



**DESTINY KYLE**

**WHEN THE  
STARS  
GO COLD**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## WHEN THE STARS GO COLD

By **Destiny Kyle**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# WHEN THE STARS GO COLD

By Destiny Kyle

## Photo Description

The two pictures show two different guys. The first one is black-haired, gray-eyed and has pointy ears. He is holding his head with one hand, as if something bad has happened and he is wondering what to do. The second one is blond, blue-eyed, and is sitting in shallow water like he has tripped and fallen.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*(Guy 1) He is a trained and seasoned warrior. Perhaps he is a defender, a mercenary for hire, a bodyguard. A shadow that follows you, without you knowing. Are his intentions good/bad? He had seen and experienced more than most in his life. Is he mortal? Does he age slower than normal humans? He appears to be a man who has always known the world, the good and the bad. He seems to be focused, solid. He knows what and when to expect certain things. Then he meets (intentionally or not?) (Guy 2) and his life is flipped inside out.*

*(Guy 2) He is clumsy and innocent/naive. He has heard of the evil/bad, but has never experienced it first-hand. The people that surround him have both good and bad intentions. Is he just a pawn in some people's eyes? Viewed more like a 'product' or 'doll'. Born with the ability to bear children. (He knows and is educated about being a bearer). Is he (completely) human? Does he know of his true origins? Then he sees him (Guy 1) and his sheltered world changes.*

*They live two very different lives, but something brought them together. I don't want cheating. It's a mpreg story, so some details about the mpreg part (the process and birthing) would be fantastic!*

*If the author feels rape is part of the story (of the bearers/anyone), I don't want my MCs to be a victim of this. Attempted rape, would be tolerated, if the author felt it.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jeanne*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** outer space, mpreg, aliens, disease, tragedy, flashbacks, military, captain, family politics, established couple, grief

**Content Warnings:** death of secondary character, death of a child

**Word Count:** 35,852

### Acknowledgements

This is my first story destined to reach readers. Writing it has definitely been exciting, but also a long and shaky process. In the end, this story would have never happened without a few people I want to give special thanks.

First and foremost, thank you Raevyn, Shaz and SueM for the obvious reasons; creating this event and giving my imagination the possibility to go wild.

Second, a very big thank you goes to Jeanne for the wonderful pictures and prompt.

Next, a huge thanks goes to Ali MacLagan, who volunteered to be my beta without knowing how much trouble she was getting herself into. In addition to being a talk buddy and a supporter whenever I got confused, blocked, or stressed, she has been a wonderful beta and helped me kick this story into shape.

Another person who deserves a very special thanks is my editor Gabby Heckmann, who had the patience to help me add in extra things at the last moment and found me when I got lost in the translations.

Also, thanks to the Proofreaders, Quality Assurance, Formatters, and the Second Level Editor for their roles in making this story the best it could be.

Last, but not least, thank you very much to Gabbo De La Parra who made the beautiful cover.

# **WHEN THE STARS GO COLD**

**By Destiny Kyle**

## Prologue

Gerard watched the faces of his crew silently. Most of them still just looked sick and tired, some looked completely devastated. Unfortunately, his own husband fell into the second category. He briefly wondered how he looked. Was his grief as visible as Avin's? Was the pain as visible in his eyes as it was in the brilliant blue eyes of his partner? He wanted to go and comfort his husband, but Avin was too angry with him. He hadn't wanted to leave the ship, and Gerard had had to use force to get Avin into the shuttle for the short trip to the Delta Seven station. The shuttle was barely large enough to take them all, but Gerard didn't want to take the risk of separating the passengers in two shuttles. The remaining members of his crew weren't exactly in the mental state some call "stable."

"Sir?" One of the pilots interrupted his thoughts. "We will reach the coordinates where Delta Seven can pick us up in an hour. Will there be any instructions?"

Gerard nodded and stood up. It was time for him to give his final orders.

"Everyone, listen up." Eyes from every direction turned to him. "In an hour we will be in Delta Seven's range. I want you all to remember that the nature of our mission was, and will remain, a secret. No one, and I repeat, *no* one is to know which ship we came from. The story we are all telling is that our ship was a transporter for passengers and cargo and it suffered irreparable damage from a pirate attack. Most of us will claim to have been passengers. I know some of you have family and friends on Delta Seven, but every revelation on the mission will be viewed as treason and treated as such. So be careful of what you say and in front of whom. A working colony is not a place you want to go to. Now get ready for boarding the station."

Two hours later, the last member of the crew was successfully accepted on Delta Seven. Gerard secretly admitted to himself that he felt relieved.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter One

*Three months later*

The *Lunar Star* was a really beautiful and comfortable passenger transporter, but Gerard was just thankful that it was big enough to hold all of his crew and their families. After weeks of quarantine, treatment, and other bureaucratic obstacles, he and his crew had been all ordered to go home and were finally on their way to Wailea. Gerard wished this was the end of his troubles, but all signs showed that there was still trouble that had yet to unfold. Apart from the fact he had a hearing scheduled for the loss of his ship, Avin had also been successfully avoiding him for the past three months, not without the help of his and Gerard's families. Gerard's brother, Akond, had arrived a couple of days ago too, and kept telling him all about how he planned on marrying Avin. Today, he'd caught Gerard having lunch with Shaya in the mess room. Gerard was hoping that the two of them could spend some quality time together, but the moment Akond saw them, he made a detour to join them at their table.

"Look who's here. Mind if I join you?" Akond didn't wait for an answer and took the seat on Gerard's right. "How are you, little brother?"

Gerard just rolled his eyes at his brother's mocking tone.

"We were better before you showed up."

"Oh, and here I thought you two could help me with some wedding plans." Akond looked about to laugh, and Shaya just shook her head. "Avin and I had a little disagreement over what gifts we want to buy. He wants them to be simple, can you believe that?"

"What's wrong with simple? I like simple." Shaya interrupted before Gerard had the time to answer.

"For a wedding gift? Oh, come on, wedding gifts are supposed to be seen, they need to show that you have someone to take care of you. They are not supposed to be simple. I found a perfect bracelet attached to a ring with these big red firestones. It will suit Avin. Every time he moves his hand, people will see it."

"Yeah, something big and flashy to show who he belongs to... Sounds like you." The sarcasm in Gerard's voice couldn't be mistaken.

“Oh, shut up. What does a half-breed like you know about wedding gifts anyway?”

Gerard watched his brother as Akond took his tray and left their table. With his tall, slender build, white hair and gray eyes, Akond was a perfect representative of his race. All Wailenians had light hair—white was the most common color, but sometimes also light blue or green, pink, and, rarely, blond. Their eyes were also light—yellow, blue, gray, and they had pale skin to match too. They were delicate in face and body, but were taller than the other races who shared similar DNA with them, like humans and lestans. Gerard’s black hair immediately exposed him for what he was—a mistake of his father, who had thought that having fun with a human prostitute was a nice way to spend some free time.

Up to the age of seven, Gerard lived with his mother in the brothel she worked at. He was pretty much left to fend for himself in the streets of Merinda till one day his mother figured out who his father was: Zolan Kneal, candidate for Planet Chancellor. She thought to use Gerard to blackmail his father for some starlets, but she thought wrong. When Zolan Kneal heard about the hybrid son he had, he used all his power and connections to pronounce Gerard’s mother an unsuitable parent and get him away from her, leaving her empty-handed.

At first, seven-year-old Gerard had been excited to go live with his father and his family. He thought that Zolan would love him and care about him and he would have a real family. Soon, he knew better. The only reason Zolan took him in was so his opponents in the election wouldn’t be able to use Gerard against him. Larea, Zolan’s wife, and their son looked at him as the family disgrace. Akond was a couple of years older than Gerard, and even though he never hit him or abused him in any physical way, he also never missed an opportunity to call him “mongrel” and remind him of his mixed race. With time, Gerard realized that probably the only reason his stepbrother never hit him was the fact that along with the black hair, his mother’s human DNA had given him more muscle and broader shoulders. From his father he had received the gray eyes, the pointy ears, the pale skin and delicate facial features, along with the Wailenians’ height. At 2.53 meters he was taller than average for a Wailenian, though not by much, but his broader frame was what made him look intimidating.

When he was fifteen, Gerard decided he wanted to join the Fleet Academy. His brother, who had just been accepted in it, laughed at him and told him they didn’t let mongrels in there because of their genetic inability to handle it. For

the next two years, Gerard set about to prove Akond wrong—he trained hard, he sacrificed sleep to study, he put up with being looked down upon and even laughed at, but in the end, he aced every test they put him through and got in. His genetic profile tests classified him as Pilot First Class, same as Akond. Five years later, he graduated as head of his class and decided to join the Military branch.

The marriage between Akond and Avin had been arranged a year later. Gerard still remembered that day, the day he first met Avin Azoal.

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*Ten years earlier*

“And here is my little half-brother Gerard. Gerard, this is Avin Azoal, my fiancé.”

Gerard knew he was staring but couldn't make himself stop. The blond boy standing next to his stepbrother was absolutely stunning, even for a pure blood Wailenian. Unruly blond hair, sparkling blue eyes; he looked so delicate that Gerard wondered how any man could look that way. He also looked young—too young to be getting engaged. Avin gave him a brilliant smile.

“Hello! Nice to meet you.”

“Hello, Avin. Nice to meet you too.” Gerard returned the smile. “Congratulations on the engagement.”

Avin stepped back, sidling up close to Akond. That and the way the boy looked at his brother—eyes sparkling, and full of admiration—told Gerard how smitten Avin actually was with his new fiancé. Akond had always had his choice in partners. He was beautiful and many fell for his charms, but the boy next to him was still a child. Gerard doubted that he was even eighteen, never mind twenty.

An hour later, Gerard finally managed to confront his brother without Avin around, who had seemed to be glued to his side.

“Akond, what are you thinking? That fiancé of yours is still a child.”

Akond shook his head.

“He is eighteen. For a bearer, that is the normal engagement age.”

Gerard didn't get the chance to answer, as Avin chose that moment to return. Only now, he had a wet spot from something spilled on the front of his shirt.

“Well, hello again. How do you like the party, Gerard?” he asked.

Gerard looked around. The party mainly consisted of family and friends of both Akond and Avin, but hardly any friends of his, except Shaya, who was here with her parents.

“The party is nice,” he answered before changing the topic. “I was just asking Akond when you’re planning the wedding for?”

“It will be two years from now, after I reach my fertile stage.”

From his roommate in the academy who was also married to a bearer, Gerard knew that bearers’ engagements were always arranged before they reached sexual maturity. The third gender was highly valued in the society for their good genetic profiles, and in order to get engaged to one, your genetic profile had to be matched with his. To marry a bearer was considered a great honor, and Gerard finally understood why his fun-loving, promiscuous brother had agreed to the engagement.

“Hey, stranger!” a well-known voice interrupted Gerard’s thoughts as Akond and Avin moved on to the next group of well-wishers. “Think you can manage to get your eyes off your brother’s fiancé and spend some time with a friend?”

“Hey, Shaya. For you—always.” Gerard smiled.

“So... You like your brother’s choice of a mate?”

“I don’t think it was actually his choice. Did you know that the boy is a bearer?”

“A bearer? Really?” Shaya had recently graduated as a doctor, and even if reproduction abilities weren’t her specialty, there was no way a bearer would not peak her curiosity. “How do you know? I couldn’t guess just by the look of him.”

“Akond told me when I asked him why his fiancé is so young. He is still a child, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess he is. Bearers’ parents usually get them engaged early and married as soon as they reach sexual maturity, even if they can’t conceive yet.”

“Yes, I know,” Gerard confirmed. “The boy looks pretty smitten with Akond though.”

“For now.” Shaya shook her head. “We will see how long that will last.”

## Chapter Two

Avin stared out at the dark space. He was sitting in one of the panoramic galleries meant for passengers to observe space events, but at that moment, the gallery was empty. This was where he came when he wanted to escape his family's constant attempts to make him feel better. He found it amusing how easily his parents had accepted the story they were given about him being shaken up after surviving a pirate attack. They never asked him anything. Did they really believe that after being in the military for years he would be scared that easily by pirates? He was a weapons expert for stars' sake. Avin still remembered how much they had opposed his choice to join the Military branch of the fleet after he graduated the Academy. His father was Chief of the Merchant branch and had supported him when he decided to follow Akond's steps and join the Academy, but when it came to his choice of branches, things became tense. It took both his father and his mother years till they fully accepted that their carefully raised, delicate bearer had chosen a dangerous path. Little did they know that the worst of all dangers for him weren't the pirates or the fights or the weapons he chose as his specialization, but something a lot more quiet, dangerous and devastating. And Avin was angry with them. Angry because they never warned him, never prepared him for the pain and desperation that was plaguing his mind. Angry because no one ever told him how much it could hurt. And it did. It hurt so much that he couldn't even talk about it for fear he would lose even the little control he had regained over the past few months. Anger was not the only thing eating at him. Because he knew he wasn't being fair to his parents who always made sure that he had only the best, who gave him everything he ever wanted. It wasn't fair to Akond, who had been trying to be nice and make him feel better by taking him to the order station so they could choose their wedding gifts. The thought of the wedding gifts stung. Akond hadn't liked the beautiful crescent moon pendant with a galaxy stone that Avin had set his heart on years ago. Instead he wanted big, flashy firestones that Avin found so overwhelming. Avin sighed. The gifts weren't yet ordered so there was still time to try and change Akond's mind. On the other hand, there were still other things he needed to take care of first. Like the silver tattoo on his left wrist that was a symbol of his bond to another. On that thought, he sprang into action. It was lunchtime and he suspected Gerard would be in the mess hall.

When he turned to the corridor leading to the mess hall, Avin saw Akond leaving it with a tray of food. Briefly he wondered where his fiancé planned to eat lunch, but he was relieved that the chance of Akond stumbling upon him talking with Gerard was lowered.

He approached the entrance and saw Gerard sitting at a table in one of the corners with Shaya. Just the sight of him made his blood roar with rage. How easily Gerard had abandoned Helly. Little, sweet Helly, his Helly.

Avin took a deep breath to try and calm himself. There were things to be done. He went and got some food, which bought him a bit more time to calm down, before steeling himself and heading straight to Gerard and Shaya's table.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked. Gerard blinked and Shaya's eyebrows raised; it was obvious that both of them were surprised to see him. He hadn't talked with them for weeks.

"Not at all, take a seat." Gerard gestured toward the free chairs.

Avin sat, and for a few minutes, silence settled over the table while they pretended to be busy with their food. He could feel the weight of Gerard's stare, and for some reason that made him nervous.

"What is it, Avin?" Gerard finally asked. "You are not really eating, only playing with your food and fidgeting with your communication bracelet," he said to Avin, raising his left eyebrow in question.

"I wanted to talk with you about something."

"Okay, I am here and listening." Avin just kept fidgeting with the communicator on his left wrist that covered the silver bonding tattoo underneath. Gerard's gaze flicked down to Avin's wrist and a sudden understanding flashed in his eyes. "You want the tattoos removed." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, that's what I wanted to talk with you about." Avin was relieved he hadn't had to say it. "I think we both agree this marriage is over. The reason for it is gone and won't come back."

Pain flashed in Gerard's eyes but disappeared in a moment.

"Yeah, I believe you are right. When do you want us to do it?"

"As soon as possible." Avin was relieved that Gerard agreed so easily, but at the same time, some strange disappointment filled his heart.

*Three years earlier*

“And don’t bother calling me again!” Avin shouted and shut the connection angrily. Akond had done it yet again, and he’d had enough. But what was he to do now? The heat was coming in a few days. He needed to find another partner. Silent tears rolled down his face. This wasn’t the way he imagined his first heat going. Pain and desperation overtook him and he started sobbing.

Avin was so distracted, he didn’t notice when the private cabin door opened, or notice the person who stood there for a minute before he finally came in and shut the door behind him. But Avin did notice when warm hands landed on his shoulders soothingly. He lifted his tear-filled eyes to look at the face of his friend and captain.

“What’s wrong?” Gerard quietly asked.

Avin tried to answer but sobs choked him. Gerard sat next to him and tenderly hugged him. Avin nestled against his chest and cried till he had no more tears left.

A few minutes later, Avin started feeling ashamed of his outburst. He gently pushed himself away from Gerard.

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” Gerard interrupted him. “What happened? Did Akond do something again?”

Avin nodded.

“We had another date set for our wedding, and I called him so we could arrange where to meet, but... He claims he can’t leave his ship right now.”

Since they had gotten engaged more than six years ago, Avin and Akond had set a few dates for their wedding, but something always happened to prevent it. The first one was postponed because Avin still hadn’t reached his sexual maturity stage. That happened two years later. Then Akond was on a mission so they postponed it again. And for every date after, Akond always had a perfect excuse to delay the wedding—crew problems, important missions, not wanting to rush things when he only had a couple of days free, and so on. Avin tried to be understanding, to accept the fact that Akond’s career was important to him, that he had responsibilities as a Military captain. But his patience had its limits.

“Did you two talk about another date?” Gerard asked.

“No.” Avin shook his head. “I told him to not call me again.”

Avin’s whole body was shaking. Gerard gently cradled him against his chest again, not saying anything.

“I am tired of it, you know. He always finds a reason to postpone it. And now my heat is coming and he won’t meet me.”

“Wait, what?” Gerard jolted. “Akond doesn’t want to meet you for your heat?”

“He... doesn’t know about the heat.” Avin blushed. “But I don’t want him to come to me just so we can have sex.”

“Don’t you two usually meet to have sex?” Gerard seemed genuinely surprised.

Avin felt his face burn and knew it was probably deep red.

“Uhhmm... No, we don’t. Akond wanted to, but... You know, when we got engaged, Akond was already sexually mature so we agreed that I wouldn’t expect him to not sleep with others. He is attractive and he enjoys sex, so I just let him have his fun. But I did not want to be one of many lovers. I told him I would not sleep with him till we got married so I would know that there would be no one else after me.”

Gerard smiled. Avin returned a shy smile of his own. But it was quickly replaced as Gerard sobered and his lips pressed into a tight line.

“Okay, that is all very well and good, but things have changed now. You are in heat and we need to find a way to get you to Akond as fast as possible.”

Avin shook his head again.

“We can’t. I have no idea where his ship is; their position is kept a secret. And I am not going to fall so low as to beg him to fuck me, heat or no heat.”

Gerard must have heard the determination in his voice because he didn’t insist. Instead he asked, “What are you planning to do then?”

“I guess I will just have to find a partner for the heat. But... I don’t want it to be someone I do not even know.”

“Do you have someone here on the station you want to spend the heat with? We are due to leave in a few days, but I might be able to delay the departure a day or two if you need it.”

Avin shook his head.

“No, all my friends are on the ship. And there are not that many.”

Avin had always been shy. As a bearer, he had been sheltered, mostly kept away from other children his age except for his sister, and she had been twelve years older. By the time he was old enough to remember her, Aslin had left home to study Political Relations. The first time he talked with someone close to his age for more than a couple of minutes was when he first met Akond a couple of weeks before their party. His parents said that he and Akond were to get a matching test together and if they fit, they were to celebrate their engagement. The test came out positive and the celebration was held. Avin couldn't remember ever feeling so out of place; he even managed to spill some juice on himself to his utter embarrassment. The entire time he kept close to Akond. Outgoing, flamboyant Akond, who talked to everyone with ease and familiarity and made him feel even more awkward. In the academy, things hadn't been much better. As a bearer, he had been favored by the instructors and hated by his classmates. The fact that he was shy and clumsy didn't help. All that made him pretty much a loner. The only friend he had made was, to his surprise, Akond's brother. For the first two years of their engagement, Gerard had been assigned to the home defending unit. By a string of strange coincidences, they kept bumping into each other and slowly developed a strong friendship bond. Even after Gerard was reassigned out of Wailea, they kept in touch. When Avin finished the academy, he applied for Akond's ship, but his fiancé told him he didn't have an open space for a weapons expert. Swallowing the disappointment, Avin applied for the new ship everyone had been talking about. When he went to meet his new captain, he was surprised, but glad, to see it was Gerard. Thanks to him, Avin had made a few friends from within the crew. But did he really have a friend he wanted to spend his heat with?

“Okay, if you prefer someone from the ship though, you need to be careful. You are command staff, sleeping with the crew is not very advisable. But I do understand why you'd prefer a friend.”

“Do you?” Avin got nervous. It was a big favor to ask.

“Yes, I do. A friend will treat you right, won't just fuck you and leave you.”

Avin nodded. It seemed like Gerard really understood. He licked his lips and asked, “Will you do it? Will you spend my heat with me?”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Three

Gerard's chest felt heavy. He expected this moment to come, but it still stung, and he had no strength left to fight anymore. If it was what Avin wanted—so be it.

“Shaya, when will you be able to do it?” he asked.

“I do not know. I'm a passenger here, same as you are. I don't have access to the medical center and I need some supplies for it.”

“Can't you ask for them from the medics here?” Avin asked.

“Of course I can, but I will have to explain who they are for. Supplies for tattoo removal are specific, so I can't hide what I am going to do with them.”

“Okay, can you send me a message when you have what you need?”

“Yeah, sure. But that will be no sooner than the ship's first stop.” Shaya nodded.

“That's okay. Thank you, Shaya.” Avin nodded and stood up. “I will get going, now. Have a nice day, Gerard.”

Gerard nodded in return and Avin strode away. When Avin couldn't hear them anymore he turned to Shaya.

“Why did you lie?” he asked.

“Lie? Lie about what?”

“Don't pretend, Shaya, you aren't a good liar,” Gerard pressed. “I can always tell when you are lying. You have all the things needed for the tattoo removal. So why did you say you don't?”

“Maybe because I know you don't actually want it,” Shaya challenged him.

“It doesn't matter what I want. If that will make him happy—I am okay with it.”

“But will it? Avin is hurt and grieving; I don't think he is thinking straight. I am giving him some more time to think over his decision.”

Gerard's laugh sounded bitter even to himself.

“Oh, come on, Shaya. You know as well as I do that he's always had a crush on Akond. And now that Akond finally wants to proceed with the wedding, why would Avin change his mind?”

“Maybe because while Akond was always missing and postponing the wedding, you were always there and were a good friend?”

“Yes, Shaya. A friend. That is how he always saw me.”

Gerard’s voice was pained. Avin never looked beyond the friendship.

\*\*\*\*

*Ten years earlier*

Gerard was bored. Two days since the engagement celebration, and now he was stuck with Akond and his *fiancé* for their know-you days. Tradition stated that after an engagement was announced, the two families were to spend a week together so they could get to know each other. For that purpose, they all went to the house that would be Avin’s when he turned twenty. It was a beautiful house next to an even more beautiful lake. Gerard loved the place but couldn’t say the same about the company. Thankfully, his family had invited Shaya to join them so Aslin Lais, Avin’s sister, wouldn’t be the only young female there. Gerard had at least one person he could talk with.

“Hey, Gerard, we are going down to the lake. Stop staring at the wall and come join us,” Shaya said, peeking into his room.

Gerard didn’t really feel like hanging out with Akond, Avin and Aslin, but had nothing better to do, so he followed them. The lake was calm and blue, surrounded by old trees, and Gerard liked the peaceful environment. By the time he reached the water, Akond was complaining that it was too quiet and boring.

“This place needs some life,” Akond was saying. “More people and a few places where you can go and have fun.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Avin was staring at Akond and taking in his every word. “But it’s a nice place to raise kids.”

Akond just shrugged, and the boy didn’t say anything else. Gerard was surprised the terribly shy boy had even said that much. Aslin didn’t say anything either, but Shaya, always the mediator, tried to change the topic.

“Guys, why don’t we go to that rock over there? See, there are stones set in the water so we can get there without getting our feet wet.”

And to prove her point, Shaya took a few steps on the mentioned stones. Akond followed her and Aslin went after him. Avin hesitated for a moment, before he followed after them. Gerard stayed on the shore watching them go

from stone to stone. Avin made it halfway across when he suddenly lost his footing and fell into the shallow water. For a minute, he just sat there till the others realized what happened and turned to him.

“Uhm... I am sorry, I slipped.” Avin looked embarrassed, his blond hair falling in his eyes.

Akond rolled his eyes. Aslin asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I am. Just a bit wet,” was the answer.

“Okay, then get up already. Sitting in the water won’t help you get any drier.” His sister shrugged.

Gerard watched closely as Avin tried to get up. Unfortunately, the moment he stood up and tried to step back on the stones, he slipped again and ended up sitting in the water once more.

“Oh, Avin, really? It’s not that hard.” Aslin obviously wasn’t a very patient person.

Gerard started on the stones to get closer. The fact everyone was watching him obviously didn’t help Avin’s balance because he fell back in the water before he even managed to stand up completely. Tears welled in his blue eyes as Avin looked from person to person as if silently pleading for help. Gerard abandoned the stones and stepped into the water. When he reached the boy, he just lifted him up and started carrying him back to the shore. Avin gave him a thankful look and buried his face in his chest. His wet clothes soaked Gerard’s clothes too, but he didn’t care. He never forgot how Avin felt in his arms, how he clung to him, the tears in those blue eyes, or the silent thanks they gave him. In that moment, Gerard realized he was falling in love with those eyes and the boy they belonged to.

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## Chapter Four

Avin walked out of the mess hall without any real direction in mind. He wanted to be alone, but was afraid to be. Some strange disappointment heaved his heart. And that made the anger swell in him. He wanted to hit something. An hour in the fight-training room might do him some good, but they were not on their ship anymore. Avin wasn't sure that the *Lunar Star* even had a fight-training room. He hadn't found one yet, but he had found plenty of other rooms created for the passengers' entertainment. Maybe one of them would be able to offer him a distraction from the acid pain that ate at him. He stopped and tried to think of the options. The bar room absolutely wouldn't work, nor would the music room. There was a zero gravity room, but it sounded too passive for his burning anger. The game room sounded like a better option. Avin turned in that direction when the ship shook violently. Most people around him managed to stay on their feet, but he and a couple of others fell. Confusion was evident on everyone's faces. Avin stood up and tried calling his father on the communicator. When Rasen Lais didn't answer the call, he tried calling Akond instead. Another violent shake came, but this time he managed to stay on his feet. People started to panic and cry out as they ran in every direction. Akond didn't answer his communicator either. After a brief moment of hesitation, Avin headed back to the mess hall. His experience in the military was telling him that the ship was under attack and, despite what was going on between them, he wanted to talk with Gerard.

The corridors were now full with running people. The shakes kept coming and coming. A nearby panel threw electric sparks. Screams were coming from everywhere. Avin tried to call his father again but there was still no answer.

The mess hall was full of people, too. Most of them were too confused to even run. Others were just gripping the closest object or person to them. Gerard's black hair stood out among them, but with the chaos surrounding him, it still took Avin a couple of minutes till he managed to reach him and Shaya.

"Gerard! Gerard!" he shouted as loudly as he could, but the noise around him was deafening. Finally he managed to grab a hold of Gerard's upper arm.

"Gerard!"

"Avin! Are you okay?" Gerard seemed relieved to see him and reached out to touch him, before seeming to change his mind and let his arm fall back to his side.

“Yeah, I’m okay. What do you think is going on?”

“We are under attack as far as I can tell.”

“Yeah, I think so too. And they’re using laser weapons.”

Gerard nodded in agreement. As a weapons expert, Avin was capable of recognizing almost every weapon known to the Wailenians.

“I think they are targeting the engines. At least one of them has stopped working,” Gerard added.

Avin stood close to Gerard so he could speak to him without shouting. But when the whole ship jolted with the next extremely strong hit, everyone in the room stumbled; few remained standing, the rest fell to the floor. Gerard lost his balance, and toppled, landing on top of Avin. Avin’s gaze met Gerard’s gray eyes. It had been a long time since he last felt his husband’s weight over him.

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### *Three years earlier*

Avin’s fingers trembled and a knot sat heavily in his stomach when he rang on Gerard’s door. After awkwardly explaining that his heat had started the previous night, Gerard invited him over for dinner. That made Avin feel warm inside and eased his doubts of making a mistake.

Gerard opened the door in seconds.

“Hello. Come on in.”

Avin had visited his rooms a few times before, so he was surprised to notice some little changes there. As a captain, Gerard occupied an apartment not very far away from the ship’s command room. He had a living room with a small kitchenette, bedroom, bathroom, and a spare room he used as storage. Right now, his dinner table was pushed to the middle of the living room and was set with a dinner for two. In the middle of the table was a bowl of fresh strawberries. Avin loved strawberries.

“Oh, Gerard, where did you get these?” He smiled happily.

Gerard laughed, a nice deep laugh that Avin had very rarely heard from the man.

“Bought them from the merchant ship that arrived at the station right before we left yesterday. I thought you might like them, make you feel better.”

Avin blushed. The fact that Gerard went out of his way to please him made him feel confident in his choice to spend the heat with him.

“Shall we eat?” Gerard asked.

They took their seats and dug into the food. Avin thought that he would be too wound up to eat, but the food was delicious and the conversation was nice. They spoke of random things—the mission, the crew, and everything else but the real reason why Avin was there tonight. By the time they moved to the dessert, Avin felt almost comfortable. The strawberries were delicious. Fresh fruits in general were a rarity in the ship’s menu, and strawberries, which were human fruits, even more. They always had been Avin’s guilty pleasure, but he had no idea how Gerard knew that. Before he had time to rethink, the question left his mouth.

“How did you know I love strawberries?”

Gerard laughed again. There was something in his laugh that made Avin think that he was not the only one nervous in the room.

“I noticed you buy them every time they are offered in a station or a planet we visit.” Gerard blushed a little bit. “I even ordered a few plants to be delivered to the ship’s greenhouse and I hope our gardeners will manage to take care of them.”

“Really? Thank you!”

Avin jumped up excitedly and gave Gerard a hug without thinking. The touch spiked his heat. His face was so close to Gerard that they actually shared a breath. The first touch of lips was slow, tentative. Just like a butterfly’s wings. His already hot body now was on fire. But he also got nervous again. Gerard seemed to have felt him tense because he gently nuzzled his cheek.

“It’s okay. We don’t have to do anything now. You know that, don’t you?”

Avin didn’t answer, just kissed him again. This kiss was more forceful. The heat was burning inside him now and made him more daring, even demanding. He nibbled on Gerard’s lower lip and soothed it with his tongue. Gerard moaned against his lips. At last their lips gave way and their tongues touched in a brief battle for dominance. Avin’s whole body was burning, his hands roaming. Gerard’s lips left his and started planting little kisses across his right cheek till he reached his ear. Avin let a low moan escape his lips when a soft, wet tongue outlined his ear. His fingers fumbled with Gerard’s clothes. He wanted to touch skin. He captured Gerard’s lips with his again, as he finally

managed to undo the buttons of the shirt Gerard had on, and he spread his palms against the cool skin of Gerard's stomach. Gerard pulled away and Avin practically whined in protest.

"Avin..." Gerard was breathing heavily. "I think we better move this to the bedroom."

Avin could only nod. His whole body was on fire with need and Gerard's cool skin felt so nice against his palm... he wanted to touch more of it. By the time they reached the end of the bed, Avin had managed to get Gerard naked from the waist up and undo his own shirt. They kissed again. The feel of smooth, naked skin against his made Avin shiver. He wanted—no, he needed more. The next thing he knew, clothes were flying off and he was crawling backward on the bed. Gerard followed him. Despite his black, human hair, he had the smooth, pale skin of a Wailenian with no additional body hair. Avin wanted to touch and explore that skin, and Gerard's hands on his skin felt like heaven. Their kisses were hot and frantic. Naked skin rubbed against naked skin, arousal against arousal. The feel of Gerard's weight over him was making Avin's skin burn even hotter. Without a thought his thighs opened to invite him in but Gerard didn't hurry. Avin felt him exploring every part of his body he could reach with his hands or lips—his face, his neck, his chest. Avin moaned loudly when Gerard licked at his nipple. The first time Gerard stroked his arousal he practically screamed with need. He grabbed a handful of black hair and pulled him up to crash his lips against Gerard's again.

"Gerard... Stop playing around... Need you..." Avin's body arched.

The response he got was a hungry kiss and Gerard's hand sliding down his thigh, lifting his knee to give him better access. Another slide of the cool palm and Avin finally felt a finger teasing his entrance. He knew that the heat had prepared him already but he counted on Gerard to make sure. The first breach felt a little strange but also so good. But he wanted more than a digit.

"Gerard..." A needy whine escaped Avin in between heavy breaths.

Another hungry kiss followed while the finger disappeared. Gerard moved closer and Avin shook with anticipation.

"Avin... are you sure?"

"Yes... Yes..." Avin knew he was begging but couldn't stop himself.

The first push burned a bit, but not as much as Avin expected. Gerard stopped to give him time to adjust but he didn't need it. He tightened his legs

around Gerard's waist to show him it was okay to move. His mouth just couldn't form any coherent sounds except needy moans. The rhythm was slow, teasing, but not the kisses. They were hot and passionate. Avin was stroking Gerard's back, trying to make him go faster. And he did. The pleasure was rising fast in both of them. The feel of Gerard sliding against his prostate and the entrance of his womb was driving Avin insane with pleasure. His fingers clawed at Gerard's back, and he knew he was probably leaving marks, but he couldn't let go. Gerard wasn't a loud lover, but even he was constantly moaning now. Their movement became desperate. Avin felt Gerard's hand sneaking in between their bodies to touch his arousal but it wasn't needed. The pleasure reached a breaking point and he shouted out his release, tightening around Gerard and making him lose control. A couple of thrusts later, Gerard cried out loudly and came deep inside him. He collapsed over Avin, both shivering with aftershocks. Avin found Gerard's weight strangely soothing so he just tightened his hold and breathed hard. At that moment he was feeling perfect—loved, wanted, satisfied. He wanted to keep that feeling forever.

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## Chapter Five

Gerard lifted himself up.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” He was a lot heavier than Avin and had landed roughly over him.

“No, not hurt. I am okay.” Gerard offered him a hand to get up and Avin accepted it. “That was a bad hit.”

“Guys, you okay?” The doctor in Shaya was already examining them for possible contusions; Gerard could see it in her eyes.

“We’re okay, Shaya,” Avin reassured her. At that moment, his communicator beeped with an incoming call.

The face of Jelila Azoal appeared.

“Avin, where are you? Are you okay?”

Avin sighed, but Gerard understood her concern.

“I’m okay, Mom. I am at the mess hall with Gerard and Shaya. Where are you and do you know what’s going on?”

“Thank you, Universe. I am so glad you are okay, baby.”

Gerard smiled at the sentiment.

“Mom, what’s going on?”

“Oh, nothing very serious, you shouldn’t worry.”

“Yeah, right.” Avin rolled his eyes. Gerard wondered how Jelila thought she could hide the situation from her son. He had been in the military for years now and he knew how bad the situation was... and could get. “Mom, I am a weapons expert, I can tell when lasers are being fired at us. So, please, just tell me what’s going on.”

“Oh, baby, I just don’t want you to worry about it.”

“Mom...”

“It’s just some nasty pirates, but you really should not worry. Your father and Chief Yazik went to the command room to speak with the captain and they will take care of everything.”

“Okay, Mom, thanks for letting me know.” Avin cut off the connection and turned to Gerard. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.” Gerard shook his head. “This is a passenger ship, not military or even merchant. They only have basic weapons, and at least one of our engines is not working properly. I’m sure we’ve suffered other damages too.”

The engines of the ship roared, and the ship shook again. Gerard thought that they were trying avoidance maneuvers, but the only chance he saw for them was if they managed to turn on the light engines. Wailenian ships were known as one of the fastest to reach light speed; they had a good chance of escape if they hadn’t suffered too much damage. Seemed like the captain of the *Lunar Star* had the same idea, because right after he felt the ship accelerating.

“Get a hold of something stable. We are going back to light speed,” Gerard warned Shaya and Avin. The only problem was that the only thing they could grab ahold of was him.

Gerard had no idea how, but he managed to keep all three of them standing. Avin was clutching his right arm and Shaya was using his left shoulder as a handle to steady herself. Gerard almost lost his balance again but managed to keep his footing. He couldn’t help but notice how nice the feel of Avin’s chest against his arm was.

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### *Three years earlier*

Gerard woke up slowly with the feeling that something was missing. It took him a second to realize that the bed next to him was empty. Avin obviously had managed to slip out earlier. Gerard sighed. The night before had been a dream come true, and he had hoped he might get the morning as well from what he knew about bearer’s heat, but Avin obviously had other ideas.

An unexpected sound caught his attention. It sounded like dishes clattering, and came from the direction of his living room. Gerard got up to check it out. To his great surprise, he found Avin setting down a big tray with what looked to be breakfast on the table.

“Hey,” Gerard greeted.

Avin obviously hadn’t heard him enter the room, because he jumped a bit.

“Oh, hey... I... I brought breakfast. It’s... It’s nothing special, I got it from the mess hall, but... I thought you might be hungry.” Avin blushed.

Gerard realized he was still completely naked.

“That is great. Thank you. How about I go take a shower and put some clothes on and we go back to bed and have breakfast in there? We can get some more sleep after.”

Avin blinked a few times.

“You want us to have breakfast in bed? And sleep after? Together?”

Gerard nodded.

“Yes, I believe that sums it up.” Seeing Avin’s obvious surprise, he continued, “My roommate in the academy was married to a bearer, you know. His heat happened while we were there and after it, the two of them spent the entire day curled in bed. They said that after the heat, bearers need a few hours for their hormone levels to get back to normal and it is best if they spend it with their partner. Something about avoiding post-heat depression.”

Avin blushed even more.

“And you don’t mind if we just curl up in bed to sleep?”

“Not at all. I did make sure we both had the day off, didn’t I? Alog is on duty today and he will call us if something comes up, but he won’t bother us if it’s nothing important.”

Gerard was caught completely by surprise by the next thing Avin did. He actually hugged him.

“Thank you!” Avin whispered at the side of his neck. “You are being so nice to me.”

Gerard rubbed his back softly.

“No, thank you for choosing me.”

Avin stepped back and smiled shyly.

“I will get the tray to the bed. Why don’t you go do whatever you were planning to do?”

Gerard smiled and headed for the bathroom. It only took him a few minutes to get back to the bedroom, sonic shower and all. By that time, Avin had set the food tray on a stand next to the bed and had stripped down to his underwear. Gerard followed suit and only put on some underwear. The breakfast was nice, but mostly it made Gerard warm inside that Avin had brought it for them to

share. After they were done eating, they lay down again. Avin was lying on his back on the other side of the bed a bit awkwardly until Gerard tapped the empty space between them. He loved the happy sigh Avin made when he curled around him and put his head on Gerard's chest. Gerard gently cradled him in his arms and listened to his breathing as it evened out, and it became obvious that Avin was asleep again. Gerard thought that sleep was actually a good idea. Avin had woken him hot and bothered numerous times during the night, so he was feeling happy and satisfied, but exhausted. They got up a couple more times during the day for food, but mostly they just cuddled and slept. The next morning they both headed for their shift without mentioning the heat again.

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## Chapter Six

About half an hour after the light engines started, they began to fail. Fifteen minutes later, they went out completely. Avin wondered how badly they had been damaged and how far away they managed to get from the pirates.

“Everyone okay?” Shaya asked.

Gerard looked at Avin, but nodded.

“I’m okay.” Avin sighed.

“Okay, help me look around to see if there are any injured people?” Shaya asked next.

“Sure,” Gerard agreed.

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go,” Avin agreed, too.

Around them in the mess hall, passengers stood in small groups talking and questioning what had happened. There were no obvious serious injuries and they decided to head out.

“Do you think we managed to escape far enough?” Avin asked as they walked.

“I have no idea. We didn’t go very far but I also didn’t see their ship, so I don’t know how fast they would have been able to follow us. We might have put enough distance between us,” Gerard answered. “I am more worried about what damage we took. We don’t know what was hit and damaged along with the engines.”

The corridors were full of panicked people with dirty faces and no real idea what to do. The yellow and blue emergency lights were flashing everywhere, but it looked like there were no serious injuries, mostly just bruises that Shaya didn’t even bother slowing down for. Avin wondered where she was actually heading.

“I want to go to the medical center. All injured people will go there and they will probably need help. But if you have an idea where the ship is most damaged, we can head there first to check if there are people there who need assistance,” Shaya answered without stopping.

Avin noticed Gerard got that look he always got when deep in thought; the one where his forehead wrinkled and his brows drew close together. He was

ready to bet that Gerard was already estimating where the damages were the worst just by what he had heard during the battle.

“I believe that most hits were in that direction.” Gerard finally spoke when they reached the next cross section. He was pointing to their right.

“Okay.” Shaya nodded and turned right. “Any idea what’s in that direction?”

“On this level I believe it is the gardens,” Avin answered. “On the level above is the panoramic galleries. Not really sure what’s on the lower levels.”

“Probably the life support systems,” Gerard added. “They are usually under the greeneries. Let’s hope they haven’t suffered much damage or we will be in trouble.”

By the time they reached the gardens, it was obvious that Gerard was correct in his estimations. Sparks were flying from the cables exposed in the broken walls and panels. Avin saw flames dancing in the branches of the trees that stood ahead of them. Thankfully, everyone seemed to have left the area and the sprinklers that watered the gardens were now working to extinguish the fires.

As they got ready to leave, they heard voices coming from their left.

“Come on, Zeda, we need to get out of here,” a woman was saying.

“I am trying, I can’t go any faster, Zila.” Another voice, probably Zeda’s, answered.

They turned in the direction of the voices and saw two women walking toward the exit. One of them was using her hands to cover her pregnant belly. Gerard immediately started toward them.

“Are you okay, ladies? Can we help?”

“Oh, please! My sister is five months pregnant, and she can’t run but there’s a fire, and we need to go out and...”

Avin watched Gerard lift the pregnant female like she weighed nothing. He had always admired Gerard’s strength.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of here.”

Avin saw them head for the exit with Shaya trying to check if Zeda and her baby were okay. It took them a few seconds to realize that Avin wasn’t

following them but was instead frozen in place and staring at the swollen belly of the woman.

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*Three years earlier*

Avin stood awkwardly in front of the medical center. He was a bit nervous to go in. It's not like he had anything serious to worry about, but he didn't really like medical centers. He was just planning to go back to his room when the door suddenly slid open.

"Oh, subcaptain, what can I do you for you?" one of Shaya's subordinates asked him.

"Hello, I'm looking for Doctor Amdahl actually," he managed to say.

"Sure, come in. She's in the back, go straight in," the tiny female invited him in.

With no way of escape, Avin went to find Shaya. Just as the assistant had told him, she was sitting in the small room at the back of the center.

"Hey, Shaya," he greeted her.

"Hello, Avin. What a nice surprise to see you here." Shaya smiled. "What I can do for you?"

Shaya knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't come without a reason.

"I... I have a bit of a problem," Avin started. "I think my hormones haven't returned to normal after the heat."

"The heat? You were in heat? When?"

"A week ago." Avin blushed.

"And what do you mean your hormones haven't returned to normal? What makes you think so?"

"My sense of smell is still heightened like it was during the heat. And I am also a bit... moody."

"Okay. Let's check you out." Shaya nodded.

She stood up from her chair and showed him to one of the couches in the main room.

"Can you please lay down?" she asked while taking out her scanner.

Avin did what he was told but not without asking, “Is it really needed?”

“Yes, it is. I need to check on your physical condition first.”

Shaya turned on the scanner and held it over his stomach. The device looked like a metal cylinder but from one side it scanned through whatever was there and projected a holographic image of it through the other. Now it was showing the insides of Avin’s belly. Shaya touched it a few times and made the image zoom in. And then again. And again. She did it a few times till they got a clear hologram of the inside of Avin’s womb. There was a tiny black spot.

“Oh, stars.” Avin was shocked.

“Avin, I think your hormones won’t go back to normal anytime in the next six months.”

“Shaya... what am I to do?”

“I take it this wasn’t planned. Why didn’t you take precautions if you didn’t want to get pregnant?” Shaya was surprised.

“I... I didn’t even think about it. I know I should have but... I forgot.”

Avin was confused and scared. The baby had never been in the plans. Shaya seemed to understand that because she didn’t scold him for forgetting a simple thing as contraception and just said, “I think you should talk with the father first.”

Avin nodded.

“Yes, I think you are right. I need to talk with Gerard first.”

“Gerard? He is the father of the baby?” Shaya blinked with surprise.

Avin turned bright red.

“Hmmm, yeah. I didn’t want to spend my heat with someone I didn’t know. And Gerard is my best friend...”

Shaya nodded.

“Gerard will be a good father, too,” she added.

At that moment, Gerard himself walked into the medical center. He was clearly surprised to see Avin there.

“Hey, Avin, I wasn’t expecting to see you here. Everything okay?”

Avin fidgeted nervously but didn’t answer. Gerard lifted his eyebrows questioningly but didn’t say anything more. Instead he turned to Shaya.

“You ready for lunch?”

Shaya hesitated for a second.

“Actually I’m still a bit busy. Why don’t you take Avin instead?”

Avin appreciated the chance Shaya was giving him to speak with Gerard in private, but wasn’t sure he was truly ready for that. He was scared and nervous, but after a few more words with Shaya, he followed Gerard out to the mess hall. They got their food trays, and Gerard turned to look for a table.

“Uhhmm, Gerard?”

“Yes?” Gerard turned his head toward him.

“Would you mind if we go somewhere more private? I want to talk with you about something.”

Gerard nodded.

“Sure. My room?”

“That would be nice.”

Once again, Avin found himself sitting at the small dining table in Gerard’s quarters. Gerard didn’t press him about what he wanted them to talk about, but ate his food quietly. Avin was too nervous to eat and was just playing with his lunch.

“I am pregnant,” he suddenly blurted out.

It felt like time had stopped. Gerard completely froze for a few seconds, a look of complete shock on his face.

“You talked with Shaya about it?” he finally asked.

“She saw it with the scanner. I thought that something was wrong with my hormones after the heat and went to see her. I had no idea. I didn’t even think about it.” Avin hid his face in his palms.

Suddenly the realization hit him. He was expecting a baby. Fear contracted his chest and tears ran down his cheeks. A second later, he was sobbing desperately. Strong arms unexpectedly lifted him from his chair like he weighed nothing and carried him to the armchair next to the window. Gerard sat there with Avin in his lap and cradled him while he cried.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. We’ll handle this.” He kept whispering to him. “I am here, we will handle it.”

It took Avin a few minutes to get a grip. But even after he calmed down, he didn't move to get up.

“What I am to do, Gerard? I have always wanted a baby but... not like this. I wanted it to have a family and home.”

“It does have a family, Avin. I am here and I am not going to leave. It's my baby too.”

Avin lifted his face to look at him.

“Aren't you scared?” he asked.

“Are you kidding me? I am terrified.” Gerard sighed. “But I have always wanted a family and... I lost hope a long time ago that I was ever going to have a child of my own. This baby... It is a chance for me to have what I have always wanted.”

Avin smiled. At least he wasn't going to be left alone to care for the baby. He knew they would have to talk more about it and make some decisions, but for the moment he let himself settle against Gerard's chest.

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## Chapter Seven

Gerard was worried. A few hours after the attack and the ship was still in disarray. An announcement was made to ask all passengers who weren't hurt to go back to their cabins some time ago, but it seemed a lot of people didn't follow it. Gerard himself was still at the ship's medical center with Avin. Shaya had left them to go help the staff soon after they brought in the pregnant woman. Thankfully, both she and the baby had been all right. In the meantime, Gerard was trying to get more information from the crew about who was hurt. Avin seemed curious too, and stuck around. His father still wasn't answering his calls.

From what they had heard so far, the damage the *Lunar Star* sustained was significant. The light engines were damaged with no chance of on-site repair and the closest station without using light speed was a month away.

Suddenly Avin's communicator rang. He had been very quiet since his freezing episode down at the gardens. Gerard was a bit worried about him and was watching him closely.

"Yes?" Avin accepted the call.

"Avin, where are you?" Akond said.

"I am helping Shaya and Gerard at the medical center. Where are you? I tried to call you; I have no idea how many times."

"We are in the command room with my father, your father, Chief Yazik, and the captain."

Before Akond had the time to add anything else Avin said, "We are on our way. Be there in a few," and turned off the call.

Gerard looked around for Shaya to warn her they were leaving but didn't see her anywhere. He decided to call her communicator later and headed out with Avin.

As Gerard and Avin approached the command room, they heard loud voices. When they arrived they found everyone in the middle of a heated discussion.

"There is no way for us to make it if we don't send a distress signal." Judging by the clothes he was wearing, he was the captain of the *Lunar Star*.

“We can’t send a signal, Captain. You know as well as I do that they are somewhere out there and are just waiting for us to send it so they can locate us,” Akond said.

The captain nodded.

“I know, but the damages we have are too severe for us to repair. Worst of all is that our gardens and greeneries have been almost completely destroyed. We are lucky that the ship is not full at the moment but there are still over three hundred people on board. Without most of the plants we only have oxygen for two weeks. And that’s if we close all extra facilities and rooms and drain them.”

“Do we have any information about what nearby ships we have?” asked Gerard’s father, looking at the two Chiefs in front of him.

“None of mine,” answered Chief Lais.

Darjen Yazik, Chief of the Military branch, looked in Gerard’s direction for a second before answering.

“We lost the only ship we had in the area.”

“The only station this far in space is Delta Seven, so not many ships come this way,” continued Avin’s father. “The next one of mine scheduled to reach Delta Seven will be in the area in about a week.”

“A week? A week is good. We do have oxygen for that long, don’t we, Captain?” Zolan Kneal asked.

The captain nodded.

“We can last a week. But are we supposed to just sit here?”

“No, you are right. We better use the ion engines and move. A moving target is harder to locate,” Chief Yazik stated.

The Chiefs and the Captain, along with Gerard’s father, kept discussing details of the actions that needed to be taken, but Akond turned to Avin.

“How are you, babe?”

The tiniest hint of a smile touched Gerard’s lips when he noticed how Avin rolled his eyes at Akond’s words.

“I’m okay.” Avin shrugged.

“Good. There is nothing for you to worry about.” Akond put his arm across Avin’s shoulders. “This will delay our wedding gift shopping a bit, but it’s nothing too serious. You’re not still angry with me over the gifts, are you?”

Akond’s words made Gerard think about the wedding gifts he had looked at years ago after his wedding. They had been perfect crescent pendants with a galaxy stone that reminded him of Avin’s eyes and how they shined when he was happy. But the pendants had been way too expensive for him. The tradition was when a child turned twenty, his or her parents gave them some money and property as a gift, and they used that to set themselves up to begin their own life. But Larea had opposed him getting anything that belonged to her, so Gerard ended up receiving only a small amount of money that barely covered the rest of his education in the academy. Ever since, he only counted on his pay. He couldn’t afford to buy expensive jewels for wedding gifts. Not that they’d had any real ceremony.

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### *Three years earlier*

Avin was pregnant. Gerard still couldn’t believe it. Just the thought of it made his heart beat faster with both fear and happiness. It had been a couple of days since Avin told him. After the initial shock of the discovery had passed, Avin had gotten so excited that he was already thinking of baby names. But they still hadn’t decided about their living accommodations. Gerard had offered for him to move into his spare room, but Avin was still thinking it over. Today they were going back to Shaya so she could check on Avin’s pregnancy more thoroughly.

“How are you, soon-to-be parents?” Shaya greeted them cheerfully.

“Hey, Shaya.” Gerard smiled. “We are doing fine. We came for the exams you wanted to do.”

“Very good. Let’s make sure that little one is doing fine.”

They went to one of the examination couches. The medical center was busy that day, so Shaya touched a few buttons on the panel next to it and lifted the separation walls to give them some privacy. Gerard had always liked that in the medical center. Two rows of couches were lined up against the walls of the main room. Each couch could be separated from the others by force field walls. These walls could be transparent if the patient needed to be isolated but watched, or they could be frosted if privacy was needed. At the same time, the

fact that the couches were all in the same room allowed easy access and observation if more than one patient needed emergency help.

Fifteen minutes later, Shaya had confirmed that everything was normal and the pregnancy was progressing as it should.

“So when am I performing your wedding?” Shaya asked at the end.

“What?” Avin jumped.

“You know, usually Wailenian couples who are expecting a baby get married, too,” Shaya said.

Gerard’s eyes widened with shock. He really couldn’t believe Shaya had just said that. His chest tightened with worry of Avin’s reaction to her words.

Avin had barely said a word since they got there and was now sitting on the couch with his right hand gently laid over his belly. Gerard watched how he blinked a few times with surprise and then blushed.

“We... still haven’t decided that. Gerard...” He stopped, unsure.

Their eyes met. Gerard saw a pleading light in the blue eyes. He dared a small hopeful smile himself.

“We can do it.”

“You want us to get married?” Avin’s eyes widened.

Gerard didn’t have the courage to speak his real feelings out loud but instead said, “I want our baby to have a real family.”

“Okay.” Avin nodded.

Gerard couldn’t believe his ears and had to dig his nails into his palm to make sure he was hearing right.

“Okay? You want us to do it?” He just had to be sure.

“Yes, why not? I already told you that I have always wanted my baby to have a family.”

They just stared at each other for a few seconds, smiles on their faces.

“So, when should I prepare for the wedding?” Shaya insisted.

“Oh, it doesn’t really matter,” was Avin’s answer.

“I can do it now. I just need to get the supplies.”

Gerard throat was so tight that he could only nod in agreement.

Shaya returned a few minutes later with two tattooing bracelets and two syringes.

Gerard didn't need the celebration that would usually surround the ritual wedding tattoos. None of that mattered to him. He just needed the doctor to do it, and he was thankful the doctor was Shaya. He looked over at Avin, who was fidgeting on the sofa. When their gazes met, a bright smile lit up his soon-to-be husband's face. The warmth in his chest spread as he watched Avin rise up from the couch and walk over to stand next to him. The feel of Avin's fingers entwining with his settled the butterflies fluttering around in his stomach. The ritual of bonding consisted of blood being taken from each partner and injected in a bracelet. Each partner got the bracelet with the blood of the other put on his or her left wrist. The blood reacted with the chemicals in the bracelet and the result was a silver tattoo, a symbol of their bonding. Usually, in order for the tattoo to stay on the skin, the marriage had to be consummated in the next three days. But Gerard knew that when the couple was pregnant already, it usually wasn't needed as the chemicals also detected the baby's DNA, and that was enough for the tattoos to become permanent instantly.

Shaya didn't hesitate, but got to work immediately. Very soon both he and Avin had new silver tattoos on their wrists. For the first time in years, Gerard felt hopeful about his future.

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## Chapter Eight

For the next four days, things were tense on the ship. Being limited to only their living quarters and the mess hall, passengers were getting restless. Every room or section on the ship that wasn't vital had been sealed. The *Lunar Star* was moving slowly toward Delta Six in the hopes of intercepting the ship Chief Lais mentioned, all while trying to avoid discovery. Most passengers didn't realize how bad the situation actually was and were complaining about the restrictions. The ones who did realize it were Gerard's crew, but they kept mostly to themselves.

Avin was doing the same. Akond had been complaining of boredom and that was irritating him. Today he had insisted Avin join him and a few of his friends for dinner. Akond's company consisted of his weapons expert, Ksita Vix, an old friend from the academy, Fozan Blick, and his bearer husband Aon Ners. They took a table at the center of the mess hall and that didn't make Avin feel better. If anything, he felt even more exposed.

Their company was one of the noisiest around. All of them were aware of what was going on with the ship and Avin thought it was Akond's way of trying to distract the other passengers and show them there was nothing to worry about, so he tried to play along. He noticed his and Akond's parents sitting in one of the corners with Chief Yazik. Gerard and Shaya occupied the table next to them. Some other members of the crew were sitting close by. It was very easy to tell who had any knowledge of how a ship worked—they were all sitting quietly and didn't make a fuss.

Suddenly Avin noticed that everyone at his table went quiet and was looking at him.

“What?”

“We were asking how you and Akond plan to spend your wedding celebration time,” Ksita said.

“I don't know. We haven't exactly made plans yet.” Avin looked at Akond. “We can go to my house on the lake and spend a few days there, just the two of us.”

“Oh, come on, Avin, you really want to go back to that boring place? There is nothing there but water and plants.” Akond scrunched his nose in distaste. “We should go to Merinda. We can have a lot of fun there.”

“Akond is right on that. You can really have fun at Merinda,” Ksita agreed.

Avin looked at her, annoyed. He had no idea why she was here in the first place. He found it heartwarming that Akond had been worried about him enough to come to Delta Seven and bring him home, but why he brought his weapons expert with him was a mystery. He’d also noticed Gerard going out of his way to avoid Ksita. The two of them obviously knew each other and were not on good terms. She was successfully pissing him off too.

“I don’t really like Merinda,” Avin said. “But if you want, we can go there.”

“Oh, it’s a very nice place to enjoy yourself,” Aon said. “You really should try it out.”

“Actually, I am not worried about our wedding celebration time, mostly I wonder how we will arrange things after it. We both have our jobs and responsibilities.” Avin looked at the other bearer.

“You will quit.” Akond’s abrupt tone suggested that conversation was finished.

“No, I will not.” Avin squinted his blue eyes, ready for a fight.

Fozan looked at him, wide-eyed.

“And how are you planning on raising your kids if you are working?”

Avin’s heart was beating so fast he thought it might explode. Just the mentioning of kids made him want to scream.

“A lot of Wailenians have kids and work at the same time,” Avin pointed out. “And we don’t have kids yet.”

“Yeah, for that we are supposed to have sex, you know.” Avin knew that Akond was trying to distract him but it was only annoying him more.

“And for that you will have to wait till we are actually married,” was his angry answer.

Aon laughed.

“And what if we die in the next few days? Are you planning on dying a virgin?” Akond smiled smugly.

Obviously Avin’s table companions were trying to make a joke of him. And that was the last straw for his anger to flare.

“A virgin? What makes you think I am a virgin, Akond?” he asked with fake innocent tone. He loved the look of complete shock in Akond’s eyes.

“What? You thought that while you went around and fucked everything with legs, I just sat around and waited for you? Sorry to burst your bubble, Akond, but you thought wrong. And let me tell you a secret—I have had some really amazing sex these past few years, and once we get married, I will expect nothing less from you.”

With that Avin got up and strode out of the mess hall, leaving his tablemates staring at him with mouths hanging open.

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*Two years, nine months earlier*

Avin was feeling horny. Again. Three months into his pregnancy and his hormones were running loose. He felt like he was still in heat. Apart from the fact that he now had a baby bump. The whole crew was staring at him wherever he went, but the only ones who dared asking questions were his fellow subcaptains Alog, Jik and Raiza. But of course everyone noticed he'd moved in with Gerard. Avin felt uncomfortable at first about being everyone's gossip topic, but got used to it with time. He had more important things to worry about. He was now occupying Gerard's spare room, and together they were getting ready for the baby. Shaya had confirmed that it was a girl.

In the meantime, their ship was going deeper and deeper into the unexplored area. They had no communication with Delta Seven anymore. The last day they'd been in range, Avin sent a message to his parents warning them that they wouldn't be able to contact him for the next few months. He contemplated telling them about Gerard and the baby, but decided news like that was better shared in person. To Akond he didn't bother sending a message at all.

Apart from his constant state of arousal, Avin liked being pregnant. The first time he felt the baby move, he sat still for hours just trying not to miss her next move. Gerard had been as excited as he was.

Even now he couldn't resist touching his swollen stomach. His skin had become more sensitive, and even the slightest touch made his arousal flare. He started slow at first, with just a light caress around the edge of his belly, then slowly slid his hand down to his aching arousal. His mind tried to imagine what it would be like if he was with Akond, but his mind wasn't cooperating. Images of his night with Gerard flashed before his eyes—the way his skin felt like silk under his fingers, the way his black hair spilled over the pillow and moved with each thrust as Avin rode him...

Avin was so engrossed that he didn't notice the door of the bathroom opening. The first time he realized there was someone else with him in the bathroom was when strong arms surrounded him—one around his chest and the other joining his own hand on his arousal. Avin wanted to protest, but the extra touch turned out to be enough to trip him over the edge, and the only thing he could do was lean back on Gerard's broad chest and cry out in pleasure.

For a minute they both just stood there without saying a word. Then Avin felt Gerard stretching out his hand and wiping it on a rag. Seconds later he realized that he was being lifted and carried out. Gerard sat them in his favorite recliner, much like he had when Avin first told him they were going to have a baby.

Avin felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment. He wanted to get up and get dressed, as he was still completely naked, but Gerard held him still.

“Stay please!”

Avin buried his face in Gerard's chest. He felt a hand gently caressing his pregnant belly.

“I am sorry. I had no idea you were here, I thought you were at the command center.”

“That's okay, I understand. My shift ended half an hour ago.” Gerard put his cheek on top of Avin's head.

“Still, I am sorry. The pregnancy... it makes me feel horny.”

“I can always help you with that,” Gerard gently offered.

Avin lifted his head to look at Gerard, his eyes wide with surprise.

“You want us to have sex again?”

“Avin, we are married now, and we are expecting a baby. I don't think either of us are going to have sex with someone else, so I see no reason why we don't do it together if we need it.”

Gerard, of course, had a point. Avin had never given a thought about all the consequences of their marriage, but it was normal for Gerard, as a healthy male, to want to have sex, too. And he certainly was horny enough. Then a thought occurred to him.

“Gerard...” Avin bit his lip. Gerard lifted his eyebrows, expecting him to continue. “I'm not sure I can...”

He looked pointedly at his belly.

Gerard nodded.

“Yes, I don’t think it will be good for the baby if you bottom. But I don’t think there will be a problem if you top.”

Avin had the feeling he would never be able to close his mouth again from the surprise.

“You will let me top?” He just needed to make sure he heard right.

“Sure.” Gerard nodded. “Why not?”

Avin smiled.

“Most people assume that as a bearer I am supposed to be the bottom. You enjoy bottoming?” Avin’s curiosity spiked.

“I don’t know, I have never tried,” Gerard admitted.

“But you want to try now? Why?”

Gerard shrugged.

“The only long term relationship I had before was with a female, so no option there. And my relationships with men were mostly one-night stands who assumed I prefer to top. Probably because of my size. Anyway, I never felt comfortable enough with any of them to actually want to try it. But I... You are different. I trust you and you are my husband now, so why not give it a try?”

Avin’s heart beat fast with excitement. The whole time, Gerard never stopped caressing the bump that was their baby.

“You really care, don’t you? About me and the baby.”

“Of course I care, Avin. You two are my family now.”

Avin smiled brilliantly. He never thought that such a simple statement could make him so happy.

“You are really excited to top, huh?” Gerard returned the smile.

Avin realized that he was still completely naked in Gerard’s lap, and his arousal was prominent. He felt his face heating up again. Gerard laughed out loud.

“So you want to go to bed?”

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## Chapter Nine

Gerard watched as Avin strode away. He had no idea what he said to Akond at the end of their conversation, but his brother seemed to be in shock. In front of him, Shaya was laughing.

“I don’t know what that was, but I think Akond just learned that Avin is not the starry-eyed boy he met anymore.”

Gerard knew Shaya was right, but it just made him feel sad. He preferred the happy boy smitten with his brother to the angry, sad man Avin had become.

A sudden commotion behind him interrupted his train of thought. All the tables were vacant except for the half-empty plates; the occupants having left in a hurry. Gerard looked at his brother, who stood up and went to join their parents on their way out. Something was going on, but Gerard had no idea what.

“I wonder what made them all leave in such a hurry,” Shaya voiced Gerard’s thoughts.

“Yeah, that was a bit strange.” Gerard shrugged. “It must be something big, but I doubt they’ll tell us anything.”

“Why does Akond get to know what’s going on and you don’t?”

“Akond is their golden boy, a valued captain. I am being persecuted for losing my ship and I am half-human at that. Why would they invite me?”

“You are, and always will be, better than Akond.”

Gerard really appreciated Shaya’s loyalty to him, but sometimes her statements made him feel a bit uncomfortable. Trying to hide it, he looked at one of the panels on the wall that projected what was happening outside of the ship. What he saw there almost made him fall off his seat. Because outside there was a ship. A Wailenian ship.

“Shaya... We need to find a watching panel, but not here.”

Shaya’s yellow eyes widened with surprise at the sudden statement.

“I have one in my cabin,” she offered.

“Let’s go.”

Gerard almost dragged Shaya all the way to her cabin. He had a bad feeling in his stomach. Once there he just turned the screen on and started to flip in between different views of the outside space till he found what he was looking for. A ship was definitely there, and they were getting closer to it with every minute. It looked like a merchant ship, but the distance was still too great for them to see if its name was visible. Gerard lifted his eyes to Shaya's. She returned his shocked look with one of her own.

“Let's go to the command center. We will find out more there.”

They sprinted there. When they entered the command center, it was in disarray. No one even noticed that two more people just joined them.

“Sir, the ship is still not answering our calls,” Gerard heard the communication officer say.

“Can we make a scan?” the captain asked.

“It looks like a merchant ship for long distance transportation,” Avin's father was saying at the same time on the other side of the room. “But it's very suspicious that they are ignoring our calls.”

“Sir? The scanners can't detect any form of intelligent life,” the same man announced.

“So it's a ghost ship.” Akond was good at stating the obvious.

“But what does it matter?” Zolan said. “It's not like we have any other choice but to go to it.”

“That can be dangerous, we have no idea how this ship got here and where its crew is,” Chief Yazik interrupted.

“But what does it matter? We are running out of oxygen and that ship may have a working air-production system,” Gerard's father insisted.

At that moment, Avin walked up to them. Gerard hadn't noticed him entering the center.

“It's one of our own ships. It can't be that bad.”

Gerard couldn't believe Avin said that. His breath stopped in his throat. Avin's father looked at him.

“He is right, this is one of my ships and we need to go and at least find out what happened with the crew.”

“I have to agree. We need to go to the ship,” the captain said after a brief moment of hesitation.

Chief Yazik nodded.

“Form a team to go. But make sure they are well protected.”

“Sir, if you allow me to say so, I don’t think it’s a good idea to go to an unknown ship. As far as we know, there might be a disease over there,” Gerard tried to speak.

Everyone turned in his direction with looks of disapproval in their eyes.

“Thank you, Mister Kneal, your personal opinion does not interest me,” Chief Yazik cut him off. “Send the team as fast as possible. We need to know what the actual condition of the ship is.”

An overwhelming sense of dread settled over Gerard. He knew he had been dismissed, but he kept worrying and refused to leave the command center. He needed to know if what he suspected was true.

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#### *Four years earlier*

Gerard was proud of his crew. It had taken him six months to select them all, but he was finally satisfied with his choices. Most of all, he was happy that Avin had joined his crew as a subcaptain responsible for weaponry. The other three subcaptains were Alog Frain, a very capable engine expert, Raiza Sils, an ambitious pilot, and Jik Rew, for communications and foreign relations. The only person in the crew he didn’t choose, or have final approval of, was Doctor Shaya Amdahl, and that was because she was the one who chose him. The ship they were going to fly on was the first of its kind. The technology there was a result of years of Shaya’s hard work, so she got the position as head of the medical team by default.

As a doctor, Shaya had specialized mostly in neurology and brain function. Ever since she finished school, she had been working on connecting a computer directly to the brain. Shaya thought it would be useful for making replacements for amputated limbs. But when her experiments proved to be extremely successful, the military contacted her with the request to replicate the technology in a ship. The project had become a reality six months ago, and now the *Dragonwanderer* was ready to leave on its first big journey.

Gerard was awaiting final commands from the Chief of the Military. He was supposed to meet him at his office at the docks in a few minutes, so he headed

there. For a few seconds, he wished his father and brother would've been able to see him in his new captain's uniform. He contemplated calling Zolan, but gave up on the idea. Over the years since his graduation from the academy, Gerard talked less and less with his family and now he had almost no connection with them. He actually got news of them mostly from Avin.

Chief Yazik was already expecting him when Gerard got there. After the standard greetings, the chief invited him to sit.

"First, congratulations for your promotion, Captain."

"Thank you, Sir." Gerard nodded.

"As you well know, the *Dragonwanderer* is an experimental ship. How you handle it will determine if more ships like it are built in the future. It is also the heaviest armed ship we have as of now. The plans for your ship and your crew are big. As you have already been informed, your first mission will be in the Delta sector."

The chief stopped talking and looked at Gerard. He nodded in confirmation that he had indeed received the orders. Delta was a small sector at the border of the known territories. The first to explore it were the humans, and they were the ones to name it. It consisted of five habitable planets, of which only one had developed intelligent life, but they were not yet developed enough for contact to be established. The other four planets were colonies; twenty-seven automatic mining sites and seven stations for military and trading purposes. The space beyond station Delta Seven was unknown. It was the last outpost and Gerard's ship's new base.

"Unfortunately, there is a lot of trouble in the sector. Reports of pirate attacks from there are received every day. Your task will be to make sure I get less of them. This will also allow you to test the limits of the *Dragonwanderer*. I believe I don't have to tell you to be careful; you should already be aware of the risks the new technology possesses."

Chief Yazik stopped talking, expecting an answer.

"Yes, Sir. I am familiar with the risks and I have accepted them."

"The testing period for the ship has been set to one year. That will be the duration of your mission in the sector. After that, it will be decided if other ships like it will be built, and you will also receive new orders. Any questions?"

"No, Sir, thank you!" Gerard shook his head.

Yazik stood up and Gerard followed suit.

“Then I can only wish you good luck and a safe journey.” The chief finished the conversation.

After another set of good wishes, Gerard left. An hour later, the *Dragonwanderer* left the docks on its way to Delta Seven.

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## Chapter Ten

Avin was feeling restless. The group sent to check out the newly found ship had returned. Now they were having another meeting at the command room to hear the report and discuss options. Even though Chief Yazik dismissed him, Gerard had stayed and lurked in the corner of the room. No one paid him any attention, but Avin could clearly see that he was worried and eyed the group of people who had just come back suspiciously.

“The ship does respond to our general recognition codes,” one of them was saying. “It let our shuttle into one of its docks. We didn’t have enough time to check everything, but we managed to look around a bit, and we even reached the command center. Everything looks to be in perfect order. Some parts of the ship are closed and require access codes. The key of the ship is not there, so we couldn’t activate it.”

“What about the name of the ship? Did you see it?” Chief Lais asked.

“No, Sir. The name of the ship is hidden. It takes a key or an emergency activation code for it to be revealed.”

A few more questions were asked, but Avin stopped paying attention to them. He kept staring at the ship on one of the screens. He wished he’d been a part of the group who went to the ship, but they wouldn’t let him.

The sound of the door opening and closing returned him back to the current situation. The reporting group had left to get some rest, and now only the command staff of the ship and the high-ranking guests remained.

“The ship certainly looks big enough,” Zolan Kneal said.

Avin wondered what he had missed. He looked at Gerard and was shocked to see that Gerard’s eyes were wide with horror.

“We can’t just all go and move to an unidentified ship.” Gerard interfered again. “We have no idea what happened with the crew. What if they all died of some sickness?”

Akond rolled his eyes.

“Obviously that’s not the case or the key would still have been there. So we know someone actually left the ship and took the key with them. Not to mention that the rule for all our ships that encounter disease is to make sure the bodies are destroyed, so they would have set it up to self-destruct.”

“And what if the self-destruct system malfunctions?” Gerard insisted.

“Oh, Gerard, really?” Akond’s voice couldn’t be more sarcastic. “Don’t you know that it has a backup system, and in case the ship can’t trigger an explosion, it sets itself on a course to the nearest black hole or supernova?”

“And how do we know where this ship was heading before we got to it?” Gerard challenged him.

Avin had never seen the two brothers fight each other like this before. He briefly wondered if they had always been like this and he had overlooked it. Shaya, who had stood quietly behind Gerard, was looking at Akond with annoyance. The other people in the room were looking at Gerard with a mix of pity, annoyance, and disapproval.

“Enough!” Chief Yazik said. “We are to move to the ship as fast as possible. Start preparing.”

His tone suggested that the decision was final and no objection was to be taken.

Avin’s heart accelerated. He was going home. He was going back to his baby girl.

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### *Two and half years earlier*

The pain started in the middle of the night. The first time Avin thought it to be a hard kick, but when it repeated a few minutes later, he realized that it was finally time. Gerard was sleeping next to him with his hand over Avin’s belly.

“Gerard!”

Avin couldn’t hold back his cry of pain.

The reaction was immediate. In a matter of seconds, Gerard was up and checking on him, his hands gently running over his face, his chest, and his belly.

“What’s wrong? Where does it hurt?” There was no mistaking the concern in his voice.

“Call Shaya, I think it’s time.”

After that, Gerard wasted no time. Only a few minutes later, Avin found himself on a couch in the medical center with Shaya and some of her staff surrounding him.

“Seems like it will be a fast birth,” Shaya said when another wave of pain hit him.

“Fast birth? What does a fast birth mean?” Gerard raised his eyebrows. The confused look on his face would have made Avin laugh if he didn’t feel like someone was trying to open him from the inside. Shaya’s laughter, however, rang through the room.

“Means he will give birth fast. The baby is in a good position and is ready to come out,” she clarified, watching the image on her scanner.

“Shaya!” Avin shouted. “You are not gonna make me watch it, are you?”

“No, unless you actually want to.”

“No, thank you, it’s enough I am feeling it!”

Avin’s voice rose to a shout before he even had the time to finish his sentence. Gerard took his hand.

“Calm down, Avin, calm down. Take a deep breath. Try to relax.”

“You try to relax, I am giving birth,” Avin snapped back.

Avin noticed one of the nurses smiling while preparing the necessary stuff for the baby. Strangely, that did make him feel better. He gripped Gerard’s hand tightly.

Minutes passed slowly. Avin felt like he was getting ripped open. Gerard was still holding his hand, and from time to time placed gentle kisses on it.

By the time Shaya told him it was time to push, Avin was exhausted. He felt like he was losing his grip on reality. The only thing that existed was the pain. Gerard was talking to him, smoothing his hair, and never complained how hard Avin was gripping his hand.

“Okay, one last push, Avin,” he heard Shaya say.

And he pushed.

For a little bit, the world stopped. The cry of a baby was what brought him back. Avin finally let go of Gerard’s hand to reach for their daughter. The moment he looked at her baby face he knew that all the pain was worth it.

Around him, Shaya and the rest of the medics were making sure everything was okay, but he only had eyes for the little girl in his arms. Avin saw how one of the nurses touched a probe to the baby’s tiny hand. A minute or two later Shaya asked, “What will her name be?”

Avin lifted his eyes toward Gerard. He was sitting on the chair next to the couch and had put his hands over his mouth. Avin gave him a small smile and felt happy when Gerard gave him a broad one in return.

“Helly. Her name is Helly,” Avin finally answered.

“Helly Azoal. I like it.” Shaya nodded.

“Azoal?” Avin gave her a blank look.

“Yes.” Shaya nodded. “The test shows that most of her dominant genes are from you so she is getting your name.”

Avin nodded, but was too exhausted to answer. Instead he turned to Gerard again. “Do you want to hold her?”

Gerard immediately reached to take the baby like he had only waited for her to be offered to him. Avin felt warm and happy.

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## Chapter Eleven

Gerard had been one of the first to arrive on the found ship. It gave him the time to go and get into his quarters without being watched. Shaya joined him soon after she managed to claim her own cabin.

“What are you thinking of?” were her first words when she arrived.

“I am just wondering how they think they can operate a ship they don’t know anything about.” Gerard shrugged. “Did they say anything important after I left?”

After Chief Yazik gave the order for them to move, Gerard left, but Shaya stayed for a little longer.

“They were mostly making plans,” Shaya answered vaguely.

“Are they planning to use the code on the ship? If they can guess which code is for the ship, of course?”

“They talked about it. They’re counting on the fact that Chief Lais knows all merchant ship codes. But for now they’ve decided to not try guessing it because the code can only be used once. If they use it now and the pirates find us before help comes—we will be helpless. Or so they think.”

“So basically, we will keep doing the same thing we’ve been doing—crawling slowly on ion engines in a complete communication silence. Only difference I see is that here we are not going to run out of oxygen.”

“Think that sums it up, yes.” Shaya put her tongue in her cheek. “What are you planning to do?”

“I don’t know yet. I am... still too confused to make any plans.” Gerard massaged the bridge of his nose. “For now, I will just make sure that Dock Two is safely locked and no one can get in. They have very limited access to the ship’s functions and can’t open areas without codes. That means they won’t find the armory or the single fighters, as Dock Three is also code locked.”

“They’ll mainly have access to the living areas. They can’t even access the engines if a repair is needed. They will see the training rooms though.”

“I wonder how many of the facilities they will actually open. That might make them realize there are too many for a simple merchant ship.”

Every type of ship in the Wailenian's fleet had a different build. The passenger ships were big, with many entertaining facilities and living quarters. They had the bare minimum of weapons, and only enough storage for the passenger's luggage. The merchant ships were the biggest ones. They had small crews and living areas for them, but the amount of weapons they had were not much more than the minimum. Most of their space was storage. The military ships usually were the smallest ones. They had only the minimum amount of storage space and enough living quarters to support the crew, but nothing too extravagant in entertainment facilities. They were always heavily armed. A person who knew the usual facilities for each ship would most probably guess what type the ship was, so Gerard was wondering how long it would take his brother and the others to figure out that this was no merchant ship. He was surprised Chief Yazik hadn't figured out what type of ship it was yet, but he had only been on the ship once. He probably didn't even consider it being the *Dragonwanderer* because it was supposed to be destroyed. Gerard also considered trying to talk with him again but dismissed the idea, remembering how he had been dismissed in the command room.

"They eventually will figure it out, I guess." Shaya nodded. "But they do not have access to all of the living quarters, either. I am getting a bit worried that there will not be enough space for everyone."

"That's a good point. Our crew will probably try to take their own cabins, and I don't think they will have a problem with that. The doors are programmed to their biometrics, but if they try to switch cabins, things will get a bit messy because no one else will be able to take theirs."

"Not all of them wanted to return, you know. I think some would have preferred to stay on the *Lunar Star*."

"Not sure I wanted to return either," Gerard murmured. "What they are planning to do with the *Lunar Star*?"

"They want to conserve it and tow it to the nearest station."

"So no one is to remain there?"

"No. We are all moving here."

Gerard shook his head. Things could go wrong on so many accounts, he couldn't even count how many.

After Shaya left, Gerard decided to start getting his quarters in living condition again to take his mind off of things. He tidied and washed, used the

dust pen on all surfaces to suck the accumulated small layer of dust off, and put some clothes in the washing machine. The only place he didn't go was the spare bedroom. Gerard wasn't ready to go in there.

When he was done and there was nothing else to do, Gerard sat in his favorite recliner but jumped up immediately. There sat a small doll.

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*Eighteen months earlier*

"See, princess, Daddy bought you a doll. Isn't it pretty?"

Gerard had Helly on his knees and was pointing at Avin, who was holding a beautiful doll for her to take. The toddler grabbed the toy and shook it. Everyone in the room laughed.

"I think she believes it to be a rattle toy," Raiza said.

"Rat toy," Helly tried to repeat.

Everyone laughed again.

"No, princess, not a rattle toy. It's a doll," Gerard said.

Helly turned to look at him with her big gray eyes.

"Rat toy," she insisted.

Everyone laughed so hard that tears flowed from their eyes.

"She sure is stubborn," Alog added.

"With these parents, what do you expect?" Shaya joked.

Another wave of laughter filled the room.

"Can you believe it's been a year since she was born?" Shaya continued.

"They all grow so fast." Alog nodded, looking at his own son who had already turned two.

As if hearing his father, the boy lifted his eyes from where he had been playing with the other kids invited to the party. He got up and toddled over to his father. Alog forgot he had just gotten himself a cookie and knelt down to see what his son wanted. The boy grabbed the treat from his hand and stuffed it in his mouth. The laughter in the room was explosive.

At that moment, Helly turned to Gerard. "Rat toy?"

Gerard smoothed her unruly blond hair, so much like Avin's.

“No, princess, a doll. Daddy bought you a doll.”

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy...” Helly waved her little hands toward Avin.

Gerard knew that Avin loved it when she was seeking him like that.

“Come here, princess.” Avin extended his hands to take her.

Gerard gently handed her their daughter, but in the process she lost her grip on her doll and it fell. Her gray eyes filled with tears.

“Rat toy?”

“Here it is, princess.” Gerard quickly handed her the doll.

Helly hugged the doll, put her little blond head on her daddy’s shoulder happily and promptly fell asleep.

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## Chapter Twelve

Avin was deciding which cabin he wanted to take. He had no intention of returning to Gerard's.

"Hey, Avin. What are you wondering about?" Akond interrupted him. "And in the middle of a hallway at that."

Avin shrugged.

"Just wondering which cabin I want."

Akond smiled.

"I've got a nice big one over there. If you want, I can share."

For a second, Avin wondered what Akond was aiming at, but he didn't have to wonder for long.

"We can practice for the wedding," Akond added cheekily.

"No, I don't think so." Avin rolled his eyes.

Akond's constant attempts to get him in bed were annoying him now. He wondered if Akond ever saw him as anything other than a sexual object.

At that moment, Raisen Lais and Jelila Azoal showed up from around the corner.

"Oh, here you are, baby. We have been wondering where you went," Jelila said.

Avin sighed.

"I am here, Mom, just choosing a room."

"Choosing a room? Why don't you stay with Akond? You two are getting married soon."

Akond gave him a smug grin.

"Come on, babe, I'll show you our room."

Avin shook his head, disbelieving. Did Akond really think he would change his mind and stay with him just because his mother told him to?

"I told you. I'm not gonna share with you, Akond."

Avin saw his father giving him a concerned look. Jelila's eyes went wide.

“But, baby, it’s normal for engaged couples to share a room.”

“It’s also normal for engaged people to set a date to get married and then actually get married.” Avin knew he had been harsh, but he was too annoyed to care.

“So that’s what is bugging you. You are still annoyed I postponed the wedding.” Akond nodded. “But, babe, try to understand, I had my duties as a captain.”

“A lot of captains are married, Akond. So don’t bother. I am neither eighteen, nor twenty anymore.”

“Avin, son, calm down. It’s not good for you to get so agitated,” Raisen interfered, raising his eyebrows.

That made him calm a little bit.

“I’m not agitated. I just want my own room.”

“Okay, get your own room then.” Raisen nodded.

“Yes, I will go do that. See you later.”

Avin turned to leave. He had only made it a few steps away when he heard his mother say, “This is not normal. Something is wrong with his nerves. Maybe we should ask Doctor Kips to check him out.”

Avin almost laughed. They thought something was wrong with his nerves?

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### *Six months earlier*

Avin watched the exploration team return from his screen in the command center. Gerard had gone to meet them at the dock. Ever since their current mission began two and a half years ago, this had been the fifth planet they found with suitable conditions to sustain life. He briefly wondered what his parents would say if they could see him now. In the last message he’d received from them, they’d implied that he was wasting his time with the military fleet and that they did not like the fact they couldn’t contact him. For the past couple of years, their communication had been rare, and was mostly in the form of messages whenever they got back to Delta Seven to report and restock. His parents still didn’t know about his marriage or about Helly. The mission was highly confidential and they had no idea where their bearer son actually was. The more he thought about it, the more Avin was glad that his parents were unaware that for the past two and a half years his ship had been exploring the

unexplored area beyond Delta Seven in search of livable planets. They'd found this planet a few days ago and the team returning was the seventh one who had gone there.

Avin smiled. The planet was really beautiful. It had some of the most amazing flowers he had seen, but so far they had no indications of an intelligent life-form.

"What are you thinking about?" Gerard interrupted his thoughts.

"How beautiful this planet is." Avin smiled. "One day it will be a perfect home for someone."

"Yeah, I think you are right." Gerard nodded. "But there are still many years till we inhabit this part of space."

"Did the team report anything new?"

"Still no traces of intelligence. The flora and the fauna don't seem to vary much from one area to another. We still have a lot more to explore though," Gerard said. "By the way, why are you still here? Jik was supposed to replace you half an hour ago."

"Yeah." Avin nodded. "But he still hasn't showed up and he is not answering his communicator."

"That's not like him." Gerard shook his head and turned toward the rest of the crew in the command center. "Anyone know what's going on with subcaptain Rew?"

"I last saw him at lunch, sir. Heard him complaining of a headache. He said he would go lay down till his shift started," one of the pilots answered.

"Hmmm, I guess he probably overslept," Gerard said.

Avin watched him bite his lower lip while contemplating what to do. After a minute or so, he lifted his left wrist and called someone on his communicator. At first, Avin thought he was trying to contact Jik again, but to his surprise it was Shaya who answered.

"Yes?"

"Hey, Shaya, have you heard anything from Jik today?"

"No? Why should I have?" Shaya answered with obvious surprise.

"Seems like he complained from a headache earlier and he still hasn't showed up for his shift. Thought you might have given him something."

“No, I haven’t. But if you want I can go and check on him.”

“That would be great. Thank you. Keep me updated, please.”

“Sure. Will call you in a few.”

A few minutes later, Gerard’s communicator rang.

“Gerard, can you and Avin please come to the medical center for a few?” Shaya asked.

There was some strange urgency in Shaya’s voice that made Avin’s chest tighten.

“Sure, we will be right there.” Gerard was on his way out the door before he even closed the connection. Avin followed.

When they arrived, they found Shaya secluded behind a shield field. Jik was lying on a couch looking pale and in pain. Shaya was scanning him.

“Shaya, what’s going on?”

“I found him in his cabin like this. He seems to be in a lot of pain and can’t form a coherent sentence, but seems aware what’s going on. I am trying to identify what the cause for this is, but for now he is going to be under quarantine. I have decided to put myself in too, because I’m the one who found him. But whatever the thing is, it’s affecting his neurological system. When I got there, he was having some sort of a seizure. Good that as a doctor I can go in all cabins or he might have suffocated.”

Avin’s chest felt heavy. They all had been in contact with Jik in the past few days.

“Are you sure it’s contagious?” he asked.

“Honestly, I have no idea. I still can’t identify it and that bothers me. I’d prefer to play it safe and keep us in isolation.”

“Do you think other members of the staff might already be sick?” Gerard asked.

“Everyone can be sick for as much as I know.”

“Anyone come in today with a headache? Seems that’s how it started,” Gerard continued.

“No one so far, but I will make sure to quarantine everyone who does. Do you think you can send the people Jik spends the most time with in for a checkup?”

“That will be a lot of people. Jik likes to spend time with friends.”

Shaya nodded thoughtfully. Avin could tell that Jik’s sickness bothered her.

“So the people who he spent the last few hours with before he got sick, at least?”

“I can try.” Gerard nodded.

In the next few hours, three more people checked in with headaches. Despite Shaya’s efforts, Jik’s condition continued to deteriorate. He was going in and out of consciousness. Another seven people got sick the next day. They were all quarantined, but the disease seemed to continue to spread. Jik fell into a coma and died two days later. By that time, Shaya was also experiencing the first symptoms. The count of the sick ones was over twenty.

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## Chapter Thirteen

Gerard was amazed how fast things got settled on the new ship. Only a couple of days had passed since they moved and it looked like they had been here the whole time. The bar was reopened and some passengers seemed to enjoy having a fitness center with a fight-training room. Most of them didn't even realize that they couldn't see the whole ship. Akond realized it though, and seemed set to explore as much as he could. Gerard had been making rounds around the ship to make sure everything that was supposed to be locked was indeed locked, and kept stumbling over Akond in the most unexpected places. He was on his way to Dock Two to make sure it was completely sealed when he found his brother a corridor away.

"Akond, what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? What are you doing here?"

"I asked first," Gerard shot back.

Akond shook his head but, to Gerard's surprise, he answered.

"Same as you, I am checking the ship for safe pods. I found a few places they have some, but for such a big ship they are too little. There should be more of them somewhere."

"Any idea where the rest might be?" Gerard jumped at the offered excuse.

"I am starting to think they might be in the docks. I can't find them anywhere else, but why would safe pods be in the docks? If you could get to the docks, you wouldn't take a safe pod, you would board a shuttle."

Gerard took a deep breath. He had to make Akond go away from the docks and stop asking questions.

"Or they might not be on the ship at all. The crew might have taken them."

"But why would they do that? The ship is not damaged or anything for them to be in a hurry to leave it. They could have used shuttles."

"Yeah, but only one shuttle was missing from what I saw in the dock when we arrived. Not enough for the whole crew."

"Actually, it might have been enough." Gerard could tell that Akond was just thinking out loud. "This ship is confusing. It's not like the typical merchant ship."

“What do you mean? It looks pretty much like a merchant ship to me.”

“It looks like it, yes, but did you notice how many living quarters it has? A merchant ship wouldn’t have so many people on board. But there’s still not enough rooms for a passenger ship. And the ship is too big for military. If I hadn’t seen that it was really a ship, I would have guessed that this was a station, looking at the inside.”

“Oh...” Gerard’s eyes widened. “I hadn’t thought of that, but it does look it. Think it was supposed to be turned into a station?”

“Maybe, it’s still a bit weird.” And with that, Akond turned and left without saying good-bye. Gerard was relieved to see that he headed away from the docks.

Gerard turned and headed to his original destination. Dock Two was closed and locked. Gerard checked the access panel and was relieved to see it was untouched. Using his access code, he changed the security clearance for unlocking the doors. Only his and Shaya’s codes were to work from now on.

After he was done, Gerard leaned against the door. He felt a little relieved. At least now he was sure no one was going in there.

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### *Six months earlier*

Gerard was scared. Shaya had been in a coma for two days, but her condition seemed to stabilize a bit. A few others of her staff had fallen sick too. No matter what they did, the count of the sick kept growing. After Jik, eight other staff members died. No one had recovered. The day before, a child was admitted with symptoms of the disease. Neither of her parents were sick and they had no idea from where she might have contracted it. Gerard watched them cry next to her bed, unable to help. Silently, he prayed he and Avin would never have to be in their place.

Panic had settled on the ship. Gerard ordered everyone to stay in their quarters. If someone experienced any symptoms, they were to call the medical center for escort. The whole medical staff wore protective suits, but Gerard couldn’t be sure they weren’t infected already. For now, they still didn’t know how long the incubation period was, but Gerard was thinking it was around a week. Jik had been one of the members in the first exploration group. They’d gone to the planet eight days before he got sick.

Gerard left the medical center and went back to the command room. The fact it was empty didn't ease the heaviness in his chest. Avin had locked himself and Helly in their quarters. Gerard didn't want to bring the disease to them, so he was now using Avin's old room for the rare few hours he took to sleep. He was surprised he wasn't sick yet, as he was the first to meet the crew when they returned to the ship, and he himself had been in the second group to go to the surface.

Gerard checked the sensors. Everything seemed to be in order. He had set the ship to go back in the direction of Delta Seven, but not reach the station. Without the crew working, he could only use the light engines whenever he connected directly to the ship, but couldn't do that all the time, so they were moving slowly.

While Gerard was getting ready for another connection, his communicator rang. For a second he contemplated pretending to be already in and not to answer. News was rarely good the past few days, but with a sigh he decided against it.

"Sir, we need you in the medical center," one of the doctors said.

"Shaya?" Gerard swallowed.

"Yes, sir. Doctor Amdahl... she just woke up, sir."

Before the doctor even finished, Gerard was sprinting toward the medical center.

At first, Shaya had been very confused and weak, but her condition improved over the next few days. She was suffering from mood swings and she seemed apathetic, but slowly her doctor mindset took over. Soon she seemed to be completely recovered.

After her, a few other members of the crew woke up, but many still died. Gerard was happy Shaya made it through, but at this point half the crew was sick and the survivors were only a few. They suffered from depression and needed to be looked after. Shaya stated that they were now immune to whatever was causing the illness and that she was trying to work on a vaccine, but days were passing and nothing seemed to work. The worst of all were the children. Half of the children on the ship had gotten sick, and not even one had pulled through it. Gerard was extremely worried.

Then the call came.

By the time Gerard and Shaya reached his quarters, Avin was crying from the pain. Helly was crying in her bed, but Gerard couldn't tell if it was because she was sensing something was wrong with her daddy or because she was in pain too. The answer became obvious an hour later when she started thrashing and screaming.

Desperation settled over Gerard. He sat in between the beds of his husband and their daughter and prayed silently for them to make it. He had never felt so helpless in his life.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Avin looked around the corner, and only after he was sure it was clear, he continued moving. He had never thought he would have to sneak around like a thief, but lately his parents had been following him around like hawks. And if that wasn't annoying enough, they kept telling him how good things would be after he and Akond got married. Like he was supposed to be thrilled he wouldn't be able to work and would just travel along with Akond and watch from the sidelines. And when Avin insisted he didn't want to leave his job, his mother scolded him for being childish and Akond laughed. That was the last straw for his patience. Now he was avoiding them at all costs.

After a few more corners, Avin finally reached his destination—Dock Two. He had been coming here every day since they moved onto the ship. He never got the courage to try and go in, and he was sure Gerard made sure no one was able to get in anyway, so he just sat on the floor with his back against the door. Today was no different. At least till Shaya showed up.

Avin was expecting her to nag him for being there, but she just sat next to him. For a few minutes, no one said anything.

“What are you doing here?” Avin finally asked.

Shaya shrugged.

“Thought you might use the company. You sit here all by yourself every day.”

Avin's eyes widened.

“How do you know that? Have you been following me?”

“No.” Shaya shook her head. “But I have been keeping a close eye on the dock. We don't really want anyone venturing in.”

Avin nodded. He should have expected that.

“You need to let her go, Avin,” Shaya said quietly. “She's gone.”

Avin started shaking his head—back and forth, back and forth.

“I can't! I can't! She is my little baby, I can't let her go.”

“Yeah, but not only yours.”

Avin blinked a few times, not understanding.

“She was Gerard’s too,” Shaya continued. “You and Helly meant everything to him, and now, not only has he lost his daughter, but his husband too. Do you realize how much it hurts him to see you like this?”

Avin’s breathing accelerated.

“It’s not like that. He is not losing a husband.” Shaya looked at him questioningly as he continued. “Gerard and I... we have always been friends. Yes, with some benefits, but just friends. We only got married because of Helly. But for him, I always have been just a friend. Someone he needs to look after. He never cared... that way.”

Avin realized he was rambling, so he just stopped. Shaya kept giving him that same questioning look.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am sure, Shaya. Why else wouldn’t he say anything about our marriage? Why didn’t he decline to give me a divorce?”

“Maybe because you haven’t said anything either. Maybe because he doesn’t want to ruin your marriage with Akond. Maybe because he thinks that will make you happy again.”

“Akond loves me.”

“Does he?” Shaya said calmly.

“Of course! We will get married as soon as we reach safety and you remove my tattoo.”

“Then why haven’t you even told him about the tattoo and Helly? Are you ashamed of her?”

“That’s not it! It’s just...” Avin covered his face with his palms.

“It’s just...?” Shaya continued mercilessly.

Avin lifted his face to look at her and just shook his head, unable to answer.

“It doesn’t matter, Shaya. Akond wouldn’t understand. Gerard doesn’t understand either,” he finally said after a couple of minutes.

“I think the problem is that you do not understand, Avin.”

Shaya activated her communicator and pushed a few things. Avin’s own communication bracelet rang with an incoming file.

“Maybe you need to watch this. Maybe it will make you understand things better,” Shaya said, and left before he even had the time to ask what she was talking about.

Avin curiously opened the file. It was a video recording from one of the cameras in the medical center. His guts churned.

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*Five months earlier*

Avin lay on the couch unmoving. On the couch to his right was Helly. Gerard was sitting on a chair in between them. He looked like a ghost—pale, scared, his clothes wrinkled and his dark hair loose from its usual ponytail. His eyes were darting in between the two beds.

“Hey. I brought you something to eat.”

“Thank you, Shaya. I don’t think I’m hungry.” Gerard shook his head.

“You need to eat. You haven’t eaten or slept for days. You will pass out from exhaustion,” Shaya insisted.

Gerard accepted the food, but his mind was obviously not on it.

“How are they doing?” he asked.

Shaya shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Gerard, I don’t know. I still can’t identify the virus that is causing this or how to stop it. I can’t even tell why some people survive and others don’t.”

Shaya was on the verge of tears. The fact she couldn’t help her patients obviously bothered her.

“How many are sick?” Gerard asked and mindlessly took a bite from the food.

Shaya bit her lip. The numbers were scary.

“Around eighty percent of all the people on the ship have been infected. Roughly one-third survived.”

“Only one-third?” Gerard rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Approximately, yes. And they... they are not good either. All of them are suffering from severe depression. Some are suicidal even. I try to help them, but we do not have the space or the staff to keep them all here.” Shaya’s entire

crew had been infected. Not many of them made it, but those who did were trying their best to help.

“Oh, stars.” Gerard pushed his half-eaten meal aside and put his face in his palms for a minute. Then suddenly he lifted his head and asked, “Why, Shaya? Why I am here and still healthy and the two of them are lying there?”

Shaya shook her head. She had no answer for him.

At this moment, Helly’s bed started beeping. Shaya was there in an instant. Some of her surviving crew joined her. Gerard jumped to his feet but tried to stay out of their way. His face was frozen in fear. Shaya was giving orders for meds to be given and things to be done, but it was obvious that the girl was not breathing.

It was like the universe stood still. Gerard stood there, hugging himself and shaking in silent cries. After half an hour Shaya finally gave up.

“Gerard, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Gerard didn’t say a word. He just sat on the bed next to his daughter’s still little body. Tears rolled down his cheeks, but he didn’t bother to wipe them.

Hours passed, but Gerard still sat there. Eventually he ran out of tears, but he still didn’t move. Shaya came again and gently laid a hand on his shoulder. After a few minutes Gerard finally lifted his head and looked at her. He repeated his question from earlier.

“Why, Shaya? Why?” his voice was hoarse with pain.

Shaya swallowed her tears. She knew that nothing she could possibly say would make things better, so she didn’t say anything. They remained quiet for a few minutes, but finally Shaya said, “Gerard...” she licked her lips nervously. “We need to put her in a pod.”

At first Gerard looked at her, not understanding. Then he remembered the rules. There was a safe pod for every person on this ship, and a few extra. Whenever someone died from disease, his or her body was to be sealed in a safe pod. The pods were hermetically sealed so putting the body in was, in theory, supposed to limit the chances of contamination. Helly was to be put in one of these pods.

Gerard wouldn’t let anyone touch the body. They brought in a pod and he very gently laid her in. He gently kissed her head before sealing her in. He was getting ready to help carry the pod out when Avin’s bed started beeping too. Shaya rushed to him but luckily the beeping stopped.

“Shaya, what’s going on?” Gerard asked.

“His heart went out of rhythm for a few seconds, but he’s stable now.”

Gerard swallowed and nodded. He moved his chair next to Avin’s bed and took his hand. Shaya left him alone.

“Please, universe, don’t take him too. Please, not him too.” Gerard’s entire body shook with desperate cries while he clung to Avin’s unmoving hand.

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## Chapter Fifteen

Gerard knew he was being watched but didn't care. He just kept hitting and hitting. He had missed his fighting sessions with his robot. Some of the passengers who didn't know him were amazed by his strength. Gerard knew that some of the more enthusiastic passengers had experimented training with the robot but had little to no luck, as it was built especially for him and his human strength. He briefly wondered how Akond hadn't noticed that fact after he'd watched Fozan try sparring against the robot and getting smashed. At least for now, his brother had given up on the idea of finding the rest of the safe pods for the ship. Gerard suspected Akond preferred to keep himself busy with Ksita Vix instead. That sneaky, treacherous woman and his brother suited each other.

Long ago, while they were still both in the academy, Gerard and Ksita had been a couple. He even asked her to marry him. Her words, that he had been fun as a boyfriend but being a half-blood made him unsuitable as a husband, still stung. Just the thought of it made Gerard hit the robot harder. Ksita started working with Akond not long after that. He suspected that they were also sleeping together. Gerard briefly wondered if Avin suspected that too. But that got him distracted, and suddenly he got a blow to the stomach from his fighting robot.

"You okay?" he heard a worried voice ask him from somewhere behind his back. Just the sound of that voice made him forget everything else. Which resulted in getting another hit in the stomach. Gerard almost heard when Avin flinched behind him, and he decided he'd done enough for the day. Turning the robot off, he turned toward Avin.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" he asked when he noticed Avin wasn't dressed for training.

"I was just passing by." Avin lifted his shoulders. "But you got hit pretty hard. Are you all right?"

Gerard knew that Avin usually "passed by" places when he was hoping to find Akond.

"I'm okay. The hits weren't that strong." Bitterly he added, "And I last saw Akond heading for the bar."

Avin shook his head.

"I know where Akond is. I wasn't looking for him." Gerard looked at him unbelievably.

“I was looking for you,” Avin continued.

This caught Gerard by surprise.

“You were looking for me?”

Avin’s cheeks turned a brighter red as he nodded.

“I was wondering if you would want to hang out.”

Gerard’s heart beat faster. Avin wanted them to hang out? Gerard didn’t know what caused such a sudden change of heart—only a few days ago Avin was barely talking to him and now, suddenly, he wanted them to hang out?

“Why?”

“Because you understand,” Avin answered, staring somewhere at the empty space behind Gerard.

Gerard looked into his husband’s big blue eyes. Once they shined with joy and innocence, now the only thing he could find in them was grief. And Gerard understood that grief.

“Give me a few to clean up and then we can go take a walk in the gardens, if you want.”

“That sounds great.” Avin nodded.

A few minutes later, the two of them were walking on a path well known to them in the fruit garden. For quite some time, no one said anything. Gerard had been secretly watching Avin over the past few months and took note of all the changes that happened to him. Gone was the vibrant, happy boy from ten years ago; gone was the proud parent from the past three years. What was left was a young man who rarely smiled, with the same unruly blond hair as before but with new nervous movements of his hands. Gerard wanted to cradle him to his chest and hold him there till the stars returned in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Avin blurted out.

Gerard was confused. “Sorry about what?”

“Everything—ignoring you, being angry with you, forgetting I’m not the only one who lost her...” Avin choked and tried to swallow his tears.

Gerard reacted on instinct by putting his arms around Avin and hugging him gently. Avin nestled against his chest and cried.

*Four months earlier*

Gerard hated the silence. The whole ship was unnaturally quiet and that unnerved him. When he got home to his cabin, things were worse. There was no happy girl's voice to chirp at him there, no laughter, no games. But Gerard didn't only miss his daughter, he was also worried to death about Avin.

Ever since he awoke from the sickness and found out Helly hadn't made it, Avin hadn't said a word. He mostly just sat in a chair and stared at the wall. Gerard tried everything to get him to talk to him, but Avin had been completely irresponsible.

In the meantime, the epidemic was slowly coming to an end. Every single person on the ship had fallen sick. Shaya's estimation had been correct: thirty percent survived. All of them adults, not a single child lived through it. Alog and Raiza were both gone too. The loss was great. Sadness and depression had settled over the ship. And silence.

After visiting the medical center to talk with Shaya and get some meds for Avin, Gerard headed for the mess hall. A new problem has arisen. All the survivors were suffering a severe hormonal imbalance, which resulted in depression. The fact most of them had lost loved ones didn't make it easier for them to handle. Lately, there had been a wave of suicide attempts. Unfortunately, some of them had been successful. Only a few hours ago, Gerard had to put Alog's wife's body in a safe pod next to him and their son. Shaya was worried and instructed him to keep a close eye on Avin. Not that he needed the reminder.

The mess hall was almost empty. Only a few people occupied tables, and most of them seemed too uncomfortable to meet his eyes. Gerard had the feeling they were all blaming him for not getting sick. As each of his crew members fell ill, as he watched them die, one by one, Gerard remained healthy. And that made him feel even worse. Gerard felt like a coward for doing it, but he grabbed some food for himself and Avin and left the mess hall as fast as he could.

When he got back to his quarters, Gerard was surprised to find Avin not at his usual spot in the recliner. Dread clutched at his heart. He dropped the tray at the counter and went to search for his husband. First he checked in the bedroom, but Avin wasn't there. He wasn't in the bathroom either. The last place left to check was the one Gerard feared the most—Helly's room. Avin lay curled into a ball on the floor. Terror made Gerard's heart beat so hard, he had

the feeling it would explode. In a second, he was on his knees next to his husband.

“Avin! Avin! Do you hear me? Avin!”

Gerard checked for a heartbeat and was relieved to find it. But something was wrong. Avin was unconscious and his lips were a strange green color. Gerard reached for his communication bracelet. Shaya answered on the second ring.

“Gerard...”

Before she had the time to continue, Gerard interrupted her.

“Come right now! Something is wrong with Avin.”

Shaya didn’t bother answering but Gerard could tell she took off immediately.

For the next couple of hours, Gerard felt as if he was sliding back into hell. Avin had taken all the meds Shaya had prescribed him. It took her two hours to cleanse his body of them and declare him out of danger.

“So he is gonna be all right?” Gerard just needed the reassurance.

“He is going to recover. No permanent damage was caused. Luckily, you found him in time.” Shaya nodded.

Gerard massaged his temples.

“What do I do, Shaya? What do I do?” He bit his lower lip. “Avin is sad and lost and I don’t seem to be able to help him. The whole ship is counting on me and I can’t even help my own husband. Everybody is looking at me like I’m some kind of a freak for not getting sick, but they also count on me to get them home. And Avin... Avin looks at me like it’s my fault. And maybe... Maybe it is, but there is nothing I can do about it.”

“It’s not your fault, Gerard. You had no way to know there was a virus on that planet. If anything, it’s my fault for not detecting it. And it’s absolutely not your fault that you were born half-human.”

“You think I didn’t get sick because of my human genetics?”

Shaya lifted her shoulders.

“It’s the only thing that makes you a little different than the rest of us. I am still doing some research and tests, but for now that is my best guess.”

Gerard took a deep breath.

“Can I stay with Avin?”

“Absolutely. He is sleeping now and he needs rest. You do too. The bed next to his is free, try to get some sleep.”

With that, Shaya showed him where Avin was and left him alone. Once again Gerard sat next to his husband’s bed and held his hand. Hot tears finally fell from his eyes.

“Don’t leave me, Avin. I can’t make it without you. Please, don’t leave me. I promise I will do anything to make you happy again. I promise.”

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## Chapter Sixteen

The bar was full. Avin had no idea why he agreed to have the party there, but Akond and his family had insisted that after missing a few of his previous birthdays, they should make this one count. The bar has been Akond's idea. No one bothered to listen when he insisted he preferred a small gathering of only family and friends. Avin was relieved that at least Gerard and Shaya would be attending too. Since their talk in the gardens, he and Gerard had slowly started to rebuild their friendship. They avoided any hard topics, but at least they were talking again. It wasn't easy, things were a bit awkward, but their current situation gave them some safe topics to discuss. Lately, the command staff had been worrying over the fact they had not detected any traces of the transport ship that was supposed to pass close by. The distance between them was big but, if anything, at least the radar system of the ship was working at full potential without needing a key. They should have found at least some traces of it by now.

But at the moment Avin had other things to worry about. While crying on Gerard's shoulder, he'd noticed that his sense of smell was heightened. At first he just noted it as odd and didn't pay much attention to it. Until his skin started to feel more sensitive, too. That's when Avin realized that he was going into heat again. The thought terrified him. The timing was terrible. And the party didn't make things any better. The heat was fully started now, and just the sight of the crowd in the bar was making him nauseous. Akond had grabbed a firm hold of his arm and was dragging him around to greet various people, before eventually taking a seat at a table. Avin had no idea how or why, but Gerard and Shaya were sitting with them.

"So, guys, have you bought the wedding gifts already?" Ksita asked from across the table.

"Not yet. We were planning to but then all that mess happened. But we will order them once we reach safety. The firestones were just perfect." Akond grinned.

Avin took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second.

"No, they were not."

"Oh, come on, babe. Of course they are perfect."

Before Avin had the time to answer, Gerard interfered.

“Akond, you really need to listen more to your fiancé. If he says he doesn’t like the firestones, choose something else. Something you both like.”

“Oh, Gerard, leave Akond alone. He knows what he is doing. Firestones are great for wedding gifts,” Ksita interfered again.

Avin noticed how she put her hand on Gerard’s shoulder, who was sitting on her right. He stiffened at the touch. Avin made a mental note to ask Gerard about her whenever possible.

“They are obviously not that great to Avin if he doesn’t like them,” Gerard contradicted her.

“But they are so beautiful. We got them, too.” Aon looked fondly at his husband while showing them his star-shaped brooch with a big firestone. “I like your brooch by the way, is it a wedding gift?”

Gerard looked at his own star-shaped brooch with black crystal.

“No, it’s not. It’s just a trinket I like,” he answered.

“Goes with the ring, I see.” Ksita smiled. “They are pretty.”

Avin watched the scene with wide eyes. Ksita was flirting with Gerard. And Avin couldn’t decide who was more surprised by that—him or Gerard.

“Thank you.” Gerard nodded.

Ksita gave him another smile. Avin’s breathing deepened. The heat was making him itchy and restless. Sitting with so many people around him, especially Ksita, made him even more nervous. He wanted to throw something. Avin took a sip of the drink in front of him, not even caring what it was. His heart was thundering in his chest.

“Are those smoke stones, brother?” There was no mistaking the mock in Akond’s voice. Avin wondered again what his problem with Gerard was.

“No, they are just black crystals.” Gerard lifted his eyebrow. “We both know I’m not like you and can’t afford big flashy stones.”

Gerard’s tone was nonchalant, but Avin noticed how the fingers on his right hand twitched. They’d been married for three years, but it wasn’t until that moment that he realized that he knew nothing about Gerard’s finances. On the ship, starlets weren’t needed unless you wanted to order any luxuries from the stations.

“But big sparkling stones are beautiful and are well suited for wedding gifts.”

Avin looked at Akond. How had he never before noticed how spiteful his fiancé was?

“According to you, brother, everything big and flashy is beautiful.” Gerard shrugged.

“You should see the bracelet with the ring I have chosen for us with Avin. It’s amazing.”

Avin decided he had had enough.

“Yes, that’s the problem, isn’t it? You choose it. You want to go to Merinda. You want me to quit my job. You, you, you... It’s all about you. You have never cared about me, never cared about what I want, or about how I felt!”

“Oh, come on, Avin.” Akond put his hand on Avin’s shoulder. “Calm down, don’t spoil the party. It is your party after all. Once we are married, everything will settle down, you will see.”

Akond smiled while saying that, but there was a hint of annoyance in his tone. Too bad, because Avin had made up his mind.

“No, it’s your party. I never wanted it. You decided to throw it and didn’t even bother asking me. Like with everything else. Well, guess what? I don’t care about this stupid party. And you can find someone else to wear your pretty, flashy stones.”

With that, Avin stood up and turned to leave. His skin was burning from both the anger and the heat and all the smells in the room were making him dizzy. Out of the corner of his eye he still could see Ksita leaning over to Gerard.

“Well, that was entertaining,” he heard her say.

“Akond, you really should know better than to argue with a bearer in heat.” Fozan or Aon, Avin couldn’t tell which one, said.

After that Avin was too far away to hear anything else. He left the bar as fast as he could and headed toward the living quarters. The heat was getting worse and Avin could feel that he would lose control soon. He remembered how, for his first heat, Gerard had given him strawberries. Avin wished for some of those juicy fruits right now. Maybe they would have helped him hold his temper.

*One year earlier*

“Helly, don’t go too far.”

“Strawberries, Daddy. Look, they are pretty.”

Avin laughed at his daughter. She loved when he took her to the greenhouse so they could pick some of the bright red fruit. Ever since Gerard bought the first few plants, the gardeners were supplying them with strawberries on regular intervals. A few days ago when they called to tell them the fruits were ripe, Avin took Helly with him to pick some. She was thrilled. Now she was running ahead of him toward the rows with strawberry plants and insisted she pick her own fruits.

“Hello, sir.” One of the gardeners joined them. “Do you want me to pick the strawberries for you or you will do it yourself?”

“Thank you, Zivan, I will handle it. Helly is extremely excited to get the fruits,” Avin answered. “Princess, wait for me and I will help you get them. We don’t want to crush the plants.”

Helly turned and ran back to him.

“Come on, Daddy. Let’s get the strawberries. Father will make us cakes.”

The gardener laughed.

“We’ll leave you to your task. If you need anything, call me.”

“Thank you.” Avin nodded and took Helly’s hand.

It took them half an hour to collect all the ripened strawberries. Avin could tell that the two-year-old was getting tired. She still had a big strawberry in her hand and wouldn’t give it to him.

“Princess, why do you keep holding that strawberry? Give it to me to put with the rest of them.”

“No! This is the biggest strawberry. It’s for Father.” Helly shook her head.

Avin smiled. Suddenly the girl squealed and ran.

“Father, Father.”

Avin turned to see Gerard kneeling down to greet their daughter.

“Hey, princess.”

“Look, I got you a strawberry.”

But instead of showing her father the fruit, Helly pushed it into his mouth. Avin laughed at Gerard's expression with a mouth full of huge strawberry and red juice dripping down his chin.

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## Chapter Seventeen

“Bearer in heat? What do you mean?” Akond asked.

Gerard looked at Shaya. She seemed as surprised as he was, but she had never seen bearer’s heat. How could he have not noticed Avin was in heat again? He had seen it before. And Akond obviously didn’t know about the heat at all.

“You don’t know?” Fozan was surprised too. “Bearers go into heat every few years or so. This is the only time they can actually get pregnant.”

Akond’s eyes widened.

“And we also become very sensitive and nervous during this time. Not a good idea to piss us off.” Aon almost laughed.

“And you think Avin is in heat now?” Akond asked.

“Absolutely, I know the signs.” Aon nodded. “And it’s not just from today either. He will need to mate and very soon. You better go find him and apologize ’cause you are going to get laid.”

Akond stood up. “That sounds good.” He rubbed his palms together. “See you all later.”

“And, Akond, be careful. If that is his first heat—he is probably scared and nervous,” Aon added.

Akond stopped.

“When is the usual time for the first heat to happen? And how often?”

“First one can happen anywhere in between the age of twenty-five and thirty. Starts a few years after a bearer reaches sexual maturity and repeats every two to four years,” Shaya spoke for the first time that evening.

“And during this heat the bearer can get pregnant, but not any another time?” Akond turned to her.

“Yes, that is the only time a bearer can conceive. The rest of the time a bearer can impregnate a female or another bearer, but can’t get pregnant,” Shaya confirmed.

“Thank you.” Akond nodded and left.

Gerard felt as though he was suffocating. His chest hurt and he had the sour taste of bile in his mouth. He quickly excused himself and stood up to go.

“Oh, come on, Gerard. You can’t go. It’s so early.” Ksita fluttered her eyelashes toward him.

“Not that early, actually. I am planning on going to bed, too. Goodnight, everyone,” Shaya interfered.

Shaya wisely didn’t say anything on the way to their cabins. Gerard closed his door and leaned against it. Avin was in heat. Gerard wondered if Akond had already found him. His mind was telling him to stop torturing himself: his imagination, though, kept supplying him with images of Akond and Avin together. How long would it take for Akond to find out that Avin loved his spine being touched? Would Avin beg him to hurry like he begged Gerard?

With a strangled cry, Gerard pushed himself away from the door. The next thing he knew, something hot and heavy collided with him. Hot lips found his and sweaty hands grappled at his clothes.

“Avin... What are you doing here?”

Avin tore his lips from Gerard’s neck and answered.

“Right now? I think I’m undressing you.” Avin emphasized every word with a small kiss on Gerard’s face or neck. “After that, I’m planning to turn you around and fuck you against the door. And then I’ll make you sit in the recliner while I ride you.”

Gerard moaned loudly. He knew that Avin was overcome by the heat and would probably regret it in the morning, but he couldn’t make himself care. His hands roamed freely on Avin’s already naked body. His clothes fell quickly, and Avin pushed him to turn around.

Gerard was surprised when he felt slick hot fingers preparing him. He’d thought that Avin would be too far-gone into the heat to remember. It still hurt when his husband pushed inside him, but he welcomed the pain. It made him feel alive again and he moaned loudly. With palms against the door, Gerard braced himself. The heat had taken full control over Avin and each thrust was fast and deep. The pleasure was building fast. Avin’s breath was erratic in his ear, and Gerard could tell he was close to climax. Gerard tried to get a hold of his own arousal but his husband grabbed his hand.

“No, not yet,” Avin managed to croak. “Later. I promise I will take care of you, but not yet.”

Gerard whined in protest but didn't try again. Avin bit at his shoulder when the pleasure overtook him and Gerard felt him spasming inside him, while he was still desperate for release.

For a few seconds, Avin remained still with his forehead against Gerard's neck. Then, surprisingly gently, he pulled out of him and guided him to the recliner by his arm. When sitting there he could very well feel the leftover soreness, but didn't have time to dwell on the feeling as Avin climbed onto his lap. The slide in was fast and easy, the heat making any preparations unnecessary. Avin made that sweet moan that he always did when Gerard was pushing inside him. It drove him crazy with need.

"Do you love me? Tell me that you love me," Avin asked breathlessly.

"You know I love you. I always have," Gerard rasped.

Avin's arousal hadn't wavered, and with a happy sigh, he started moving. The need was too great for them to hold back or go slow. Their movements were frantic, lips clashing, hands caressing, roaming, even clawing at each other's body. It was too hot, too much. With a strangled cry, Gerard stumbled over the edge, which seemed to trigger something in Avin because he followed him almost immediately.

For a few minutes their heavy breathing was the only sound in the room. Gerard held Avin close, never wanting to let go. He knew things would be different in the morning and Avin would most probably regret this night, but that was a problem for later. For now, he was here with him, and nothing else mattered.

"Avin, do you want us to move to the bedroom?" asked Gerard quietly.

"Hmmm..." Avin gently nuzzled his neck. "I was actually thinking the dinner table."

"The dinner table?" Gerard repeated, puzzled.

"Yeah. We have never tried it on the table." Avin pushed himself to sit upright.

"Already?" Gerard laughed.

Avin gave him an embarrassed half smile.

"Table it is." Gerard smiled and kissed his husband again.

*Two years, seven months earlier*

Gerard woke up slowly. By the sound of Avin's breathing, he could tell his husband was still asleep. Gerard loved it when he woke up like this—spooned behind his partner with a hand over his belly. Avin was five months pregnant now, only a month left to the birth, and his belly was swollen quite prominently.

As he was thinking of the baby, Gerard suddenly felt a kick at his palm. Avin obviously felt it, too, as he moved a bit, but didn't seem to wake up. Careful to not disturb him, Gerard shifted so his face was close to the baby bump.

"Hey, there, little one. Don't kick Daddy. Daddy needs to sleep," he whispered gently.

For a few minutes Gerard just laid there, gently caressing his husband's belly. The baby seemed to have heard him because she didn't kick again.

"She really listens to you," Avin said suddenly.

Gerard jerked with surprise. He hadn't noticed that Avin had awoken, but the blond man was now looking at him with a smile on his face. Gerard smiled too.

"She is a good girl and knows she needs to listen to her parents." Gerard moved back to lie down next to his husband.

Avin turned around to face him.

"I already can't wait to see her, you know," he said.

Gerard laughed.

"Already? Avin, you've not been able to wait to see her since you found out you were pregnant with her."

Avin laughed too.

"True. That, and she is a bit of a kicker. Sometimes I have the feeling she is set on bruising all my insides."

Gerard gently rubbed the side of his belly again.

"You are doing great. Only a month left."

With a happy smile, Avin moved in and gave Gerard a peck on the lips.

Gerard turned and checked the time.

“I still have about two hours till my shift starts. Anything specific you want to do in that time?” he said.

“I’m open for suggestions. What do you have in mind?”

Gerard was waiting just for that. In seconds he had Avin on his back and was bathing him in kisses, slowly going down.

“Gerard...” Avin rasped.

“Ahammm...” was Gerard’s only answer in between kisses, while taking off Avin’s pajama pants.

“I like your idea.”

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## Chapter Eighteen

Avin was tired. He had no idea what woke him up. His eyes were still heavy with sleep, but he tried to find out what jarred him. Gerard was awake too and was gazing at him with a strange look in his eyes.

“Morning,” Avin mumbled.

“Morning.”

The strange tone in Gerard’s voice had Avin almost completely awake... and worried. Had he overstepped his limits the previous night?

“Are you okay?” he asked tentatively.

Gerard’s eyes widened with surprise. “Yeah, I’m absolutely fine. How are you?”

Avin nodded. “I could use some sleep.” He looked around, confused. “What’s that noise?” Judging by Gerard’s jaw, Avin could tell his husband was tense over something.

“I believe it’s your communicator. It has been ringing for quite a while.”

“Oh, right. Sorry. I will go pick it up.”

Avin stumbled off the bed and headed for the living room to pick up his communication bracelet. Gerard got up too and Avin saw him disappear into the bathroom.

Avin grumbled when he saw who was calling. He answered anyway.

“Where, the stars, have you been?” Akond shouted at him.

“Before you woke me up, I was sleeping. And morning to you too.” Avin really wasn’t in the mood to deal with him right now.

“I have been looking for you the whole night.”

“You should have found something better to do,” Avin answered sarcastically.

“Where are you? I’m coming.”

Avin took a look around. With a soft smile he answered.

“I’m where I’m supposed to be. And you don’t need to come. I’m going back to bed.”

“No, you need to come to me. I know you are probably scared but we need to meet up immediately,” Akond insisted.

“Scared? About what?” Avin was completely surprised.

“That whole first heat and everything. But we can take care of that, you don’t have to be scared.”

Avin laughed.

“Akond, I’m not scared at all. My first heat was three years ago. I wonder where you were during it. Oh, I remember—you were so busy on your ship you decided our wedding should wait. Again. And I also remember that back then I told you to not call me again.”

Avin could tell Akond was shocked, but he didn’t care. There was nothing more he could tell him, so he just ended the call.

At this moment, Gerard came out from the bathroom.

“Who was it?”

“Akond.” Avin shrugged. He couldn’t decide what he wanted more—food or sleep.

“What did he want?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. He was being annoying.” Avin dismissed it. “What would you prefer—we go back to bed or we go have some breakfast first?”

Gerard’s eyebrows went up but he didn’t insist to know more.

“Breakfast sounds nice.”

A few minutes later, they were already heading out of the mess hall with some hot food on a tray for them. Suddenly Avin noticed Akond coming in, and not alone, but with Avin’s parents.

“You go. I will join in you in a few,” Avin said to his husband.

Gerard nodded and left with the tray.

“Here you are, baby,” Jelila started. “Where have you been? We were worried about you.”

“Where everyone is supposed to be during the night, Mom. I was in my bed.”

“But Akond was looking for you. He said you were in heat. We searched the whole ship. Then we couldn’t enter your cabin. Even Doctor Kips’ code couldn’t open the door.”

Avin rolled his eyes.

“Doctor Kips is not head of medical staff on this ship, Mom. Of course his code won’t work.”

“Where have you been?” Akond’s voice had an edge to it as he grabbed Avin’s arm.

“That is none of your business, Akond.” Avin jerked free.

“Yes, it is my business. When my fiancé is in heat he is supposed to be with me.”

“When your fiancé is in heat you are also supposed to be there. And when you are not—your fiancé gets himself someone else. And if you are so interested—I was exactly where I was supposed to be—with my husband.”

To prove his words, Avin lifted his left wrist and showed his tattoo. He hadn’t bothered with putting his communicator on before coming to breakfast, so the silver ring was perfectly visible.

“Avin!” Jelila was scandalized.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let’s move this to somewhere more private. We are making a scene.”

Avin looked around but no one in the mess hall seemed that interested in their family drama.

“Nothing really to be moved. I said what I had to say.”

“Oh, no, you are going to explain to me how that happened.” Jelila pointedly looked at his wrist with distaste.

“Very simple actually—I went in heat and Akond was too busy to marry me, so I got someone else, I got pregnant, and then I got married. That’s it.”

“You are pregnant?”

There was no description for the disgust in his mother’s voice. A new wave of pain stabbed Avin in the chest.

“No, I’m not pregnant. I was pregnant three years ago. My daughter died.”

Tears welled in his eyes and the sorrow choked him. Avin turned and ran. He didn’t stop till he entered Gerard’s living room. Their living room.

Gerard had set the tray with the breakfast on the table and was sitting in his recliner. The moment he saw Avin crying, he was next to him. Avin nestled against his chest. Avin really appreciated the fact his husband didn't ask him any questions. He knew he would have to explain to him later, but for now he felt comfortable just having a shoulder to cry on. The morning hadn't started well.

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*Eight months earlier*

Avin woke up with the feeling he had slept too long. A quick look at the time told him that it was really later than his usual wake up hour. Luckily, he wasn't scheduled at work today, but it was strange Helly hadn't woken him already. Usually the first thing she did in the morning was look for her daddy. Avin got up to check. Gerard obviously had been up for a while because his side of the bed was cold.

The scene Avin discovered in their living room was unexpected. Gerard was crawling on the floor on all fours, with Helly on his back.

"Go, go, go!" Helly was shouting.

Gerard tried to move faster while avoiding obstacles like the table, chairs and so on. On the table, Avin noticed there was breakfast.

"Daddyyy."

Helly noticed him standing at the door and almost fell from her father's back to get to him faster. Avin picked her up. He smiled at the sight of the doll in her arms.

"Hey, princess."

Gerard stood up from the floor and came to give him a quick kiss on the temple.

"Hey. How did you sleep? We tried to be quiet and leave you to sleep a bit longer. Sorry if we woke you up," his husband said.

Avin shook his head. "No, you didn't wake me. It was just time for me to get up."

"You want some breakfast?" Gerard asked.

"That would be lovely, thank you."

Avin carried their daughter to the table and sat with her. Gerard sat across from them.

“What do you say, princess—are you hungry?”

“Hungry.” Helly nodded.

Avin looked at his husband’s fond smile.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Yeah, I did. At least till that little devil woke me up.” Gerard laughed. “But you looked tired after your shift last night so we decided to make you breakfast and leave you to sleep. Didn’t we, princess?”

Helly lifted her eyes from where she was trying to feed her doll and squealed.

“Yes, Daddy, we made you breakfast. Father let me put things in the pancakes. And then he was my horsey.”

“Great, princess. How about we eat the pancakes now, hm?” Avin smiled and offered her a bite of pancake.

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## Chapter Nineteen

Avin eventually calmed down. Gerard had no idea what caused the tears, but he wouldn't push Avin to share. In his post-heat condition, that sounded like the best tactic to not make things worse.

Breakfast was mostly quiet. Gerard noticed how Avin was fighting his yawns, so after they ate, he gently steered him toward the bed. He was fast asleep the moment he settled over Gerard's chest.

The current turn of events was confusing Gerard. Avin was supposed to get married to Akond, but came to him for his heat. The previous night, Gerard assumed, was a result of Avin getting so angry with his fiancé. Gerard thought Avin would regret it in the morning, but he hadn't seen any signs of regret. He wondered what Avin said to Akond in the mess hall earlier. This time, his brother knew about the heat and was probably pissed off. Gerard hoped Akond wasn't the one who made Avin cry, because he wasn't sure he would be able to hold his temper any longer.

Gerard was tired. And not because of the lack of sleep, but because everything was just too much—the epidemic, Helly's death, Avin's decision to end their marriage and marry Akond instead, the return here. It all piled up on him and made him wish for a place where he could go to mourn in peace and quiet. But for now he settled down to just sleep with his husband. One last time.

Gerard was woken up by the sound of an alarm. The emergency panel in the living room was flashing yellow. The moment he saw what the screen showed, Gerard swore.

"Avin, get up!" he shouted. "They found us!"

Gerard pushed a few buttons on the panel and sent an emergency summons to the communicators of all his crew. Most of them still weren't cleared to go back on active duty, including Avin, but he had no other choice.

"Who found us?" Avin asked sleepily behind him.

"The pirates. We need to get control of the ship. Like right now."

That sprung Avin into action, his military training kicking in, and in minutes they were both dressed in their uniforms and sprinting toward the command center. When they got there, everything was in disarray. The crew was gathering at the entrance. Avin's father was trying different emergency

codes on the key panel. Zolan, Akond, Ksita, Fozan and Aon surrounded him, urging him to go faster. Chief Yazik was there too, but kept quiet and stood off to the side. He was the first to notice the uniformed crew that stood at the door.

“Rasen, stop trying. You don’t have the code,” Yazik said.

Avin’s father lifted his head, surprised. Then he saw them too. Now everyone looked in their direction with stunned expressions and wide eyes.

“Everyone move to the side. Kneal, get moving.”

The chief was the first to follow his own command. Gerard was already holding his brooch, and now stepped forward to put it in the key panel. When it clicked into place, all the panels lit up. A brief alarm sounded, and in the floor at the center of the room, a big panel started moving to reveal a big hole. In less than a minute, five seats emerged from it with control panels.

“Welcome on board, Captain,” a robotic voice said.

Gerard took the middle seat and started his screen. Avin took his place on his left, but the other three seats remained empty. Jik, Raiza and Alog were dead and Gerard needed to replace them immediately. With so many losses, he wasn’t sure who was supposed to take their places, so the first thing he did was to call up on his screen the diagram of the chain of command.

Once the empty spaces on the command seats were filled, Gerard checked on how all sections were staffed. They had less than the minimum people required for normal functioning of the ship, and that was a problem, but he couldn’t do anything about it, as the passenger ship staff wasn’t prepared to work with military ship equipment.

The whole check only took a couple of minutes but in that time, the pirate ship had closed most of the distance between them and was almost in firing range.

“Try to establish contact,” Gerard ordered. “Reveal the name of the ship.”

On the big screen on the right, an image of their ship appeared. There they could see the cloaking fall. *Dragonwanderer* shined with big letters. Gerard heard everyone in the room gasp in surprise. The ship was a legend in the military fleet. But he had no time to deal with their surprise or questions.

“Sir, they are not answering our communication attempts,” the woman who replaced Jik reported.

“Release the tow,” Gerard ordered to his new head-pilot. “Lift the shields. Weapons at the ready.”

“Tow released.”

“Shields to a hundred percent. All weapons armed and loaded.” Gerard heard Avin saying next to him.

“Do not open fire first. If they start shooting at us, use the lasers at will. Wait for command to use other weapons,” was Gerard’s next order. “Engines?”

“Ion engines fully functional. Light-speed engines possible in fourteen minutes,” the woman sitting next to Avin answered.

Gerard took a deep breath. The *Dragonwanderer* was heading into battle one more time.

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### *Three months earlier*

Avin was recovering slowly. At least physically. He was still in a deep depression and Gerard was extremely worried. He was also completely exhausted. Day and night he was running between the command center, Avin, and every other place he was needed. Thankfully, the suicide attempts had finally stopped, but Shaya informed him that the survivors needed rest and couldn’t return to their duties yet. Gerard was left alone to navigate the ship back to Delta Seven. They were going to be in contact range in a couple of days, and he had a final decision to make. The bodies of all the deceased were stored in safe pods in Dock Two. Gerard had to decide how to destroy them. They were infected and he couldn’t bring them to Delta Seven, so he had to make the choice before they reached the station. With Avin being the only member of the command staff to survive, Gerard had decided it would be best if he discussed the situation only with Shaya.

He found her in the back room of the medical center.

“Hey. What’s going on?” Shaya greeted him.

“Hello to you too.” Gerard nodded. “You have some time? I wanted to discuss something with you.”

“Yeah, sure. Take a seat.” Shaya nodded toward an empty chair. “What is it?”

“I wanted to talk with you about the bodies. We can’t bring them with us to Delta Seven.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve been wondering what you were planning to do.”

“There are two options. First one is to dispose of the bodies in space and use the weapons we have to destroy them. The other one is what protocol says we should do if we are left with less than the minimal crew for normal functioning of the ship—leave the ship and set it to self-destruct.”

Shaya nodded again at his words.

“And what are you planning to do?”

“I don’t know. We have a couple of days till we are in communication range with Delta Seven. Whatever I do, I have to do it before then.”

“Do you think you can destroy the bodies with the weapons we have?” Shaya asked.

Gerard lifted his shoulders.

“I don’t know. I can work with them and use them against big targets, but against so many little ones? I don’t know. I’m not a weapons expert. Avin could do it, but he won’t. On the other hand, this ship is one of a kind. Can’t even imagine what the command will do if we destroy it.”

Shaya shook her head. The decision wasn’t an easy one, and Gerard could tell she didn’t know the right answer, either.

Ultimately, Gerard decided to follow the protocol. The next day he gave an order to everyone to pack their personal belongings. The cargo shuttle was big enough to accommodate them all. It was going to be a bit tight, but better than splitting the crew into two shuttles.

The hardest obstacle, Gerard discovered after announcing his decision, turned out to be his own husband. When he heard about leaving the ship, Avin finally started talking again.

“No! Absolutely not! I’m not abandoning my baby!” he shouted.

“Avin, she is gone. There is nothing you can do for her.” Gerard tried to reason with him, but Avin didn’t want to hear any of it.

“NO! You can’t make me. I’m not going anywhere!”

The argument lasted for hours and ended when everyone was already in the shuttle. Gerard just lifted his husband and carried him there. Avin screamed and thrashed and tried hitting him, but Gerard had always been stronger than him and he was not weakened by illness.

Before leaving, Gerard tried to set the self-destruct mechanism, but it required confirmation from at least one of his subcaptains. So instead, he set the auto-navigating system on a course to the closest black hole.

Finally, Gerard took the key of the ship—a black crystal that recorded all information about the flight. It was embedded in a star-shaped brooch. And he said good-bye to the *Dragonwanderer*—his home for the past four years.

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## Chapter Twenty

The first shot didn't come immediately, and Avin wondered why. The pirate ship just stood there for a few minutes and waited, still not answering their communication attempts. Gerard looked stiff. At least the extra time allowed Avin to determine the best targets for his shots.

The shield deflected the pirates' first shot without problem. Avin returned it with one of his own. The pirates obviously had a good shield too, because his lasers did no damage.

In the next few minutes the battle intensified. Gerard was shouting orders left and right, and Avin kept his fingers on the laser weapons. Wailenian ships were mostly known for their agility, but Avin could tell the lack of staff was slowing them down. The pirates were constantly on the move. What Avin found strange was the fact that they always kept to the same side and didn't try to get them in the back. Not that it mattered, he had weapons on the back of the ship, but often that was a preferred tactic in battle. They also tried to come at them from above, but not from below. And they kept them under constant fire. The shields were slowly declining.

"Shields at sixty percent."

"Can you get a good enough hold of them to fire a proton missile?" Gerard asked.

"I can, but their shields are still too good and will deflect it. I can try to use the electromagnetic pulse to try and take them down, but that will only last a couple of seconds."

"So a pulse and a missile right after it?" Gerard asked.

"I can try." Avin nodded.

"Do it."

Avin didn't hesitate. The moment he had a clear shot, the pulse and the missile flew. The whole room exploded in cheers when seconds later the pirate ship blew up. But Avin noticed that Gerard still looked worried.

"What's wrong?" he quietly asked.

Gerard shook his head.

“Probably nothing. I just don’t like how they attacked us only from one side. They never tried to look for weak points in our shield on the other side. And the fact they actually attacked in the first place... We were bigger than them, better armed. The more logical decision would have been for them to avoid us. There was no way for them to know we are understaffed and can’t operate at full capacity. So why did they attack?”

Avin nodded. Gerard had said exactly what he’d been thinking. At that moment, the woman on the communication controls said, “Sir, we have a problem.”

Gerard took a deep breath.

“Let me guess. There is another ship, somewhere below and on the left of us.”

The woman nodded.

“They just turned off their light engines. They are bigger than the first one.”

“What is our condition?”

“Shields at fifty-five percent. Weapons loaded and ready,” Avin reported.

“Ion engines at full power. Estimated time for possible activation of the light-speed engines—eighteen minutes.”

In order to start, the light-speed engines needed a big initial blast of energy. It was produced by the ion engines, but the shields drained a lot. In order to get that energy they had to drop it, but eighteen minutes was too long.

“Can we estimate what weapons they have?”

“Lasers for sure. And the scanner shows high probability for proton missiles,” Avin reported and continued. “Our shield is too low. We can’t afford to be hit by one of those. It will penetrate it.”

Everyone in the room was silent. Gerard was fidgeting with his hands in his lap. Then Avin noticed what he was actually doing—Gerard had taken off his ring.

“Oh, no! You can’t do that. The shield is too low, you will get hurt!”

“You have any better ideas?” Gerard asked him calmly.

Avin swallowed. They couldn’t avoid the battle and were too slow to win it.

Gerard opened a small compartment on the right handle of his seat and inserted the ring there.

“Procedure for direct control initiated,” the robotic voice announced.

Avin watched as metal rings flew out from Gerard’s seat to bind him in place. The first ones were around his wrists, then around his legs, waist, and chest. The last one was over his eyes. Fighting his panic, Avin reached to make a call on his communicator.

“Everything okay, Avin?” were Shaya’s first words.

“No. Gerard is connecting to the ship. Get your team ready, we might need you in the command room.”

Avin barely managed to get the words out. His breath was ragged and he had the feeling his heart would explode with worry.

After that, everything was a blur. With Gerard taking over, he had nothing left to do but watch and worry. The *Dragonwanderer* had its full speed and agility again and attacked the second pirate ship with all its might. It took a few more laser shots, but Gerard successfully managed to avoid a proton missile shot at it. Avin barely noticed any of it, staring at the shield readings. It dropped to thirty percent.

The first thing that told him it was over, was the cheering in the room. Avin turned to Gerard to check and see if he was all right. The metal bands released him and Gerard slumped to the side. His hands flew toward his head and Avin could tell he was in pain. Where, for stars’ sake, was Shaya? Avin got up and gently cradled his husband. Gerard opened his eyes and looked at him.

“Don’t let them in Dock Two,” he rasped.

“Shhh, it’s okay. I won’t let them in there, don’t worry. It’s okay, Shaya is on her way, you will be okay.”

Shaya rushed in with some of her staff at that moment. Avin stepped aside to let her do her job.

“Gerard, do you hear me? Where does it hurt, Gerard?”

“My head. Oh, stars, my head is going to explode, Shaya.”

“We need to get him to the medical center,” Shaya said to her crew. “Now.”

They loaded him onto a stretcher and took him out. Avin tried to follow them but Shaya stopped him at the door.

“You can’t come, Avin.”

“Of course I can, he is my husband,” he insisted.

“Yes, he is. But now you are also the captain of the ship. There is nothing you can help him with, and right now you need to take care of the crew and the passengers.”

Avin stilled. He hadn’t realized it, but with Gerard hurt and Raiza, Jik and Alog dead, he was the highest-ranking officer left.

“I can’t. I can’t do it, Shaya, I’m not Gerard.”

“Yes, you can!” Shaya insisted. “These people now count on you, Avin. Gerard chose you as his weapons expert because he believed you could handle it.”

Avin turned and looked at the people in the command center. He was glad they couldn’t hear what the two of them were talking about. But Shaya was right—he had to make sure they were all safe. Avin took a deep breath and, with one last look at the stretcher taking Gerard away, he turned and stepped back into the command center.

“Shaya!” He turned.

“I will call you when I have any news,” she answered him, and left.

Avin turned again toward the people in the command room. He sat in Gerard’s seat and ignored Akond’s lifted eyebrows.

“Take us back to the *Lunar Star*,” he ordered to the head-pilot on his right. “Take it in tow again and set course to Delta Six. The sooner we drop the ship off, the sooner we can head home.”

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## Chapter Twenty-one

The first few hours passed without incident. With the light-speed engines on, the *Dragonwander* was to reach Delta Six in three days. Shaya called Avin to tell him that Gerard was in a coma and, though he was worried sick, he remained in the command center.

“Hey, Avin.” Akond had returned again. “Where are the safe pods? I still can’t find them and we might need them in case of trouble.”

“They are in Dock Two.”

Avin was surprised by Akond’s behavior after this morning’s scene in the mess hall. He suspected his parents talked with him and instructed him to not question Avin. But it was obvious he was still annoyed.

“Then open it so we can retrieve them.”

“No!” Avin shook his head. “The pods are there for a reason and will remain there.”

“You know I am a higher-ranked officer, don’t you?” Akond scowled.

“You are a higher-ranked officer on your own ship. This is my ship and you are just a passenger,” Avin answered him with ice in his voice.

“What’s wrong with you? You are not acting like yourself.”

“Let me see.” The sarcasm in Avin’s voice was prominent. “First off, my husband is in a coma in the medical center. Second, I have a ship with a crew and passengers to take care of. Third, I am not eighteen anymore. I grew up. I saw the black hole, Akond, I lost a child. And fourth, you don’t know me at all, you have no idea how I’m supposed to act. So go away.”

The anger on Akond’s face showed that he was ready to argue, but at this moment Chief Yazik entered the room.

“Captain Azoal, I wish to speak with you in the conference room,” he said, and went out again.

With one more look in Akond’s direction, Avin left the command center, wondering what Chief Yazik wanted.

It turned out he wanted Avin to report what had led them to abandoning the *Dragonwanderer*. Chief Yazik said he had originally planned to listen to the

reports when they got back to Wailea, but as they were here now, he wanted to be aware of the current condition of the ship and staff. Avin made his report and was dismissed.

When he got back to the command room, Avin was glad to notice Akond gone. His crew was watching him warily, but Avin also noticed some new respect in their eyes. That surprised him a bit because he had never been the most respected among the command staff. A ship usually had only one, and very rarely two, weapons experts. That automatically gave him rank of a subcaptain without having to climb the same chain of command as the others. The rank was mostly complimentary, and it was extremely rare for a weapons expert to take command of a ship when the captain was unable to perform his duties. Avin surely never expected it to happen to him.

Suddenly an alarm sounded in the command room.

“Attention! Unauthorized attempt to access Dock Two!” the robotic voice kept repeating the message again and again.

Avin swore and dialed Akond on his communicator.

“Akond, the stars take you, what are you doing?”

“I’m taking the safe pods. Care to open the doors for us?”

“I told you to stay away from them, you idiot. They are all infected.”

Avin’s hands were flying over the captain’s control panel. A picture of the door of Dock Two appeared on the screen on the right. Akond, Ksita, Aon, Fozan, and the captain of the *Lunar Star*, with a few of his crew, were trying to cut the door open with lasers.

“Very funny, Avin. Open the door now.”

Avin didn’t bother answering and shut down the connection. His heartbeat was frantic and he had the feeling he might suffocate. His hands were shaking. Chief Yazik entered the command room, but Avin didn’t pay him any attention.

“Turn off the light engines,” Avin ordered.

When the engines stopped he gave his next order.

“Empty Dock Two.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me. Empty Dock Two into space. We can’t let them get to the bodies,” Avin insisted.

His head-pilot looked at him with worry, but followed the order. A few hundred safe pods flew into space behind them and got stuck on the *Lunar Star*. Avin got up from Gerard's seat and moved to his own.

"Release the tow," was his next command.

The *Lunar Star* stayed behind them with all the bodies still stuck on it. Avin waited till they were at a safe distance and fired two proton missiles. The *Lunar Star* blew.

For a minute, Avin just stared at the screen where the passenger ship had been. Then he covered his face with his palms. His baby was gone. His little sweet Helly was dust in space. He wanted to cry, but he had no time for that.

"Avin!" He could hear Akond's angry shout.

A few seconds later he stormed into the command room. His face was red with rage. The others from the group Avin saw at Dock Two stood at the door, but didn't come in. Avin stood up. His blood felt like ice in his veins, and a cold calmness settled over his heart.

"What did you do! You... You... idiot! We needed the damn save pods! What if something happens and we need to leave the ship? What if..."

Akond was so angry that he could hardly formulate a coherent sentence, but Avin got the feeling his anger had little to do with the save pods and everything to do with his marriage.

"I'm being an idiot? I told you that the pods are holding an infection, and you still tried to get to them. Did you even hear me? Are you so angry with me that you actually lost your mind? I get that you are pissed off at me for marrying your brother, but that sure as hell doesn't give you the right to endanger the whole ship just to get back at me! Stars damn you!"

"Y-You..." Akond was stuttering with anger, and Avin silently asked himself what he ever saw in the man. "You have no idea what you're talking about, you spoiled little brat. You think that just because you are a bearer you get to do whatever you want?"

Avin's jaw almost dropped with surprise. It wasn't the fact that Akond called him "spoiled," he knew he was. But coming from Akond? Avin felt a hysterical desire to laugh. He got ready to answer him, but to his surprise another voice answered instead.

"Kneal! In the conference room right now! And the others with you!" Chief Yazik ordered.

Avin had forgotten he was there, but was thankful for his interference. He wasn't in the mood to deal with Akond anymore.

"Start the light-speed engines again," he ordered, once he managed to calm a bit.

For a few minutes Avin enjoyed the quietness in the command room. Everyone was doing their job and didn't speak much. Avin guessed they all were exhausted. He set the autopilot. He had sent the new communications expert to rest right after the battle, and now she returned to take over the night shift. Avin sent the rest of the crew to rest too, and he himself left the command room. He called Shaya.

"Hey, Shaya. Where are you?"

"At the mess hall, getting something for dinner," she answered him. "Want me to get something for you, too?"

"That would be nice, thank you. I am heading to the medical center to see Gerard."

"Okay, will meet you there in a few." Shaya cut the connection off.

When Avin arrived at the medical center, he saw that his and Akond's parents were there. That surprised him to no end. Then he noticed Doctor Kips doing something to Gerard.

"Hey! What are you doing? Leave him alone."

"Avin, leave him. He is just taking some blood for the tattoo removal." Jelila said.

"What? No! Absolutely not! No one is removing our tattoos." Avin was pissed off. His parents were still trying to dictate his life.

"Don't be ridiculous, Avin! Of course we are removing them. You are to get married to Akond."

"No, I'm not! Stop trying to tell me what to do. I'm not your doll, I'm an adult and I can make my own decisions."

Larea opened her mouth to say something but at that moment Shaya came in with a tray of food. Her yellow eyes widened at the sight before her.

"May I know what's going on here?"

"Nothing of your concern, Doctor Amdahl." Larea answered her coldly. "We are getting Avin's tattoo removed."

“Oh, and who gave you the right for that? Because I heard him say he doesn’t want it removed.”

“You know the rules for bearers, doctor.” Doctor Kips interfered. “If a bearer gets married to someone who is not their arranged fiancé, the mentioned fiancé has the right to ask for the cancellation of the marriage.”

Avin’s chest tightened. They were going to force him to marry Akond.

“Only if that same fiancé is a better match genetically. Can you prove Akond is a better match?”

“Oh, don’t be stupid,” Jelila answered. “Akond passed the matching test.”

Shaya nodded.

“Indeed, he passed. I have even seen it. Want me to show you?” Shaya went to one of the screens on the wall and pushed a few buttons. Avin saw the results of the match test he and Akond had years ago appear on screen. “Eighty percent. As Doctor Kips here can tell you, for a bearer that is barely acceptable.”

“And do you know what the results are with his husband?” Doctor Kips asked.

“Of course I do, I married them. It didn’t matter, as Avin was already pregnant, but I still had to sign their match result in the marriage record.” Shaya pushed a few more buttons.

“Ninety-eight percent?” Avin thought Doctor Kips’ jaw would hit the floor.

“How often do you see that?” Shaya asked him with a smile.

Doctor Kips handed her the tattoo removal tools.

“What are you doing, Doctor?” Jelila almost screamed.

“Personally, I’m planning on going to the mess hall for dinner. Nothing for me to do here. His husband is a perfect match. Such a high percent is extremely rare. Even if they actually want to get divorced, I doubt any doctor will want to do it.”

With that, Doctor Kips left. Jelila, Larea, and their silent husbands followed him, and Avin was finally able to breathe normally again.

“Thank you, Shaya.”

Shaya nodded.

“You are welcome. Now let’s have dinner.”

“How is Gerard?”

“Still the same,” Shaya said after another check on his husband. “I found some interesting things though. I’ll tell you while we eat.”

After a few minutes, Avin grew impatient.

“So what do you think? Is Gerard going to wake up soon?”

“I have no idea. He is in a coma. There is no physical reason for it from what I see, so the only thing we can do is wait.”

“No physical reason? So he is not really hurt?”

“Not much anyway.” Shaya nodded. “The interesting part is that he was actually experiencing the exact same symptoms as the virus.”

Avin’s heart stopped beating.

“Is he sick? After so long?”

“No.” Shaya shook her head. “I found no traces of the virus in his system. But the virus attacks a certain part of the brain. A single gene determines the development of that part, one way or another. When I created my machine for Gerard to connect to the ship, I used that part of the brain as sort of a conduit. In order to be able to do it, he passed a preparation, a stimulation of that part. But the main criteria for being a captain of this ship was that he had that specific gene. Only about thirty percent of the Wailenians have it.”

“Okay, okay, let’s see if I’m following you,” Avin said. “You say that those of us who have the gene were the ones who survived?”

“Yes.” Shaya nodded. “I only checked a few of the survivors’ genetic profiles, but all of them had the gene.”

“And Gerard?”

“He was immune because I’d already stimulated that part of his brain as part of his preparation for the ship. And when he connected to the ship during the battle, he over stimulated it again. That’s why he was experiencing the same symptoms,” Shaya explained.

Avin nodded.

“So it wasn’t his being half-human. It was just that gene.”

“Sort of. Only thirty percent of the Wailenians have that gene as I said, but it’s a lot more common for humans. And Akond does not have it, so I guess Gerard got it from his mother. But he didn’t get sick because he is the captain and because of the preparation he’d gone through for that position.”

Avin bit his lower lip.

“But if I have the gene and Gerard has it, Helly should have had it too.”

“She did. But that part of the brain is the last to develop fully. You know how our bodies work—our brains develop till the age of twenty, and after that we enter sexual maturity. No child, gene or no gene, had a chance of survival. The brain is just not developed enough,” Shaya explained sadly.

Avin spent some time next to Gerard, but eventually Shaya shooed him off to go get some rest. Coming back to their cabin alone made him feel lonely. The remains of their breakfast were still on the table and the bed was still unmade. He was too tired to deal with all that so he just took off his clothes and crashed into bed. Avin settled on Gerard’s pillow. It still had his scent on it. But there was a bump. He lifted his head and checked what was under it. There, hidden, was a small doll. Avin knew it well—he gave it to their daughter for her first birthday. Gerard had kept it. Cradling it to his chest, Avin laid back and wept.

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## Chapter Twenty-two

Waking up was slow. Gerard blinked against the light. His head felt heavy. It took him a few minutes to remember where he was. Then he realized he had no idea where he was or how he got there. The room was definitely unknown, and the big windows with trees outside told Gerard he was definitely not on his ship anymore. His throat felt sore from thirst, so he tried to reach for the water glass on the counter next to his bed. His body felt stiff and was hardly listening to him. Then Gerard noticed what he was wearing. It was a care suit. It was usually put on patients who were bedridden for a longer period of time. Gerard wondered how long he'd slept. But his first goal was to get the water. He almost made it, too, but his stiff fingers couldn't get a good hold of it and the glass fell on the floor.

A hurried noise outside told Gerard someone was coming. Shaya came in running.

“Gerard! Can you hear me?”

Gerard's throat was still too sore, so he just nodded.

“Do you know where you are?” Shaya continued to question him.

Gerard shook his head no.

Then Shaya finally noticed the broken glass on the floor.

“Did you try to get the water?”

Another nod. Gerard hoped that she would finally bring him some water. But instead Shaya just shouted.

“Avin! Come here fast, and bring some water with you.”

Shaya busied herself checking on Gerard. He was surprised to hear that Avin was there, and found himself looking expectantly at the door as his stomach churned nervously.

“What's going on, Shaya? Any change?” Gerard could hear Avin asking, but Shaya was blocking his view.

“Yeah, big one.”

“Is he going to wake up soon?” Avin sounded hopeful. Gerard could also hear the sound of glass being put on something.

“Hmmm... no.” Shaya turned to Avin with a huge smile. “He’s already awake.”

“Oh...”

The next thing Gerard knew was that he was fiercely hugged and a vast amount of blond hair was filling his mouth. He tentatively raised his arms to put them around Avin. Shaya laughed out loud.

“Avin, calm down, you are squishing him. Now where is that water?”

Hesitantly Avin released him and stepped back. Gerard felt a straw being put at his lips but didn’t pay it any attention. He was too busy staring at Avin. His slim, delicate Avin had a belly. A big one. Gerard felt the straw nudge his lips again and instinctively sucked on it. When his throat wasn’t feeling so dry anymore he managed to rasp, “How long...”

“A bit more than five months. I was starting to think you’d miss the birth.”

Avin smiled a brilliant smile. The one Gerard had almost lost hope of ever seeing again. He lifted his hand hesitantly and reached toward Avin. His husband seemed to understand the gesture because he moved closer and gently put Gerard’s hand on his belly. Gerard smiled and felt a warm calm spread over his body before he once again fell asleep.

Over the next few days, Gerard slowly recovered. The first day Shaya got him out of the care suit and he even took a small walk around the house. He finally found out that they were at the lake house. Avin hardly left his side, but with Gerard seated next to a window, Shaya made him take a walk outside. She insisted it was good for the baby and for him to have some exercise. Personally, Gerard thought she just wanted to make Avin leave them alone for a bit. He wasn’t disappointed.

“You have been quiet since you woke up,” Shaya started.

“A lot to think about, I guess.” Gerard nodded.

“How are you feeling? And no, I don’t mean physically, I already know about that.”

“A bit confused I guess. It’s hard, you know. It feels like yesterday Avin came to me in heat and now he is close to giving birth. And I have no idea how I got here. What happened with the crew? And where is the ship? And what about the bodies?”

Shaya nodded. Gerard thought she’d probably expected that.

“The crew got home. Most of them still have families here. The *Dragonwanderer* is on the docks and took some minor repairs. It will be ready to fly again when you are fully recovered. And Avin destroyed the bodies soon after the battle.”

“Avin destroyed the bodies?”

Gerard had thought, if anyone, Shaya would’ve be the one who’d have taken care of that.

“Yeah, Akond tried to get into Dock Two. Avin had to empty the dock in order to stop them. The bodies got stuck on the *Lunar Star*, so he just blew it.”

“He blew the *Lunar Star*?” Gerard smiled. “Okay, I wish I had seen that.”

“You should have seen Akond. He was so pissed off at Avin. I actually couldn’t tell who was pissed off more between the two of them. They didn’t speak to each other till the end of the journey. And the fact you and Avin had gotten married and there was nothing for him to do but accept it? He wouldn’t speak to me either. Such a nice plus.” Shaya laughed.

“What about the hearing for the *Dragonwanderer*?”

“That is over too. The council agreed you had followed the protocol. Now they are waiting for you to recover to assign you a new mission.”

Gerard nodded. It was great news. He loved the lake house, but he still felt like a guest in it and longed to go back to the ship. It was something he was familiar with.

Later that night, Shaya also allowed Gerard to sleep in a normal bed. He got settled in the master bedroom and was glad when he realized Avin was planning to sleep with him. But it seemed like Avin was not in a hurry to get into bed. He was sitting at the edge of the bed and kept fidgeting with his hands.

“Okay, Avin, spill it,” Gerard finally said. “What is bothering you?”

“I... I wanted to give you something. I bought you a gift. Actually, I bought us a gift.”

Gerard lifted his eyebrows. Avin gave him a small package and he tentatively opened it.

“I don’t know if you will like it, but if you don’t we can always get something else.”

Gerard's jaw dropped when he saw what was in the package. Two pendants shaped like crescent moons laid there, each around a galaxy stone

"You know, we have been married for four years now. We never bought wedding gifts back then or had a celebration or anything. But I thought that maybe we should at least have the gifts," Avin kept rambling.

"Did Shaya tell you?" Gerard interrupted him.

"Did she tell me what?" Avin's blue eyes widened in confusion.

"That this is what I would have bought for our wedding gifts if I could've afforded it."

"You would've?" The happiness in Avin's voice proved to Gerard that he actually had no idea this had been Gerard's choice. "No, she never told me. But I saw these years ago and I always thought they were the perfect wedding gift. You like them?"

Gerard smiled.

"Yeah, the perfect wedding gift indeed."

"You going to put one on me?" Avin asked, crawling closer.

Gerard was more than happy to do so. After both pendants took their places, Avin and Gerard finally settled into bed to get some sleep.

"Gerard?" Avin murmured with his head on Gerard's chest.

"Mhmmmm?" Gerard was sleepy.

"I'm sorry."

Avin's words quickly got Gerard to full consciousness.

"For what?"

"For being selfish. We both lost Helly, but I was so overtaken by my own grief, I never even thought of yours. And even then you were still there, still taking care of me, still trying to make me happy. And the only thing I did was hurt you."

"You don't have to be sorry," Gerard started, but a hand sneaked to his mouth and a finger silenced him.

"I do," Avin continued. "I was raised so sheltered that I never knew what pain and grief was. I lived in a dream world where everything was perfect. I thought things would always be like that—perfect husband, perfect kids, perfect

family, perfect life. And I was so lost in that dream, I never noticed that I already had it. I believed Akond was my perfect man, but mostly because I was told so, and when it turned out he wasn't, I decided to settle for whatever I could have. I wanted a perfect husband, but I myself wasn't one."

"Yes, you were. You gave up on the man you loved, but you never ever made me feel like I was just a second choice," Gerard said, but Avin still hadn't finished.

"You weren't. You never have been. Ten years ago, when you got me out of the lake, remember? I wanted you to be the one I was engaged to that day. But you weren't, so I convinced myself Akond was just as good and I would be happy with him. But even then I knew that I wouldn't be. And when the heat came and he said he was busy and couldn't marry me on the date we had settled on? I actually felt relieved. I didn't want to admit it, even to myself but... I didn't want him. When we got Helly and we were a family... I never, even once, thought about Akond or wondered what it would have been like if it were him there with me. Things were perfect the way they were. I guess what I'm trying to say is... I love you."

Tears of happiness welled in Gerard's eyes. He gently lifted his husband's face and kissed him. A slow, tender kiss, but with a promise for love and happiness.

"I love you, too." Gerard gently laid his hand on Avin's belly. "And the little one there."

With a happy sigh Avin settled again on his chest. Gerard finally felt at home.

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## Epilogue

*Three months later*

Gerard and Avin stood holding hands in front of the sapling in their backyard one last time before they were due to leave.

“I think Helly would have loved that tree. And this place,” Avin said.

“Yes, I think she would’ve.” Gerard nodded and looked at his husband. “We will be back.”

“I know,” Avin agreed. “But I still miss her.”

Wailenian tradition held that when someone died, a tree was to be planted in their memory. Avin had chosen for Helly a beautiful moonflower tree. Now they’d come one last time to say good-bye before their next journey.

“I miss her, too,” Gerard said. “She always will be our little princess.”

Avin smiled a sad smile but didn’t say anything.

A few hours later, the *Dragonwanderer* was ready to leave the docks. While Gerard went for his last instructions, Avin headed for the command center. There was their crew—new and old. Avin still hadn’t met his fellow subcaptains, so he decided it was time to introduce himself.

“Hello. I am Avin Azoal,” he said while taking his seat at the weapons control.

“Hello to you, too,” the woman on his left, the new engine expert, said. “Teeze Vlas. Nice meeting you.”

“Yes, Teeze, I know you.” Avin laughed.

Teeze had been the one to fight with him and Gerard against the pirates months ago.

The new pilot subcaptain introduced himself as Wilk Querp. The communications expert was a woman, too—Veya Finnd.

“We were just discussing if the captain would take one of the children on the ship in the command room while we are taking off. For good luck, you know,” Teeze told him.

Avin smiled.

“I know for a fact that he will.”

“Great. A good luck charm at the start of a journey is important,” Veya chirped.

The doors opened and Gerard entered the command center. Everyone stood up to greet him. In his hands was a two-month-old baby. Its black hair immediately made it clear it was his own child.

“Hello, everyone!” Gerard greeted his crew. “Welcome to the *Dragonwanderer*.”

Gerard took his place at the captain’s seat and gave his orders for leaving the dock.

“What is his name, sir?” Teeze asked while they were maneuvering.

“Eos.” Gerard smiled. “Eos Kneal.”

“He is a beautiful boy,” Veya said from the other side.

“He is beautiful, yes. But he is not a boy.” Gerard laughed. “Eos is a bearer.”

At this moment Eos started to cry. The *Dragonwanderer* was safely out of the docks, but no one could hear anything over the baby’s cries.

“I think he is crying for his mother,” Wilk suggested.

“Too bad.” Avin laughed too. “Because he doesn’t have one.”

He reached toward his husband and took the baby from his arms. The moment he settled him against his chest, Eos calmed down.

“Why is he always doing that?” Gerard smiled.

The whole command center laughed. In the meantime, they’d managed to get the *Dragonwanderer* clear of the docks.

“Okay, everyone,” Gerard said. “I hope you are all ready, because it’s time to go.”

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Ever since she learned to read, Destiny has used books as her personal escape from reality. If you ever try to get her attention when she has a new book—well, don't bother, she won't notice you at all. Destiny loves Paranormal, Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Mystery, and Romance books, and craves HEA's. If the main characters happen to be a gay couple—even better. She also enjoys puzzles, Sudoku, real-life escape rooms, or everything else that challenges the mind*

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