



HEAT

**GRABBED
(VICIOUS + HALLIE)**

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HEAT

Rubbing the back of his neck, Vicious eyed his watch with increasing irritation. He had been digging through his inbox for nearly an hour and there was no end in sight. It figured that the day he'd promised Hallie he would cut out of work early would be the day a deluge of time-sensitive paperwork flooded his inbox.

Today was *the* day.

His chest tightened with anticipation. All this time. All that waiting. Finally. *Finally*.

For the last two weeks, Hallie had been secretly – and frankly, illegally – taking fertility medications supplied by Risk. Years of malnutrition had taken their toll on Hallie's body so achieving a successful pregnancy had proven impossible. Even now that she had gained a proper amount of weight and had excellent results on her metabolic panels, her body refused to cooperate and produce an egg for fertilization.

Watching Hallie suffer through their infertility had gutted him. He loved her so much. There was absolutely nothing he wouldn't do for his sweet little mate. A problem solver at heart, he wanted to fix this and to make it possible for her to have the family she so desperately wanted and deserved.

The fertility drugs Hallie needed were highly controlled and available only on Harcos Prime to pureblooded Harcos females matched with pureblooded males. Prescriptions were only provided under the strictest of circumstances and required a three-medic tribunal for approval. Even with Risk's enthusiastic support for their use on Hallie, it had been impossible to even submit an approval request for her.

So Vicious had done what any husband who adored his wife would do. He had called in a favor and broken about seventeen different laws to get his hands on those medications. Pierce had taken a little side trip during an intelligence gathering mission to the main pharmaceutical depot where he had used his tradecraft to get his hands on the required medications. The boxes had been handed over to Hazard who had ferried the vials of precious medication as far as the Colonies. Once there, Dankirk had picked up the package and smuggled it onto the *Valiant*. Orion had invented a reason to push Dankirk through the ship's mandatory cargo and contraband check, and the drugs had been safely delivered to Risk without issue.

It was ridiculous that he'd had to resort to tactics worthy of a Shadow Force op to get his hands on the medications his wife needed – but infertility was such a taboo in their culture. Among the pureblooded families back on Prime, the inability of a woman to conceive was treated like a shameful secret. If the male was proven defective or if a Grabbed female couldn't conceive, it was even worse and often led to a Discard.

Vicious wasn't ashamed of Hallie, and he would throat-punch the next bastard who mentioned the word Discard. Grunting at the very thought of ever giving her up, he swiped his finger across the screen built into his desk to clear away the communique he had just answered. His inbox dinged with the arrival of a new message, and he groaned with frustration.

Swiping his finger up to find the new message, he perked up at the sight of Hallie's name. Noticing it was a vid file, he flicked the message to his private and secure viewing window that was protected from the ship's spying software. As soon as he opened the file, he was glad he had taken that extra step.

The fifteen second video was nothing more than Hallie teasing him by slowly unbuttoning the uniform shirt she was wearing. She knew how much he loved seeing her in his uniform top. The glimpse of her perky breasts and the tantalizing peek of her belly sent a zing of heat straight to his cock. Visions of all the ways he planned to enjoy her lush body had him aching and hard.

And then all hell broke loose.

An unfamiliar alarm sounded. Glancing at the ceiling, he waited for the ship's automated warning system to start shouting at him.

"Catastrophic atmosphere failure impending," the computerized voice calmly announced. "Oxygen venting has commenced."

Vicious shot out of his seat, snatched up his handheld tablet and shoved it into his pocket. He was out of his office in six quick strides and nearly collided with Rampage, his second-in-command. The bull-sized officer shot him a mildly concerned look. "Ten credits says Menace finally blew a damn hole in the hull with one of his weapons tests."

Vicious cracked a smile. "I'd take that action."

The comm on his watch chirped with an incoming message from Orion. Vicious tapped the screen. "You're go for Vicious. What's the status of this alarm? Are we venting or is this a test?"

"It's an alarms system malfunction," Orion replied in a harried voice. "Come up to the bridge. We may have a bigger problem."

Shit.

"On my way." He glanced at Rampage. "Hold the fort."

Leaving his capable second-in-command on the Land Corps deck, he took the elevator to the bridge and entered Orion's command space. It took his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dim lighting. He spotted Orion up on the admiral's perch and took the stairs two at a time to reach him. "Well?"

"We were running routine updates on the ship's systems when the engineers noticed a cloaked program running in the background."

"A virus?" Vicious didn't know much about the ship's internal systems. The software used to run the *Valiant* was outside his purview. He sensed from Orion's tense stance that this was serious.

"Yes." Orion pointed to the large screen on the far wall where a map of the ship was projected. Sectors of the ship were lighting up with red. "The virus is setting off alarms across the ship to keep the techs busy."

"Why?"

“We think it’s searching for weaknesses in the tech shields around our classified vaults. Now that Shadow Force is back on the ship, we’re at risk for these types of software incursions.” Orion motioned for the intelligence officer standing nearby to come closer. He glanced at the report on the tablet presented to him. “The virus is starting to compromise simple ship systems. We’ve lost all power in the mess and the elevators are down. The pharmaceutical boxes have gone to lockdown, and the med bay is running the operating rooms on backup power. The surgery schedule is clear, but if we have any critical patients—”

“Sir,” an engineer interrupted urgently, “we’re losing systems in the engine room.”

“Get Rigel on a private comm now.” Orion stepped into his secured room on the control deck to speak with the ship’s head engineer. Rigel had been plucked from the same orphanage as Torment and sent straight to the Sky Corps academy for training. The *Valiant* was in good hands, but even the best hands could only fix one thing at a time.

When Orion emerged a few minutes later, he stepped closer to Vicious. Lowering his voice, the admiral said, “Rigel and his engineers are telling me that the virus is moving fast through our systems. It’s no longer just poking and prodding at our security. It’s tearing into the most vital systems. Rigel believes a hard shut down and fast reboot of the ship may be the only way to contain and kill this damn thing before the entire ship is compromised.”

Vicious didn’t like the sound of that. They trained and drilled for such an event so he was fully aware of the risks involved. Wondering if this was the setup for a sneak attack, he glanced at Orion. “And if shutting down the ship is exactly what the Splinters want us to do?”

Orion’s expression confirmed that he shared Vicious’s concern. “It’s a risk either way. If we don’t shut down and purge the virus, the ship may enter a catastrophic failure state. My engineers are good, but physics is our master. Without our engines? Without thrust? We’ll be pulled into Calyx’s orbit—and it won’t be pretty. Without atmosphere? We’ll have to eject the life support pods before we all suffocate.”

With a curt nod of understanding, Vicious said, “What are my orders, Admiral?”

Orion laid out the plan, and both senior officers got to work. Their styles couldn’t have been more different. Where Vicious barked at his men, Orion spoke in that cool, collected voice that the Sky Corps men expected. Vicious had refined his commanding voice on the battlefield, shouting over the din and agony of combat, while Orion had perfected his in rooms like this, where the tension was so thick it could have been sliced with a knife.

Standing at their battle stations, both officers monitored the situation. A ship wide bulletin ordered all soldiers and airmen to their battle stations and all civilians to their evacuation points. Vicious allowed himself a moment to worry about Hallie. She was brave and smart and so resilient. If things went sideways, somehow, someday, she would get off this ship and make it to safety.

In rapid fire succession, Orion went around the room and asked each command center whether their sector was secured for shutdown.

“Battle stations?”

“Go.”

“Civilian collection pods?”

“Go.”

“Medical bay?”

“Secured.”

“Personnel pods?”

“Go.”

“Mess?”

“Secured.”

“Weapons stations?”

“Go.”

“Flight?”

“All stations are go for flight.”

Each control sector called out their status until Orion was assured the ship was ready for shut down. “Officers and crew on the bridge – time to strap yourselves in tight. All loose items in locked drawers.”

His chest tightening with apprehension, Vicious dreaded the upcoming shift to weightlessness. If the ship’s systems cycled properly during the restart, gravity would be one of the first systems to return. If not, well, they were going to have bigger problems than air sickness.

Torment appeared on the deck. He nodded at Orion as if to silently inform the admiral that the Shadow Force teams were in place. Stepping next to Vicious, he whispered, “I sent Pierce to Hallie.”

Torment didn't have to say anything more. Vicious understood that his mate had been afforded a level of protection that no other on the ship had. If the worst happened, Pierce would get Hallie off the ship and to the Colonies. "Thank you."

Torment said nothing as he left the deck and disappeared.

Taking control of the ship wide comm, Orion addressed his vessel. "This is your captain speaking. This is not a test. I repeat. This is not a test." He paused. "Prepare for shut down."

His warning given, Orion signaled the waiting engineers. Starting with the gravity projector, they slowly dialed down the core until the effects of the false gravity began to fade. Vicious felt the sensation of weightlessness in his stomach first and then in his chest. His arms began to lift, and he felt his booted feet tugging against the straps securing him to the floor.

Sector by sector, the engineers killed the ship's systems. Four airmen stood at the back of the room. At regular intervals, one of them called out the seconds that had passed since the shutdown cycle started. A second called out the time until the ship's atmosphere reached critical levels. A third called out the time remaining until the *Valiant* drifted into the gravitational pull of the planet Calyx. It was the point of no return, the moment when Orion would be forced to order a complete evacuation of the ship. The fourth airman guided the bridge through the proper steps of the shutdown. Once complete, he would guide them through the power-up steps.

Orion, who hadn't strapped himself in, latched onto the emergency hold bar along the top of his main command panel to keep from floating away. With the other hand, he reached under the collar of his uniform shirt and retrieved a biometrically activated key dangling from a necklace he wore at all time. Vicious exchanged a glance with Orion. They both knew the stakes here.

Orion took one last glance around the control room. "Clear for restart?"

His second-in-command nodded firmly. "Cleared for restart."

Orion held the key between his thumb and forefinger, activating the biometric sensors, and slipped it into the card reader slot on his command panel. A loud alarm screeched six times, giving him a chance to remove the card and stop the process. When the last alarm faded, there was a static pop and then a slowly descending hum as the ship died.

An eerie quiet descended on the ship. The last zip of power fled the system. The entire room plunged into darkness. Arms floating and stomach lurching, Vicious held his breath and waited.

Engineers at their control panels began flipping on their emergency lights. The airman with the restart protocol started calling out orders, first among them for Orion to reactivate the ship. With the card still in place, he flicked a pair of switches and then removed it. With a satisfying hum, the power returned to the command deck. Screens flickered as they powered up, and Vicious exhaled with relief.

Completely weightless and held in place only by the straps on his boots, Vicious ignored the controlled chaos around him and focused solely on the reports coming in from the Land Corps officers serving under him. The bulk of the operation at hand would be carried out by the Sky Corps, but his men would be the ones who led the evacuation, collected the civilians on the planet's surface and defended them.

One by one, the ship systems came back online. Power. Atmosphere. Engines. Communication. Radar. Weapons. Flight.

"What's the status on the gravity projector?" Orion requested another update on the one system that had obviously not come back online.

"Unknown," his second-in-command replied.

"Get Chance on my comm. I want an update from him right now."

"Yes, sir."

Until the gravity returned, Orion couldn't release civilians or non-essential personnel from their evacuation pods. It was simply too dangerous to have people floating through the ship. Once the gravity returned, they would be flung to the floor or hit by unsecured objects.

Thinking of the civilians, Vicious pictured Hallie strapped into her assigned pod. He could just imagine the look of wonder on her face as she experienced weightlessness in a somewhat controlled environment. He hoped that their children inherited her insatiable curiosity and her optimism. Even now, when their plans to make a baby had been scuttled by a Splinter virus, she was probably smiling and doing her best to keep everyone else in her pod calm.

Vicious was pulled from thoughts of his mate by the sound of Orion's voice as he interrogated the engineer about the gravity projector. At the same time, the second-in-command was briefed by Rigel via the open comms on the status of the virus and the ship.

"We have no sign of the virus after the reboot; however..." Rigel's voice cut out and static filled the air.

"Say again?" Orion had wrapped up his communication with Chance. "We lost you, Rigel."

"Zero signs of virus post reboot. Some damage in isolated systems. Intra-ship comms. Elevators. Inbound and outbound messaging." Rigel's voice was clear, but the amount of static in the background was very high. "Suggest issuing orders for confinement to quarters and cutting all non-essential communications."

"I'll take that under advisement." Orion cut the radio traffic. More comfortable in near zero gravity, he pushed off the communication panel he had been holding onto and glided effortlessly through the air. Vicious watched his counterpart with some envy as Orion easily propelled himself across the deck to the Land Corps station. Like a bird landing on a tree limb, Orion came down slowly and said, "I'm going to enact Plan Seven."

"I suspected as much." Vicious recalled the minute details of the plan because he had drilled it into his brain. "I'll have the SRU teams posted and activate the compliance watchmen assigned to each housing floor."

"Gravity returning," an engineer across the bridge called out.

Orion changed his grip on the panel as he prepared for the inevitable pull. Vicious felt the first tug of gravity in his stomach and arms. As the gravity producing core powered to life, the *Valiant* rocked slightly and pitched down. He reached out to steady Orion as the admiral lurched forward.

"Thanks." Orion shifted his stance as the full tug of gravity finally gripped them. Safe on his feet, he rolled his shoulders and sighed. "Now the real work begins..."

He wasn't joking. Getting the ship back into fighting shape was no simple matter. The systems might have rebooted fine, but every single one of them had to be tested and retested. Every single aircraft on the flight deck and in the hangars had to be launched and tested and returned to the ship to ensure the virus wasn't hiding in the onboard software for each craft.

While Orion tried to get the *Valiant* in top shape again, Vicious ordered the SRU and guard posts into place before overseeing the controlled release of civilians and non-essential personnel. He caught a glimpse of Hallie in a live feed. He swallowed the urge to ask the engineer manning the station to follow her movements. She was perfectly safe, and he had his duties to attend.

The duties that were taking him away from his mate and possibly ruining their chances of conceiving the child they both desperately wanted.

Hallie would never bring it up or blame him for today, but he would always know that it was his fault. The one single time in the entire length of their relationship that she had asked him to put her first and work second – and he'd failed her. He'd utterly fucking failed her.

Pushing aside his troubled thoughts, Vicious forced his concentration on the matter at hand. It took two hours to return all the civilians and non-essential personnel to their quarters where they were confined. Only emergency communications were allowed and the elevators were only working in certain areas and with certain access codes.

"V?" Orion called him over to the far side of the control deck. "A word?"

Vicious joined Orion. "Yes?"

"I just remembered that you were supposed to be on leave almost four hours ago."

Orion shot him a meaningful look. "Your special project begins today?"

Vicious nodded. Orion was fully aware of the illegal drugs on his ship and their use on Hallie. He'd also been the first person Vicious informed when the conception dates were set by Risk and he'd needed to arrange his leave.

"Then what the hell are you doing here on this deck?"

Vicious gestured to the din surrounding them. "We've been busy."

"The worst is over. Rampage is perfectly capable of handling the mop up. Get him in here and up to speed and then go. I know where to find you if you're needed – but grab Cipher. You're going to need someone to get you through the sealed doors and into elevators." Orion gripped his shoulder and gave an encouraging squeeze. "Good luck, V."

Fully aware that he was lucky to serve alongside a standup man like Orion, Vicious cracked a smile. "I owe you."

"Rest assured, I'll collect on this favor someday."

"I'm sure you will." Vicious returned to the Land Corps control stations and contacted Rampage who collected Cipher along the way. He made sure Rampage was up to date, signed off on the necessary handover and then split from the control deck with Cipher leading the way.

The unnerving quiet in the hallways sent a strange shiver up his spine. "I've never been on a ship this quiet."

"I have," Cipher replied while hacking the sealed door standing between them and the only elevator in this sector that reached the upper floors of officer housing. "Before I was tasked to Raze's team, I worked with the Shadow Force squad based on the *Indomitable*. One of our aircrafts coming back from a prison transport floated into *Indomitable's* airspace. Other than the silent radar distress beacon, the ship was dead in the sky."

"And?" Vicious followed Cipher through the door he had unlocked. Two seconds later, it slammed closed again and hissed as it sealed tight.

"And we boarded the ship and it was quiet like this," Cipher said, scanning their surroundings. "It was a ghost ship. The lights were dimmed in some areas and totally dark in others. The atmosphere was so thin we had to rely on supplemental air. There were signs that there had been some kind of an event on the ship. Like that," he gestured to the abandoned spilled cup and liquid pooling on the floor.

"But?"

"But all the rescue pods were still docked," he said with a haunted look. "We found every single aircraft accounted for and in the hangar bays." He reached the elevator they needed and glanced up at Vicious. "But you know what we didn't find?"

Vicious shook his head. "What?"

"Bodies."

"What? Not one?"

"Not a single one," Cipher said as he started to hack the elevator. "We combed that ship from top to bottom. We scanned access shafts. We looked at every single second of security footage on that ship. One second, the ship was bustling with activity. The next second? It was a ghost town."

"That's not possible."

Cipher shrugged. "It happened."

“Why have I never heard about this? Surely, this would have been in our daily reports.”

“Technically,” Cipher said as he tapped at his tablet screen, “I just broke about fifty laws telling you about the *Restitution*. It was the last job I worked with Shadow Force before they sent me to Raze.” He typed in a code and the elevator dinged. “Never thought I’d be that happy about a demotion.”

Joining Cipher in the dark elevator lit only by one pale emergency light, he asked, “What do you think happened to the crew of the *Restitution*?”

“Gas,” Cipher said as he programmed the elevator to take them to the private floor where Hallie waited. “One of our sensors picked up on the faint signature of a specific nerve agent in one of the sealed access shafts. I think someone – the Splinters – gassed them and then hacked the security mainframe to destroy the evidence of the attack. I only know that when I started asking questions about the vid evidence that I got my ass busted and sent packing.” Cipher glanced at him as the doors closed. “What does that tell you?”

“That you were asking the wrong questions.”

“I was asking the *right* questions, but the answers were above my pay grade.” He leaned back against the wall of the elevator car and sighed. “That’s the problem with Shadow Force. It twists men up inside. It makes them distrustful of everyone. I couldn’t work on a team like that. I’m better off in SRU here.”

“You’re one of the greatest assets on the *Valiant*. I mean that,” Vicious added when Cipher scoffed. “You’re a one-of-a-kind soldier, and we’re lucky to have you. We couldn’t possibly –”

The elevator shuddered and jerked to a stop, throwing Vicious across the car. He narrowly avoided slamming his face into the metal wall. By the sounds he made, Cipher wasn’t as lucky. The emergency light cut out, and the men were left in total and disorienting darkness.

“You okay?” Vicious asked as he reached down and lifted the flap on his uniform pants to retrieve an emergency light stick.

“I think I broke my nose.” Cipher’s voice sounded different. “Fuck. I’m bleeding everywhere.”

“Hang on.” Vicious snapped the light stick and gave it a shake to activate the chemicals inside. He quickly located the first aid box built into the elevator wall and opened the clear panel to grab it. “Let’s see the damage.”

Head tilted back, Cipher stood still while Vicious examined him. "Is it broken?"

"Yes." Vicious opened the first aid kit and found the necessary supplies. "Let's get your face cleaned up before you choke on all that blood."

A short time later, Vicious had Cipher patched up and knelt down to clean up the blood making the floor slick and dangerous. Cipher used a multi-tasking tool from one of his many pockets to open a hidden panel beneath the elevator control screen. He plugged his tablet into a port there and cursed when codes Vicious could never hope to decipher ran across the screen.

"What is it?" Vicious returned the first aid kit to its slot and began to clean his hands with one of the antiseptic wipes.

"We are totally cut off from the mainframe. I can't even send out a distress call to let anyone know we're stuck in this damn thing. We have no juice and no connection."

Vicious experienced a wave of claustrophobia. Small, confined spaces had always been difficult for him. Facing an unknown amount of time in this one didn't fill him with the warm and fuzzies. "We have to get out of this damn thing."

"The ceiling maybe? There should be an access panel and a way to get out into the shaft. If we're close enough to a set of doors, I might be able to get us out that way..."

They scrounged together more emergency light sticks from the first aid kit and their own pockets first. The stronger and taller of the pair, Vicious hoisted Cipher up toward the ceiling and held him there while the other soldier accessed the roof panel. Using his full strength, he pushed Cipher through the hole left behind when the panel was removed. Cipher climbed out into the darkness. Vicious listened to Cipher's clunky footsteps and the grunting noises the other soldier made. "Well?"

"No go," Cipher said, poking his head through the hole. "I can reach the next set of doors, but the fire suppression seal is engaged. There's no way to bust it open from inside the shaft. It has to be done via hallway access."

"Shit." Vicious exhaled roughly. "I guess we'll have to wait for help."

"Yeah." Cipher disappeared from view. "But I think I can rig up some better lighting at least."

After a few minutes of tinkering, the lights in the elevator flickered. At least they wouldn't be stuck in the dark for the next few hours.

"Coming down," Cipher warned. "Watch your head."

Vicious stepped out of the way as Cipher lowered himself through the hole in the ceiling and dropped down into the elevator car. He wobbled on his feet, and Vicious reached out to steady to the SRU engineer. "You all right?"

"This damn nose," Cipher growled. "It's sore as hell."

"I've broken this one three times," Vicious said, tapping his. "Those jolts of pain are enough to make you want to puke."

"Pretty much," Cipher agreed. He carefully sat on the far side of the elevator and tapped away at his tablet. "It's going to be hours before they find us."

Vicious could hear Cipher's stomach growling and knew exactly why the other man was concerned. Before sitting down, he reached into the thigh pocket on the other side of his uniform pants and fished out one of the carefully wrapped packages tucked away there. "Here. Catch."

Cipher caught the package he tossed. "What's this?"

"Hallie," Vicious said as he slid down to his ass and stretched out his long legs. "Every morning, she slips something special in my pocket while I'm showering."

"I can't take this." Cipher tried to hand it back, but Vicious waved his hand. "It's from your mate. She wanted you to have it."

"If she was here right now, she would be poking me in the ribs until I gave them to you. That's just the way she is."

"I know." Cipher unwrapped the small package. "I saw her visiting some of the wounded airmen in the infirmary when I was in for a med check."

Vicious had never liked the med bay. It made him uncomfortably aware of how quickly his life could change. Hallie, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy volunteering there. She spent a few mornings each week reading to wounded soldiers or helping them compose their messages home. She also brought in baked goods (approved by Risk, of course) and made sure that soldiers and airmen preparing for discharge had care packages waiting in their quarters or on their flights home.

"I think this is for you." Cipher handed over the handwritten note inside the tightly wrapped package of treats.

Vicious leaned over to take it. There was nothing salacious in the note. It was a simple message in her soft, loopy handwriting. He tucked the note away in his pocket. Knowing that

she had put that note into his pocket while anticipating tonight caused a stabbing sensation in his gut.

Dropping his head back against the elevator wall, Vicious closed his eyes and tried to ease the tension headache threatening to erupt at any moment. He silently scolded himself for not paying more attention when Risk explained the way the fertility drugs worked. He didn't know how long they had to make this work. Did he have one hour? Five? Ten? Were the final minutes of their window of conception counting down even now?

"Did you hear that?" Cipher asked in between bites of the thick, sweet cake.

Vicious cracked open one eye. "Hear what?"

Cipher pointed toward the ceiling of the elevator car. "I heard a noise coming from up above us."

"Are you sure?" Vicious held his breath and strained to hear. Just when he was about to tell Cipher he was hearing things, Vicious detected a thump and then a noisy metallic scrape. Pushing to his feet, he stood under the hole in the ceiling and stared up into the shaft. More screeching and creaking sounds echoed above them—and then finally Vicious spotted a bright beam of light. Recoiling from the blinding beam, he protected his face with his forearm.

"General? Cipher?"

"Pierce?" He peered up through the hole in the ceiling and could just make out the familiar profile of the Shadow Force operative.

"Yes, sir. Is Cipher with you?"

"He is."

"I can get you two out of there, but it won't be easy. It'll be a rope climb. Seven floors," he emphasized.

"I don't care if it's fifty floors. I am getting out of this box because I promised Hallie I would be there for her today."

"She said you'd say that," Pierce remarked. "Stand back. I'm dropping down some gear."

Vicious heeded the warning. A few moments later, coils of heavy duty rappelling line dropped down through the ceiling.

"You'll have to take turns," Pierce called down.

"Cipher is injured. I'll send him up first."

“Is it bad? Do we need medical? Risk is just down the hall in your quarters.”

Fear punched him in the gut at the mention of Risk in his quarters. The long list of side effects for the fertility drugs raced through his mind. What if she had suffered a similar reaction to the antibiotics she had been given not long after they were first mated? “Is Hallie sick?”

“She’s fine. Risk came by to check up on her for that stomach virus she’s had. She actually sent me to find you. Swore up and down when you and Cipher went missing that you had to be in this elevator shaft and not in some access stairwell.”

Vicious had to smile at that. He had no problem imagining Hallie bossing around Pierce. “We don’t need medical on standby.” He glanced back at Cipher and noticed the engineer’s eyes were starting to swell. “It’s a broken nose.” Remembering Cipher’s reaction to the jolt of pain earlier, he said, “I can go first and help Pierce haul you up if you’d prefer.”

“I’ll live.” Cipher waved off any concern and retrieved a pair of gloves from a pocket of his tactical pants. Stepping up to the open ceiling panel, he called out, “Do you know if the power supply is cut?”

“It’s down,” Pierce assured him. “We’re good.”

“And if it’s not?” Vicious asked while unclipping the harness and gloves.

“Hopefully the electrocution will kill us before the fall,” Cipher grumbled as he fashioned a safety harness from some of the trauma webbing tucked away in the first aid kit and a pair of carabiners tugged free from his tactical vest.

“That’s comforting.” Vicious helped Cipher tighten the harness and then gave the line a shake. “He’s ready to come up.”

“I hope you have enough muscle in those scrawny engineer’s arms for the long haul!”

“I bet I have enough power left in these muscles of mine to knock you flat on your ass when I get up there,” Cipher growled back at Pierce.

Laughing, Vicious stepped back and watched Cipher expertly negotiate the line. Like every Land Corps soldier, Cipher had been taught various techniques for climbing a rope without knots. Even after all these years in service, they were all required to pass a monthly fitness test. Even Vicious reported to the gym to run the course. His rank wouldn’t protect or save him in a battle. His body was the best weapon he possessed.

Cipher made quick work of the rope, pausing only to wipe the blood running down his face. When he reached the top, Pierce helped haul him through the doors. Vicious caught the

safety harness that Pierce dropped back down to him. He had to make adjustments to the webbing because he was significantly larger than Cipher. Once he was hooked onto the line, he considered whether the harness would do much to protect him if he lost his grip. He'd probably end up with a broken leg or two, but he'd survive. Probably.

Using the brake and squat technique he preferred, Vicious jumped straight up into the air and grabbed hold of the rope. Simultaneously, he looped the rope along the outside of his right leg and pulled his left foot up into the brake. Squatting deep, he launched himself higher up the rope, looping and braking as he climbed. After four floors, his arms burned like hell. He was reminded why soldiers of his size were typically kept out of SRU and Shadow Force. Too tall. Too heavy. It took much more strength for him to maneuver the rope than it did Cipher.

"Come on, boss," Pierce encouraged with a smartass grin. "You're almost here."

Scowling up at the Shadow Force operative, Vicious hefted his body weight the final few feet. Pierce gripped the front of his safety harness as Vicious swung toward the open doorway and landed with a heavy thud onto the floor. He crawled the rest of the way out of the shaft and then flopped onto his back. Breathing hard, he grinned at the ceiling. The burn in his muscles left him feeling oddly elated and accomplished.

"I wasn't sure you'd make it," Pierce teased. "I spent floors four through seven of that climb coming up with excuses that would keep me out of a court martial."

Vicious reached over and whacked Pierce on the leg with his closed fist.

"Shit!" Pierce's cry of pain morphed into laughter. "Hell, I forgot how hard you can hit."

Sitting up, Vicious pushed to his feet and started to unfasten the makeshift harness.

"Wait for Risk. Make sure he takes Cipher get back to the med bay." He shot the SRU engineer a no-nonsense look. "You *will* go to the med bay for a head check."

"Yes, sir."

Addressing Pierce, Vicious said, "Tell Orion and Rigel that this elevator is a death trap."

Pierce nodded. "Are you still taking your trip to the Colonies?"

"Unless there is a security bulletin or Orion closes the docks, I'm taking Hallie on that trip. She has plans with her sister arranged."

"Then I'll be going with you," Pierce replied.

"I'm perfectly capable of protecting my mate while on vacation," Vicious hotly shot back.

"I'm sure that you are, but General Thorn gave the order. You and Hallie are high-value targets. He wants you protected which means you take a Shadow Force escort."

Because that worked out so well for Hallie the last time, Vicious thought in frustration. He handed the harness to Pierce. "Then I'll see you the day after tomorrow. We're leaving on the early transport ship."

"Yes, sir."

Vicious pivoted on his heel and strode down the private hallway to the entrance of the spacious quarters he shared with Hallie. Only Orion had a larger apartment, the perks of his position on the ship. He scanned his wrist chip and opened the door. When he stepped inside, he spotted Risk waiting for him in the living area. The medic hopped to his feet, and Vicious began to worry.

"What's wrong with Hallie?"

"Nothing," Risk said quickly. "Well – okay." He spread both hands in front of him. "I may have *possibly* been a bit heavy-handed with the dosing."

Vicious narrowed his eyes. "And what the hell does that mean?"

"It means that Hallie is having some...interesting side effects."

"Interesting? How?"

Risk glanced toward the hallway that led away from the living area and toward their sleeping quarters. "I had to prescribe a cold shower – if you get my meaning."

He did get Risk's meaning, and he wasn't pleased that the medic had been so cavalier with Hallie's health.

"Also," Risk said carefully, "you should be aware that Hallie's response to the drugs was far, far more successful than I had hoped."

"And that means what exactly?"

"It means that I was concerned Hallie wouldn't have adequate hormonal response to a conservative dose of the medications. We only have enough for two trials. I wanted to make sure we gave you two the best chance so I chose an aggressive dosing schedule."

"And?"

"And I finished her scan in preparation for the triggering shot and, well, let's just say that it's a good thing you two have so many extra bedrooms in your quarters. I visualized seven

ripe eggs during my scan. It's highly –*highly*– unlikely all seven will drop and be fertilized. But..."

"But?"

"But two? Two is possible. Three is within the realm of probability."

Vicious swore under his breath. He rubbed his tired face between his still aching hands. Exhaling roughly, he asked, "How dangerous would a pregnancy with more than one baby be for Hallie?"

"Every pregnancy carries risk, Vicious. That's even truer when we're talking about mixing genes like ours with the genes of smaller, more fragile humans like Hallie."

Suddenly this whole fertility drug mess seemed like a bad idea. He tried to imagine Hallie carrying two or three fetuses. It seemed impossibly dangerous. "Should we cancel this cycle?"

"Vicious, you want a child. Your mate wants a child. There is a very high likelihood that the next twenty-four hours is going to give you what your hearts desire more than anything else in this universe. Achieving one pregnancy will be a miracle. I wouldn't fret about the very slim possibility of twins."

"And if that slim possibility happens? If it's twins? Or triplets?"

"Then you let my team do what it does best," Risk replied calmly. "We'll bring in the best experts. We'll monitor Hallie closely. She and I have already discussed the likelihood of requiring a surgical birth. Nearly all of the new mothers from Calyx who have bred with our men have required one. Their hips and pelvises simply aren't designed for the large babies our DNA codes. Whether Hallie conceives one baby or seven, she's going under the knife."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It's anything but," Risk said. "Parenthood is full of risk, Vicious. Hallie is extraordinarily healthy. She's active. Her med checks always come back in the excellent range. She's young and strong and ready to be a mother."

He appreciated Risk framing the situation in that way, but it didn't help ease his anxiety any.

"I left the ovulation-inducing injection with Hallie. We weren't sure how long it would take you to get back to her. I showed Hallie how to use it. This one goes into the stomach. She

can give it to herself or you can help. The others I left with her you'll definitely have to administer."

"Others? How many others?"

As if sensing that he would go full-on overprotective alpha when he heard the actual number, Risk was deliberately vague. "She'll need one every morning until she has a negative pregnancy test."

"And if it's positive?"

"Then she'll need one every morning until nine to twelve weeks into the pregnancy."

"Twelve weeks?" Vicious didn't know if he had it in him to stab Hallie every day for twelve weeks.

"I left ice packs and heating pads to help." Risk turned sideways to point out the places appropriate for injection. "She's not as thick as some women so make sure to find a spot with adequate fat tissue. For Hallie, that's probably going to limit you to the buttock area here."

"And after I give the shot?"

"Heating pad and massage. After this first injection, ovulation should occur within the next twenty-four hours. I'd recommend that you and Hallie have sex at least twice during that time period." Risk laughed. "I don't think that will be a problem."

It definitely would not be a problem. Risk had ordered him to abstain from intercourse with Hallie for the last four days. He'd been nursing the galaxy's worst case of blue balls for all four of them.

"In the morning, start the support shots, okay? Do you have any other questions?"

"I don't think so."

"In that case, I'll leave so you two can get started." Risk headed for the door. "If you need me, I'll be down in the med bay all night. We have emergency communication lines open."

"Speaking of emergencies, you need to give Cipher a checkup. He banged the hell out of his face in that elevator."

"How bad?"

"His nose is pointing toward his ear."

"Ouch. Any signs of concussion?"

"None that I noticed, but I'm not a medic."

"I'll check him out and clear him."

Vicious walked Risk to the door and saw him out before locking up their quarters. He wanted to search out Hallie first, but he made a detour into his office to plug in his tablet and make contact with Orion to ensure that the admiral was aware of the elevator situation. When he entered his office, he spotted the covered dish waiting on his desk. Even with all of the chaos on the ship, Hallie had thought of his comfort and his needs.

Never one to turn down a meal, Vicious inhaled the neatly made sandwich while logging his location into the ship system and activating his out-of-office message signature. Anything flagged as a level two or higher communique would still reach him. Everything else would have to wait.

After a quick conversation with Orion, he followed up with Rampage and contacted Raze to make sure he was aware of CIPHER's injury. He had just disconnected when he heard Hallie's voice.

"I thought you were off-duty."

His attention snapped to the open doorway of his office where Hallie now stood. Wearing only one of his uniform undershirts and with her damp hair loosely braided, she leaned against the doorframe with her arms crossed. Her slim legs drew his gaze. He followed the curve of them right down to the tiny feet that she liked to tuck against his legs while they slept.

"I am." He walked away from his desk as if to prove it and crossed the open floor between them. "I'm all yours, Kitten."

Standing in front of her, he reached out to touch her face, but she gasped and grabbed his hand. Her dark eyes went wide with worry. "What happened to your hand?"

"It's nothing."

"It's *not* nothing." She carefully traced the outline of the rope burns blossoming on his palms. "We need to ice these right now."

"They can wait."

"Vicious—"

He swooped in and kissed away her protest. She whimpered against his lips but surrendered to his insistent kisses when he slid his hand down the curve of her spine. He cupped her bare bottom in one big hand and nibbled at her soft mouth. When he swept her up and carried her toward their bedroom, she wrapped her arms around his neck and took control.

A rush of heat gripped him as she cupped his face and stabbed her tongue against his. It seemed that it was only yesterday that she had been the shy, nervous bride he had chased down and captured. Watching her become this wild, sensual woman had been one of the greatest experiences of his life. He would always be a man who embraced his role as head of their household and the dominant in their marriage, but he enjoyed letting Hallie take the reins every now and then.

But tonight was all about her. He wanted her writhing and panting and trembling by the time he was done with her.

Very carefully, he set her down by the bed. He noticed her white collar on the dresser next to medical supplies. Following his gaze, she explained, "Risk told me not to wear my collar tonight. There's no guarantee I won't have a bad reaction to the medication you have to give me so he felt it was safer not to have anything around my neck."

Her words struck him hard. Feeling overwhelmed by the risks they were taking, he sat down on the edge of their bed. Reaching for her hand, he sighed and asked, "Are you sure you want to do this, Hallie?"

Her face fell, and she looked like she was going to cry. "Have you changed your mind? Do you not want a baby with me?"

Certain she was being so dramatic because of the outrageous levels of hormones coursing through her veins, he calmly clasped the back of her neck and hauled her between his open thighs. Closing her in tight, he held her gaze. "Kitten, I adore you. You are the only thing in this entire universe that matters to me. I want to have children with you. Don't ever doubt that."

"But?" she asked quietly.

"But I'm your man, and it's my duty to keep you safe." He kissed her tenderly. "I shouldn't be putting you in unnecessary amounts of danger."

"Vicious," she said forcefully, "we live on a warship. When you Grabbed me, you brought me into this scary, dangerous world of yours. There is more risk of me being hurt living on this ship than there is if I take that shot or get pregnant with a litter of sky warriors."

She had a point, and he grudgingly acknowledged it with a grunt. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you, Hallie."

"Nothing bad is going to happen to me."

Sliding his hands down her body until they rested on her slim hips, he asked, "Are we crazy to be thinking about starting a family in the middle of a war?"

"Do you want to wait for peace? Because I've read the history of your people, Vicious, and we'll be waiting forever."

"There was peace when I was a boy, but it didn't last long."

"See what I mean?"

"Yes, but I can't imagine having to run to the bridge to oversee an evacuation of the ship while my mate and my daughters are shot off into space in a life pod."

She tilted her head and gave him a strange look. "Your daughters?"

He shrugged. "Call it a hunch."

"And do you like that hunch?" She studied him. "You won't be sad if we never have a son to carry on your legacy?"

"Boys are nothing but trouble. I should know," he said with a laugh. Tracing her full lower lip with his thumb, he thought of all the things he would do to spare her any pain. Having a son meant that she would have to bear the pain of sending their boy back to Prime for one of the top tier academies. A son from his line would be expected to do great things and the foundation for those great things would be built far and away from Hallie. "Daughters can stay with us until they choose a mate."

"Unlike their poor mother," she said with teasing grin. "The sweet, innocent woman you chased down and corrupted with your dirty Sky Warrior ways."

"And you've loved every minute of my corruption," he answered, brushing his lips against hers.

"Every single one," she agreed. Touching her forehead to his, she whispered, "Everything will be fine, Vicious."

He envied her optimism. "I hope you're right."

"I'm always right," she said with an impish smile. "Now hurry up and stab me with that scary needle before I lose my nerve."

"Let me shower first." He rubbed her lower back. "It won't take long."

Hallie flicked through the buttons on his uniform shirt and gave a fistful of fabric a tug to silently urge him to stand. He did as requested and enjoyed the familiar act of Hallie undressing him.

At the end of every shift, he returned to their quarters and she helped him out of his uniform. While he showered, she buffed and put away his uniform pins and shined his boots. Some males demanded their mates do those things, but he had never had to ask. She had simply started doing it shortly after he had Grabbed her, and it had become part of their daily routine.

That half hour of undressing and showering was the time he used to clear his head so he could give Hallie his full focus. She seemed to have intuitively understood this in the same way he had recognized her desperate need to run. When living on her home planet, running had been her one daily escape. Like him, she needed some time to herself to clear her head and focus her mind. It had been surprisingly easy to convince Raze to let her use the SRU's private gym a few days a week.

Some days, like today, their routine was nothing more than extended foreplay. She ran her hands over his bare skin as she undressed him, and he bent down to sneak in a kiss here or there. That demure smile of hers sent a bolt of heat right down his cock. Her flushed cheeks and slightly dilated pupils betrayed her arousal. With all the hormones saturating her bloodstream, she was probably aching with need by now.

Well, he couldn't let her suffer, could he?

Dropping down onto the bed, he parted his legs and then hauled her back onto his lap. He draped her legs across his, pushing her thighs wide open. Pulling her back against his chest, he anchored her to him with an arm around her waist. He nibbled at her exposed neck and earlobe while stroking his hand up and down her bare thighs. She shivered under his touch, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he made her moan.

"Is my sweet baby hot for me?" Vicious grazed his fingers down the seam of her pussy and evoked a gasp. He could feel the slick heat of her dripping onto his fingers as he explored.

She mewled just like the kitten he thought she was and rocked against his hand. She gripped his wrist and his thigh and dropped her head back against his shoulder. "Vicious!"

Grinning triumphantly, he bit her neck again and gently traced her clitoris. Hallie cried out as he circled that swollen nub. Soft and wet and highly aroused, she was so close. He knew his mate's body as well as his own. The right amount of pressure. The perfect pace. The way she shuddered when he licked and teathed that sensitive spot right along the curve of her neck.

Arching her back, Hallie climaxed in near silence. Only the sharp and sudden intake of her breath could be heard. He rubbed and rubbed and kissed her neck and cheek until she slumped against him and placed her hand over his in a silent urge for him to stop.

Cupping her bare sex, he nuzzled her throat until she turned her head. Claiming her mouth, he kissed her lovingly. He wanted to take her right now, but he needed that shower after climbing that rope. Very carefully, he put her in bed and drew the covers up to her stomach. He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

She rolled on her side to watch him leave their bedroom. It didn't take him long to soap up and rinse off and clean his teeth. He quickly dried off and returned to their bedroom. He walked to the dresser and inspected the medical supplies left behind by Risk. As he cleaned his hands with the disinfecting towel provided, he heard Hallie slide out of bed and come toward him. She slipped out of the shirt she had borrowed and stood naked next to him.

Kneeling down in front of her, Vicious opened one of the skin prep swabs and picked out the spot where she would get this first injection. He cleaned the area very carefully before opening the package containing the sterile syringe. The needle on this one was short and very fine. Even so, he hated the thought of causing her pain in this way. It was different when they were playing their private games. There she was rewarded with pleasure.

Very quickly, he administered the injection, pinching the fleshiest part of her stomach and stabbing the needle into her body. When he was done, he set aside the self-sealing injection and wiped away the tiny drop of blood dripping from her skin. Ever so gently, he kissed the spot and then dotted kisses across her stomach.

He noticed the way she shifted. Reading her was easy enough. She was in pain – and not from the shot. "Where do you hurt?"

"It's not hurt exactly," she said, capturing his hand and dragging it to each side of her belly. "It's a strange full feeling. Risk said it's a side effect of the medications. I'm supposed to watch out for some other symptoms, just in case."

"Just in case what?"

"Just in case I need to check into the medical bay for observation." She caressed his face. "It's nothing, Vicious. Really."

It wasn't nothing, but he wasn't going to argue with her. She had made it clear that she was willing to go through this to create a family with him. He had to respect her decision and support it. Heaping his guilt onto her shoulders wasn't going to help.

Picking her up, he carried her back to their bed and crawled in with her. Careful to keep his weight off her stomach, he started with her sweet, pliable mouth and kissed his way all the way down to the very tips of her toes before working his way back up to her thighs. He nestled between them, relishing the heat of her thighs on either side of his face, and pressed ticklish kisses on her sensitive skin.

With one long swipe, he traced length of Hallie's glistening pussy. He still remembered her shocked outrage the first time he had dared to do this for her. He also still remembered the shrieks of pure joy that had escaped that pretty little mouth of hers when he'd helped her find that first climax.

Taking his time, he enjoyed his mate's body. Hallie grazed her fingers along the top of his head while he pleased her with his mouth. She rocked her slim hips and rubbed her foot along his ribcage. He sensed the tightening in her muscles as she moved closer and closer to the edge. Firming up his tongue in the way she liked best, he listened to the shift in her breathing, using it as a guide for his flicking and fluttering.

"Vicious!" she cried out his name when the first wave of pleasure engulfed her. Gripping her bottom in both hands, he lifted her right up and held her tight to his mouth. She went wild as he feasted on her. Of all the feats he had accomplished in his storied career, none compared to the feeling of triumph he experienced when Hallie lost control like this.

She dropped back to the bed, and he lessened the intensity of his onslaught. With slow flicks and long swipes of his tongue, he eased her down from that high. A fine sheen of sweat covered her flushed skin. He kissed his way back up her body until he reached her breasts. Her taut nipples enticed him. He latched onto one and then the other while caressing his mate's body with his hard, rough hands.

His fingertips ghosted over the tattoo she had designed for them. The version on her body was smaller and more intricate than the one on his. He placed a loving kiss on the date he had Grabbed her from that forest and another on the date he had married her in the tradition of her people.

Hallie shoved on his shoulders, coaxing him onto his back, and took the more dominant role. She peppered kisses along his jaw and then spread her hands across his shoulders and down his chest. He closed his eyes as she grasped his stiff cock and stroked him slowly. When she wiggled down his body, he smiled in anticipation of her soft, wet tongue gliding over his dick.

And there it was.

Exhaling a low, deep breath, Vicious let the wave of heat wash over him as Hallie painted his cock with her talented tongue. Just as he knew how to work her body, she had mastered his. The erotic combination of her mouth and hands was enough to make him groan and ache for her.

“Let me inside you, Kitten.”

Licking her lips, Hallie sat back on her heels. She continued gliding her hand up and down his shaft. “But I just started having fun.”

“I want us to both have some fun.”

“But you love it when I suck you like this,” she said, stroking him even slower.

“You’ll love what I have in mind even more,” he promised. Sitting up, he grasped her by the waist and hauled her on top of him. He bucked up against her, thrusting his erection between the slick tops of her inner thighs. “Ride me.”

“Is that an order, General?”

He grasped her bottom in both hands and lifted her right where he wanted her. “You bet your fine fucking ass it is, ma’am.”

Hallie gasped as he guided her slick, hot pussy down the length of his cock. Stretched and filled by him, she let out a mewling whimper. Gripping his shoulders, she started to move. Vicious dropped back to the bed and took full advantage of the incredible view of his beloved mate driving them both into a frenzied state. She swayed back and forth, taking it slow and easy at first, but when he licked his thumb and placed it atop her clit, Hallie shuddered and picked up the pace.

In moments like these, Vicious couldn’t believe how damn lucky he was. He’d picked Hallie out of a crowd, chased her down and captured her. He’d dragged her back to his strange and violent world and terrified her by trying to consummate their union in the way of his

people. For some reason, this beautiful, sweet and incredibly tender-hearted woman had chosen to forgive and love him. She had accepted his culture and embraced a new life with him.

When his fellow officers or friends ribbed him about the way he indulged Hallie and denied her nothing, he let it slide off his back because they would never understand what it meant to have a woman like Hallie as a partner in life. After everything she had given up for him, there was absolutely nothing he wouldn't give her now.

Head thrown back, Hallie began to climax. The sensation of her orgasm was too much for him. With one hand on her lower back and the other along the curve of her neck, he thrust up into her faster and harder. He surged deep and came. Every muscle in his body tensed as he filled her with his seed, all the while hoping that this was the time it struck fertile ground and took hold.

Still buried inside his mate, Vicious guided her down onto his chest and wrapped his arms around her. She burrowed into him as he stroked her hair and her cheek. When she kissed him, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the intimacy they shared. He often craved these quiet, tender moments the most when he was away from her.

Resting her head on his chest, she finally asked, "What really happened earlier?"

He combed his fingers through her hair. "You know I can't tell you that."

"I thought it was another drill until Pierce grabbed my arm and practically dragged me to the life pod assigned to our floor. He pushed me into my seat, fastened my belts and told the pilot who was with us to prepare for ejection. That's when I knew that something really terrible was happening."

He wanted to tell her everything, but the rules were the rules for a reason. Someone on this ship was trying to kill them all. Hallie wasn't involved, but if anyone ever got wind that she knew too much, she would either end up hauled into the Shadow Force interrogation rooms or the person trying to kill them would target her. He refused to either option.

Wanting to reassure her, he said, "You're the mate of a high-ranking official, Hallie. If something happens on this ship, you'll be one of the first to escape. When Orion or his second-in-command or Rampage take a mate, they'll be assigned to that same life pod for a reason. Our mates and our families are given a priceless advantage over all the others on the *Valiant*."

"That's not fair, Vicious."

"Fuck fair," he replied rather viciously. "I fought and bled and proved my worth as a male and a warrior. I've earned the rights and privileges that come with my rank. My mate and our children have a right to those privileges."

She petted his chest with soothing strokes. Whenever his temper got the best of him, she was always there to rein him back in and calm him. "I wake up every morning and I am so thankful and grateful for everything you've provided for us, Vicious. Don't ever believe differently."

"I've never believed differently. Not once have I ever thought you take anything for granted, Hallie. I don't even think you're capable of being ungrateful, Kitten."

"That doesn't mean that I have to think it's fair that I get to be ejected to safety first over all of my friends and their families."

"There's that soft heart of yours," he murmured. After everything she had been through in her short life, she had yet to grow hardened or jaded. She genuinely wanted the best for everyone around her, even if it meant her own life might be at risk.

"You love this soft, mushy heart of mine."

He kissed her lovingly. "I do."

Hallie shifted in his arms until they were both on their sides, her back to his chest. He enveloped her from behind and breathed in the clean scent of her hair. Very quietly, she said, "I didn't want to leave you behind today. I just kept thinking that if the worst was going to happen, if the ship really was going down, I wanted to be with you."

"Don't say that," he implored. "I want you to live, Hallie. If the worst ever happens, if I have to die in the line of duty, I want to die knowing that I made sure you survived. You deserve to live a full, long life."

"It won't be much of a life without you," she whispered sadly. "I don't know how I would go on without you."

"You would go on living the same way you always have," he stated firmly. "I love you, Hallie, but I won't have you giving up on life if the war takes me from you." Placing his hand on her stomach, he said, "Soon, you'll be a mother. You have to think about our family first."

It gutted him to think of dying and leaving her behind. It wasn't easy for him to talk about these things, but she needed to know. "I've made arrangements for you and for any children we have. Shadow Force will always task a man to you in the event of an evacuation or

attack. That operative will get you to safety and then to one of our embassies or a brother ship. You'll have a very hefty pension, full citizenship benefits and access to all the programs created for widows."

She rolled over in his arms and clasped his face in her small hands. "I don't want money, Vicious. I just want us to be together forever."

He wanted to promise her forever, but he was a realist. He'd seen enough death on the battlefield to know better. He couldn't promise her forever, but he could promise something else. "Hallie," he touched his forehead to hers, "I swear to you that I will fight like hell to survive any attacks on this ship."

"And I swear that I will fight like hell to make it off this ship alive so you can find me." She sealed her vow with a deep and lingering kiss. It didn't take long for that kiss to turn hungry and needful. "Vish." She nipped at his neck. "Please."

"Again?" He was always ready for a second round as soon as they finished, but sometimes Hallie needed a little longer to recover. Not today, it seemed. Apparently this was one of those interesting side effects Risk had mentioned.

"And again," she said with a mischievous laugh.

"Roll onto your side." Mindful of her sore stomach, he shifted Hallie until she faced away from him. He lifted her top leg and draped it over his and then thrust into her from behind. "That's it, Kitten."

Slow and easy lovemaking had been one of the best discoveries he had made since taking a mate. The unhurried pace and the gradual build was something he had come to love and enjoy. A long time later, she came quietly while he rocked into her. He followed her right over the edge, whispering his love for her against the shell of her ear.

Sated and relaxed, they fell asleep together, her cold feet tucked against his calves and her face burrowed in against his chest. When he woke a long time later, his fuzzy brain needed a few seconds to make sense of his surroundings. He glanced at the clock on the bedside table and noted how early it was. Not wanting to wake Hallie, he very carefully slid his arm out from under her neck before covering her up with their blanket. He made as little noise as possible getting out of bed or going into the adjoining bathroom.

As he pulled on a pair of lounging pants, he noted that his hands were killing him. He found some burn cream in the first aid kit and applied it to the blisters that had formed on his

fingers and palms. When he was done, he trekked into the kitchen for something to drink and a piece of fruit before making his way to his office. As he sat down, he noticed the blinking message icons on his tablet and sighed. It was going to be one of *those* mornings.

There were two Level Two messages. The message from Orion brought him up to speed on the *Valiant*. The ship had received an all-clear from the engineering team. All systems were running and the confinement to quarters order had been lifted. Communications had been re-established. The other message from Division headquarters informed Vicious that his reports and other assorted documents were expected to be filed by the end of the day. He hated the thought of wasting any of his precious time with Hallie on paperwork but it had to be done before they left on their trip.

After sending replies to those messages, he opened the Level One encrypted communique from General Thorn. As he skimmed the lines of the message, his stomach churned. Thorn had given Shadow Force the greenlight to enact one of their ultra-secret plans to sniff out the double agent or agents aboard the ship.

Even as the commanding Land Corps officer on this ship, Vicious hadn't been briefed on the specifics of this plan. Torment would probably give them a need-to-know list of bullet points, but it was clear that the covert operatives would be allowed to run wild and free on this one. He hated to think how many innocent people would be dragged into those interrogation rooms. Memories of the way it had all gone so badly with poor Naya still haunted him.

Not wanting to think about any of this, he pinched his fingers across the screen and closed the message. Logging out of the system, he stored his tablet in a locked drawer and returned to Hallie. After taking off his pajama bottoms, he slid under the covers.

"You're up early," Hallie said in that soft, sleepy voice.

He tilted her face and kissed her. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't."

"Are you hungry?"

"Let me get dressed, and I'll make breakfast."

"No," he said firmly. "We are on vacation. We'll have something sent up from the officer dining hall."

"Maybe a little later." Hallie's hand slowly drifted down his chest.

Smiling in the darkness, Vicious knew exactly what she wanted. Since their earliest days together, she had chosen this as her silent, shy way of coming onto him. When her hand found and stroked his cock, Vicious decided that today was going to be a *very* good day.

Her shy, light touches grew more confident, and their gentle, languid kisses turned more passionate and wicked. He palmed her breast and played with her nipple while she stroked the length of him and flicked her tongue against his. By the time he slid his hand between her thighs, she was dripping wet and practically begging him to make her come.

So he did.

Capturing both of her wrists in one hand, he dragged her arms overhead and held her captive. The fingers of his other hand thrust into her, curving inside that hot channel and rubbing against that sensitive spot that made her shudder and scream. When she'd had enough of that, he circled her clit with tight, fast flicks.

With a cry of sheer joy, Hallie came apart beneath him. She thrashed against their bed, bucking her hips and arching into the grip he had on her wrists. "Vicious! Vicious!"

"That's it, Kitten." He nipped at her lower lip. "You come hard for me."

She was still shaking and trying to catch her breath when he flipped her over and gripped her hips. Hauling his mate onto her knees, he shoved them wide apart and thrust into her, sheathing his cock in the welcoming heat of his woman. She cried out and clutched at a pillow. She fisted the sheets in one hand as he took her in the rough, desperate way she loved most.

Mindful of the discomfort she had shown last night around her stomach, he was careful though. He watched and listened for any signs that she wasn't enjoying herself or needed him to ease up, but she showed him the exact opposite. Hallie pushed back against him, meeting his thrusts.

When he grabbed a handful of her silky dark hair, she pulsed around his cock, confirming what he already knew – that she loved it when let loose the dominant side. A few well-placed smacks to her perky little ass confirmed it. She clawed at the sheets and whimpered in that way he'd come to know as her signal for more.

He gave her what she wanted, alternating swats with circular massaging. Her ass blossomed bright red under his authoritative hand. He was always careful not to give her more

than she could take. This morning was no different. He enjoyed their games, but he would never harm her. Never.

Wanting to see her beautiful face, he pulled free just long enough to turn her over and slide between her thighs. He kept his weight off of her, pinning her wrists overhead again and thrusting hard and deep into her. He was getting close – *too* close – but he could tell she wasn't there. As if reading his mind, she shook her head. She was perfectly satisfied by her earlier orgasm and didn't want another right now.

Hallie wrapped her legs around his waist and darted her tongue against his. Her permission given, he unleashed the hold on his own climax. She urged him on, lifting her hips and flicking her tongue against his while he held her captive and fucked her like a wild man. He felt that low buzz along his spine and groaned her name. "*Hallie.*"

Breathless, she begged, "Breed me, Master."

"*Fuck!*" Hearing Hallie beg in that erotic way drove him crazy. With a roar of pleasure, he came so hard he saw bright white spots when he closed his eyes. Jerking his hips, he slid deep and gave her exactly what she wanted. Locking her legs around him, Hallie held him in tight while he shuddered through the aftershocks of an incredible orgasm.

Finally, he slumped forward and eased off the grip he had on her wrists. Capturing her sweet mouth, he kissed her lovingly. She enjoyed a rough touch, but she also needed tenderness and affection. He nuzzled their noses together. "I love you, Hallie."

"I love you." She smiled up at him and caressed his jaw. "Just remember how much you love me when you stab me with that huge needle later," she teased. "Gently, please."

They spent some more time in bed, kissing and touching and talking quietly. Eventually, Hallie slipped out of bed and into the bathroom. He didn't bother with his pajama bottoms when he followed her a short time later. She made room for him in the shower. Taking advantage of their unhurried schedule and their new allotment of water for the starting week, he washed her hair and massaged her neck and back. They rarely had time to shower together anymore, and he sure as hell wasn't going to waste an opportunity like this.

Hallie didn't get dressed after their shower. Naked and warm, she waited for him in the bedroom. He pulled on his usual off-duty clothing and walked over to the dresser where the remainder of the medication Hallie needed had been left by Risk.

“Risk said it has to go into the muscle so it’s a longer needle than we normally see,” Hallie said, her voice betraying her anxiety. “He also said it’s a bigger stick because the medication is thick.”

Remembering Risk’s advice, he eyed Hallie’s backside and then the impossibly long needle attached to the syringe. His stomach knotted up as he considered how much pain he was going to cause her.

“What’s wrong, Vicious?”

“Ice packs? Hot packs?” He picked up the sealed package containing the syringe. “This needle is going to hurt, Kitten.”

“I know.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“It won’t hurt nearly as much as childbirth,” she said with a shrug. “Or my recovery from surgical birth since Risk has already decided I can’t bear your children naturally.”

The image of Hallie strapped to an operating table while Risk sliced her from hip to hip to deliver a Harcos-sized child rocked him with guilt. “That doesn’t make me feel any better. I get all the pleasure, and you get all the pain? That isn’t the way I like to do things.”

“Well,” she said, coquettishly walking her fingers up his bare chest, “I’m sure you have all sorts of interesting ways to make up for that...”

And there it was – Hallie’s optimism and her determination to always find the good in life and take things in stride. She obviously knew that this process was going to be painful and that the future held the promise of even more pain if this worked, but she wasn’t afraid. She was embracing the unknown and refusing to be cowed by it.

Vicious wasn’t sure what their future held. They were trying to make a family in the middle of an escalating shadow war while floating high above a hostile planet. At any moment, it could all go to hell.

But he refused to dwell on the what-ifs.

With this woman – *my woman* – at his side, he was the luckiest man on the *Valiant*.

Cupping the back of her neck, Vicious drew her in close and bent low to tease her with a kiss. “Careful, Kitten. I’m a man who always rises to the challenge.”

Hallie rose on tiptoes in a silent bid for a kiss. “I’m counting on it...”

The End.