks like some kinda gun-bomb went off out here!”

Hal turned around. "Sorry!" He scratched at the line of his nose, leaving a smudge of gun oil shining there. "I couldn't find the right ejectors before. I'll tidy once I've finished up this bit."

Axton pushed up from the door frame and crossed to the engineer's work table. He traded his cup for a random rag, found a clean spot in the cloth, and used it to rub at Hal's nose. "It's good seein' you so happy, darlin', but we haven't had a job in weeks! What's the point in bein' a hunter without somethin' to hunt?"

Hal plucked the rag from Axton's fingers and smirked. "If you're bored, just say that."

"I'm bored!" Axton told him, and they both laughed. He eased his arms around the engineer, one hand straying into the back pocket of his trousers for a brief grip of ass. Despite that pleasant feel, he played his mouth into a moue. "I need a challenge."

"You've seen the state of the warrant boards," Hal began, but Axton shook his head.

"Fuck the boards. We don't need some half-assed bounty list to tell us what needs doing. I bet half the mugs walkin' around Dero have outstanding warrants that haven't even made it to the galactic net, yet." He hugged Hal close by the hips as his smile returned. "I got a nose for the hunt. Let's find ourselves one."

The sexy curl of Hal's lips gave away his favor, even before he said, "Just give me a few hours."

"A few hours?" Axton repeated, easing back a half-step.

Hal gestured to the gun pieces on the bench. "I can't just leave all this out!"

Axton groaned under his breath. "How 'bout this, then? You clean up here while I run ahead and rustle us up

some trouble. I'm good at that."

"No doubt," Hal said. "But, I don't think it wise for you to go in alone."

"Wise? No. Fun?" Axton grinned. "Yes."

"At least take the Drehlafette with you." Hal swung the focus of his gaze down and up again, and tweaked one side of his mouth. "If you think you can handle her, that is."

"Is that a challenge?"

"I don't know." Hal stretched his smirk wider. "Is it?"

Axton lifted his brows in genuine surprise. "You mean you're trusting me - alone - with your girlfriend?"

Hal's dare did more than intrigue: "I'm getting hard just thinking about it."

Axton stepped in again, to rub his palm over the evidence. "So you are. Maybe we should do somethin' about that," he said, and, with a slap of leather and jingle of metal, he pulled open Hal's trousers.

The engineer didn't waver. "I thought you were going to find us a hunt?"

"I will." Axton held his gaze as he pushed both trousers and shorts past Hal's hips to his thighs. "First, I want to suck you off a bit."

"Oh," Hal said, and eased back against his work table, gripping the edge with both hands as Axton went to his knees. "All right, then."

The engineer's dick bounced free in front of him, but Axton first took a moment to run a long drag of his tongue from the valley of Hal's hipbone to his waist, once on each side. The younger man blew a hum, and his cock gave an eager flutter. Axton steadied it with his fingers, stroking it once from head to base. His attention made the

hood slide back and stay, showing off the slick and tender cap. Axton admired it a second before closing his eyes to concentrate, as he led it to his lips. He suppressed the urge to ravish and kept his suckling slow, determined to prove his technique involved more than the blunt brazenness his partner had complained about no more than a week ago.

As though to validate this more sophisticated effort, Hal didn't complain. He didn't say anything, in fact, as Axton played between deepening sucks a roll of his tongue over and around the firm, thick shaft. Hal didn't last longer than a few minutes, either, shuddering to a release that tasted of sharp licorice and rich malt, and that Axton swallowed down with a satisfied smile.

He offered the wilting rod a parting flick of his tongue, to keep the sweetness there. That, he passed back to Hal, in a languid, lapping kiss as they pressed together again, chest-to-chest. "Pretty nice, huh?" he said.

Hal nuzzled against the short growth of stubble over Axton's cheek. "Very. Would you like me to return the favor?"

The thought tempted, but Axton shook his head. "That's okay." He gave a gentle tug on Hal's pants, bringing them up to his waist again, and snickered. "Being horny keeps my senses sharp."

Hal pulled his trousers up and slipped his belt back through its buckle. "You certain?"

"Yeah. Come find me in town when you're ready. I'll scare us up some bad guys."

"I'll join you as soon as I can."

"No rush. I got the missus to keep me company," Axton said, and locked the Drehlafette into her new shoulder harness before striding out the door to the beach beyond.

Hal had designed the harness based on an old shotgun scabbard, upgrading it with multiple magnetic and physical safety catches and releases tailored to the autocannon brick's dimensions. It added extra weight that imbalanced on the first wearing, but being both easy to reach and tucked out of the way, it worked like a charm in terms of access, so much Hal had cursed himself for not thinking of the design before. Axton couldn't fault him for the oversight. The autocannon wasn't a typical weapon, after all.

He practiced unsnapping and snapping it back into place as he walked toward Dero, in an effort to get used to the motion and sensation. To his surprise, it felt pretty damn good. It wasn't the construction that surprised him, of course: the engineer had built the Drehlafette itself. It was that Axton had never considered the autocannon might fit so naturally to *him*. Shame Hal couldn't build them another one. Axton's nerves tingled to imagine how much damage and intimidation *two* independent autocannons could cause.

He walked into the gun shop, where he almost didn't recognize Kaija sorting pistol parts at the counter. She'd wound her dark hair in a binding wraparound of braid, and loose trousers had replaced her skirts. He did notice the alluring curve of her tits - accentuated now by a corseted vest rather than the low-slung ruffles of a blouse - as well as her chirrupy greeting:

"Howdy, Mister Axton!"

"Miss Kaija," he said, making a conscious effort to look her in the eyes. He wondered if Vesper had gotten lucky with her, yet, or if there were still room in whatever bed she was sleeping in, these nights, for a man lacking in

feminine company. "You're looking pretty as a picture this fine day."

She smiled, her lips not dressy red but natural pink. Still luscious, though. "So are you."

He showed off his teeth in a flattered grin. He missed the old flouncy whore-garb but had to admit: "Workin' in the gun shop suits you."

She nodded, a few dark tendrils of hair bouncing in front of her ears. "I like learning. And Vesper's real smart. It's just...." Her smile wilted.

"Just what?"

Kaija refreshed her light humor with a quick shake of her head. "It's nothing."

He reached out, thumbing one corner of her mouth. "It's not nothin' that's put a frown on that pretty face."

The lips beneath his thumb pressed up in a new smile, but it didn't last. "Can I ask you a question?"

Hal probably would have called his sudden interest opportunist, but Axton couldn't let this buxom belle go unaided. Not with her having been such a help to them in the past. And with him being so bored at the moment. But mostly the first. "Ask away."

"You think I'm pretty," she said, with a quiet ache in her voice. "Don't you?"

He bobbed his head. "I certainly do."

"And, would you bed me?"

The question, asked so plainly, made him stare, as he started to feel a confining stiffness in his pants.

"Not for just any good time," she said, as though mistaking his momentary pause for confusion. "But, because you like me?"

He took a step closer to her, just one, but only the

slimmest thread separated them for measure. "I certainly would."

"And, you wouldn't think it silly, or untoward, or... *hypocrisy* for a girl like me to ask a man to be with her just because she likes him?"

"I certainly would not," he said, and a shift of his feet and a breath blew away the final distance between them. He lifted her face toward his and dropped his voice to a murmur as he swept his gaze over her. "In fact, I'd consider it an honor if a fine young lady like yourself took enough of a shine to a rogue like me to invite me into her bed. Especially if it's for honest fondness."

Her big eyes shone, full of soul. "Really?"

"Definitely."

"Okay," she said, and the next moment worth any remembering was in the spare room above the gun shop, the same where Axton had once recovered from an evening of too many stiff drinks, and where he now slipped his hand under Kaija's unbuttoned vest as he dabbed pecking kisses along her neck.

She didn't flinch from his lips, but she didn't moan or sigh. Her breast didn't perk under the stroke of his palm, either with gooseflesh or arousal. For a second, he thought maybe he was just being too gentle, that she liked it rougher. She'd been the one with those leather back shackles, after all. Deep down, though, he doubted it.

He drew up from her. "You're not feelin' this, are you?" It came out more statement than question, but she answered anyway:

"It's fine." She smiled a little. "You're real sweet."

"Just not the target you were aimin' for," he guessed, cracking a wry smile. "Am I right?"

“I’m sorry.” She shifted away, pulling the halves of her vest closed over her chest. “This wasn’t a very nice thing for me to do.”

The rejection might have stung under ordinary circumstances, but, this time, he only shrugged. “That’s okay. Everybody gets lonely.”

Kaija slumped with a heavy sigh, looking suddenly very young. “When Vesper asked me to come work over here, I jumped at the chance. I mean, this is a real trade, not just fancy stuff on my back. And, he’s a good teacher: smart and patient and real gentle. I like him.” A dusting of pleasant bashfulness colored her cheeks, and she smiled. “And, I thought he liked me, too. But he won’t even touch me,” she said, as the pink turned dark with an exasperated breath. “Let alone bed me!”

Axton scraped his teeth over his lip. It still tingled from her taste, just as his fingers still itched for her skin. But his inner ear hummed with Hal’s voice, from not that long ago: *“If you’re lucky enough to find someone you want to be with, you should be with them. No games, no ultimatums. Just honesty.”*

Axton sat back, pulled a breath, and drawled, “Well, y’know, he’s probably just...scared.”

Kaija scoffed. “Of me?”

“You’re a sassy, sexy little miss. One who’s clued-up about what to do in the bedroom. That can be intimidating for a down-home boy.” He relaxed his smile. “Especially one who doesn’t want to get hurt.”

Her momentary flare of exasperation disappeared. “I’d never hurt him! All that stuff I used to do: johns asked me to do that. I only did it ’cause that’s what they’d pay me for.”

He chuckled at her tender concern. “It ain’t quite that

kinda hurt. More like, when you trust somebody, and they take advantage of that, and still send you up-river.”

Kaija pinched her lips together. “You mean Mister Strenk.”

He’d been thinking of Sarah, and all the whispered *I love yous* gone to waste, but the comparison held for Vesper’s bastard boss, too. “That one’s better off left buried.” He patted her knee and smiled again. “Your clever boyo likes you, though.”

“You think so?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Just give him time. He’ll come around, believe me.” He winked. “If you can wait that long, that is.”

“I can wait,” she said, the more coy shade to her cheeks returning with a new smile.

So they waited, out front of the shop until Vesper returned, his runner laden with supplies from Halimede, at nearly the same time Hal arrived, looking flush from the heat but refreshed all the same.

Vesper looked at Kaija. “Want to help me unload?”

“Sure,” she said, hopping up from her seat and dusting at her thigh as she bounced to Vesper’s side.

“Gently,” Axton reminded, and she giggled as she followed Vesper into the shop, both their arms full with boxes.

Hal came to stand at Axton’s shoulder. “You’re staring.”

“That boy better make his move soon,” Axton said, still following Kaija’s round bottom with his eyes as he got to his feet.

“Or what? You will?” Hal snorted. “Dream on, old man. You know you’re all about the cock.”

“You are, maybe.” Axton faced him with a sneer.

“Mine. But I-” he said, and stopped, for the sight of twin bandoliers reflecting the late afternoon sun.

“What?” Hal prompted.

Axton kept staring. “That’s Calamity Jayce.”

Hal looked around. “Where?”

“There.” Axton nodded far up the road. “Right outside the doc’s.”

Hal followed his indication with a squint. “Your senses *are* sharp.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Axton nudged him and grinned. “What do you say? Wanna grab us a bad guy?”

“Need you even ask?” Hal reached over his shoulder, to pull a blunt sawn-off into both hands.

Axton hadn’t even noticed him wearing it. “When’d you put that together?”

“Please. I can build one of these in my sleep,” Hal said, and gave the shotgun a swift, thunking pump. “Shall we?”

Axton flared his nostrils. “Fuck. Now, I’m really horny. Let’s make this quick.”

Hal grinned as he started them up the road, side by side. “What did I tell you? All about the cock.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Death at the Press of a Button

The runner jumped a waste ditch and landed with a crunch of shocks, making Axton clench both the rollbar and his teeth. “Why do they always gotta run?”

Hal sniffed from behind the wheel. “Well, if you hadn’t spooked him-”

“Hey, I wasn’t the one pointing the shotgun at him!”

“His pistol was *in his hand*. I wasn’t about to approach him unarmed. Hold on.”

The runner’s undercarriage squealed from another jump and landing, Axton’s teeth clattering with the impact. “We’re gonna run outta land before you catch up to him.”

“You’re the marksman. Can’t you shoot out his tyres or something?”

“Not with you screechin’ all over the road!”

Hal snickered. “Road, he says.”

Axton flashed a quick grin, too, as he pulled out his Jakobs and shifted his weight for a standing grasp of the rollbar. “Just try and keep her steady, darlin’,” he said, and

leaned halfway out the side of the runner. He took aim and fired. Miss, miss, hit: straight into the boot. The fourth shot went through the rear shield, and Calamity Jayce's runner screeched into a sharp curve.

"How was that a tyre?" Hal barked. "We need him alive!"

Their own runner ground to a stop at an angle to Jayce's, and Axton swung his door wide. "He's still breathin'," he said, when a spang of gunfire made him tumble from his seat to the ground. "Take cover!"

Hal scrambled out to crouch behind his door, too. As he reached back into the runner for the scattergun, he called through the car, "I guess I shouldn't have worried." Three rapid pops of ammunition and a splintering of fore-shield made both of them duck deeper. "Though, I wish we hadn't taken Vesper's car."

"We'll make Jayce pay for it." Axton did a quick reload of his pistol, snapping the cylinder back into place with a jerk of his wrist. He looked across at Hal, mouthing, *Ready?*

Hal nodded and held up three fingers. Axton did the same. They counted down together - ring, pointer, and middle - before scraping up from the dirt, weapons free and locked on the smuggler's runner.

The Calamity Kid had taken cover behind his own car, but he didn't answer with any more fire. That left the three of them in a standoff for a minute, until Axton called:

"Make it easy on yourself, Jayce. We've got you outnumbered and outgunned."

"Why're you after me, anyway?" Jayce called back. "What'd I ever do to anybody?"

"You run contraband," Hal said.

"So does everybody, out here. You know a better way to make a living?"

"Not everybody skims off the top." Axton scowled. "Or sells stuff after it's been poisoned."

"That's the hydro-farmers do that," Jayce returned. "Not me."

"That's not what your warrant says."

Jayce blew an audible snort. "Of course it'd say that! The locals don't want any competition. They want to keep down enterprising entrepreneurs like me."

"You believe this bleeding heart shit?" Axton muttered over to Hal, who shrugged.

Jayce kept going: "We're more alike than you think. We're all just trying to get by, out here."

"Do not compare us to your sorry dealer ass," Axton scolded.

"How 'bout this?" Jayce said, still hidden behind the car. "I give you twenty percent of my shipment, and you look the other way."

Axton scoffed. "Do we look like dope runners to you?"

"There's a lot of money in it, if you play your cards right. This stuff is a hundred percent, Malan grade. It sells itself!"

"We're not interested in goin' criminal." Axton straightened his gun arm with a snort. "Now, unless you got eighty grand in cash over there to cover the price on your head, we ain't making any deals." He cocked the hammer on the Jakobs, loud enough to be heard.

"Okay, okay. You can't blame a guy for trying."

"Toss your guns and quit wastin' our time." Axton shook his head, adding under his breath, "Asshole."

“Don’t shoot,” Jayce called, as a plasti-grip pistol skittered across the dirt, followed by another. “I’m coming out.”

Axton heard a steadying scrape of sole. He kept his sight trained on the car as he looked for the top of Jayce’s head. When it didn’t show after five seconds, he steadied his hold on his pistol and glanced at Hal, giving a quick jerk of his own head toward Jayce’s runner.

They each took one sidestep past their doors when a kilo bag flew up. It exploded with a shot, weed flying everywhere. In the drifting cloud, Jayce popped up, spraying semi-automatic fire.

Hal answered with a blast of tungsten composite. Axton capped off two fast shots of his own, when he heard the dull *pok* of ammo piercing steel and Hal fell backward, gun clattering into the dirt beside him.

Axton unlocked the Drehlafette from his shoulder, pressed the activation pad, and threw, to hell with “Wanted Alive.”

The autocannon landed past Jayce’s cover, rapid-spitting rounds almost before she’d fully built herself. If Axton had paused to listen, he’d have said she sounded *angry*. He didn’t pause, though, but raced around the runner, getting his arms under Hal to drag him behind the car. The engineer had a hand pressed to his side, but it was already bloody, and getting worse.

“She’ll kill him,” Hal mumbled.

As he said it, Axton could hear the Drehlafette whirr. He didn’t hear anything from Jayce. “Too late for that, now.” He put his arms around Hal again, half-lifting him up.

“We needed him alive.” Hal’s boots slid out from under

him, making Axton curse.

“Jesus. Forget about Jayce. We gotta get you to a medic.” He eased Hal into the runner on the passenger side and set both of the engineer’s hands on the wound, ordering, “Hold there.” He started to rise away, when Hal gurgled up at him:

“Don’t leave her.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Axton muttered, but he ran to get the autocannon anyway. As the Drehlafette powered down, he glanced at Jayce - now, just a mess of bloody holes with half a face, collapsed against the car’s chassis - before scooping the compacted brick into hand and locking it back into its shoulder harness. He swung into the runner and stomped on the gas, tyres screeching as he did a turnaround at speed.

“I’m making a mess,” Hal said, words slurring as he looked around his seat.

Axton pressed his right hand over both of Hal’s. “Just keep pressure on it.”

Their fingers slipped together over the leaking blood until Hal wheezed, “Pull over.”

Axton flashed him a panicked look. “What? Why?”

“Because I don’t want to die in this fucking car!”

“You’re not gonna die,” Axton snapped, trying his best to stay sharp. “Now, shut up and quit squirmin’. We’re almost there.”

They’d chased Calamity Jayce for maybe ten minutes, but it felt three times longer to get back to town and Doc Graves. Axton hated that name – too many bad associations – but they had little choice. At least the doc was smart, and capable. She could fix Hal. She’d have to.

He brought the runner to a skidding halt in front of the

doctor's door, shouting, "I need help!" He jumped out before the wheels had settled and slid across the hood to the other side. When he jerked open the passenger door, Hal spilled into his arms, his skin a dull pallor and his arms swaying limp.

"Somebody, help me!" Axton bellowed, struggling to pull the engineer's unconscious weight from the car. He had him halfway onto his shoulder when two men hustled to either side of them, to take competent hold of Hal. They laid him to a trestle and started toward the doc's.

Axton jogged inside with them. "He's been shot," he said, when Graves stepped in his way.

"We've got him from here." She glanced at his front. "Are you hurt, too?"

Axton followed her look; his hands and torso were covered in a smear of blood. He shook his head, stammering, "No. No, just- just him." She nodded and turned, but he grabbed her by the arm. "You gotta help him," he said through a rattling breath.

"We'll do everything we can," the doctor said, giving another nod as she tried to move away.

Axton squeezed her bicep, holding her in place. "He's my partner. I can't do this alone."

She pulled his fingers off her arm. They left a red print on her sleeve. "We'll do everything we can," she said again, the same words but the tone just a bit different.

Axton stared at the doorway through which they'd taken Hal, and muttered to himself the same words again, too: "I can't do this alone."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Where Soldiers Go

Axton kept steady watch on Hal's still face. He couldn't think of any other way to describe it, at the moment. Handsome, yes, and intact, thank Christ. But not peaceful, not dreaming, just *still*.

It had been that way since yesterday, when Doc Graves and her team had settled him on a flat transportation pallet outside their triage and operating theater. The other five pallets in the room sat empty, but the good doctor or one of her assistants walked through every hour or so. Otherwise, Axton had been left to watch over Hal alone.

For once, he preferred the quiet. It might have been common knowledge that he ran with a partner, but if any of the other hunters around knew he had a soft spot for said partner, there could be hell to pay. So he huddled over Hal with his back to the wall and with a clean sightline to the outside, making sure his every move and look stayed under the radar. He couldn't help reaching out to touch, though, and, with a graze of his fingers over the younger man's temple, Hal's lashes flickered.

To spite any suspicion it might bring, Axton smiled when the engineer opened his eyes. “Hey.”

Hal managed a smile, too, if a weak one. “You could do with a shave.”

“You look like shit, too.”

Hal chuckled, but stopped with a grimace. He pressed his hand to his side and sucked a pained breath through his teeth.

“Easy,” Axton warned. “You took a bad hit. Lost a lot of blood.”

The blue in Hal’s eyes went crystal-sharp. “Are you all right?”

“I’m okay,” Axton said, smiling again for the worry.

“Jayce?” Hal asked, and Axton shook his head. The engineer’s gaze flicked to the Drehlafette. “Did she-?”

“Yeah, she was pissed. Blew half his face clean off. Not that I blame her,” Axton added with suppressed anger for that dope-dealing fucker.

Hal broke into another low groan as he tried to push himself up. “When can I get out of here?”

Axton straightened his posture at an incoming flutter of white coat. “Ask the doc,” he said, nodding at Graves as she came to stop beside Hal’s pallet.

“Why is it,” the doctor said, “that, whenever I finally manage to get a handsome man in here, he’s always desperate to leave as soon as humanly possible?” She smiled. “It’s my terrible bedside manner, isn’t it?”

Hal managed another smile. “No offense to the good doctor, but if I need to convalesce in a bed, I’d rather it be my own.”

She nodded. “That’s fair. How do you feel?”

“Sore,” Hal said. “And, a tad lightheaded.”

“That’s the blood loss,” Graves told him with knowing detachment. “And, the soreness you’ll just have to live with for a day or so. I’ll give you another stim before you go, but we don’t want to overdo it. The Anshin bonders work wonders for tissue regeneration, but I’ve always been of the opinion that the body heals best when we don’t interfere too much.”

“Especially when supply’s at a premium,” Axton guessed.

Graves hummed. “Handsome and perceptive.” She drew a medicinal hypodermic from her pocket, popped the security cap expertly with her thumb, and leaned close to Hal’s arm. “On three. One, two,” she said, and jabbed.

“Ah! Fff-!” Hal said, biting back his curse with a snarl.

The doctor smiled. “What did I tell you? Bad bedside manner.” She stood straight and nodded toward the door. “You’re free to go. But, no rush.” Her smile turned winsome. “You gentlemen definitely pretty up the place.”

Axton followed the breezy flow of her coat with his gaze as she moved to the other room. “I like her.”

The engineer hissed as he scratched at his arm. “Sit here a bit and we’ll see how much you like her then.”

Axton smiled at him. “You’re just pissy ‘cause she flirted with me.”

“She was flirting with me, actually.”

“Yeah, like that’s not barkin’ up the wrong tree.” Axton pushed himself to his feet and offered Hal a steady grip. “Shall we?”

The engineer took firm grasp of Axton’s hand and stood, teetering with a woozy wobble reminiscent of a drunk. Axton made to put his arm around him, but Hal shrugged him away. “Piss off. I can walk.”

Axton raised both hands in easy surrender. “Okay.” Though, he stayed on Hal’s heels as the engineer loped – with a starting limping sway that quickly became a more natural stride – out to the street.

They met Kaija and Vesper in front of the gun shop. The kids had been scrubbing and tugging at the pockmarked runner but stood up when Axton and Hal strode close.

“We’re glad you’re okay, Mister Hal,” Kaija said.

Hal smiled at her, but it didn’t last. “Sorry about your car.”

Vesper shrugged. “It’s just a car. We can fix it.”

Kaija lifted a rounded ruck from the ground. “We went to the place you said and told Sheriff Dearborn about the packages. There wasn’t any reward, but we thought you should have this.” She looked to Hal. “It’s not much, but maybe it’ll help you sleep a little easier.”

Axton shouldered the ruck without looking inside, while Hal smiled again and said, “Thank you.”

“You want to take the car?” Vesper asked, but Hal shook his head.

“I’d rather walk, if it’s all the same,” he said, still smiling a little.

Axton waved goodbye before taking to Hal’s side, for the long, steady march back to the beach. They didn’t talk, but Axton knew well the contemplative silence that often settled in with walking away from an op gone bad. And, he had his own serious thinking to do.

When they got back to the bungalow, Hal detoured from his side toward the bathroom.

“You okay?” Axton asked softly.

Hal started pulling off his shirt. “I need a wash.”

“Want a hand?” Axton tried to jest, but his voice didn’t quite comply. “Or, two?”

“I’m fine, thanks. Just want to get this smell off me.”

“Okay.” Axton left Hal to his shower and moved to the bedroom, where he unlocked the Drehtafel from his shoulder and laid it on the floor beside the bed. He dropped Kaija’s ruck amid the mussed blankets and opened the top flap, finding inside a roll of soft fabric. Sheets, he realized, of the luxuriously high threadcount sort they’d enjoyed on the *Princess Eve*, what felt like a lifetime ago. A compact bag of weed fell loose from the unfurled cloth, too, as well as several bundles of bills. Jayce’s, presumably, and Axton snorted to think if the idiot had just been willing to part with this cash, he’d still be alive, right now. And Hal wouldn’t have nearly bled out in a runner....

The sound of water had stopped, but Hal hadn’t come out, so Axton got up from the bed, the nerves along his spine tightening. He peeked past the boundary of the bathroom door, finding his partner standing naked under the dripping shower, head down. “Darlin’?”

His wet hair left rivulets like tears down Hal’s face, and he used two fingers to caress the mark of his bullet wound, not lovingly. “I’ll always have this. Won’t I?”

“Probably.” Axton recalled the permanent line on his chin from a rogue bottle, the divot under his right arm from a bayonet stab, and the round welts in the hollow of his left shoulder and near the small of his back, just shy of his kidney. He stepped toward Hal, his boot soles squelching in the puddled water, and took him in an easy, swaying embrace. “But, that’s okay.” His snicker worked, now. “The ladies cream over a dude with scars.”

“And we all know, I am all about impressing the ladies,” Hal said. The joke fell far short of a smile.

Axton sobered again, too. He looked down at the uneven bump of skin just above Hal’s hip – already healing, thanks to Anshin’s patented bio-stimulants – and laid his palm atop it. The engineer’s belly flinched from the touch, but Axton pressed his hand flat. Even when he blinked, he could see the mark where Jayce’s bullet had pierced Hal’s flesh, and the deathly whiteness of his partner’s skin, and his blood staining his hands. “It could’ve been a lot worse.”

“If you hadn’t been there,” Hal said, and Axton shifted his jaw. That was half right.

“I’m sorry.”

Hal touched Axton’s cheek. “Why are you apologizing?”

“You were almost killed yesterday,” Axton said, voice parching around the words.

Hal cupped his jaw, lifting his face. “It was Jayce who shot me. Not you.” He bowed his head so they were nose-to-nose. “I owe you my life.”

Axton looked up, switching his stare from his hand to the bright electric blue of Hal’s eyes. “You don’t owe me anything.”

The engineer offered him a tiny smile. “At the least,” he said, tilting his head so their mouths moved close, “I owe you this.”

His kiss tingled with a tender but insistent need, that Axton felt, too. He pushed Hal to the wall, leaning in so their simple press of lips became a crush, teeth scraping and breath blowing hot and wet. His fingers grabbed Hal’s more giving flesh, hard enough to make the younger man

thrum a groan between them. Axton unclasped their lips to give him air, and to mutter, “Let me fuck you?”

“Yes,” Hal said, already pulling at the buttons of Axton’s shirt.

It took only a moment for their bodies to come together, skin to skin, and not much more for them to finger and stroke each other to eager readiness. Axton put his arms around Hal again, using the wall to leverage their uneven heights. Even as they balanced against each other there, he told the engineer, “Hold on to me,” and Hal did, clutching his shoulders and hooking one leg over his hip as they worked to fit together just right.

Hal’s first “ah” was pained, and Axton froze mid-push, holding the muscles in his thighs to a burn. The second sounded the same, except his partner followed that one with, “Don’t stop. You feel so good...!”

Axton answered the best way he knew, with a rumbling kiss and the full roll of his hips, over and over again until they both turned huffing, flushed, and slick with sweat. He probably looked ridiculous standing there with his shirt tails dangling loose and his pants around his boots, but when Hal came with a shudder in his arms, spunk splashing between their bellies, Axton came, too, as much for his partner’s life as for his own joy.

When their senses returned, they eased apart but not away, staying close with deep, patient kisses and light, fluttering caresses that led to a second chilling wash under the shower, for both of them, this time. Afterward, Axton drew Hal to the bed, where they wrapped themselves together again with fresh-smelling limbs and soft-scented sheets. Hal laid his head against Axton’s shoulder and Axton put his arm around him, fingers dallying in the

younger man's hair.

The lulling quiet should have turned him drowsy, but it only reminded Axton of Graves's recovery room, and the pensive thoughts that had bounced in his head all day. They prompted a murmur into the damp warmth of Hal's hair: "Will you do somethin' for me?"

Hal raised his head to nuzzle at Axton's scratchy cheek. "Anything," he said, as his fingertips skated along Axton's happy trail, down to his groin.

Axton ignored the ticklish attention and turned to face him, all seriousness. "Hang back, from now on?"

The engineer stopped his roving hand. "What do you mean?"

Axton didn't look away from his puzzled stare. It made him honest, and candid. "I don't want you in the field, anymore."

Hal stared at him with wide eyes a moment. Then: "That's insane! Who's going to watch your back, if I'm not with you?"

"That's what the autogun's for," Axton said, glancing to the space beside the bed, where the Drehlafette sat.

"No. No!" Hal shoved himself to sitting, the blue of his eyes nearly throwing sparks. "She's a clever machine, but she is still just a machine!"

Axton rose to sitting, too, to put them at an even gaze. "Yeah. Which means, if she gets shot to hell, we can rebuild her. Unlike you," he added sharply, and the sudden heavy silence that fell over the tiny bedroom made it feel cavernous.

After a moment, Axton broke their bubble of quiet, with a low sigh and a stroke of his fingers over Hal's temple. "We've been treating this like a game," he said.

“But, it’s not.”

Hal’s gaze stayed sharp and steady. “Ax, I can do this. Yesterday wasn’t my fault-”

“You’re right. It was mine.” Axton shook his head at the engineer’s blank look. “I never should have tried to make you like me. You’re not a soldier. You don’t belong on that front line.”

“I belong with you!” Hal snapped, his voice cracking on a desperate upswing. “I may not be a soldier, but I’m your partner, and partners look out for each other!”

“This is me lookin’ out for you!”

“Ax-”

“Hal, *please*. Just do as I ask, for once. Okay?”

The engineer slumped away, but his face showed as much resignation and acceptance as dejection.

Axton hooked his hand behind Hal’s neck. “I’m just tryin’ to keep you safe, darlin’. You know that,” he said, and leaned in for a kiss. Hal’s indignation faded with the hushed smack of their lips, and he rose more fully into their kisses with each passing one. Such refreshed affection emboldened Axton to smile, and say, “Look on the bright side. Now, you’ll have time to make me those guns you’ve been promising.”

Hal twisted his lips in a charmingly boyish show of embarrassment. “I do have some ideas about that, actually,” he admitted.

Axton bumped their heads together. “See?” he said, and chuckled. “You show me a grunt who can do that.”

It was weak, but Hal smiled back at him. “Somebody’s got to keep you safe, as well.”

An easy warmth bloomed in Axton’s chest as he looked deep into the close, vibrant blue of Hal’s eyes. “I wouldn’t

trust that job to anybody else.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

One Man Army

As had become routine over the last few weeks since their new duty arrangement, Axton woke to the perking smell of steeping kaffe and the frustrated grumble of Hal's swearing:

"Shit!"

Axton lurched up from the bed with a stretch and a scratch, finding the kaffe waiting in the kitchenette and his partner futzing in the workshop in his underwear. He traded the steaming drink in his hand for the engineer's waist under his arm, murmuring, "Morning."

"Morning," Hal replied. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"I needed to get up, anyway." The workshop table didn't make any more sense to him now than it had ever done, so Axton swayed against him front-to-back, nestling his chin in the crook of Hal's neck as he asked, "You wash my clothes?"

"They're drying outside. Though, I would appreciate it if, next time, you might try to keep the bitumen stains to a minimum. They're a bugger to get out."

“It ain’t my fault the casino just sealed its new roof.”

“You can’t work from another roof?”

Axton pressed his lips briefly to Hal’s neck without a kiss, muttering, “What’s got you so hot and bothered?”

“Coil on the sniper rifle’s busted.” Hal groaned an exasperated sigh. “This third-hand shit is ridiculous! I spend more time repairing these guns than I do actually using them.”

Axton shrugged against him, unconcerned. While the engineer stayed in his ear and sometimes kept watch with a scope, Axton had felt a lot better knowing his brainy partner was safely out of play. It made the actual running and gunning a bit trickier, but not nearly so much as it might have been without the Drehlafette at his side. Their metal lady-friend had the enviable ability to shut up - or down - any mouthy target who wouldn’t come along peaceably. Though, Axton still enjoyed the excitement of the work, himself.

“We’re still in the tracking phase,” Axton reminded, now. “I’ll just use the AR.”

“It’s not as precise-”

“I’m precise enough.”

Hal grunted under his arm. “Like you were with Maphrodite?”

Axton shrugged again. “He can get himself a new leg.”

“You weren’t the one who had to clean up the runner afterward.”

“Maybe not. But, I loved watchin’ you do it!”

The engineer chuckled and clicked his tongue in the same breath. “You’re incorrigible.”

“That’s me,” Axton said, and gave a grind of his hips against Hal’s ass. “Can’t be corriged.”

Hal broke into a full laugh. "That's not even a word!" he said, but Axton ignored the correction, instead turning Hal about in his arms for a flow of ready, nipping kisses that eased the rest of the engineer's pissy miff. He considered hoisting his partner over his shoulder for a tumble to the bed, when Hal pulled back out of their last kiss with a muffled hum. "I nearly forgot! I have something for you."

"I bet you do," Axton said with another lascivious bump of his hips.

Hal returned him a toothy grin. "Wait here." He sidled out from Axton's embrace and flashed him his pointer finger. "Close your eyes, and hold out your hands."

Axton did as told but muttered, "I'm almost afraid to know what you're gonna do."

"It's nothing to be frightened of. Not for you, anyway," Hal said, just as he dropped something hard, heavy, and metal into Axton's waiting arms. "All right. Open your eyes."

Axton's first sight was Hal's bright blue gaze nearly as-sparkle, followed by the slick burnished curves and lines of a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. He felt a grin split. "You built me an RPG!"

Hal nodded. "Finished it yesterday, while you were waiting for Boll and Ox."

Axton let go a low breath of smitten appreciation. "What'd I tell ya, darlin'?" he said, hefting the weapon onto his shoulder. "This is what you're meant to be doin', not wasting your time lookin' down a scope for a pair of loser bandits."

"She still needs ammunition," Hal said, ignoring that last with a scratch to the back of his neck. "Vesper should

be getting a new shipment in the next day or so. All the specs are up to snuff, though.” He bit down on one corner of pretty lip. “What do you think?”

“Gorgeous,” Axton said, as he peered into the targeting reticle with an excited flutter. “I mean, nothin’ like the missus,” he was quick to add.

Hal was equally quick to agree. “Well, no. Her level of acuity would require a proper nano-tech lab, and my chances of coming across one of those are rather slim, this far out from Central Core.” That hesitant but hopeful look returned. “But, how’s she feel?”

“Like Christmas morning,” Axton told him, and Hal’s face glowed with a blushing grin both bashful and proud. Axton set the RPG on the table and turned, sliding his hands around Hal’s waist again, to bring him close. “Thanks.”

Hal’s smile softened to one of gentler affection. “You’re welcome,” he said, and shifted in for another kiss. That led to a fuller embrace for both of them, one that lasted through a slower, more languorous trade of tongues until Axton hummed around their lips:

“Someday, I’ll get you a real lab.”

“That’s all right.” Hal reached up, to flick an ever-uncooperative spike of Axton’s hair. “This may be simple, but it’s better than any corporate lab I’ve ever had.”

Axton drew his chin back with a quizzical squint. “Yeah?”

“I get to do what I want,” Hal told him. “For someone who appreciates it.”

“It’s good work.”

“Better in the hands of a man who knows what to do with it.”

“Everything’s better that way,” Axton agreed, mirroring him for a brush of his fingers through blond fringe. His hand continued around the back of Hal’s head, pulling it close for another start of kisses. These didn’t turn licking and lazy but deep and heated, and Axton started to tip them onto the workbench when Hal stopped them again, with a hum of more pointed protest, this time.

“No, no. We shouldn’t start this, now.”

“Why not?” Axton said, still perched over him.

“Because we’re in the middle of a hunt, and you need to stay focused.”

“But, it’s been *days*...! A man has needs. And, you’re hot, like this.” Axton grabbed a squeeze of ass, but Hal didn’t react as hoped.

“You’re the one who said being horny keeps your senses sharp. Remember?”

Axton scowled as he eased them up. “Me and my big mouth,” he grumbled, shifting his stance for his semi.

Hal smiled as he stood straight, but he didn’t slide out from his narrow space between Axton and the table, instead shooting him a leading quirk of one brow. “I could always come with you,” he began, but Axton shook his head.

“We made a deal: I’m front line, you’re support.”

Hal raised both shoulders. “And all I’m saying is, support’s more effective when it’s close by.”

“Dero’s not far,” Axton said, to waylay this familiar argument. “If somethin’ happens, I’ll holler.”

“Promise?” Hal said, and Axton smiled.

“Cross my heart.”

By midday, he’d made his way into town alone and parked his ass on the high rooftop of The Swan saloon,

straying his assault rifle's sight over the road below and the buildings across the way. The measured pace did nothing for his lingering arousal, though. He had to shift his hips to a more comfortable prone position, to allow for the presence of his subtle stiffness. He didn't make that known to Hal, though, just sighed with dramatic complaint over his comm:

"Y'know, ten years with Dahl, I got used to waiting around. But, even I've got my limits."

Hal's voice crackled in his ear, all business-like: "Maybe we should forget about Boll and Ox, target somebody else. Two is riskier, anyway."

Axton couldn't argue that point...but more risk meant more reward, and the solo offenders in their area offered little challenge and even less payout. If they had transport to the other islands, they could chase bigger game, but Theia's ubiquitous seas made that prospect unlikely, at best. Still, this waiting-around shit was starting to take its toll.

"Maybe you're right," he said, sighing for the debate. He swung his rifle's sight over the windows opposite one more time, in the hope their targets might magically pop their heads. A flash of skin made him stop. Not for ugly Boll or Ox, but for pretty Kaija, who rose suddenly into view in the room above the gun shop. She rolled her shoulders in a slow, seductive sway, slipping off the straps of her top and shrugging her plump breasts free.

"Oh, shit...!"

"Ax?" Hal snapped in something like a panic. "What is it?"

"Sh!" Axton told him, mostly on instinct. "Shut up." He stared through the sight, to catch every shift and

nuance of those pretty tits as a hand that wasn't Kaija's reached up from below the sight-line of the window and cupped one of her breasts. She arched her spine, curling her body into a smooth, pale S, and craned her head back in invitation. Axton dropped his jaw a little as Vesper answered, by laying his mouth on her skin.

"Fuck me," Axton muttered, moistening his gaze with a fresh blink.

"Ax!" Hal hissed, and Axton snapped himself loose of his voyeurism with another quick blink. He'd forgotten the engineer was still in his ear. "What's happened?!"

Axton kept his focus on Kaija as she moved her body in a sinuous sex roll. "Your boy's finally stepped up to the plate," he said.

Hal's voice relaxed a bit. "What?"

"Vesper. Looks like he's made his move." Axton snickered as he watched the girl pull the boy's face to hers and sealed her mouth over his. "Or, maybe Kaija did."

"How do you know?"

"Cause I'm watchin' 'em go at it."

"For God's sake! You are supposed to be keeping a lookout for Boll and Ox, not playing peeping Tom!"

"Hey, this is the most interesting thing I've seen all day."

Hal clicked his tongue. "Next, you're going to ask me to build a camera into the sight, so you can keep record of your prurience."

Axton snorted. "The last thing I want is to be reminded of all the sex I ain't havin'."

"You know," Hal said, with an abruptly amused chuckle. "There's a way we can fix that."

Axton swung up the rifle and hopped to his feet. He

grinned and jogged over to the emergency ladder at the far side of the roof. "I hope you ain't plannin' on doing any more smart stuff today, darlin', 'cause when I get home, I'm gonna fuck you stupid."

The comm rang with Hal's game laughter. "I'm counting the moments!"

Axton slid down the rails of the ladder to the street, the rifle slung to his back, the Jakobs in its holster, and the Drehlafette perched silent on his shoulder. "Just lemme grab a quick leak." There was a place between the close walls of the saloon and the post registration next door, where he found a shallow shadowed spot that smelled like impromptu latrine. He opened his trousers and shifted his feet, craning his head up and down as he let loose with a steady stream. He gave himself a quick shake to dry, and heard the tread of steps behind him as he tucked himself away. This outdoor toilet was getting a lot of use today.

"All yours, buddy," he said, when he turned...and walked straight into Ox's barrel chest. "Shit!" Axton's hand went for his revolver, just as something hard and heavy struck him in the back of the head. He heard Hal shout his name in his ear but couldn't answer, and the last thing he thought before everything went black was, *Idiot*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

When the Little Lady Speaks

As he floated in a hazy dimness, Axton thought himself eight years old, swinging from a barn rafter as the sun beat down on the upturned faces of his sisters gathered in a cluster below him: Aleen grinning wide, Aife hopping from one foot to the other while Alys held her shoulders, and Arden shouting at him to get his ass down from there right-fucking-now. His feet swayed in the air, a kick turning the world sideways. The wood of his support beam strained his arms, pulling his young muscles taut. He tried to get a better grip, but his fingers wouldn't work: they tingled with too much blood loss, and he slipped from the beam, landing hard with a slamming crack in his side.

“Wakey-wakey, pretty boy.”

Axton coughed around a sharp tang of blood. He wheezed for breath, and the stench of sweat assaulted his nostrils. Some from his own armpits, so close to his face as he turned his head – he swung from the ceiling, a dull, steady creak and sway accompanying his every tiny movement – but mostly from the pair of dirty pirates who

drifted into focus as he opened his eyes. Boll and Ox. The back of Axton's head flared with a sharp pain at reminder of their alley ambush.

He did a swift glance over the room, squinting through the red at the edges of his vision. They were in some sort of shack, smaller than the bungalow and littered with random rucks and scattered clothes. There were windows, too, the one right ahead of him looking out over water. Beneath the sill sat a table, where they'd settled his comm, the Jakobs, and the Drehlafette brick. The big one, Ox, clutched his AR with one hand.

"Well, hello, ugly," Axton quipped as best he could from around a mouthful of phlegmy spittle.

Ox snarled, showing off a gap of missing teeth. It reminded Axton of the kids from *Siren's Song*, except this gap was uneven, the product of too many brawls. "Who you callin' ugly?" Ox said, and gave a quick pound of his fist into Axton's side again.

Axton spit a spray of blood onto his face, mostly on purpose. "Looked in the mirror, lately?"

Ox's snarl twisted further, but Boll put out a hand. In it, he held a crude S&S pistol with a short, sharp bayonet welded to the bottom of the barrel. "Easy there, brother. His bounty specifies alive."

Axton's brain snapped into focus. Bounty? He was the one hunting these fuckers, not the other way around-

Boll's bayonet raised to his throat yanked him back to his current conundrum. "What did you do to warrant such a high price tag, pretty boy?" the pirate asked, his breath stinking of jaw-rot. "'Cause from where I'm standing, you don't look to be worth more than a case of year-old rations."

Axton forced a smile. "You tell me, you're so keen to collect."

"War crimes," Boll informed him. "No details, though. What happened? You bury your balls in some high-class ambassador's daughter?" He tapped the point of his bayonet against Sarah's ring. "Did this belong to her?"

Axton shot him a jeer. "It was your momma, actually. 'Course, I was, like, eighth in line, so, you know, she was pretty worn out by the time I got my piece."

"You shut your mouth about our ma!" Ox cried, gripping the rifle so it groaned.

"Her ass was nice and tight, though," Axton went on. "I had her cummin' and prayin' to God better'n your daddy ever did."

Boll's fist swung into his gut, and Axton gave another loud, retching cough. His gaze fell to the comm and earpiece across the room. Hal might still be on the other end, if he hadn't already given Axton up for dead, but the engineer couldn't do him any good, not at distance. Maybe it was worth it to keep a partner more close by than not-

His gaze flashed to the Drehlafette brick. He did have a partner close by.

"What are you looking at?" Boll glanced to the table, too. "Is it that box thing?"

"You don't wanna touch that," Axton warned.

Boll scowled at Axton for another second before striding over to the table. He picked up the brick and rotated it for a good look. "What's inside? Military plans? Secrets?" He snorted. "You wanted for espionage?"

Axton stayed silent.

Ox laughed from his chest. "Open it up, brother! I want

to see what he's hiding."

Boll regarded the brick with a puzzled tilt of his head. "There's a switch." He clicked it and had just enough time to say, "What the hell?" before the Drehlafette clanked open, support struts first.

Axton swung his legs toward the ceiling and hooked his boots above another beam, out of the way of the autocannon's springing barrel. Ox shouted, "Shit!" and fired off a short burst, but the Drehlafette spat at him, three times in the chest and one in the neck. Boll didn't even get to shout before her laser eye targeted him, too, with a round to each shoulder that made him stagger before the left side of his jaw exploded and he flopped to the ground.

Axton unlatched his boots from the crossbeam. They almost touched Ox's unmoving chest, but not quite. He looked to the Drehlafette. "Well, darlin'. Now, what do we do?"

The autocannon just whirred, her muzzle swinging back and forth in search of another hostile target.

He grabbed the chain from which he dangled and kicked his legs, but the beam held its own. When he tried again, the only crack came from his right shoulder, which protested against his twisting with a sharp jolt of pain.

"Fuck," Axton muttered, when his gaze fell to the comm on the table again. "Hal!" he shouted across the shack. "If you can hear me, I'm in some kinda shed or cabin, along the coast. There's probably a runner nearby. Boll and Ox are down, but I'm chained to the ceiling." He grasped and yanked the offending chain again, but it still resisted his strength. "Hal!" he hollered again. "I need you! *Hal!*"

His noisemaking swayed him around to the Drehlafette, which whirred, thunked, and whirred again in a useless metronome glide.

He didn't know how long he twirled sluggish pirouettes from his wrists, but sometime into the lengthening of shadows in the hut, he heard a creak of metal not from above his head: gears braking to a halt. A tall form, feet shoulder-width apart, broke the steady stream of light in the doorway, and Axton's heart jumped into his throat at the sight of twin scattergun barrels pointed straight at him. It jumped a little higher when the gunman lowered the weapon and Axton saw his face. "Sure as hell took ya long enough," he said, managing a weary but relieved smile.

"I should leave you up there," Hal said, before moving around the bodies and the Drehlafette, to stand at Axton's swaying side. "You all right?"

"I've been better."

Hal glanced to the ceiling. "How are you...?"

"Over there." Axton nodded toward the length of chain looped around a spike in the far wall.

Hal followed the chain with his gaze, as though making calculations, and frowned. "I can't do it from here."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just get me down!"

Hal strode to the spike, laying his shotgun on the table on the way. He grabbed the loose end of chain and looked to Axton. "You ready?"

Axton rolled his eyes ceiling-ward. "Would you just do *off*!" His legs collapsed beneath him as he hit the floor, dropping him to his ass against the boards. The chain clattered free of its last pulley spot and hit his crumpled shoulders. "Agh!"

“Sorry!” Hal rushed to his side. “I’m sorry.”

Axton tried lifting his hands, but they didn’t cooperate beyond a weak rattle. “Help me get loose.”

Hal unwound the jangling chain and hissed at the dark blue bruises and blood-red cuts scoring Axton’s arms. “That doesn’t look good.”

“Went through a lot worse with Dahl.” Axton settled into a more comfortable sitting position and jerked his head toward the sundries in the corner. “See if you can find anything worth scavenging while I wait for the feeling to come back in my fingers.”

The engineer kicked and poked his way through the first random pile, but he didn’t do it silently. “This wouldn’t have happened if I’d been there with you.”

Axton shrugged. “I did all right.”

“You were radio-silent for over an hour,” Hal went on, undeterred. “When I heard the Drehlafette go off, I-!” He paused, mid-stoop of lifting the flap of a largish ruck. “I didn’t know what to think.”

“When the little lady speaks, folks tend to listen.”

Hal didn’t answer, his head still down. He pulled some sort of scanner from the ruck, glanced at its make, and dropped it aside. He did the same with a few bottles of cheap liquor. The riffling papers he pulled out next were ready to follow when he looked at Axton again. “How did they even know you were tracking them?”

“They didn’t.” Axton grimaced, partly for the sharp tingling in his hands, but mostly for the words to come: “I think warrants are startin’ to come in from Central Core.”

Hal’s blue eyes went wide. “Dahl?”

“Or Hyperion.” Axton shrugged again. “Reilly’s armor

alone probably cost a pretty penny.”

“Fuck,” Hal wheezed.

“Relax-”

“Relax? How am I supposed to relax? Half the hunters in the galaxy could be after us!”

“Nobody’s better than us on this rock,” Axton said, shaking his head. “We’re sittin’ at the top of the food chain around here.”

Hal snorted. “The T-Rex probably thought the same thing.”

“Hey, if these two jokers are a sign of what’s comin’, I say, bring it on!”

“I’m certain that attitude won’t get us killed,” Hal muttered, and Axton clicked his tongue.

“You worry too much.”

“You don’t worry enough,” the engineer shot back.

“Look, a man can’t control anybody but himself. If they come, they come. We just gotta be ready for ‘em.”

Hal didn’t reply to that.

Axton let him stew in silence. His hands had regained enough feeling to make possible his own search for usable supplies, so he got up and moved to a pile, pawing his way through the pirates’ junk: another set of empty bottles, a handful of ammo magazines he stuffed into a pocket, and a wad of cash. Though, he nearly left that find alone, rolled as it was in a pair of skivvies soiled to the point of making him gag on air.

“We definitely did the galaxy a favor offin’ these losers,” he mumbled, wiping his hand on his trouser leg. He glanced at Hal for a reaction, but the engineer sat hunched over a pile, not moving. This time, Axton decided to prod. “Find anything good?”

Hal waved two rumpled sheets at him. Axton recognized them immediately: wanted posters. The first bore a monochrome copy of his own stoic Dahl identification photo, placed squarely above the printed reward for his head. The number seemed steep, even for pissing off both Dahl and Hyperion, but it paled in comparison to the trail of zeroes listed under Hal's fresh-looking face. The engineer's wanted notice emphasized *Grand Theft, Damaging Computer Systems Through the Transmission of Code, Damage of Military Property by Means of Explosive, and Assault on Multiple Army Officers.*

Axton blanched as he looked from Hal's wanted sheet to the man himself. "What the hell did you *do*?"

"I told you. I took the Drehlafette."

"You never mentioned any of this other shit!"

Hal shifted under Axton's stare. "I had no choice! Dahl wasn't about to just give me a weekend leave pass."

"Yeah, but sixty *billion*?"

"She would have made Dahl a self-perpetuating fortune," Hal explained, though he didn't sound proud for the fact. "For her base design or for mass manufacture." He shook his head. "I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let them take her away from me."

Axton rolled his eyes, muttering, "Of all the engineers in the galaxy, I had to find the one crazy enough to fall in love with his gun."

Hal slumped. "I'm sorry. I never meant to involve you in this."

After a moment, Axton deflated, too. "Forget it. We're partners." He shook the engineer's rap sheet. "But, this number changes things."

"What do you want to do?" Hal asked. "Fight? Or, do

we run?”

Axton glanced out the open door of the shack, to the runner parked on the beach. They could run, but if the idiot Bone brothers had caught wind of them, who else would be on the lookout for their payout? Fighting felt better. But even with the Drehlafette keeping watch, it was only a matter of time before all of those zeroes on Hal's wanted poster - not to mention his own - would tempt bigger and badder opposition.

Axton drifted his gaze around the room, to Hal, the autocannon, and finally the shotgun on the table. He walked over to it, his fingers tingling as he laid his hand on the stock. “There's a third option,” he said. “One to make sure nobody comes after you ever again.” He shook his head. “You're not gonna like it, though.”

Behind him, he heard Hal rustle to his feet. “What is it?”

Axton turned, the shotgun braced in his hands. “You die.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Third Option

For the second time in as many days, Axton woke from pain. Not the sharp strike of a fist, this time, but the prickling tingle of a burn. He started to open his eyes, but they protested with the clutch of sleep crust. So, he kept them closed, and tried to remember.

Fire. There'd been a fire, a burst of exploding orange bigger and brighter than the sun on the horizon. And a scream. His scream, for an already-dangerous plan gone awry. A plan for-

"Hal?" he said, voice croaking.

"Easy," someone told him. A woman's pitch and lilt that he recognized: Graves, the doctor in Dero. "Take it easy."

Axton opened his eyes. Glaring lights attached to the ceiling shone down on him, one of them flickering and buzzing from the erratic contact of insect wings. He'd been here before, on the other side of a bed: Graves's clinic. He swung his gaze up, finding the good doctor standing above him, almost aglow in her white coat. "What happened?"

“You staggered in here a day ago. Dehydrated, delirious, and covered in thermal burns. Mostly superficial, but some second degree. We’ve been treating you here since then.”

His nerves jumped with the memory of that bursting blaze. “There was an explosion.”

She nodded, slowly. “Yes.”

“A car,” he said, as he started to shake off his painkiller-induced haze.

Another halting nod. “Yes.” Graves’s gaze went cloudy with a sudden but practiced dispassion. “Now, you need to rest. Your body’s been through a trauma.”

A blink sharpened his focus, as he remembered more than just the last bits and pieces. “My partner. Where is he?”

Her professional detachment wavered, and she clenched her lips, so tightly they almost disappeared. “You should speak with the sheriff about that,” she said, and started away.

He reached for her hand, didn’t quite make it, and snagged the edge of her coat. “My partner!”

She paused and echoed herself: “You need to speak with the sheriff.”

As if summoned by his name, Sheriff Dearborn walked into the clinic, the metal tips on the soles of his boots tapping a steady rhythm over the floor. The tapping stopped as he took Graves’s place at the side of Axton’s cot and hooked his thumbs in his belt. “You ready to tell me what happened?”

Axton glanced at his hands, laid flat at his sides, now. The flesh ached red, and puckered where blisters had formed. Those faded nearly as he watched, as the Anshin

bonders stimulated his cellular rejuvenation, but the angry red still made him frown. He focused on one pustule between the middle and ring finger knuckles on his right hand, its throbbing keeping time with the sound of his pulse in his ears.

“Me and my partner,” Axton said, being careful to measure his words with precision. “We went after Boll and Ox. Traced ‘em to a shack about twenty clicks south of town.”

Dearborn’s moustache ruffled. “You mean, the Bone brothers,” he said, and raised two wanted posters in the same hand. Ox’s square face and Boll’s skinnier one stared blankly from the papers.

“That’s them,” Axton confirmed.

Dearborn tucked those pages behind his back. “Then, what happened?”

Axton let his gaze drift to his hand again. “It’s kind of a blur,” he lied, as he recalled the sight of Hal’s half-naked body crouched over Boll’s legs, the sharp smell of dumped gas, and the whisper of desperate words around the bitter taste of Hal’s anxious kiss....

“Try,” the sheriff prodded again.

“They were in the house. I told ‘em to come out, make it easier on everybody.”

“Where was your partner in all this?”

“In the car. But, they didn’t wanna come quietly, so we exchanged fire.” Axton paused for a thoughtful swallow. The dry ache of his throat and lungs made him grimace. “I’m pretty sure I got one of ‘em.”

Dearborn nodded. “Ox. We found him in the house.”

Axton held back a witting nod of his own. “And the other one? Boll?”

“Let’s get back to your story. They were in the house, you exchanged fire...?”

“There was shouting, and more return fire.” Axton returned his focus to his hand. “The runner, it-!” He focused hard on the fading blister. “My partner...!”

“This him?”

Axton looked up into Hal’s blank paper gaze. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s him.” He risked meeting Dearborn’s eyes. “Did you find him?”

The sheriff tucked that poster away, too. “There was another body. Too much damage to make a conclusive ID, but... You say he was in the car?” Axton nodded, and Dearborn offered him a stilted bow of his head. The lowermost whiskers of his moustache only twitched as he muttered, “I’m sorry.”

“What about Boll? You get him, at least?”

“There was no sign of him. He might have made it to one of the hydro-processing rigs. More likely, he simply took off.” Another apology, lame for its aloofness: “I’m sorry.”

Axton held the sheriff’s stare. “My partner. I wanna see him.”

“That may not be a smart idea,” Dearborn warned, but Axton stayed firm.

“I want to see him.”

The sheriff didn’t argue further, if only for Graves’s presence as she returned with a final dose of stimulant. The jabbing needle made Axton hiss, as did the cascade of nanotech-controlled bio-regenerators that rippled beneath his skin, exciting his body’s natural healing phases. He watched the inflamed tissue relax to a more familiar shade, and the doctor paused at his shoulder. “I’m

sorry,” she said, though Axton couldn’t be certain if she meant it for the needle, his burns, or his loss.

Dearborn’s cool stoicism betrayed no hint as to any suspicions. So, Axton kept his own emotions in check, even when the lawman led him outside and around the back of the sheriff’s station, past a black husk of metal parked in the shade, to a closed-off room with a covered slab set beneath a starkly bright light. It looked too short to be a body. Not a full one, at least.

“Most of the lower half was fused to the interior of the car,” Dearborn confirmed. “We extracted as much as we could, but the blaze was pretty intense.” He grasped the protective sheet and warned, “It’s not a pleasant sight.”

Axton just nodded him on, so the sheriff pulled at the cloth.

Burnt down to bone, all bodies looked pretty much the same. To anyone unfamiliar, that skull with the missing jawbone might have once belonged to a young man with blond hair as fine as mother’s milk, and eyes so blue they shone even in the dimmest light. But Axton had stroked Hal’s cheek enough times to know those angles didn’t rest quite high enough, and kissed Hal’s brow enough times to know this forehead was too shallow. Still, he looked at that skull a long while, the strange shape and spacing rich with promise if not straight-up reward.

“We didn’t recover much for personal effects,” Dearborn said. “As I mentioned, the fire was severe.”

His skin strained against the regenerative stimulants as Axton squeezed his hand into a fist, but it didn’t crack. “What are you gonna do about this?”

“We’ll transmit updates for the three of them to warrant control at EdgeComm. But, other than that,

there's not much else we can do. What would you like done with the body?"

Axton looked up. "What do you mean?"

"We can't keep him like this," the sheriff said, gesturing to the corpse. "It's a biohazard."

Axton let go a sigh as he unclenched his fingers. "Do whatever you need to do."

"You don't want the remains?" Dearborn sounded almost surprised.

"That's not my partner, anymore," Axton said, a statement as close to the truth as the sheriff would ever get from him.

Dearborn didn't keep him for further questioning, and he couldn't collect anything for Ox, but Axton stayed around town anyway. The meds had left him a bit woozy, and he really wanted a drink. His first beer went down cool and piney, a welcome change over the dry, antiseptic air of Graves's clinic...and even more so over the however faint stench of burnt rubber and flesh that hung around the sheriff's station. In the middle of his second beer, Kaija and Vesper joined him, sliding into the seats on either side.

"Took care of that delivery job," Vesper said in a hushed voice.

Axton wondered if he'd done right by these kids by letting them in on the plan. But they both knew how to keep their cards close to their vests, and Axton appreciated not being alone. He'd have to do enough alone, from now on. "Thanks."

"Is this it?" Kaija asked. "Or, will we see you again?"

"I could use some furlough," Axton admitted. "But, I'll be around." Exhaustion kept his roguish grin from coming

as easily as it usually did, but he gave it his best effort. “Still plenty of fortune and glory to be had, out here.”

“Take care ‘til then,” Kaija said, and shimmied from her barstool.

“We’re here if you need us,” Vesper added, pulling Kaija to his side before moving out the swinging doors.

Axton watched them go over the last pull of his beer. They were awfully couple-y, and seeing them so made him long more acutely for a mate of his own.

He rode out of Dero the same way he’d stumbled in – alone – and made his way north, to the familiar stretch of secluded beach and its bungalow hideaway. The structure itself stood silent and dark by the time Axton loped up onto the wooden portico. The door swung easily ajar, though, and he walked inside, inhaling deep the smells of soldering and gun oil. It led him to the workshop, where he stopped beside the door, let out a weary chuckle, and said:

“Hey, honey, I’m home.”

Two long strides brought Hal from his chair to the doorway, where he grabbed Axton in a firm hug. Neither the pain meds nor the regenerative stimulants felt so good as Hal’s arms wrapped around him, or the press of his lips to Axton’s neck, or the blow of his breath as he whispered, “Oh, darling. I was afraid something had happened to you.”

Axton took Hal in his arms, too, closing his eyes to concentrate on that sharp electric blue smell that came off Hal’s skin. “Somethin’ did.”

Hal pushed them apart – too soon – and shot him a worried frown.

“Played a little too fast and loose with the gas,” Axton

explained. "Kinda blew up in my face."

"But, you're all right?" Hal stroked his thumb at Axton's temple.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Axton mirrored him, smiling gently. "And, it was worth it."

A lightning strike of excitement flashed in Hal's blue eyes. "You mean-?"

"Sheriff had his questions, but he's more interested in not makin' waves than rustling up trouble. And, you're gonna have to get used to stayin' outta the spotlight, at least for a while. But, yeah, it worked." Axton smiled wider. "You're a free man."

"Free." Hal let out a quiet sigh that smoothed the divot between his brows that had been there since the first moment Axton had laid eyes on him. "We should have done you, too," he said, but Axton shook his head.

"Boll gave us a lucky break, but Ox was too big to pass for either of us." He moved his thumb from Hal's smooth cheek to his soft lips. "This way's better. Trust me."

The engineer smiled in answer for a long minute, until he rolled his focus away and chuckled through his teeth, "I suppose I'll have to think up some ridiculous new name for myself."

"That can wait." Axton wound his arms around the other man's waist and pulled them together. "Right now, I'm thinkin' we deserve a little somethin'-somethin' for our trouble."

Hal snickered. "What did you have in mind?"

"How about a hot supper of shitty canned rations?" Axton teased. "With some skunky beer to wash it down."

"Maybe a little weed to get the taste out of our mouths after?"

“And a skinny-dip in the dark when we’re done,” Axton said, and they laughed together as they swayed in a mutual embrace. Their laughter lasted only a moment before Axton raised his chin and lifted his mouth to Hal’s, to tell him in a tongue-flicking whisper, “And then, you can fuck me under the open sky like a free man.”

Hal’s whole body went still as stone, save the eager patter of his pulse, which Axton could feel even through his shirt. “Aren’t you just full of ideas?”

“Darlin’,” Axton said, winding his arms more tightly around him. “I’m just getting started.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Closing the Gap

He'd gotten used to not having Hal at his side for jobs, but maintaining the ruse of the engineer's demise meant, among other things, now Axton had to do without Hal's voice in his ear, too. Of course, shutting down the comm frequency did not seem to be an option:

"Leave the line open," Hal pressed, for the fourth time that day alone. "Please?"

Axton checked the rounds in his Jakobs and flicked the cylinder closed with a jerk of his wrist. He slid the revolver into its holster with a faint sneer. "It's not like you can come ridin' to the rescue."

"I know I can't leave the beach," the engineer said as he packed the last three rifle magazines into the supply ruck and slapped the flap closed. "But, at least I'll know how the job's going." He paused a moment. "I worry about you."

Axton clicked his tongue. "You know me."

"Yeah. That's why I worry." When Axton tried to wave him off, Hal grabbed him by the sleeve and hissed, "This

job is *dangerous*—”

“Please! It’s Micklet and his boys—”

“There are three of them.”

“They’re bullies who like to play with matches.”

“You’re not fireproof.”

Axton sneered. “Do me a favor, huh? Un-bunch those panties before I get back?” Hal glowered mutely, until a new and lewd thought made Axton’s demeanor flop. “Or, better yet,” he said, letting his gaze and hand stray to the buckle of Hal’s belt as he flared his nostrils with a leery smile. “Get ‘em off when you hear me comin’?”

The engineer cracked a smile. “And, how will I know when that is, if you don’t keep your comm open?”

Axton’s jolly salaciousness collapsed under that leaden reasoning. “Fine.” He grabbed the earpiece from Hal’s waiting hand and tucked it into place. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic.” Hal passed the Drehlafette brick into Axton’s hands, too, like handing over a pack lunch. “Don’t forget this.”

“Yes, dear.” Axton left his saccharine tone to drip as he locked the compacted autogun into place at his shoulder.

Hal sighed. “I don’t mean to nag. But, you have no idea what it’s like to have to sit here, alone, not knowing... *anything* of what’s going on out there. If you’re pinned down, or hurt, or—”

“I’m wearin’ it, okay? So, no more backtalk.” Axton smiled, sidling up to arm’s reach. “Now, I gotta go to work. You be good while I’m gone,” he said, stealing a pecking kiss and a swift squeeze of ass before moving to the door. He’d just stepped off the portico when Hal called after him:

“I need roll pins! And a new crane, for your revolver,

since you insist on loading it like a bad actor in some holo-serial.”

Axton kept walking but turned and waved for three steps, laughing under his breath at his partner’s refreshed single-mindedness.

He half-hummed an old Army cadence to keep time as he walked toward the mountain range where Micklet and his cronies had been seen last. As the terrain up to his chosen lookout perch turned rocky, it shifted and slipped under his boots. He swallowed back his instinctive curses: no point worrying Hal more than he already was. Silence had never been Axton’s strong suit, though, and, as he settled into a sniper position, he found he missed the pleasant distraction of conversation. The lack of it didn’t make the stakeout any harder, just a hell of a lot more boring. So when his targets finally showed late in the afternoon, he took to talking to the closest partner he had to hand: the Drehlafette.

“Just look at ‘em, darlin’,” Axton said, as he lined up Tinder in his crosshairs first, followed by big Blister and that runt, Micklet. “Hairy asses shining in the sun.” He drew a breath as he eased his finger on the trigger, sliding his focus between the three. “And absolutely no idea I’m about to put a hole right...through...their-” The rifle recoiled against his shoulder. “-windshield.”

All three skips crouched at the shattering of plexi. Tinder hustled his trousers back up around his waist, while Blister looked up and around, one hand brandishing his shotgun. Micklet spun, ignoring his dangling dick as he made a frantic scan of the perimeter.

Axton’s saner side kept his voice to a whisper and movement to a minimum, but the eager merc inside of

him ticked off a countdown to action: “Ten...nine... eight... And, I’m bored.” He unlocked the Drehlafette from his shoulder and tossed her to the ground, shouting, “Chew ‘em up, honey!”

Micklet capped off a trio of rounds, Blister pumped a spray of shot, and Tinder emptied the rest of his magazine, but none of them hit him. None of them lasted against the Drehlafette’s volley, either: she tore into all three in a rapid spray of heavy arms fire. Though, to last-standing Micklet, Axton gave an extra round to the head, for completion’s sake.

He climbed down from his overlook to the stream bed below and praised the whirring autocannon: “You sure make a pretty mess, darlin’.” He left her popped as he crouched among the circle of bodies. “Who says three’s too much to handle? I bet we could take out a whole platoon, you and me.”

The Drehlafette replied with a momentary lock of her barrel as she drifted from side to side.

The skips had a little less than three grand in cash between their pockets, and a mix of semi-decent firearms worth maybe half that much to Hal or Vesper for parts. Axton did find a rather smart-looking VTAC on Tinder’s hip, though, and slipped the shaft into his own belt. “I’ll be having that.”

He ballooned his chest with a swell of accomplishment as he stood and looked around at the three scavenged bodies. “Not a bad day’s work, if I do say so myself.” He grinned at the Drehlafette. “Especially since work ain’t really work if it’s fun enough. Right, sweetheart?”

The autocannon simply whirled.

Axton slumped. She was a hell of a damage-dealer, but

shit for conversation. Not to mention, no help at all when it came to loading the skips into their rickety rig for transport back to town.

Sheriff Dearborn gave him his payout without questions, and Grissom, the local mechanic, took the rig off his hands for a pittance for parts. His last stop was the gun shop, where Strenk's name still adorned the sign. Axton thought Vesper would have wanted to put that past behind him...though, the kid was probably too busy going balls-deep into Kaija, these days, to give a shit about semantics.

To his mild surprise, he found both of his fence contacts fully clothed and chatting to a short customer at the counter. Axton raised a hand to wave when their customer turned around, and his face fell at the sight of that cocky smile with the missing pre-molar.

He charged across the shop floor in four long, swift strides, snatching Twitch by his skinny neck before the kid could scurry away. "Where's my money, you little shit?"

Twitch tried to shrug. "I don't know what you're--"

"The four hundred thousand you and your fuck buddy sister stole after you left me and my partner for dead on the beach." Axton jerked him in a forceful throttle. "Does that ring a bell?"

Twitch raised his hands. "First of all, nobody left anybody for dead. We just took a few precautions."

"You drugged us and made off with our stuff!"

"You're a resourceful pair of guys. We didn't think you'd miss it. And, it all went to a very good cause!" Twitch was swift to add, as Axton bared his teeth again.

"Your bank account doesn't qualify as a cause."

"Hey, I did what I did for mine. And don't tell me you

wouldn't have done the exact same thing, in our position."

Axton let Twitch go but didn't step away, giving the mechanic a grim once-over. "You got some set of balls, comin' back here without an armed escort."

Twitch rubbed at his throat. "Figured you'd be long gone. Theia's not exactly rich with opportunity."

"Rich enough. Where is your sister, anyway?"

"In a valley about five clicks north." Twitch jerked his head toward the doorway, even though that wasn't north. "Our Kepler drive took a hit during a resource drop."

"More weed?" Axton guessed with a sneer.

Twitch sneered back. "Med supplies, from Persephone. They were supposed to be for the hydro-rig teams, but..." He fidgeted under his collar. "We got jumped."

"Serves you right," Axton muttered.

Twitch's hostile grimace returned. "Look, man, I'm sorry you were the ones who had to get played, but I'm not apologizing for looking after my sister."

"Relax, T," Vesper said. "He's okay. He helped me. Kaija, too."

"You can trust him," Kaija agreed. "Mister Axton's a good man."

Axton smiled for her favor, though it became a snarl for Twitch. "With folk who earn the privilege."

"Listen," Twitch said, sounding like he was ready to make an offer. "I don't have the cash on me, but I can get it. All we need is a replacement regulator for the fuel cells, and we can arrange a new drop-"

"You ain't leavin' this rock without giving back what you owe," Axton snapped. "I don't care what plans you got chargin'."

“I told you, we just need to install the new regulator, and-”

“And I told you: I don’t care.”

“But it’s right there,” Twitch said, gesturing to the weird metal block on the counter.

“Well, it’s mine, now.” Axton looked at Vesper. “How much?”

“One hundred thirty thousand.”

“V!” Twitch growled, and Vesper shrugged.

“Sorry, T. I know you’re just looking out for your own, but...” He glanced at Kaija. “So am I.”

Axton reached for his pocket, where Micklet’s crew’s reward smoldered against the threads. “A hundred thirty grand sounds steep.”

Vesper gave another shrug. “Don’t get much call for sub-light engine parts. I just happened to have this one in the back.”

As Axton laid the money on the counter, Twitch looked ready to start pulling at his hair. “What are you even going to do with a fuel cell regulator?”

“I’m just keepin’ it safe for ya.” Axton slapped his hand on the hardware and leaned in to the mechanic’s face again. “Until you return to me what you owe. With interest.”

Now, Twitch did grab his hair, two brown fistfuls on either side of his head. “How am I supposed to afford that, without a working ship?”

“That’s not my problem. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got some real business to do,” Axton said, and returned his attention to Vesper. Twitch stayed in the shop next to him, fuming mutely until after Axton had collected the gunsmith hardware – and regulator – into his ruck and

was nearly through the door, at which point he called:

“So, how do I find you, once I’ve theoretically got your money?”

“I’ll find you,” Axton told him. “Keep your ass planetside.”

Twitch glowered. “As if I had a choice.”

Axton left him to his miseries with a swing of his ruck and a swagger to his step. The more he considered the kids and their ship, the more he smiled to himself. Damn, if he wasn’t perched on the verge of something great...!

“Hey, darlin’,” he announced as he stepped up into the bungalow. “Guess who I ran into!”

“What the fuck do we need with a fuel cell regulator?” Hal cried, waving his hands.

Axton blanked. “How’d you know about that?”

Hal tapped his finger to his ear and pulled a *hello, dumbass* face.

“Oh.” Without a commentating voice, Axton had forgotten about the comm. “Right.”

“You couldn’t just leave it alone,” Hal groaned. “You had to be the bigshot.”

“Would you calm down?”

“He could report you, you idiot!”

“Nobody’s gonna report anybody. Those kids want to stay off the radar as much as we do. Now, listen, I’ve been thinkin’-”

“That’s a good one.”

“We’ve already got me and the autogun. Add to that a ship, a pilot, and a fence, and we got somethin’ big. Bigger than any other hustler or hunter on this rock.”

“You’re forgetting one tiny detail,” Hal hissed at him. “I’m supposed to keep a low profile, remember? How am

I meant to do that with us hopping all over the planet, blowing up targets left and right?”

Axton shrugged. “Okay, so, you’d stay here.”

Hal scoffed. “Thanks for that!”

“Look, what’s the difference between me bein’ on foot or bein’ in a ship?”

“The difference,” Hal said, leaning in to his face, “is that I thought I was your partner, not just another lackey in the new crew you’ve suddenly decided you want to put together. The decisions you make affect me, too, you know.”

Axton rolled his eyes. “Oh, for Chrissake. Of course, I know that. But this could turn our whole lives around! We could have something great.”

“I like what we have. This partnership works.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I do everything. You’re just the gearhead.”

The second the words left his mouth, Axton realized what he’d said. Or, more precisely, how he knew Hal would take it. True to that prissy, blue-blooded nature, the engineer straightened up with a sniff. “Is that so? Well, in addition to the regulator we don’t need, I hope you remembered to pick up the roll pins for *your* assault rifle, as well as the crane for *your* revolver. Oh! And more terraforming explosives for the RPG *you* want so badly and that *I* am still trying to perfect. For *you*,” he said, as he yanked the ruck from Axton’s arm. He grabbed the Drehtafel from Axton’s shoulder, too, snapping, “And this is mine,” before stalking back to his workshop.

Axton let him go. He hadn’t been so savvy with Sarah, but he’d learned when Hal needed space and time to cool off. So, he took the afternoon to have a swim, clean

himself up in a shower, and find some food for two.

Hal still hadn't left his workroom by dinner, so Axton went to the door, holding an MRE bowl of beef roast and vegetables as a peace offering: "You hungry? I made dinner."

"I'm in the middle of something," Hal muttered, head down as he fiddled with some part or other.

Axton eased a step into the room. "Well, uh, it's better when it's hot." He gave a half-hearted chuckle. "Can't taste it as much."

"Just leave it there."

Axton set the bowl on a space of table next to the semi-dismantled AR before leaving Hal alone again to his work, moving onto the portico to eat his own meal in silence.

The drone of the waves made it easier to not think, just watch and listen and be. Though, without anyone to share in even such thoughtless passage of time, he grew bored and walked back inside, laying his empty bowl and spork in the sink. He went over to the workshop doorway again, this time pausing to ask, "You coming to bed?"

Hal sat hunched far over the table this time. "In a bit."

"I'm gonna turn in."

"Okay," was all Hal said.

Axton pushed himself away from the doorframe. He had another quick wash before climbing into bed, where he settled flat on his back and stared up at the ceiling for a long time, thoughts of Sarah and Dahl and ships and money bouncing in his head until he had to close his eyes to try to get some sleep, if only to stop thinking.

In the other room, ceramic clinked against metal. Then, the patter of the shower, followed by a quiet rustling and, at last, the light tread of footsteps, broken

once by the creak of warped floorboard at the threshold of the bedroom. The mattress shifted, and Hal settled on the other side of the bed.

Axton looked his way. “Darlin’?”

Hal let out a faint sigh. “What?”

Axton rolled to his side, fixing his eyes on the slope of naked shoulders above the sheet. “I’m sorry. You do a lot. I know that.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Hal whispered, speaking to the doorway. “The galaxy’s full of brilliant stars. I’m just a gearhead, like you said.”

“You’re my gearhead. No pair of emo wankers is gonna change that.”

Hal rolled over, one side of his face aglow from the starlight cast from the window above their heads. “If you’re serious about this,” he said, his voice heavy with measured weight, “let Twitch and Ivory fix their ship. For what it costs, not what they owe us. Then, make them an honest offer for partnership.”

Axton half-rose on one arm. “Are you crazy? I’ll look like a pussy!”

“A team can’t be built on blackmail and intimidation. Maybe they’ll join us, maybe they won’t. But at least they’ll get to make the choice for themselves.” Hal looked at him, his eyes shining in the dimness. “That’s all they want. That’s all anybody wants.”

Those words struck a chord of sympathetic feeling in Axton’s gut. Though, he still sighed for his defeat. “You’re right.” He shot a glare at Hal and sniffed. “I hate it when you’re right.”

“Get used to it,” Hal said, and Axton scowled at his smugness. He grabbed his pillow and smacked Hal once

in the face with it. The engineer protested with a short yelp, followed by a humph. “Feel better, now?”

“Much,” Axton replied as he settled down again, just before Hal whacked him the same.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

For Love or Money

It didn't take long to find the valley with the crippled *Siren's Song*. Without cloak or camouflage, the ship gleamed in the hazy afternoon light, a silvery arrowhead among the dotting greenery at the bottom of the valley's bowl. Axton still stepped carefully, keeping eyes and ears trained to anything that didn't feel right. He wanted to give Twitch and Ivory an honest chance, like Hal had said, because the rewards would be only that much greater for a stronger, faster team of hunters with a ship at their disposal. But, these kids had double-crossed them once, and Axton wasn't about to let history repeat itself.

He stopped twenty paces short of the ship as a lone, slender, white-haired figure stepped from the cargo hold: Ivory, in a tank top and her underwear, her pale flesh almost luminescent. She slid a guiding hand along the rail of the ramp but otherwise moved with steady confidence to the edge of the platform, where she stopped, closed her eyes, and took a long drag of air.

Axton cleared his throat, to make himself known, and

Ivory stiffened, blank eyes wide and staring. Beneath the white sheer of her top, her nipples tensed erect.

The regulator suddenly felt very awkward in the ruck on his back.

“Who’s there?” Her voice, while strong in its calling, fluttered on an upswing.

“I’m disappointed you don’t remember me,” Axton said. “Considering how you made me the offer of partnership not too long ago.” One of his nostrils flared of its own accord. “And then drugged me and ran off with all my money.”

The girl’s breasts rounded smooth as she relaxed her stance. “Twitch mentioned he’d crossed paths with you again.” Her mouth curled into a tiny smile. “You’re the loud one.”

Axton heard Hal’s warning drift to him across the distance from the beach: *Be nice*. He couldn’t quite keep the snarl from his voice, though. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Axton,” Ivory declared, and began to scroll off facts of his life as though she were reading the list of ingredients for a recipe. “Former sergeant in the Dahl Army, and former husband of Dahl Lieutenant Sarah Mulvihill, married name redacted. Dishonorably discharged after the willful and excessive endangerment and deaths of multiple individuals, including a Hestian dignitary. Now wanted for war crimes against the Dahl and Hyperion Corporations, current bounty for capture standing at five billion dollars.”

Axton sniffed. “You’ve been busy.”

“And you’ve been bad.”

He snickered without mirth. “You don’t know the half of it, princess.”

“I know enough. I have every galactic database at my fingertips.” Ivory’s smugness almost reached her eyes before she thinned her lips. “For example, I can tap directly into Dahl High Command communication frequencies, to let them know exactly where they can find a certain former staff sergeant of theirs hiding out on Theia.”

To spite her threat, Axton felt the tease of his smile. “You could do that, I guess. Of course, I know how to transmit a communique, too. And, I think GD would be a whole lot more interested in bringing back two of their little lambs on the run than one AWOL trooper, don’t you? Especially seeing as how one of ‘em’s a pretty rare cyber-sensitive.”

The girl’s mask of control dissolved at mention of Galactic Defence, and a flicker of fear flashed across her face at the rest.

Axton moved on, with a new timbre fresh with ease. “But, life on the Edge is hard enough. No reason for either of us to add to that misery, right?”

“No,” Ivory said softly.

“Glad we agree. Now, why don’t you call for your brother, and we can have ourselves a little parlor? Peaceably-like,” he made sure to add.

She raised her chin. “My brother is...easily excited. I can speak for both of us.”

“Fair enough.” He closed their distance to an arm’s length and dropped his volume to a scale more intimate, once again recalling Hal’s warnings to keep a softer touch with these kids. “We got off on the wrong foot, last time. Now, I understand why you did what you did: it’s scary out here, and you gotta look out for your own. But, the

galaxy's a big place. And, we could benefit a lot from each other's company."

She stood her ground at the edge of the ramp, crossing her arms over her chest. "Do tell."

"Me hunter, you pilot," he said, and grinned.

"A pilot without a working ship. You made sure of that."

"I admit, I acted kinda hasty." He shrugged. "Your brother took me off-guard. But, let's not let a little misunderstanding get in the way of progress. A quick, slippery ship would come in handy in my line of work." He tossed in a flirty smile, even if she couldn't see it. "Especially one whose pilot is graced with, shall we say, extra talents."

Ivory peaked her pale brows. "You want to hire us?"

"More like a collaboration. With mutually-beneficial rewards."

"I fail to see how we'd benefit from such an arrangement."

"Your benefit would be having somebody around who knows how to use a gun." He sniffed at the gunshot scars marking *Siren's Song's* hull. "Somethin' you sure as shit could use, you don't mind me saying. Plus...twenty percent off every job?"

She scoffed. "Twenty percent?"

"You're just the transport," Axton reminded her. "I'm the one gonna be doing all the heavy lifting."

"Forty," she said, with a clipped confidence more befitting a grizzled pirate than an orphan girl.

"Thirty. With room for negotiations down the line, if you prove yourselves worthy."

She paused, as though mulling the possibilities beneath

her skin-stitched circuit lines. Then, those sightless eyes went narrow. "How do we know we can trust you?"

Axton snickered; sister was more than just the talent of this smuggling pair, she was also its brains. "That question goes both ways. But, I'm willing to compromise."

"You want my ship," she said flatly. "I want something from you."

"You already owe me a fair chunk of cash, sweet-cheeks."

"Not money," she said, white hair flowing in a shake. "A trade."

He blinked. "What did you have in mind?"

A dreamy smile claimed the place of her former serious look. "Your partner," she said.

A chilly tendril of doubt snaked its way up his innards. "What about him?"

"He's not like you. He feels things." The dreaminess turned smug. "I want him."

That hard coldness clenched his sternum, making his voice croak. "You can't have him."

"Why?" she said, and, even though her gaze was without focus, Axton felt those gray eyes bore into him, drilling through every carefully-laid layer of his armor as cleanly and sharply as a diamond-tipped bit. "Because you don't want me to?"

"Because he's dead," Axton growled. Ivory's face went as blank as her eyes, but he didn't linger to take any satisfaction in shutting her up, instead tightening the sling of the ruck as he about-faced. "And, we're done, here," he told her, and walked away, grinding his boots in the dirt with every step.

He stomped the whole trek back to the bungalow,

knuckles straining his skin white as Ivory's hair. As he came to the beach, the wind turned sharp and salty in his eyes, scratching at his sinuses, making snot run. He snorted a dangling glob onto the sand and rubbed the top of his wrist over his cheeks.

The nerve- the fucking *gall* of that twisted, sheltered, cyber-addled girl, making her sanctimonious judgments about him. He felt things: like for a father who'd taught him how to shoot, and four sisters who'd teased and laughed with and loved him well, and a momma who'd tousled his hair and cried for him when he'd left for basic. For the men and women he'd gambled and slogged through the muck and fought for his life with on more than a dozen far-off planets. For the smart, sexy, confident wife who'd made him the envy of every dull grunt in their platoon, against whose skin he'd whispered a thousand times he loved her, and to whom he'd promised to give everything, even if they hadn't lasted. And for his partner, the clever, beautiful young man who'd run with him based on little more than a smile, and who'd awakened in him such a gloriously freeing passion that Axton wondered if the farmboy and soldier and husband roles had been just stepping stones, and only now was he truly becoming the man he'd meant to be all along....

The weather had turned as he'd walked back to the beach, the low-built bungalow glowing like a beacon on the darkening shore. The light from the main door sprayed onto the portico, and in it Hal's tall shadow stood, growing more distinct with Axton's every closing step.

The engineer met him a stone's throw from the lone building, just as Axton grumbled, "So much for that plan."

“I heard,” Hal said as he fell into step beside. “I’m sorry.”

Axton stepped into the bungalow, shrugging the ruck from his shoulders and tossing it into the corner with a fling of his arm. “Fuck ‘em,” he said, the words sharp and sour even to his own ears.

“It’s a good idea,” Hal said. “They’re just not the right fit. But, there are other ships, other pilots. Big galaxy, remember?” His voice carried the coax of a smile, but Axton blew an angry scoff and shook his head. Hal’s hand touched the top of his spine, massaging with firm attention. “I know you wanted this,” he said close to Axton’s shoulder. “But, maybe it’s better, this way. A team needs to have more than the payout in common. It needs to have trust.”

Axton faced him with a scowl. “She wasn’t interested in *trust*.”

Hal paused his gentle massage. “I think she was testing you.”

“So, what? I flunked?”

The engineer smiled. “Not from where I’m standing.”

Axton stepped against him but couldn’t bring himself to return such easy sweetness. He brought their foreheads together for a light bump and murmured, “I couldn’t let her have you.”

Hal wound his arms around him and nuzzled Axton’s cheek. “You’re the only one who has me,” he whispered, and passed a light and tender kiss between their lips.

His having might have been a given, but Axton still asked, “Would you fuck me?”

Hal drew back, shaking his head. “I don’t want to fuck, anymore,” he said, and Axton cringed his brow as he

leaned in to him again.

“Please. Darlin’, *please*,” he said, pushing his face so hard to Hal’s skin that he could smell only that sharp electric blue. “I want this. I want you,” he said, and sought to smother any protest with a deeply fierce kiss. But Hal cupped his jaw and forced them apart again, just enough to whisper:

“I want you, too. I want to make love to you.”

Those words blew softer than a breeze, but they silenced the rest of the world like a gunshot, freezing the breath in Axton’s lungs. He’d always thought those words ridiculous, hackneyed, sappy. But they didn’t sound that way from Hal’s lips. From Hal’s lips, they sounded unspoiled, bracing. Sweet. Axton pressed his mouth to those lips, softly, the only worthy answer he could give to Hal’s tender sentiment.

They started to stumble toward the bedroom when Axton opened his eyes, to make sure they wouldn’t bump into anything, and his guts turned abruptly cold. Standing in the doorway to the portico, Twitch cocked his brow and said:

“Isn’t he supposed to be dead?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A Time and Place for Everything

Axton angled himself in front of Hal and swiped the Jakobs from its holster, leveling it at Twitch's head. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Whoa!" Twitch lifted his hands. "I just came to talk."

Axton pulled the hammer on the revolver with his thumb and steadied the front sights between the boy's saucer-eyes. "Talk fast."

Hal laid a hand on Axton's forearm. "He's alone, and unarmed. I think we're okay."

The knot of shocked nerves at the base of Axton's spine relaxed some, and he lowered the gun in a slow, straight drift. He set the Jakobs's hammer back into place but didn't re-holster the gun, making sure Twitch knew that with a creaking clench of his fingers around the grip.

The mechanic kept his gaze trained on the revolver a long extra second before nodding at Hal. "Always knew you were the one with the cool head."

Hal didn't bite for the flattery. "What do you want?"

"Ivory told me what happened," Twitch said, still

showing his palms. "What you said."

"Did she tell you what she said?" Axton growled, showing him the gun again even as Hal hissed and squeezed at his arm.

Twitch's focus caromed between the gun, Hal, and Axton. "She doesn't get out much. And we don't get a lot of passenger-types. She's not like regular people-"

"No shit," Axton shot back.

"It's supposed to be a gift, what she can do. But they turned it into a curse." Twitch scrunched his face in a snarl. "They locked her in a lab, stitched her with circuits. They tried to turn her into a *weapon*-"

"She got out," Hal said, with brusquer finality than Axton expected from him. "Alive. That's more than a lot of other people manage."

"Escape's not enough. That ship's been her whole life for the last six years. She doesn't have anything else." Twitch pointed at Axton. "He knows what that's like. Always running, always hiding, never knowing if that guy on the street is going to give you a chance, or take one for himself."

Hal gave a slow shake of his head. "Everyone is running, out here."

"Not you. You got out, all the way. We looked you up with GD, and they think you're dead: records archived, warrants expunged-"

"Your point being?" Hal said.

Twitch's eyes went wide, nearly glassy. "I was going to try to get your partner to reconsider, for the regulator." He swallowed hard, and shook his head. "But, that's not what I want, anymore."

Hal kept his gaze level. "You want out," he said, no

question in his voice.

“We want to be free,” Twitch reiterated. “Like you.”

“That didn’t just happen.”

“So, tell me. Tell me how you did it.”

“With help,” Hal said, and Axton stopped wondering where he was going with his sudden attitude change.

Twitch flashed his focus to Axton, his face feverish with desperation. But, he still spoke to Hal: “Can we trust him?”

“I do,” Hal said, without pause.

The mechanic thought a moment, but only one before he slipped the ruck from his shoulder and tossed it at Axton’s feet. “That’s everything we’ve got. Forty-seven thousand and change, plus some contraband. It’s yours, as well as anything else we pick up along the way: money, supplies. Even *Siren’s Song*, if that’s what you want. There’s just one condition,” he said, and fixed Axton with the first steady look he’d given. “Nobody touches my sister.”

“Nobody touches my partner,” Axton replied, his tone equally sharp.

The boy nodded and extended one hand. “We have a deal?”

Axton didn’t take Twitch’s hand but told him, “I give the orders. And we take the jobs I choose, seventy-thirty split.”

Twitch nodded again.

“And,” Axton warned, “you understand I make no guarantees we can find some chumps to take your place on a slab.”

A third silent nod, and Twitch emphasized his waiting hand with a jerk. The allure of true freedom shone in his young face, too much for him to mask and likely

overriding any temptation to skip planet and run. So Axton grabbed his fingers, gripping hard. Twitch wrinkled the bridge of his nose but otherwise didn't flinch.

Axton had to smile a little as he bobbed his head at his own dropped ruck in the corner of the room. "Get your regulator and fix the ship. When you're done, come get us. And, be ready to work."

Twitch collected his precious engine part and hurried for the door. "We'll be in touch soon."

Axton knew they'd be. He waited until Twitch was away before turning to Hal, only to find his partner regarding him with a strange look. "What?"

"You are definitely sexy when you take charge," Hal murmured, and Axton grinned.

"I know, right?"

The engineer didn't match his smile. "I just hope you know what you're getting us into."

Axton shrugged, unconcerned. "Vesper knows 'em. I can pull intel from him."

"Well, if you're going that way, get us some extra munitions," Hal said, glancing at the ruck of money at their feet. "Nothing fancy, just to see what the boy can do. He might not like guns, but he should at least know how to use one. Especially if he and his sister are ranked on the wanted lists."

"Good idea." Axton didn't stoop for the ruck, though, instead reaching out to comb his fingers through a drifted tuft of fringe at Hal's temple. He eased their bodies close again with a new smile. "But, first...!"

Hal shifted back from the lean of his kiss. "What are you doing?"

"I thought-!" Axton jerked a thumb toward their

bedroom, but Hal furrowed his brow. “No? Moment’s passed?”

“I should think so,” Hal said, walking back toward his workroom.

“Maybe later?” Axton called after him.

“Just get the data,” Hal called back.

Axton shifted his jaw at his partner's too-easy rejection but didn't give chase. Hal was right: there was work to do. He picked up Twitch's ruck and sifted through it, finding the mentioned cash in a wrap of cloth that looked like an old shirt. That went back inside to the bottom of the bag, and he extracted two bottles of Nysian grog as well as another stash of tightly-packed weed. He laid those on the main table, an incentive of celebration for his return.

He stepped into the workroom, close enough to Hal's shoulder to give it a nudge. “I'm headed out.”

The engineer turned from his work, a high compliment. “Watch your back.”

“You gonna worry about me?”

Hal smirked. “Why ask questions you already know the answer to?”

Axton snickered as he headed to the door. “I'll be back!”

“I'll be here,” Hal replied, and, with that assurance, Axton hopped off the portico to the beach, whistling a tune under his breath.

The weather held, at least until he got to Vesper's shop, where Axton picked up a loose collection of mediocre firearms across the calibre range, as well as some background info on their new prospective partners. Vesper gave no pause for the first request, but for the second, his

expression paled, and he dropped his pitch with a locking swallow.

Axton did the same, muttering, “Jesus,” at the end of Vesper’s story.

He borrowed the shop’s runner for his return to the beach. There, he unloaded the supplies under a pelting rain, leaving a shotgun, submachine gun, and pistol on the main table. They clattered loud enough to bring Hal out from his workshop.

“Find out anything?” Hal asked, as Axton reached for one of the bottles of grog.

“Well, they’re so far down the list of wanteds, I don’t think we got much to worry about in terms of hostiles.” Axton pried the cork loose with his fist and grimaced around his first swig of the harsh-sweet liquor. He took another deep gulp before passing the bottle over.

Hal held it without drinking. “I’m sensing a ‘but’ in there,” he said, so Axton told him: every wretched detail Vesper had relayed to him about Ivory and Twitch’s sordid past. As Hal listened, his face twisted into a horrified mask and his skin went cold-pale. Finally, he sat heavily into a chair, wheezing, “No wonder those kids don’t trust anyone. Six years, they said they’ve been on that ship. What would that have made them, at the time? Thirteen, maybe?”

The implications of that math made Axton’s stomach roil. “Ugly shit like that happens everywhere. Kids always seem to get the worst of it, though.”

Hal gripped the bottle in his lap like a security blanket. “I thought Strenk was bad. But, this Wolffe...! What sort of monster-?”

Axton shook his head loose of a disturbing image of a

too-young Ivory and Twitch performing for a pervert. “Nothin’ to be done for it, now.” He nodded at the bottle in Hal’s hands. “Either take a pull or hand that over.”

Hal lifted the bottle to his lips, but his arm didn’t swing smoothly. “God, that’s foul.”

“Don’t stop to taste it,” Axton advised, and took the bottle back. “Just get drunk with me.”

“I don’t want to get drunk,” Hal said. But he pulled another swinging swig when Axton passed the bottle over again, and back and forth they went until the bottom dripped dry. Even through rum-colored glasses, the galaxy looked the same: ugly, cheating, vicious. Filled with rapists, murderers, and child traffickers and pornographers. And, ex-wives who’d probably already forgotten the husbands they’d cut loose and dumped to the galactic latrine trench.

They didn’t talk while they drank, and maybe it was for lingering thoughts of Strenk or the twins’ twisted Mister Wolffe that made Hal puke up his half of the bottle. Axton didn’t feel that great, either, though less for that reason than for the hitch of Hal’s back as he spewed over the side of the portico, and for the clammy slickness of his hair as Axton stroked it off from his face.

He made Hal clean up in the shower while he set up a makeshift bed of blankets outside, where the offshore winds and pattering rain would offer a more soothing balm for drunken depression than the confines of their bedroom. While he waited for Hal, he pulled off his boots and outer layers and looked out over the rolling ocean, at a line of stars that could have pointed toward Artemisia, or Themis, or Andromeda; he didn’t know enough about star charts to hazard a guess. Still, they were pretty.

The boards behind him creaked, and Hal muttered, "I'm sorry."

"Come here," Axton said, and Hal slid into the open space beside him, naked but for a pair of skivvies. Axton reached out and ruffled his hand in the younger man's hair. It felt wet again, but clean, and cool, especially against his own naked shoulder, where he pulled Hal's head to rest.

"Look at all that, up there," Hal said, blinking toward the open sky. "Looks so romantic, from a distance." Axton was set to agree, when Hal spoke again, his voice a cutting rumble: "We never think about the children being bought and sold, and forced to-!" He drew his knees close to his chest, their bed rustling beneath him as he blew a nasal sigh. "It's like humanity became less...*human* the farther out they got from Central Core."

"The Core's got its share of shit," Axon reminded him. "The only difference out here is that most of the scumbags don't have money to hide behind. But, you really think the class of criminal in the Inner Ring is better than the ones on the Edge?"

"No," Hal admitted after a moment. "But, part of the reason I left Dahl was because I wanted to make things better. I wanted to do something right, for a change." He deflated under another weary sigh. "But, nothing's right, out here. It's all just...shit."

Axton sat up straight, subtly offended. "No, it's not. And, you are doin' something good, out here."

Hal blew a low scoff. "Like what?"

"Like us." Axton hooked his arm around Hal's neck. "A soldier and a gearhead on the run? We shoulda been written off a long time ago. But, together, we rule this

roost.” He showed off his teeth in a wide smile. “And, now, we got a ship, and a crew, and we’re gonna make the luck of the galaxy go our way, for a change. Make a difference, like you said.”

Hal’s gaze was clear, sober, and hopeful. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Axton repeated, and curled his arm to pull their faces close. “What’s there to stop us, darlin’?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

No One and Nothing

Axton eased back a step as Twitch raised the pistol, one hand around the grip and the other cupping the base. The mechanic squinted, squeezed the trigger, and the gun cracked a bang of exploding gunpowder. Axton turned to him with a frown. "Are you even tryin' to hit the targets?"

Twitch cringed into his collar. "I told you I wasn't any good with guns."

"I expected you to be better than *this*." Axton waved a hand at the untouched lineup of bottles and cans he'd set up down the beach. "How'd you stay profitable without bein' able to shoot the broad side of a ship?"

Twitch shrugged. "We've always stayed away from the chancey jobs."

"Yeah, well, hunting's all about takin' chances."

Hal approached them, holding a compact submachine gun with a modified stock. "Take a chance with this one." He traded it into Twitch's hands and explained, "The stock will give you extra stability. Just hold it to you and aim down the front sight. Now, this one will keep firing so

long as you hold the trigger,” he warned, “so you want brief, controlled fire-bursts. When you’re ready, squeeze, count to one, and release. Got it? Squeeze, one, release,” he repeated, miming the action with his own finger.

Twitch nodded and prepped himself with a square of his shoulders and a breath that ballooned his cheeks. When he squeezed the trigger, the SMG spit its volley. He yelped, from either the noise or the recoil, and released the trigger just as quickly.

Axton barked a short guffaw. Hal chuckled, too: “Sorry. I should have warned you about the kick.” He tipped his head toward the targets. “Try again.”

Twitch scrunched his face and fired once more. A spatter of ammunition sprayed from the barrel, but everything stayed standing.

“Wow.” Axton scowled at the mechanic. “You suck at this. I mean, you’re really terrible.”

“Oh, come on!” Twitch snorted in defense. “Nobody can hit those all the way down there.”

Axton grabbed his Jakobs, pulled back the hammer with the flat of his off-hand, and fired, three shots in quick succession. Two bottles popped and a can made a *ka-tang* sound as it went flying. He slipped the revolver back into its sheath and gave a silent, smug cock of one brow.

Twitch stared down the beach, recovering a moment after with a sheepish look. “Okay. Almost nobody.”

Hal sent Axton a mildly disparaging glare. “No one’s expecting you to be a trick-shooter.” He offered Twitch another reassuring smile. “Just keep practicing. And remember: relax. Your gun should be an extension of you, but you control it, not the other way around.”

“Like me and *Siren’s Song*,” Ivory said from the portico.

Axton glanced round at her, the same as everyone else. “But a lot less complicated.”

“The only reason you think it’s complicated is because you don’t understand it,” Ivory replied primly, and Axton was glad she couldn’t see, for the scornful face he pulled in her direction.

Hal caught it, though, and clamped his lips together to keep from laughing. “Well, any question is easy if you know the answer.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t bother asking, then,” she said, and Axton sniffed.

“No, you don’t get a gun.”

Ivory narrowed her sightless eyes. “I was going to ask what my job’s supposed to be, but now I’m assuming it’s just ‘pilot.’”

“That’s important.” Twitch smiled at her. “You’re the only one who can do it.”

Hal swung his earnest gaze to each point of their uneven quadrilateral formation. “We’re a four-person crew. That makes everyone important. Equally so.”

Ivory sniffed. “If we’re all equals, why do we only get thirty percent of every reward?”

Axton sneered at her. “Cause I said so.”

“Ivory’s the pilot, and I’m the mechanic.” Twitch returned Axton’s sneer for his sister. “What do you do?”

“I give the orders,” Axton said, even as Hal extended a calming arm between them.

“He’s our captain.”

“We didn’t agree to that,” Ivory said, frowning in her words.

Hal looked between both kids. “We’ll be able to vote on some things, I promise. But, when jobs turn sticky – and

they will – trust me: you’re going to want someone who knows how to stay alive and keep you the same. That’s Axton,” he said, with emphasis. “He’s got the most field experience, and he’s our best shot.”

“Does that matter?” Twitch asked.

“Yes.” Hal’s voice was firm.

“A hunt’s a lot trickier than a grab-and-go,” Axton said.

Hal nodded. “But, the rewards are greater, too.”

Axton shot both kids a challenging look. “We thought that’s what you wanted,” he said, and brother and sister fell into a weighty silence, as though for the first time considering the fate that went with their choice.

Hal frowned at Axton over Twitch’s head. “Why don’t we stop for today?” He started to lift the gun from Twitch’s grip, but the boy clutched it back.

“No. I want to keep going.” His focus ricocheted from Hal to Axton and back again. “I’ve got to learn, right?”

“If you wanna protect your sister, I’d say it’s a good idea,” Axton told him, and Twitch set his mouth into a grim, thin line as he took concentrated aim down the beach again.

The kid’s skills at target-shooting didn’t improve much over his first lesson, but at least he figured out how to spread his stance and brace himself for recoil. He’d get the hang of holding a gun in a suppressive fire situation soon enough. Dusk wasn’t the best time to put that into practice, though, so Hal suggested the twins head back to their ship, with homework: reloading magazines and basic gun assembly for Twitch, and, for Ivory, a sift through the local wanted list.

The following day saw all of them more focused and cooperative, with a lot less bitching. Working together, Hal

and Ivory had even managed to come up with a few low-threat smuggler targets:

“There’s Haze and Rumpuncher.” Hal made a face. “But, they’re two. The other’s Waterhog.”

“Let’s keep it simple.” Axton shot a look to Twitch. “At least ’til you learn how to shoot.”

“Waterhog it is, then,” Hal said to Ivory, who laid her hand on the datapad. Beneath her fingers, the screen flickered with dizzying scrolls of intel.

“He’s mobile,” she announced. “Works alone, mostly around the Helianthema Cluster of islands.”

“His ship’s what’s made him so hard to catch,” Hal explained.

“Good thing we got a ship of our own,” Axton said. “What’s maximum coverage on that sector?”

The data under Ivory’s hand flashed with new scrolls. “Roughly eight hundred kilometres.”

Axton grunted. “That’s a lot of distance to cover.”

“Not necessarily.” Hal shrugged. “He’s got to refuel, right?”

A plan started to ferment in Axton’s head. He half-turned Twitch’s way. “Hey, goggles. Is *Siren’s Song* ready for action?”

The mechanic thought a moment. “She can be.”

“All right, then, lovely boys.” Axton inclined his head toward Ivory. “And girl. Time to get serious. We’ve got ourselves a mark to catch.”

It didn’t happen right away: the ship needed some prep and her crew required supplies. Purpose lent them speed through the days that followed, though, until they’d made enough of a plan and done enough of the groundwork to justify liftoff to Theia’s southwest sector of vast oceanic

mass. *Siren's Song* and her pubescent crew might have been as ready as they'd ever get for their first hunt, but Axton wouldn't ship off before his pre-mission ritual of a free and physical fuck, to remind himself of his best reason to fight.

They started their sex as soon as the twins left earshot of the bungalow, and Hal aroused and fulfilled as well as he'd ever done, but he seemed to be holding something back, something more than just his cum. So when they settled down in the bed after a clean-up, Axton shifted close to cuddle with a hushed, "Come here." He stroked his fingers over the younger man's chest, down his belly, and around his half-firm dick. "I can finish you off, too."

"You don't need to do that," Hal said.

Axton allowed for a touch of playful offense to come out in his voice: "I thought you liked me making you come?"

Hal chuckled. "I do—"

"So, let me." Axton eased their bodies closer and gave a firmer stroke with his hand.

Hal's belly cringed under his arm. "Ax...!"

"You want me to suck you, instead?"

"No."

Axton kissed his ear, whispering wetly, "You want to do me?"

"I don't want to waste the time, is all."

"It's not a waste." Axton left off his dick and stroked Hal's jaw, to turn his face toward him. "I want to be with you."

Hal rolled fully to his side, his eyes showing a keen focus. "So, take me on the Waterhog job."

Axton blinked, before shifting back with a groan. "Oh,

darlin'...!"

"You need me out there!"

"I need you to do what I say."

"Twitch is a quick study," Hal barrelled on. "But he is nowhere near ready to offer backup in the field. And if you think Ivory-"

"Hal," Axton snapped, to shut him up. It worked: the engineer clamped his lips together, though not without a glare. Axton softened his curtness with a cleansing sigh, and offered another caress of Hal's cheek. "You're worth more than both those kids put together. You know that. But, we have to make sure your trail's cold. Dead cold," he said with quiet emphasis.

"Meanwhile, you're out there shooting up God knows what, pissing off God knows who."

Axton bumped him with his hips. "You jealous 'cause I'm gettin' all the fun?"

"No," Hal mumbled, swinging his gaze away as he rolled to his back.

"Yeah, you are!" Axton snickered and followed the younger man's roll, so he lay mostly on top of him.

"I'm concerned," Hal said. "If something goes wrong-"

"Nothin's gonna go wrong. I know what I'm doing."

Hal's gaze had fallen from Axton's face to the chain around his neck, where Sarah's ring dangled between them. "I sometimes wonder."

A rush of gooseflesh pimpled Axton's skin, and made the hairs stand up from his chest all the way to his groin. "Hey. We chose Waterhog for a first job with these kids, why?"

Hal rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Because he's a solo operator," he said with rote dullness, "without a kill

record, who shouldn't offer much trouble."

"That's right. So, you don't need to worry about me."

"That's like telling me I don't need to breathe," Hal muttered, and Axton chuckled.

"Well, I want you to do that," he said, and shifted against the engineer again. Their dicks touched, and Axton moved his hips, letting them rub together. That brought a glassy flicker to Hal's gaze, and started his breathing on a heavier pattern. It stimulated, but not enough, and Axton reached down, to take both their cocks in his hand. He tilted his head to kiss but didn't quite, only murmuring, "I want you to do somethin' else for me."

Hal's length went firm with less than a dozen strokes, and his breath started to come faster, in time with Axton's steady pumping. "What's that?"

"What do you think?" Axton said, and, this time, he swallowed Hal's precious moans in a string of smothering kisses that he kept going even after the engineer stiffened with a spurt. He continued massaging that delicate wilting dick, with a low, humming smile. "Now, you got to admit: that was nice."

Hal let out three panting breaths. "I hate you, sometimes," he said, and Axton drew back.

"Why?"

The engineer shot him a miserable look. "You don't play fair."

Axton snickered. "Ain't nothing and nobody can keep me from getting what I want, darlin'. You know that." He bent his head for another kiss of Hal's lips, but the younger man shifted out from under him and rolled to his feet. Axton half-sat up after him. "Where you going?"

"To clean up this mess," Hal said over the round of one

shoulder as he padded out the door.

The hairs under Axton's arms itched from another sudden chill as he watched Hal go. He waited a while propped in that same position, but the younger man didn't return for a long time. Eventually, Axton settled back against the pillow, where he fell to sleep alone.

Daylight broke, and, with it, the fresh start of a new hunt.

"Remember," Hal said as he checked Twitch's shotgun, "just because you're holding a gun doesn't mean you have to fire."

Twitch blinked. "Is that true?"

Axton gave the chamber of his Jakobs a confident spin. "Yeah, it's true. Just not nearly as much fun." He flipped the chamber closed with a grin and a jerk of his wrist.

Hal frowned at his grandstanding before he offered Twitch a gentler smile, along with the gun. "With any luck, all you'll have to do is show it."

"With me around," Axton declared, "you don't need luck."

"What about Hal?" Ivory asked from *Siren's Song's* loading platform. Despite her blindness, she seemed to know exactly where the engineer stood, and had turned her body his way. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"Not this time." Hal took a step onto the ship's lowered deck, so they stood within arm's reach. "But, I'll be monitoring your frequency, so you'll hardly notice I'm not there."

Axton strode up onto the ship, too, the third point to their triangle. "This job barely needs more than one. You and your brother are just comin' along for the practice."

Ivory opened her lips but no sound came out. As if in

answer to her silent question, Hal leaned forward on one leg and brushed the tip of his longest finger against hers. "Listen to your captain," he said softly.

Twitch sidled up among them and took possessive hold of Ivory's arm. "Come on. We've got launch checks to do." He didn't shoot any backward glance, but Axton could feel his bristling energy as he pulled his sister up the ramp.

A similar prickling suspicion spiked the hairs on Axton's arms. "You know," he mumbled to Hal. "Part of the deal with these kids was that there wouldn't be any extra fraternization. Especially between you and cyber-girl."

Hal scowled at him, muttering, "Grow up," before easing off the ramp to the beach.

Axton watched him walk away for the second time in half as many days. He opened his arms in a bewildered shrug. "Aren't you gonna wish me luck?"

"You don't need it," Hal said, waving one hand behind him.

Axton waited for the engineer to turn around, or at least look back over his shoulder. But Hal kept walking, his gait never pausing. The comm in his ear clicked open, followed by Ivory's voice:

"Axton?"

"Yeah, I'm comin'." Though, he stayed standing there in the middle of the ramp, his attention fixed to Hal's back.

The comm clicked again. "Flight systems are go," Ivory prodded.

"I said, I'm on my way," Axton told her. He gave up waiting for a break in Hal's commitment to this argument and turned up the ramp. It closed behind him with a

belch of air and a heavy lock of servos, and he clomped up toward the bridge. As he felt the ship's engine rumble through the plates under his feet, he wondered if maybe he should have said something more. Just in case.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Blindsided

Waterhog's looks didn't live up to his name. He was neither supple nor boarish, but a medium-built, middle-aged man whose only truly descriptive feature was a long scar that ran up one side of his mouth, giving it a permanent curl resembling a tusk. A trail of beard on that side glistened from a perpetual leak of drool, but he spoke well enough. Better, in fact, than most skips on this planet. Especially when Axton sidled his way into the empty seat across from him and drawled:

"You've given the law a merry chase, Waterhog. But, this is the end of the line." He settled his hand with the Jakobs on the table. Not brandishing, but with the barrel pointed indubitably at Waterhog's face.

The mark took a long pull on his drink, tipping the glass into the intact side of his mouth, and made Axton wait for a reply. At last, he set his half-drunk ale on the table and grumbled, "I knew it couldn't last forever." His dark, beady gaze went from the revolver to over Axton's left shoulder, where Twitch held the shotgun on him.

“So, why not make it easy on us, old timer?” Axton suggested. “It’s been a long three days spent trackin’ you down, and we really just want to collect and go home.”

Waterhog indicated his glass with a calm tilt of his head. “Seeing as how this drink is likely to be my last for a while, I’d like to finish it, if you don’t mind.”

Axton hadn’t been lying about the team’s weariness. And, this mark’s resigned demeanor was a refreshing change from all the runners, shooters, and ambushers. He shrugged. “Okay, sure.”

Waterhog lifted his glass for another slow pull, though not before sending Axton a chuckling smile over the rim. “You’re awfully accommodating for a bounty hunter. They’re usually uncouth ingrates with a dubious sense of personal hygiene.”

A smile made its way to Axton’s face for the compliment. “Well, I’m not like all the others. Maybe you’ve heard of me? Axton the Great?”

The skip shook his head. “Sorry.”

Axton recovered quickly. “What about my lady friend, here?” he said, leaning his head toward the Drehlafette perched on his shoulder. “She’s made herself quite a reputation ‘round these parts.”

Waterhog squinted, first at Twitch, then at Axton. “I may have been on my own these last twenty years, son, but even I know your young friend there is sporting a sausage link and eggs, not fresh melons.”

“Not him,” Axton said, scowling at the older man’s obtuseness. “He’s nobody.”

“Hey,” Twitch protested, but Axton ignored him.

“I was talkin’ about this little darlin’.” He touched the Drehlafette brick with his cheek and smiled. “She’s the

mechanical scourge of the Theian underworld.”

Waterhog grunted. “Never heard of her, either.” He curled the intact side of his mouth in a placating smile. “But, don’t take it so hard, son. I give the local news as much attention as it deserves. Which is to say, none at all.” He punctuated his lack of interest by lifting his glass for another swig.

Despite Waterhog’s wanted nature, Axton enjoyed his easy demeanor. But, time was money. He sat straight, rotating his wrist so the Jakobs looked square at the skip across the table. “Well, it’s been fun, old timer, but drink your last. I wanna sleep in my own bed, tonight.”

Waterhog dropped his gaze to the table. “That sounds nice,” he mused as he raised his head. “I think I’ll do the same.” And he flipped the table up, the wooden top smashing Axton in the face.

Axton sputtered spilled drink and oozing blood from his place on the floor. Above him, Twitch started to help him up:

“What do I do?”

“Get after him!” Axton barked, waving toward the door.

The kid faltered a second, then started running, his shotgun clutched to his chest. Axton overtook him at a sprint, eyes narrowed on Waterhog’s lean, loping form. The skip had less than a fifty-meter lead, but the open water beckoned in a hundred.

“Hal-” Axton started, when he remembered. “Ivory! He’s headed for the dock!”

He’d barely gotten the order out when *Siren’s Song* roared overhead and spun around in a graceful turn. Her reverse thrusters blew over Waterhog, lifting him off his

boots and sending him flying backward, to land almost at Axton's feet in a cloud of coughing dust.

Twitch came jogging up, stopping beside Axton with his shotgun levelled at the prone skip. It was hardly necessary: Waterhog's sails were in tatters. They got him into security bracelets and loaded into *Siren's Song's* hold without any more trouble.

Axton left Twitch to keep watch, while he strode up to the bridge to congratulate his pilot on her quick thinking. "You're more hunter than you think," he said, and smiled as he leaned against a flat console.

Ivory didn't turn his way. "The thrusters were Hal's idea," she corrected, and smiled, too. "He says intimidation is just as good as firepower."

Axton blinked. "When'd he say that?"

"Just now. I've been talking with him since we left."

He frowned. "You're supposed to be flyin' the ship."

"I can do both. The amplitude modulation I use to keep the frequency secure requires very little attention. As for the ship, she's simply an extension of myself. Like a rather large extremity." She stopped a moment before sputtering an abrupt laugh. "Hal says you should know all about those."

Axton stared at her before shooting her a scowl. "Awright, that's enough. We're supposed to be on the same team, here. That means no private pow-wows."

Ivory pulled her lips together into a thin line. "Do you want me to open the frequency?"

"Yes," Axton snapped.

She didn't move, as though thinking. "All right." She chuckled again, adding, "He certainly does," and Axton realized she'd asked *Hal* that question, not him. She

probably hadn't even been paying attention to him the last minute!

The comm in his ear clicked and changed scale in equalization, just as Hal murmured across the distance, "Sorry about that. Won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," Axton told him, but left the rest unsaid. At least until after they'd handed Waterhog over to Sheriff Dearborn, divvied up the reward money back at the bungalow, and let the kids fly their ship home to their valley hideaway. Then, Axton let go the words simmering at the top of his throat:

"Just what kinda fucking game are you playing?"

Hal gave him a blank look. "What are you talking about?"

"You and Ivory. With your secret chats, makin' plans behind my back."

"I heard you tell Twitch to get after Waterhog," Hal explained. "So, I gave her a safe suggestion for seizure. That's all."

"Well, you coulda run it by me, first," Axton said, jabbing his thumb to his chest.

"There wasn't any time. We had to stop him before he made it to open water. *Siren's Song* doesn't have any guns, tractors, or tracking tech, yet."

"I know that."

"So, what? I'm supposed to clear everything with you beforehand?" Hal waved a hand up and down. "Send you a memorandum listing all the possible permutations of what can go wrong on a job, and you can tick off which ones you approve and which ones you don't?"

"I wouldn'ta let Waterhog get away."

"Really. So, what was your plan, then?"

Axton faltered under the other man's stare. "I'da thought of something."

Hal pointed a finger at him. "That fast and loose attitude was fine when it was just you out there. But you need to think about those kids with you."

"What I need," Axton told him, snarling back, "is for my pilot to follow my orders, not to have another voice jabbering in her ear all the Goddamned time."

"Oh, now, she's your pilot." Hal crossed his arms and shortened his nose in a cringe. "What happened to this being a team? Our team?"

"You tell me," Axton said, matching his stance. "All that cloak and dagger shit you got goin' with Ivory. When did that start?"

Hal gave a dramatic roll of his eyes. "We just talk," he groaned, opening his arms again. "It's boring, waiting for something to happen on a job. You know that."

"You talk? What the hell do you talk about, that you gotta do it on a private frequency?"

The engineer blew another beleaguered groan that became a sigh. "You wouldn't be interested in what we talk about."

"You mean, I'm not *smart* enough to know what you talk about."

"That's not what I said." Hal pulled another face. "Why do you assume I think the worst of you, when I don't?"

Axton raised his chin but didn't answer, for the name at the tip of his tongue.

It didn't matter. Hal guessed it anyway, with a sharp look to the chain around Axton's neck. "It's because of *her*. Isn't it?"

“Leave Sarah outta this,” Axton said, fighting the urge to put his hand around her ring, because he didn’t know if he’d hold it tight or rip it off.

Hal scoffed. “*I’m* supposed to leave her out? *You’re* the one who won’t let her go!”

“This is about you and me. My wife’s got nothin’ to do with it.”

“You can’t honestly believe that.” Hal’s voice was quiet, but it cut, and Axton clamped his lips shut on a half-formed entreaty for the engineer to just *stop*, instead flaring his nostrils around a breath he pulled slowly to keep silent.

“She’s not your wife, any longer,” Hal went on, his pitch still low. “She’s not going to swing down from the stars and beg you to come back. She chose Dahl over you,” he said, enunciating the words so each syllable hung in the air between them for so long, Axton could almost see the shape of their letters. He blinked, twice, to clear their ghostly image from his vision. “I’m sorry.” Despite the sentiment, Hal’s expression lost none of its firm pragmatism. “But, that’s the truth. The sooner you stop deluding yourself that you are anything but dead to her, the better off you’ll be.”

The muscles in his chest and belly constricted under a cramping loss of air. Axton still managed to get out between his teeth, “What do you know about anything? You spoiled, stuck-up, cry-baby queer. You were *nothing*,” he snarled, “before I came along.”

Hal matched his angry growl with one of his own. “Belittling me won’t change the fact that I’m right.”

Axton stared at him, feeling his face go hot and his throat clench tight. He gave a halting shake of his head

that quickened with every heartbeat. “We’re not talkin’ about this anymore.” He turned his back on Hal and headed for the bedroom.

“Of course.” The engineer scoffed. “Of *course*, that’s your answer. Because you can’t abide anyone poking holes in this perfect macho fairy tale you’ve built around yourself!”

“Leave me alone,” Axton told him.

“You can walk away from everything but her,” Hal croaked at his back. “Why?”

“Just leave me alone,” Axton said again. He closed the bedroom door behind him and clambered onto the bed, where he stretched out on the rumpled blankets. Sarah’s ring and his old Dahl dog tags clinked onto the pillow beside his head. He cursed them but couldn’t bring himself to take them off. He cursed Hal, too. Because of all the times for the engineer to obey an order, it had to be this time, leaving him to the emptiness caused by his own stupid mouth. Again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Midnight Confessions

Axton hadn't meant to doze, but he woke amid deep night with a bad case of filmy teeth. He stumbled up, leaving the bed desolate, and staggered to the bathroom for a brush of his teeth and a quick wash of slopes, pits, and holes. As he stepped under the water, he pushed the ring and dog tags to his back; they had a tendency to catch on and cut the soap.

He frowned under the pattering spray. Sarah's ring had a tendency to catch on and cut a lot of things.

He finished washing and stepped out from the stall, where the air turned his skin cold everywhere not covered by the immodest shorts he snapped up around his waist. He ignored the chill, padding on bare feet past the workroom and kitchen, to the main door and portico beyond. There, he paused, for sight of Hal sitting in the sand halfway down to the water's low, rolling tide.

Axton stepped off the portico and watched him a moment against the horizon: the huddle of his shoulders, the sway of his hair, the shift of his bare feet in the low

humps of sand. He wiggled his own bare feet, the cold, dry granules sliding between his toes. He shuffled closer, hugging his arms as he came to another stop a stride's length away from Hal. "Hey."

"Hey," Hal replied, without turning around.

Axton stayed standing behind him. "Why're you sittin' all the way out here?"

"You asked me to leave you alone," Hal said, still looking out over the water. "Remember?"

Axton sniffed an itch of salty-air snot. "You want to come inside?"

"I'm fine, here."

"No, you're not." Axton shoved his hands into his own armpits, cringing into his naked torso. "You're gonna catch your death."

"I come out here all the time while you're out on jobs," Hal told him.

Axton blinked at his back. "Why?"

"Because there's fuck all else you let me do!" Hal shouted, and Axton cringed again, not from the cold.

"You're still angry."

"Thanks for the sit-rep, Captain Obvious."

Hal's confrontational tone brought an angry snarl to Axton's voice, too: "You're bein' an ass--"

"Well, you're being a cock! The biggest fucking cock in the whole bloody galaxy," Hal said, his words spitting. He half-turned his head, the starlight illuminating the edge of his profile, notably the sharp wrinkling of his nose as he barked, "And, do not take that as a compliment, because it's not one!"

Axton did a silent count to ten. "Is that it?"

"I haven't decided! I've been bottling this up a long

time.” Hal shook his head. “I swear to Christ, you are the most selfish, egotistical bastard I have ever met. You don’t give a shit about anything or anyone, except for how they affect *you*. Sometimes, I think even staying with Dahl would have been better than having to put up with this, day in and day out.”

The wind shifted onshore, blowing a film of salty moisture from the sea into Axton’s face, making his teeth chatter. “Put up with what?” he asked, before he could stop himself.

“You and your fucking ghosts,” Hal grumbled, when he looked back fully over his shoulder. “Oh, my God!” He scrambled to his feet in a sudden panic. “What are you doing out here in just your pants?”

Axton shifted back a step. “I’m fine,” he started to say, but the engineer braced his arms and directed them to the bungalow.

“You’re freezing. Let’s get you inside.”

Axton tried to shrug him off, but Hal’s close heat nearly made him swoon. The next he knew, he was sitting back on the bed while Hal pulled a long towel tight around his shoulders. The engineer paused there, scanning Axton’s face with a frown.

“Are we gonna make up, now?” Axton said, smiling past the staccato clicking of his teeth.

Hal’s frown became a scowl. “Just because I don’t want you standing out there in the cold doesn’t mean I don’t still think you’re a massive prick. Now, wait here.” He pushed himself to his feet and headed to the door. “I’ll make us some kaffe.”

Axton got up, holding the towel around his shoulders, and followed him out to the cooking area. As he watched

Hal fill the kettle-pot and set it on the stove for boiling, he muttered, "I'm sorry."

Hal kept on with prepping their kaffe, sorting the sachets into mugs without pause.

Axton tried again: "I said, I'm sorry."

"I heard you the first time."

Axton sighed. "I'm tryin' to start a dialogue, here. Why can't you at least meet me halfway?"

Hal turned about, bracing white-knuckled hands on the counter behind him. "Because I'm afraid of what I'll say."

"I'm not a pussy. I can take it." Axton narrowed his eyes. "So, quit bein' all clandestine and shit and just tell me-"

"You want me to be her," Hal said, pointing at Sarah's ring.

Axton scoffed. "No, I don't."

"I am *not* her!" Hal cried, jabbing his finger to emphasize every syllable. The kettle began to rattle beside him, and he raised his voice louder. "I can't ever be her!"

"I don't want you to be her!" Axton shouted back.

"Well, you don't want me!" Hal yelled, jerking his hand back to his own chest. "All you want is someone to put your guns back together, and do all the boring shit you don't want to do, like handle the supplies, and do the washing, and make the fucking kaffe!" He grabbed the whistling kettle, and a splash of jolted water hit him on the hand. "*Fuck!*"

Axton threw off the towel around him. It fell to the floor as he crossed to the sink, where Hal plunged his hand under a run of cold water. He reached out, grasping the engineer's shoulder. "You okay?"

Hal twisted his hand back and forth beneath the

stream, his gaze fixed to the flesh. "It's all right." His voice was suddenly low and calm, as though the shock of the scald had flared out his anger. "Just stings a bit."

They stood there for a stretch of wordless minutes, the only sound that of the water and the occasional cough of plumbing. Any other post-argument silence might have felt awkward, but Axton let the quiet between them settle, rubbing his thumb over the top of Hal's sleeve in a faint massage as the other man stretched and relaxed his hand.

When Hal closed the water line and made to move away, Axton put his arms around him, loosely. He bowed his cheek to Hal's shoulder, muttering against his neck, "I didn't mean what I said."

A short sigh made Hal deflate in his arms. "Yes, you did."

"No," Axton started, but Hal shook his head.

"You were right. I wasn't anything before I met you."

"That's not true." Axton cupped one hand under Hal's jaw, lifting his head and turning him about so they stood chest-to-chest. "You are the brains and tech of this team. Those kids trust you. They look up to you." He stroked the bone of Hal's cheek and whispered, "And, you are the only thing I give a damn about, anymore." He tilted his chin, listing for a kiss, when Hal drifted back and said:

"Except for her."

Axton grimaced as he eased back, too. He expected Hal's attention to be on Sarah's ring, but the focus of that crystal-blue gaze bore into his eyes, and past them, into his core.

"She was my wife," Axton said, half as lament and half as excuse. "I thought I... I mean, I stood up in front of our whole platoon, and said that I-!" He stopped short, unable

to utter the words, even now. In their place, he offered a quick shake of his head. "I know it's over. I want it to be over!" One side of his face twitched, with a snarl or a frown, he couldn't decide which. "But, I can't just forget."

Hal's gaze wavered behind a shimmer he had to blink clear. "Why? What is it about her that is so difficult for you to let go?"

"I grew up thinkin' life went one way," Axton said, feeling as lost as Hal looked. "Be a good soldier, marry a good woman, have a coupla kids. Collect my pension and retire to a sunny, quiet beach somewhere." He dropped his gaze to his hand, which he'd slipped over Hal's narrow hip. He rubbed his thumb over the ridgy hem of a pocket, the same way he'd do the skin beneath, with slow, wanting circles. "I never thought things could be different." He swallowed, hard, recalling the bright shine of Hal's eyes when he'd tumbled them to the dirt, in that fateful firefight on Andromeda, and when they'd shared a coming with a whore, and the first time they'd kissed. He raised his head, to meet that blue gaze again, and murmured, "Then, I met you, and everything...changed." He reached up and stroked a drift of Hal's fringe from his temple behind his ear. "I don't know what I'm supposed to be, anymore. But," he said, letting his hand come to rest around the base of Hal's head as he shifted close again. "I know I want you."

Their faces drifted to kissing distance, when Hal paused and asked in a scratching, raspy whisper, "Do you think of her? When you're with me?"

"Only to think, this is how my life should've been," Axton said, as he brought their mouths and bodies together.

His high emotions should have spent themselves out with his confessions, but this kiss blew Axton's flickering desire to a renewed burn. He clenched Hal's hair in a fist and scraped at his back as they swayed unevenly on their feet. Hal countered their unbalancing lurch with a forceful step, sending Axton against the table. Their stumbling bumped their mouths apart, and Hal stole that second to huff:

"I want to make you come."

"God, yes," Axton gasped, and scrabbled at Hal's belt, button, and zip. The engineer didn't stop there, throwing off the rest of his clothes into a pile with Axton's shorts and towel.

Hal leaned over him, hooking a hand under Axton's knee to push them mouth-to-mouth, chest-to-chest, and hip-to-hip to the top of the table. He broke their kisses again, leading a swirling trail of licks, nibbles, and spit down Axton's torso to between his legs, where he lavished swift but thrumming attention on his dick before diving to his testicles, taint, and ass. He traded the focus of his tongue between all of them, launching Axton into a swirling storm of exhilarated nerves until he begged for more than just his partner's mouth:

"Fuck me, please!"

Hal rose up over him again, answering with a hot, wet kiss that tasted of smoky sweat. At first, he only teased with the head of his cock, rubbing it against Axton's opening. But their shared eagerness had made Hal thick and hard, and Axton clenched and relaxed the muscles in his ass, inviting him in. So Hal gave a single thrust, and Axton grabbed him, clawing his fingers into flesh to spur him deeper.

The table scraped and rattled beneath them, but that didn't matter. It didn't matter, either, how anyone this side of Dero could likely hear his groans becoming gasps becoming cries as he crested his peak with a jolt of cum onto his torso. Nothing mattered, in fact, save this man who - for all Axton's attempts to keep his more tender sentiments at bay - filled him with such sweet joy at being so freely wanted.

Hal pulled out the last second before his climax, uttering a clipped moan as he spurted onto Axton's belly, too. Their cum mingled there, cooling into a slimy mess Axton swirled his finger through with hazy amusement.

Hal straightened up and groaned at his playing. "I'll get you something to clean up."

Axton started to tell him to wait, but it came out as only a low hiss as he straightened his legs from their crab-like position. He slid to his feet, grimacing more at the pins and needles in his toes than the spunk sliding over his skin.

"Sorry," Hal muttered as he proffered the discarded towel from the floor.

"Why?" Axton took the cloth and cleaned his torso with a curving swipe. "You were great." He looked up with a lopsided smile. "And, I like making you feel good."

Hal shifted close, taking the towel out from between them. "So do I," he said, and leaned in for a quietly smacking kiss.

Axton closed his eyes to savor a long drag of that sharp electric smell from Hal's cheek. When he opened them again, he let his gaze travel up from the press of their bodies to his partner's face. "Come to bed with me, now?" he asked, and Hal smiled.

Their last sex was too soon for either of them to make overtures, so Axton just settled on his side while Hal did the same, in a horizontal version of their standing embrace that let them nuzzle at each other, silently save for the clutch of their lips. When Axton rose on one shoulder, to deepen a kiss, the tags around his neck shifted, clinking against the ring. He froze mid-motion and looked at Hal, echoing him from a few minutes ago: “Sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“No.” Axton shook his head at the quiet misery in the engineer’s tone. “I don’t want you thinkin’ you got any reason to be jealous of...anything.”

“I understand, now.” Hal smiled again, somewhat sadly. “And, you needn’t be jealous, either. Over Ivory,” he clarified.

Axton eased back on his propping arm. “What do you talk about, with her? Is it me?”

Hal chuckled, for the first time since before Axton had left for the Waterhog job: a pretty, welcoming sound to spite the chide that followed. “And, there’s that massive ego again.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“We talk a lot of shop,” Hal told him with a shrug. “The ship, the Drehlafette.” He fell quiet again, hooding his gaze with a frown. “She worries over her brother. He’s everything to her, and she feels...helpless, when she can’t be with him.”

“She knows it’s not just the two of ‘em, anymore. Right?” Axton spoke for Ivory, to maintain their thinly-veiled charade, but kept his eyes on Hal’s face. “I mean, he’s got a team, now: two more pairs of eyes to watch over him, keep him safe.”

Hal lifted his gaze again. "Two...?"

"Mine," Axton said. "And, yours."

A fluttering blink made Hal's eyes shine with crystal clarity. "You mean...?"

Axton bobbed his head. "Good hunter teamwork's not something we can teach. They'll learn the right stuff by watchin' partners who know what they're doing, and how to work together. Am I right?"

"Yeah," Hal said, as his smile broke full and wide.

Axton tried to stay serious in the face of that goofy grin. "Remember, I'm still in charge, which means you follow orders, too."

The grin didn't waver. "Absolutely."

"And, you stay on the ship, and outta sight, especially around town."

"No arguments."

Axton sniffed a chuckle under his breath. "How long can I expect that to last?"

"At least, 'til we get in the air," Hal said, and laughed. His dizzy smile faded quickly, though, replaced by a more sober, if no less affectionate, look as he promised, "I won't let you down."

"Better not," Axton warned, only half-teasing. He caressed Hal's jaw with his palm and lowered his voice. "If anything ever happened to you...!"

"I'd want to be with you," Hal said. "The only place I ever want to be, is with you."

The open and loyal earnestness in his face started a fluttering in Axton's chest that worked its way through his whole body, including between his legs. "Then, c'mere," he said, and tossed the dog tags and ring over his shoulder so he could pull Hal into his arms without any

interference, no matter how insignificant.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Learning Curve

“He’s rabbiting!” Axton shouted as he hopped the security fence with a grunt. “South by southwest!”

“Copy that,” Hal’s voice replied in the comm. “Now,” the engineer went on in a smoother, more directive tone, “lock on to their comm position-”

“I’ve got it,” Ivory said. “Firing thrusters.”

Axton let his support do their thing and concentrated on shortening distance. Kolibri already had a fair lead, and if that slippery bastard got away again...!

“He’s headed for those sheds!” Twitch cried, as the skip disappeared through a narrow slat of door in one of the low-built, dilapidated quonset huts less than a hundred yards away.

Axton grabbed Twitch, yanking them to a full stop. “Hold up!”

“Why? We’ve got him cornered in there!”

“He’s also got cover advantage.” Axton unsnapped the assault rifle from his back and braced it in front of him.

Twitch did the same, the muzzle of his shotgun shaking

a little. "Is that bad?"

"Just stay sharp." Axton frowned at the flat terrain's lack of options. "Shit," he growled. "Hal, ETA?"

"Two minutes," Hal answered, while Ivory blew a frustrated breath.

"I knew we should have stayed closer!"

"Maintain speed," Hal told her. "Hold tight, boys," he added to Axton. "We're almost there."

"We're not goin' anywhere," Axton started, when two dark canisters shot out from the open maw in the hut, trailing smoke in their arcs. "Grenades!"

"I can't see anything!" Twitch complained.

Axton squinted through the smoke, when the soles of his feet started to tingle. He looked at the ground. Granules of dirt pattered out of place around his boots, and he jerked his head up again. "Oh, shit."

Hal's voice cracked in his ear: "Ax, what's-?" A crash of crumpling metal cut off the rest, as the single-barrel eye of a mounted cannon tore through the smoke, leading the way for a roaring, rumbling armored personnel carrier.

"Move!" Axton shoved Twitch ahead of him. "IFV! He's got an IFV!"

"What's happening?" Ivory cried.

"We need evac! Now!"

"Maximum burn," Hal barked, followed by more orders. Something about bay doors that Axton didn't register because Twitch stumbled on a knot of ground and fell to his knees, the shotgun clattering loose from his hands.

Axton grabbed him by the belt, hustling him up at speed. "Don't look back!" He heard the splintering crack of the shotgun's stock and disobeyed his own orders,

glancing behind and swinging his rifle arm for a scatter shot, when a rush of heat and the rumble of fiery engines joined the speeding crunch of tyres, and *Siren's Song* swooped into intercept formation above them.

"I'll shoot," Hal said, as their connection made a fizzing sound. "You run."

If he'd had the breath to spare, Axton would have whooped as a straight trail of smoke shot from the ship's yawning cargo door. The ground in front of the IFV exploded in a spraying cloud, and the vehicle screeched in a hard swerve to the right. Her chassis rocked unevenly, but she didn't stop.

"Reloading," Hal announced.

Ivory's voice shuddered with a strain. "No killing. Hal, you promised!"

"No one's going to die today," the engineer muttered, as that sound of compressed air came again.

The explosion from the RPG blew both Axton and Twitch off their feet, sending them tumbling into the dirt. Axton's rifle clattered out of his hands but he tossed himself over onto his back. He was already grabbing for the Drehlafette brick at his shoulder when his focus found the IFV, flipped on her side with her wheels still whining on their crumpled axle.

Axton shinnied to his feet, dragging Twitch with him. The kid took the assault rifle while Axton drew his revolver. They closed on the vehicle, sights locked on the splintered narrow foreshield. Behind it, Kolibri struggled for his door. He popped up from the open window on the side, looked out, and froze when he saw their guns pointed at him. He glanced above his head, his dirt-dusted face frowning deeper as he saw *Siren's Song*. Axton flashed his

gaze up, too, to the ship's still-lowered cargo platform, and the tall man standing there with the RPG on his shoulder. When he looked back to Kolibri, the skip raised his arms in weary surrender.

It wasn't the prettiest capture, but Axton still grinned. "Piece o' cake."

They secured Kolibri in the hold, cuffing him to one of the running rails. The skip didn't seem too shaken up about his predicament. He actually smirked a little as he rested against the wall. "You are the first hunter to catch up to me in three years."

Axton agreed with an equal smirk. "We're the best there is."

Kolibri sniffed. "Of course, no one has ever fired an RPG at me from a spaceship, before."

Axton shrugged one shoulder. "Play hard or go home."

"For me, there is no home. I am going away, for a long time." The skip looked away and back again. "I would like to ask a favor."

"What kinda favor?"

"My *Hynda*. Do not leave her to rot."

Axton cocked his sergeant's-barred-brow at him. "You mean that big armored bitch you crawled out of?"

"She was a fine partner. She should not be abandoned to the rains."

"You shoulda thought of that before you put her in my gunsights," Axton said, and settled into a watch position, his grip loose on his Jakobs and his focus fixed on the skip. Kolibri made no rebuttal, only leaned back against his wall in a resigned position of his own.

Axton almost dozed to the dull thrum of the ship's engines, until Twitch sidled up in a not-so-smooth manner

and said, "Hey, Cap? I've been thinking."

"About what?"

"That tank. I bet I could fix it up for us."

"You know anything about infantry fighting vehicles?"

Twitch shrugged. "Cars are cars. The first one I ever took apart was a Hayek 232 turbocharger. That old fossil can't be more complicated than that."

He'd never liked humoring skips, but Axton found himself studying Kolibri once more: not a young man, and one who'd stayed on the run for at least three years, no doubt at least partially for reason of his precious *Hynda*. Air support gave them a distinct advantage over other hunters, but an armed and armored ground unit would open up more impressive options for pursuit, not to mention destruction.

"Come on." Twitch showed off that space of pulled tooth in a grin. "Let me show you what I can do!"

Seeing the boy's eyes glint with greedy interest made Axton answer with a grin of his own. "Awright, kid, you got yourself a project." He stood and inclined his head toward Kolibri. "Now, keep an eye on our meal ticket while I deal with somethin' up front."

Twitch tossed off a jaunty two-fingered salute, and Axton strode up to the bridge, shaking his head. One kid itched for more firepower, while the other freaked out over suppressive fire. True, most skips were worth more alive than dead, but Ivory would have to come around to the hunter way of doing business if this team was going to survive and thrive.

He was considering just how to scold her without getting on Hal's bad side over it, when the sound of his partner's easy laughter brought him to a halt less than a

half-dozen paces from the bridge. He eased his way forward, treading silently to the open entranceway so as not to disturb the cozy sight of Ivory standing beside her pilot's chair, her hand settled by Hal's shoulder as he sat in her place among the consoles.

"That is brilliant!" the engineer was saying. "But, how do you keep it all straight?"

Ivory's gaze had no focus, but she still smiled at him. "It just takes practice. The first time I sat in that chair, I couldn't do much more than talk with the nav computer. But, I learned. I had to," she said, her smile wilting under the weight of her tone.

Hal paused in the chair, probably thinking about Wolffe, or his own decision to run from Dahl. "You don't mind teaching me, do you?"

Ivory smiled anew. "Of course not. At least you're interested." She chuckled. "Twitch doesn't care about *Siren's Song* past what her engines can do. But, she's all I have that's really mine."

"I know that feeling," Hal said, sounding weary.

"You mean your Drehlafette." Ivory's ready brusqueness rankled the hairs on the back of Axton's neck. "Why did you give it to him?"

"She's the best gun we have," Hal explained softly. "She should be with the captain. It's our job to keep him safe, above all costs."

Ivory snorted. "Does he even care?"

"He does," Hal said, though the downswing of his pitch didn't instill much confidence. "He just doesn't show it, is all."

"You show it." Ivory reached out, her hand moving toward Hal's face. "You'd make a good captain."

Hal turned the chair, parting his lips for a weak, “Uh,” as he swung his gaze away, where it fell upon Axton staring and standing in the corridor. He stood up in a rush, clearing his throat to announce, “Ax! We were just—”

Axton locked his focus on Ivory. “Little bro wants to go back for the IFV. Think you can handle that while I take care of prisoner drop-off?”

Ivory straightened the same as Hal, but she stayed cool. “We have a cargo winch. I can facilitate operation, but we’ve never done anything as big as a car before.”

Now, Axton had to look at Hal, though he only did it for a second. “Go with them. They’re gonna need help.” He jerked his head toward the aft. “I gotta get back,” he said, and started down the corridor.

Hal double-timed after him. “Ax! Wait.”

“What?” Axton said, stopping to turn around.

Hal paused in their shared space. “I don’t know what you heard, but...she doesn’t understand—”

Axton held up his hand for silence. “Just help ‘em with the car. Okay?” He offered the engineer a half-smile. “You’re good with that stuff. Just, you know, stay alert,” he said, and closed that conversation by resuming his pace.

Hal didn’t give chase a second time.

Once they landed in Dero, Axton hustled Kolibri over to the sheriff’s office, collected his payout, and went to see Vesper, who gave no argument to Axton’s rambling list of equipment from Twitch. If anything, Vesper seemed intrigued by the challenge of finding upgrade parts for an old fighting vehicle. Not so much for Axton’s secondary request, though.

“A precision gun maintenance kit. Like what you’d use for this.” Axton indicated the Drehlafette on his shoulder.

“Oh.” Vesper nodded his understanding. “Sure, we’ve got that.” He dug around behind the counter a minute before placing an all-in-one sling-case on the plexi. A hesitant look on his face made Axton pause. Doubly so when Vesper said, “That’s not like an ordinary gun, you know. You want some help?”

“I got this,” Axton said, shooting Vesper a confident smile that stayed on his face the entire hike back to the bungalow. It fell there, though, when he popped the Drehlafette to activation and she immediately went into sentry mode.

“Shit shit shit!” Axton hissed, sidestepping the main barrel as it swung back and forth. Hal had shown him how to power her up and down, but not how to make her switch modes. Well, he’d talked about input-this and override-that, but Axton hadn’t paid attention, instead too interested in the allure of Hal’s ass. “Come on, darlin’,” he begged the machine, now. “Just stay still a minute, will ya?” He ducked to her rear, scanning her edges and panels. He’d seen Hal set her to stationary before, he just didn’t know how.

“Somethin’ manual,” he said, talking himself through it. It wouldn’t be in back, where anyone could get to it. “Front,” he muttered, and edged to her side, craning his head to scan her chassis below the swinging barrel: base servo, ammo feed, laser target light, and a slide right beneath the muzzle-

“Ah ha!” Axton broke into a grin just before the barrel swung back and hit him in the head. “Ow!” He fell onto his tailbone, dropping his borer to press the heel of his hand to his brow. “Fuck.”

“What are you doing?”

Axton whipped his head over his shoulder, scurrying up at sight of Hal. “Nothin’,” he said, dusting at the seat of his trousers. He hadn’t expected the engineer to return so soon, but didn’t ask how the IFV pickup went, instead jerking his thumb at the Drehlafette. “I was...I was just gonna give her a cleaning.”

Hal walked up, reached under the muzzle, and clicked the slide Axton had found. The Drehlafette jiggered on her base pads and stopped her sentry swing but stayed activated. He never took his gaze off Axton, muttering with a look of some concern, “That’s a lot easier to do if you lock her down, first.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Axton snapped. He glanced away as a rush of embarrassed heat flooded his face. “I just forgot how.”

“Would you like me to show you?”

Axton looked up into Hal’s smile and returned the engineer a slow, drawling smile of his own. “I don’t wanna keep you from anything more important.”

Hal opened his arms. “I’m all yours,” he said, and he stepped up beside Axton and started him through the basics of Drehlafette operation and maintenance. This time, Axton kept his concentration on their mechanical missus.

They kept to that task for the rest of the day. They even stayed serious for most of it. Climbing into bed refreshed their affection, though, as Axton wound his arms around Hal, the longer but thinner spoon of their pair. He pressed a series of faint kisses under the shower-damp hairs at the nape of the engineer’s neck and said, “You were great today.”

“Thanks.” Hal waved his body deeper into Axton’s

embrace. "So were you."

"I'd forgotten what it was like to have you out there with me. When you set off that RPG...!" Axton blew a whistling breath. "Hell, darlin', it was like you read my mind," he said, and they both shook with a chuckle. He let that good feeling linger a while before speaking again, more seriously, now. "Ivory's right. You'd make a good captain. If you get over the killin' thing," he was certain to add.

Hal shifted away a hair. "I know sometimes it can't be helped. But--"

"But, nothin'. Skips are money on the run; that's it. No matter how much cash might be at stake, it's still us or them."

"I know."

Axton pulled his lips together a moment. "Make sure your girl knows that, too."

A little sighing noise came out of Hal's nose. "She's not my girl."

"Just make sure she understands. Nothin's more important to me than you," Axton said as he squeezed Hal under his arm and pressed a kiss against his warm skin. "Nothin'."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Legacy

Over the span of a few weeks, his crack team of gunsmith, pilot, and mechanic had started Axton on a steady course to becoming the richest, most badass bounty hunter on the planet. Skip after skip went down under their increasingly adept SOP of track, approach, warning shot. On the occasions when a skip chose to run, chase followed by big-fucking-warning shot always did the trick. Axton would have called it too easy...except for the bickering at payout time.

“...Eleven, twelve, thirteen thousand.” Axton set the short stack of cash onto the table in front of Twitch. “Don’t spend it all in one place. Or, do,” he added with a shrug. “I don’t give a shit.”

Twitch crinkled his nose. “Thirteen sounds a little short.”

Axton passed the rest of the day’s reward over to Hal but kept his eyes on Twitch. “You’re a little short.”

“The reward was forty,” Twitch protested.

“Thirteen of which is yours.”

“But, I did all the work! All you did was sit in the bar.”

“What can I say? Command’s got its perks.” Axton narrowed his eyes. “And, I punched his lights out for you. Now, quit complainin’, or I’ll dock you an extra grand for backtalk.”

Across the table, Vesper cleared his throat and showed his palm. “Uh, part of that twenty-seven remainder is ours.”

Both Twitch and Axton looked at him. “How d’you figure?”

Vesper closed his fingers up one by one as he counted off the favors and gimmes of the last several weeks: “Terraforming explosives, jackhammer mounts, that long-range rifle scope. Not to mention, the collider parts for that strong force engine T’s building.”

“Collider parts?” Hal wheezed, and Twitch pointed at Axton.

“He said I could build what I want!”

Hal turned that dubious ire on Axton. “Have you any idea how much those parts cost?”

“About eight thousand,” Kaija supplied.

Hal continued to glare, so Axton shifted the blame back at him. “Hey, you geeks start spewin’ your technobabble, how am I supposed to know what you’re talkin’ about!”

Hal did a quick roll of his eyes before returning his gaze to Twitch. “You can build what you want, *within reason*.” He grabbed the twins’ wad of cash, pulled off half the stack, and shifted that to Vesper. “But, it comes out of your take.”

Twitch fell against his seat with a groan but didn’t protest further. Beside him, Kaija piped up, “And, another seven for the rest.”

“That’s with the standing discount,” Vesper said.

“That’s daylight robbery,” Axton corrected. He leaned back in his own seat and crossed his arms as Hal doled out the appropriate cash. “This generation’s gettin’ more mercenary every day.”

“Well,” Kaija said, as she pressed a hand to her belly and shared a warm look with Vesper. “The next one will be better.”

Hal simply stared, while Twitch actually shut up, for once. Axton, though, more privy to a breeding couple’s pleasures, felt a grin tickle as he looked to Vesper. “Damn, son, you work fast! But, does this mean you’re gettin’ out of the business?”

“I doubt that,” Vesper said from under a blush. “Babies are expensive.”

“At least this is a pretty good place to have a family, now.” Kaija wound her arms around her baby daddy’s elbow but looked around the table. “Thanks to all of you.”

They had no more divvying to do, so, on that bright note, Axton let their fences go. Though, just before Vesper followed Kaija off the ship’s lowered cargo platform, Axton pulled him aside to offer his best adult advice:

“You need to change the name on that shop of yours. No reason to let your littl’un grow up with that past loomin’ over ‘em,” he said, and smiled.

Vesper returned him a somber look. “That name is all my family has. My uncle didn’t live up to it, but I will. And, I want my little girl to know where she comes from, and what’s owed to her.”

Axton masked his surprise with a smile. “Little girl?”

Vesper smiled, too, and shrugged. “I’m hoping,” he

said, waving as he walked to the runner, where he climbed in beside Kaija. They kissed like teenagers on a date, and Axton found himself amazed by the resilience of these kids living on the Edge.

“Axton?” Ivory’s voice crackled in his comm. “Where to?”

“Home,” Axton told her as he closed up the platform. “Take us home.”

While *Siren’s Song* was more home to the twins than any place on any piece of ground, Axton looked forward to the familiar comfort of the beach bungalow, where he could rest, recharge, and be himself. That included the longest, hottest shower the solar converters could provide, followed by a naked stretch on the bed beneath the window. The drifting sounds and smells of the sea mellowed him into a doze, though somewhere between the dazed swirling of the room and the blankness of sleep, he heard Hal say:

“Is that all you’re going to do? Lie in bed without even your pants?”

“Pants are for work,” Axton said, slurping a lazy trickle of sleep-drool before it hit the pillow. “I’m takin’ tonight off.”

The bed shifted with Hal’s weight. “Care for a rubdown?”

“Yeah!” Axton stretched out straight, crossing his wrists under his cheek. He felt Hal settle onto his thighs and grinned, preparing for the knowing knead of the engineer’s hands. Though, the first touch jolted his nerves, making him jump. “Jesus! Your hands are freezing!”

“You used all the hot water,” Hal said. But he kept his hands in place a long moment, and, between their shared

body heat, they warmed to a more soothing temperature.

The firm but simple massage of his neck and back relaxed Axton to a rambling drowse. “Wanna know what Vesper told me, today?”

Hal kept kneading. “What?”

“Apparently, Strenk was his uncle.”

Now, Hal’s hands paused. “Fuck. How did we not know that?”

“Everybody’s got their secrets, I guess. You know what I think’s pretty awesome, though?”

“That he shot him?”

“No. Well, yeah. But, that he still wants to give this daddy thing his best shot.” Axton snickered over one shoulder. “What does that tell ya?”

Hal hummed. “That life anywhere is worth it.”

Axton smiled for the sentiment, adding, “You know he’s hoping for a little girl?”

Another hum. “Hopefully, she’ll have her mother’s nose,” Hal said, and Axton gave a bouncing laugh. Hal shook with laughter, too, but quieted with a thoughtful stroke of his fingers along Axton’s spine, murmuring, “You’d have made handsome babies.”

The words - and Hal’s wistfulness - burred in Axton’s ears. “Hey. Just ‘cause my ex thought kids would mess up her career doesn’t mean I can’t have ‘em.”

Hal stiffened. “I didn’t realize children were something you wanted.”

Axton tensed, too, at the shift in their intimacy. “Well, I don’t know if I *want* to have kids. But, there’s nothin’ that says I *can’t*. I mean, Vesper ain’t the only stud around here!”

“No.” Hal’s breath hitched. “No, you’re right. I’m

sorry.”

Axton recognized that held-back sound. “Are you laughin’ at me?”

“No-”

“You are so!” Axton flipped in a roll, toppling Hal beneath him. “You cheeky fuck,” he muttered, as he tossed his dog tags and Sarah’s ring over his shoulder, out of the way.

“I’m sorry,” Hal repeated, though his smile shone wide and his belly cringed tight. “You’re a stallion.”

“Damn right,” Axton said, and bowed his head to start a path of kisses down Hal’s neck to its base. There, he blew a horsey snort, and both of them bounced with tickled laughter. That faded with their nuzzling, though, and Axton hummed a true kiss against Hal’s lips that coaxed him out of his clothes, too, for a sucking and finger-fucking that brought him to a moaning climax at the top of the bed.

While Hal’s breaths went from harsh to hushed, Axton crawled up to put them face-to-face, where he gave his partner a drifting once-over. “You’d make pretty babies, too, I’d bet. And smart.”

Hal’s torso rumbled with another lazy hum. “I’d never considered children a realistic option for me.” He stroked his long fingers into Axton’s short hair. “Though, I do like the idea of having a legacy.”

Axton squinted. “You want a kid?”

“I want to be remembered. I mean, you’re already the greatest hunter this planet’s ever seen, but I don’t have anything to my name. I don’t even have a name, anymore!”

“You made the missus,” Axton reminded with serious

sincerity. "If she ain't something to be proud of, I don't know what is." He smiled. "And, you got me."

"Do I?"

"Yeah," Axton said, and kissed him again.

Hal shifted his legs apart, and Axton shimmied between them, moving into position for a screw. As he did, Hal said from around their latch of mouths, "Stallion," and they burst into more laughter.

Their light-hearted affection lasted them long into the night, though not forever. Daylight brought the next waiting job, and work required steady hands and sharp heads. Especially when the skip decided to run.

"Hang on!" Axton said, as the IFV's shocks crunched against a sudden dip of ground.

"Careful!" Twitch scolded from the gunner's seat. "You'll bust the axle again."

Axton wrenched the wheel to the right, to stay on Mei-Mei's jet-cycle. "You shoulda packed this bitch with some speed. We're losing her!"

"She can't outrun us," Hal said, as *Siren's Song* thundered low over the landscape. Between the ship and the IFV, Mei-Mei's bike screamed across the dirt, leaving a trail of pungent smoke behind.

"Herd her toward us, if you can." Axton pounded the roof with his fist. "Get that Mohaka ready!"

"Aye-aye, Cap!" Twitch said, as a short burst of rounds barked from *Siren's Song's* yawning bay door, spattering the ground around Mei-Mei's bike with dusty plumes.

Axton snarled. "Hal, watch it! We need her alive!"

"I know what I'm doing," the engineer replied, as Mei-Mei veered to the right, out from *Siren's Song's* range and into *Hynda's*.

“It’s away!” Twitch shouted, and Mei-Mei’s cycle screeched as the Mohaka’s net enveloped the bike, bouncing it onto its side in a billowing drift of dust and smoke.

Axton brought the IFV to a grinding halt nearly on top of the bike. “Stay sharp, now,” he warned as he and Twitch approached the struggling skip with guns drawn. “This kitten’s got-” *claws*, he was about to say, when Mei-Mei shot out one leathered leg through a netting hole and banged Axton’s shin. “Fuck!” he said, dropping his rifle as he grabbed at his leg.

Mei-Mei snatched at the stock just as Twitch slammed the butt of his scattergun against the back of her head. The rifle went off, once, and she went down, faceplate first, into the dirt.

Axton fell, too, onto his tailbone. “Fuck.”

“Ax?” Hal’s voice warbled in his comm. “What’s happened?”

Axton looked to his waist, where a crimson spread of blood blossomed. “She shot me.”

The next minute was a mess of hot engine burn, scraping soles, and panicky chatter, during which Axton tried to tell Hal and the wanker twins to just *calm the fuck down* and stick to the plan. He almost managed it when Hal pulled him to his feet, but he only got out, “Down.”

“We can’t sit down.” Hal hoisted his weight further onto his shoulders. “The bullet went through, but we have to get you to town. Twitch can handle Mei-Mei, while I get you to Graves-”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Axton growled, and planted his feet.

“Ax, you’ve been *shot*-”

“Yeah, well, I don’t die so easy.” Axton pushed himself off from Hal and pressed his hand to his side. His shirt felt sticky, but the pain sharpened his focus. “Get Mei-Mei into the IFV. Then get your ass on the fucking ship and get back to the beach.” He bit back a snarl. “Ivory, you hear me? Do not, under any circumstances, let Hal show his face in fucking town!”

Hal grimaced at him, but Ivory said, “Understood.”

As Axton eased into *Hynda*’s jump seat, Hal grabbed the rail of the window. “Drive fast,” he told Twitch before giving the passenger door a closing shove.

“I’ve got him,” Twitch said, and the tyres screeched as he slammed his boot onto the accelerator.

First stop in town was the clinic. His shock had faded enough to turn every step into a stabbing pain, but Axton shoved Twitch away and ordered him to deal with Mei-Mei while he staggered into the clinic. There, Graves cleaned the wound and gave him a stim-heal that hurt almost as much as the bullet hole already fading under Anshin’s tissue regenerators.

“It’ll probably leave a scar,” the doctor said.

Axton shrugged his shirt back into place. “Just one more to add to the collection,” he said, flashing her a smile before he shambled back to the truck. A scar was a small price to pay for a successful capture, not to mention keeping Hal from showing up on Dearborn’s radar. The engineer had other concerns on his mind, though.

“Maybe we should slow down,” Hal said from the edge of the shower, where he watched Axton pull off his blood-soaked shirt. They’d sorted reward cuts and sent the twins on their way, to wind down after a rough job. Axton had wanted to do the same, but Hal pressed, “We can track

some simpler targets for a while.”

“Why?” Axton said, frowning at the purplish bruise on the side of his belly.

Hal stepped up to him, grabbing the bloodied shirt and crumpling it in his fist. “Because you were shot today, that’s why.”

Axton grabbed the shirt back and tossed it aside. “Mei-Mei got lucky, is all.”

“*We* got lucky,” Hal corrected, and cringed his brows. “Today could have been a lot worse.”

“If you hadn’ta been there,” Axton said with a smirk, repeating Hal’s own words from a similar conversation back at him. The engineer frowned, and Axton sobered, too. “What do you want me to do? Pull out?”

“Of course not,” Hal said without hesitation. “You’re the best there is. No one can do what you do.” He dropped his focus to the mark of Axton’s healing wound. “But, we need you.”

Axton felt a gentle flutter of pride in his chest for his partner’s faith. They stood close enough to embrace, but he kept his arms at his sides, guessing that the drift of Hal’s gaze down his shirtless torso would lead to a different intimacy. Sure enough, the engineer shuffled close, giving a cautious stroke of Axton’s skin as he whispered:

“I need you.”

“I’m right here.” Axton tilted his chin, to murmur in an almost-kiss against Hal’s mouth, “What are you waitin’ for, darlin’?”

Hal flicked his gaze up as his fingertips danced along the waist of Axton’s trousers, coming to stop at the button snap. “Stop me anytime,” he said. “If it doesn’t feel right.”

He kissed him then, at the same time tugging the trousers open with careful deliberateness.

Axton never told him to stop. His only words were a chorus of ecstatic *ohs*, *darlings*, and *yeses* he repeated long into the starry night.

The new day offered new jobs, but today, Axton suggested a more relaxed option: a break on the beach to swim and play and shoot the shit while they enjoyed their individual passions. For Twitch, that meant tinkering in *Hynda*, while Ivory used a datapad to manipulate *Siren's Song's* systems as she listened to her brother babble. Hal worked on the parts for a new high-powered rifle, leaving Axton to lounge under the bright Theian sun as he admired that long, lean body that had made love to him all last night.

Axton smiled. Mostly for Hal, but for this new camaraderie, too. He didn't feel for Ivory or Twitch what he felt for his brilliant engineer, but they were still part of the team. His team, something good he'd made, without Dahl, without Sarah. Something worth more than just a paycheck at the end of the day. Such good feeling made him declare:

"We need a name. Somethin' to tell the galaxy to look out, 'cause we're comin'."

Hal didn't look up from his gun pieces. "I still need to give myself a name. Coming up with one for the team is a bit farther down the list."

"You can't give yourself a name." Twitch said, scooting out from under *Hynda*. "It's got to come from somewhere."

"Or, something. Even if that something's stupid." Ivory lifted and let fall a handful of her white hair.

“I just don’t wanna be lumped in with all the no-talent hunter teams out there. I wanna be...*great*.” Axton flashed Hal a smile. “I want a legacy.”

Twitch dropped his wrench into the sand. “I want lunch. I’m starving.”

Hal got to his feet. “I could eat.” He proffered a hand to Axton, who returned a lascivious smile.

“I could do somethin’ else.”

Hal tugged him up with a conspiratorial snicker. “Not in front of the children.”

Axton laughed and put his arm around Hal’s shoulders, when a sharp hiss sounded in his ears, followed by an impact blast that blew them into the ground.

Hal groaned. “What-?”

Axton’s side burned with refreshed pain of a still-healing bullet wound but he turned himself over, to see what had hit them. Just force, and sand displaced from the gaping hole in the beach. A hole that birthed a clanking robotic monolith, whose gun arm and red eye swung his way as it boomed:

“Bounty target acquired.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Let Go

The black hole of the robot's gun locked on, and Axton froze. Hal didn't, though. He grabbed Axton by the shirt, rolling them over and out of the line of fire just as the sand where they'd been exploded with a burst of shot.

The noise jumpstarted Axton's reflexes, and the Jakobs flew up at the ready under Hal's arm. Axton had a flash of Reilly: angry, burned, crazy Reilly. This tower of death metal had no face, though, just that glaring red input orb staring down at him. The Jakobs barked in his hand, and sparks sprayed from the cavity where the robot's eye had been. It crumpled to the sand with a fritzing lament:

"Shutdown imminent."

Hal pushed up off Axton's chest. "You all right?"

Their pulses pounded together, but Axton nodded. "I think so," he said, and started to smile, when he saw a gleam of metal plummet into the sea beyond Hal's shoulder. The water plumed up while another missile impacted on the beach, scattering more sand and dirt.

Axton shoved Hal to his feet. "Get to cover!" he

shouted, as a second ‘bot rose from the new hole.

Hal bolted for the house while Twitch blasted off a barrelful of cover fire at robot number two. “Hey, sparky! Eat this!”

The robot lumbered up and fired in his direction. The first round found sand, but the second ricocheted off *Hynda*. Ivory let out a clipped cry, and Twitch screamed for her. A third and fourth shot dropped him, with a sound like choking.

“*Threat eliminated,*” the robot said, and turned to Axton.

“Incoming!” Hal shouted, and Axton steadied his hand to the clunk of metal gears as the Drehlafette formed up in front of him, already spitting rounds.

The robot teetered as one of its legs crumpled from a shattered knee joint. “*No no no!*”

The Drehlafette answered with something like a breath, followed by a powerful burst of ammunitions fire that destroyed the ‘bot’s faceless control core. Axton joined her, squeezing off two shots into the robot’s eye. The massive machine toppled forward and lay still.

The Drehlafette swung her laser sight, hungry for more. She found her new target coming off the water: a single-man skimmer with a human hunter at the helm. He took cover behind the chassis but shouted, “You can’t hide behind that mech forever, Dahl-man!”

“Dahl-man. Cute.” Axton sneered around the word as the Drehlafette belched her last and started to break down. At the silence, the hunter poked his head out, and Axton gave him his last bullet the same as he’d done with the robots: right in the eye.

Axton tucked the Jakobs back into its holster. He passed Ivory scrabbling in the sand on her hands and knees, her

white hair and pale face streaked red from the glancing blow to her temple, and approached *Hynda*, where Hal was struggling Twitch's bloody body into his arms. "What are you doing?"

Hal got to his feet, faltered, and righted himself again, enough to hustle Twitch into the IFV's jump seat where Axton had bled little more than a day ago. "We need to get him to town. Give me your shirt."

Axton didn't move. "No."

Hal pressed one hand to the top of Twitch's chest, where the biggest pour of blood oozed. "We need to help him!"

"What we need," Axton growled, "is to pack up the ship and get the fuck off this planet. Now!"

As Hal stared at him, Ivory begged for her brother: "Please! Please, don't let him die!"

"Nobody dies today." Hal shot Axton a sparking glare as he shoved his way past to the girl. He lifted her up in his arms, too, and crammed her into the seat with Twitch, laying her hands upon the pumping wound. When he moved around to the driver's side, Axton grabbed him by the arm, hissing:

"Did you not hear what I fucking said?"

"Maybe you didn't hear what I said," Hal snarled. "Nobody dies today. Not if I can help it." He jerked the door open, but Axton held fast.

"You *will not* undo everything I have done to keep you safe. Not for *them*."

"Let go of me."

"Hal-"

"He'll *die*-"

"Better him than us!" Axton barked, and leaned close

to Hal's face. "Now, you get our shit and get on the *Siren's Song*, because there is not a *single thing* you can say to convince me that our *best* choice of action is not to get the fuck off this planet right-fucking-now."

Spiderweb cracks formed at the edges of Hal's eyes, and from between his teeth he uttered just one angry, spitting word: "Kotonou."

Axton's guts plummeted, and his throat closed around any opposing answer. "Ah, hell." He shoved Hal out of the way and got behind *Hynda's* wheel. "You better have our shit packed when I get back!" he said, before he gunned the engine and tore off across the sand, leaving the engineer to deal with the dead and sparking. He glanced at the kids, to make sure Twitch was still breathing. Ivory rasped and gasped in time with her brother, pressing kisses to him through her tears. Axton looked away, his hands straining against the wheel.

They screeched to a stop in front of the clinic, and Axton jumped out, calling, "I've got wounded, here!" He'd promised himself he'd never put himself in this position again – dragging a bloody body not worth a bounty through the doctor's door – but here he was, babying Twitch into his arms as Ivory fought to stay with him. Two of Graves's assistants grabbed Twitch just as they'd done with Hal, while the good doctor herself took hold of Ivory. Axton followed them inside, hovering around the outer room with his arms crossed in front of his chest. A tech took care of Ivory on one of the cots there, but Axton let her alone.

When Graves came out from the operating theater a while later, she said, "He'll make it," and Ivory broke out with a fresh start of sobbing, this time of the grateful kind.

The doctor didn't go to comfort her but muttered to Axton, "Being your partner really shortens the life expectancy, doesn't it?"

Axton didn't reply, leaving Graves to her judgment and Ivory to her tears. He got back in the car and drove it over to Vesper's, where he parked it with a rough-sounding lock of gears.

Kaija stood outside the shop door, her face fixed on the clinic doors. "Are they going to be all right?"

"They'll be fine. Just need a few days to recupe." Axton glanced to *Hynda*. "When Twitch is up and around again, have him bring the car to the beach."

She followed his look. "Won't you need it?"

"Can't take it where I'm goin', doll," he said, shooting her a weak smile as he started away.

"Mister Axton!"

He turned, but she just stood and stared at him, a pretty young woman full of promise.

He walked back, to lay a hand at the top of her sleeve. "Do me a favor? If y'ever tell your babies about me, make up a good story?" He sort-of smiled again, a wry twist of his lips. "Make me a good guy?"

"I don't need to make up that part," Kaija said, and rose on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. When she shifted away, she sighed a little breath, and smiled.

That sight was a nice one, if hard to leave behind. It made his boots heavy, slowing him down for the trek back to the beach, during which Axton resigned himself to the only decision left to him.

When he finally strode onto the sand again, he found the robots disassembled, the larger parts grouped around the smaller ones. He didn't see the hunter's body, but he

noticed two robotic legs missing: extra weight to drag a corpse down and out to sea. That was all the thought he gave them, though. He walked up into the bungalow, finding Hal sitting on the edge of their bed, half-surrounded by a broken circle of tools, clothes, and random supplies. The engineer didn't look up but said:

"I can't leave them. Not after this."

Axton eased onto the bed beside him. "You don't have to. When the twins are ready to move, they'll come back here." He stared out the doorway. "You can figure out together what to do next. I'd say head for Persephone: it's close, and nobody knows you there. But, it's up to you."

The bed creaked as Hal shifted. "What do you mean, it's up to me?"

Now, Axton turned to him, meeting his gaze. "It's your team, now."

Hal eased away. "What about you?" he said, but the glassy waver of his eyes told Axton he already knew the answer to that.

"That hunter today was comin' for me," Axton said sadly. "And, he won't be the last. There'll be more."

"Then, we'll run," Hal said, his voice rising with a panic. "We'll run together, just like before."

"No."

"Ax-!"

"No," Axton said again, the word scraping in his throat. "The twins are gonna need you--"

"I need you!"

"No. You don't."

"Please." Hal's lashes went heavy with moisture. "Ax, *please!* I can't do this without you."

"Yes, you can. You will." Axton took Hal's face in his

hands. "You're a good hunter. And you'll be a great captain." He tried to smile, but the corners of his mouth couldn't hold it. "Trust me."

"You know I do," Hal said, as a fall of tears tumbled to his cheek.

Axton smeared away the slippery wetness with his thumb. He hooked his hands behind Hal's head and pressed their brows together, swallowing back something hard.

"I'll find you," Hal whispered, but Axton gave a tiny shake of his head.

"You know you can't do that."

Hal dropped his chin, and Axton saw his belly cringe between them. The engineer kept it together, though, and raised his head again with a measured breath. "There's so much I never said."

"You didn't have to," Axton said, and he listed in for a kiss.

Hal drew back, nearly slipping out of Axton's arms. "I'm not ready to let go."

Axton shifted his body close again, their clothes rustling between them as though trying to get out of the way. "I'm not askin' for that, yet. I want you to hold on," he said. "Just one more time." And he used a kiss to hush the rest of the words neither of them could say.

They drifted side-by-side to the bed as a pair, full of this singular moment rather than any past or future. They didn't need to be naked but got that way anyway, to feel and smell and taste one another's skin. And to see: all the familiar shadows, blushes, and scars across both their bodies. They took and gave with equal effort, but slowly, to make the feelings last as long as possible. At last, their

heartbeats stuttered for a spike of pleasure that wasn't quite joy, but sweet all the same. After, they lay in a cooling embrace, watching each other without words until Axton stroked his hand over Hal's hair and said:

"I thought of a name for you."

The younger man blinked. "Yeah?"

Axton nodded. "It's simple, but, y'know, I think simple's better, in this case. A good word to put the fear of God into folks who try to mess with you." He rubbed his fingers over Hal's cheek, back and forth, the lightest caress he could give. "And, it's close enough to your real name that you'll never forget who you really are."

"What is it?" Hal asked, and, when Axton told him, he smiled, but with a shimmering in his eyes. "I like it," he said, and they kissed and hugged each other for a long while that turned into an uneasy doze.

When Axton woke, day had turned to dim twilight. Hal's head rested in the pit of his arm, and Axton just watched him a few minutes, trying to memorize the shape of his lips, the slope of his nose, the sound and rhythm of his breath as he lay there. He closed his eyes again and sucked his own deep breath, holding Hal's electric blue smell in his nostrils. That, he'd never forget.

At last, he rose, with a creak of joint and bed frame, glancing back to see if Hal had stirred. He hadn't, so Axton dressed, with slow purpose in the stillness. He'd thought he could slip away, but, in the middle of pulling on his boots, Hal murmured from the bed:

"You were just going to leave, without even saying goodbye?"

Axton turned to look at him. His eyes were open, blue, and piercing. He seemed suddenly older, somehow: a man

hardened enough to run the spaceways without him. A hunter. Axton felt a twinge of pride at the sight. "I thought I'd make it easy on you."

"Well, you're about as stealthy as a bull with blinders on," Hal said, as he pulled aside the sheet to rise to his feet, as well. "And, if I'd wanted easy, I'd never have chosen you."

Axton chuckled, but stopped as Hal came to stand in front of him, all tall, lean, naked muscle. They looked at each other without bashful touches, seeking kisses, or coaxing words. No flutters of arousal, either, as though they'd already said goodbye and now there were only polite motions to go through.

"Where will you go?" Hal asked.

"Probably better if you don't know that," Axton told him.

Hal tweaked one brow. "Do you know?"

"I've got an idea," Axton said, but left it at that.

"You always do." Hal dropped his gaze to Axton's neck, and the corners of his mouth made their fine-line creases. Only for a moment, though. He gave a tug on the edges of Axton's shirt, straightening them like as a tie; he plucked the dangling comm from Axton's breast pocket and tucked the line around Axton's ear. His hand paused there, stroking some of the short hairs behind the ridge.

Lingering so would only make it harder to step away, so Axton shrugged with his best nonchalant air and said, "How do I look?"

"Dashing," Hal said, and they both chuckled. "Just needs one last bit." He moved to the side and stooped to the floor. When he stood, he pushed into Axton's hands the heavy Drehlafette brick.

Axton juddered his head. "I-I can't-!"

"Take her."

"No. She's yours. You built her."

"I built her to defend soldiers in the field. She belongs with you. She's the best partner you could have." The engineer cracked a smile. "Doesn't give any backtalk," he said, and they chuckled again. That faded, though, with the fall of Hal's focus to his hand, which he laid over Axton's around the Drehlafette. "I'd never forgive myself if anything ever happened to you, and she could have made a difference."

Axton bowed his head, too. "I don't have anything to give you."

"You gave me a name," Hal said, the sound of a smile in his voice. "And, so much more." After a moment, he raised his head. Axton held that blue gaze a long moment, not moving, when Hal put his arms around him and murmured into his neck, "Take care of yourself, Axton."

The sound of his full name from Hal's lips made the top of Axton's chest tighten. They shared a breath between them, while Axton closed his eyes to fill his senses one more time with that sharp electric blue smell. "You, too, darlin'," he said, and pushed away.

Hal didn't stop him.

Axton slung a ruck of supplies over his shoulder, along with the rifle and the RPG. He clomped over the threshold of the portico, down to the sand of the beach, and started away from the bungalow, forcing himself not to look back. Until he'd stepped past the grasp of light from the house, where the dark pressed too thick for him to be seen, and he turned around. Here, now, he could whisper the words, at last: "I love you." But the bungalow

galley stood empty, and nobody heard them.

He blinked his focus clear from a sudden stinging offshore wind and headed toward town again, alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

From Hell

The glaring Pandoran sun beat down hard and hot as Axton stepped off from the still-rumbling freighter, his ruck over one shoulder and the Drehlafette attached to the other. It had taken him five weeks to get here: five long, uncomfortable, expensive weeks of rickety jump seats, reeking cargo freighters, and fitful hours spent huddled under a single service blanket while the stars shifted their position in relation to every stopgap planet on his way. But he'd made it. Pandora's axis teetered on the edge of the Edge. No one would find him here.

He pressed his lips together and lowered his gaze to the dusty town around him. It could have been a twin to any of the other border world communities he'd walked through over the past year since he'd first broke from Dahl: a series of shack huts cobbled along the sides of a rudimentary street system that never seemed to grow from its first few turns. The buildings bore a resemblance to each other - broken-down or half-built, with an uneven mix of palettes - but served their own semi-advertised

purposes: a bar, a few shops, a cathouse or a hotel, depending on the level of propriety the town tried to exude. None of the structures interested, save the barred-windowed office wedged in-between an unmarked shack that could have been somebody's shitty version of a home and what looked like a repository of wounded hunter wannabes.

Axton strode up the street to the local sheriff's office, keeping his gait and chin steady but his gaze moving. Not that any of these half-baked, half-cocked losers posed any competition to him and his little lady. He hadn't met anyone to match his talent for picking up skips – or picking up their pieces – on Theia, Eos, or even Charon, and he didn't expect it here, either.

The name stenciled beside the sheriff's door said Ephraim Youngblood. Axton strolled into his office wearing his best smile, announcing, "Sheriff Youngblood, I presume?"

The man who looked up from behind the main desk was an average stocky, graying, bushy-bearded type. On any other border world, he could have been a hydrofarmer or a gaurus wrangler, but that silver star poking out from under his leathery duster intimated otherwise. "Can I help you?" he asked in a drawl.

"I think the question is, can I help *you*?" Axton said, hooking his thumbs into his front pockets and rocking back on his heels in a show of easy nonchalance.

The sheriff shook his head. "Don't waste my time, son. This town doesn't run itself, and I've got a lot of work to do. You want something, you come out and say so."

Axton spread his hands in a magnanimous wave. "All I want is to help ease the burden of keeping the peace in

your town, Sheriff.” He dropped his chin. “For the right price, of course.”

The lawman snorted. “Another bounty hunter, huh?”

“Best on the Edge.”

Youngblood snorted again. “Yeah, they all say that.”

Axton half-leaned over the desk. “‘Cept I’m the real thing. Hand over the names of your biggest and baddest, and I’ll prove it.”

“Biggest and baddest, huh?” The sheriff tapped the access console built into the desk and scrolled through a series of warrants, coming to stop on a side-by-side pair of ugly mugshots. What the first of them lacked in neck, his buddy made up for in plated teeth. “That would be Barrowman and J-Dog.” He chuckled behind his beard, adding, “But, bigger and badder than you have tried to bring ‘em in, son, and they never came back.”

“Well, none of ‘em were me,” Axton said, and introduced himself. He left off *the Great*, this time. His name alone could speak for itself. “And, none of ‘em had my partner.”

Youngblood swung his dubious gaze around the otherwise empty office. “What partner?”

Axton leaned his cheek to the Drehlafette locked onto his shoulder harness. “Why, this little lady, o’ course.”

The sheriff squinted at the autocannon brick. “What in tarnation is that thing?”

“Well, her daddy called her a Fernbedienbare Drehlafette,” Axton said proudly. He grinned. “But, I call her the missus.”

Youngblood’s brows formed a straight, stern line as he fixed Axton with a lawman’s stare. “Did you steal it?”

Axton glanced at the Drehlafette, thinking on a young

man's smile, and laugh, and the kiss of his lips. For a second, he tasted that horehound tang on his tongue and smelled that electrified blue in the air. All of that was far away, now, though, far away and safe, along with the gentler mercies of his heart. Tracking and hunting on the summer-winter continents of Persephone, perhaps, or standing tall, ready, and clever on a silver bullet of a ship carving the far-flung spaceways.

"She was a gift," Axton said, at last. "From Hell." He turned back to the sheriff, curling his mouth into a hardened killer smile. "Now, are you gonna let me have those warrants, or not?"