

Saved By Venom (Grabbed #3)

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Sneak Peek #1

As they neared the staging area, Venom noticed an agitated crowd surrounding the fence protecting the spot where a hastily erected stage now stood.

Instantly, he went on alert. His trained gaze scanned the crowd. They were mostly men in their late teens to early forties. Some of them were probably family members but it was likely there were troublemakers among them.

The Splinters operating on Calyx often chose situations like this to agitate the locals. The terrorist cell had so far evaded the Shadow Force operatives tasked with shutting them down but a few important captures had been made in the last few months. Two months earlier, Venom had been on a rescue mission for Menace's wife that had gone to hell in a matter of seconds. They had managed to save her life but only barely.

She had averted a major crisis by recovering weapons stolen by the Splinters and sold to the Sixers, a gang operating out of The City. She'd also uncovered a nasty little bit of government corruption by finding piles of food supplies in the Sixer hideout. The two groups had been manipulating food supplies and costs in the capitol city and some of the outlying villages to foment revolution. Thankfully it hadn't worked.

But this? Venom eyed the noisy crowd with apprehension. This could get ugly fast.

"Ace?" He called out to the pilot leading their men to the starting line of the Grab. Using hand signals, he gave a quick order that the pilot received with a nod. Some of the soldiers in their group glanced back at him for instructions. "Let's keep it tight and keep our hands to ourselves."

A round of yes, sirs circled the small group. They formed double lines and kept close together as they neared the shouting throng. Venom had no doubt his fellow soldiers would maintain their formation. The discipline drilled into them from childhood would allow nothing else.

Venom's ears rang with the nasty insults hurled their way. His jaw tightened but that was the only outward sign of annoyance he allowed. A fat, rotten fruit splattered on the back of a man in the middle of their group. The soldier tensed but didn't break formation. The man behind him brushed away the foul soggy flesh. Their heads high and their gazes fixed forward, they kept walking.

As if sensing their group wouldn't be fazed by insults and rotten produce, the angry crowd changed their tactics. They chanted their filth even louder and moved in closer. Venom's hawkish gaze took in the changing environment.

"Easy, men," he said, his voice calm but clear. "Stay on track. Keep moving."

A split second later, someone jumped

out of the crowd and slammed into his shoulder. Venom had just enough warning to brace himself for the impact as the heavy weight of his attacker took him to the ground. On instinct, Venom threw up his hand and blocked the falling blows. He put a hand to the man's throat and shoved hard.

Their gazes met and Venom's heart stuttered in his chest. Despite the grizzly beard and wild hair, he recognized his assailant. It was Devious, a member of his academy class he hadn't seen in more than ten years. The man had been one of the operatives chosen for the Shadow Force but he had been arrested and tried as a traitor. The transport ship carrying him to the Kovark prison system had been attacked and he had been freed and never seen again.

Until now.

Venom had never believed Devious would side with the Splinters but the evidence against him in his trial had been incredibly convincing. What if it had all been a show? Had it merely been the beginning of a deep cover?

Those questions wouldn't be answered today—or maybe ever. Schooling his features, Venom showed only fury. He punched Devious in the temple and cheek before flipping their positions. They grappled

and slapped at one another. Briefly, Venom felt Devious' fingers slipping under the cuff of his jacket and brushing the bare skin of his wrist. A moment later, the sensation vanished.

"Dev! Come on, man! Enough!" One of the protestors stepped forward to drag him out from under Venom.

At the same time, one of the soldiers taking part in the Grab snatched Venom by the shoulders and hauled him onto his feet. "Captain!"

"I'm good!" Venom shrugged off the soldier's hands. He kicked snow at Devious and spit on the ground near him. "This traitorous piece of trash isn't worth the disciplinary demerit."

A faint, mischievous smile curved the likely undercover agent's mouth as he wiped dirty snow from his face. "I'd rather be trash than a kidnapping, raping piece of shit like you."

Even though Devious said those things to stay in character Venom still flinched. Was that what people down here thought of them?

"Come on, Captain." The younger man tugged on Venom's arm. "They're waiting for us."

Venom cast one final glance at Devious before turning his back. Carefully and without rousing suspicion, he slid his fingers inside the cuff of his jacket and found the thin square now firmly fixed to the fabric liner. He assumed it was a data device of some kind and cautiously pulled it free to move it a more secure location in one of the inner pockets of his jacket.

The intel secured, he rejoined the group and marched to the flimsy fence and the too-short gate. The security appalled him. When he reached the Valiant, he would let Vicious know how shockingly underprepared The City officials were for a full-scale riot. At the next Grab someone was going to get hurt.

As they filed onto the stage, Venom's issues with the security were overshadowed by his absolute rage at seeing the way the women chosen for this Grab had been prepared for the run. They huddled together in a small space in a muddy pit a few feet below the stage. Infuriated, he took in their shaking

bodies clothed in thin cotton shirts and pants. Only a few of them had on proper shoes. They all looked miserable and frightened.

His heart ached at the pitiful sight before him. Was this how all Grabs were done? He felt sure that wasn't the case. Vicious or Menace would have told him if their women had been penned in like livestock awaiting slaughter.

This wasn't right. On other planets, the populaces viewed the Grabs as a way for women to find a good, honorable husband and a comfortable living—but here? Now the screaming protestors outside the fence made sense.

He searched the shivering group of women for one that appealed to him. Choosing a wife on sight wasn't the most auspicious beginnings for a mate bond but it was the only choice he had. He had come this far. He wasn't going back empty-handed.

The tightly packed group shifted as some of the women turned toward the stage for a better look at the men who would be chasing them very soon. A flash of white-blond hair caught his eye. He was momentarily taken aback by the pale shade. It wasn't very common among the Earth-descendants on Calyx but it was the mark of a full-blooded member of the Harcos race like himself.

He zeroed in on the pale hair. The woman it belonged to found her way to the rear of the crowd. She was a tiny little thing, petite like Vee's Hallie but not as thin. The boxy cut of her bright-red outfit obscured her frame but he could see the faint outline of curves beneath the papery fabric. She wasn't quite as curvaceous as Menace's woman but she had a nice shape.

Their gazes clashed across the wide expanse between them. Her eyes widened with shock and she took three quick steps back. Something primal ignited within him at the sight of her fleeing. Like a prowling cat catching the scent of its prey, he had to chase her now.

Her panicked gaze darted from the stage where a member of The City's council read the official Grab rules and the gate that led to the snowy open field and the forest just beyond it. Fists curled at her sides, she sized him up before taking two quick hops toward the gate.

No doubt she had done the math. There was no way she could evade him. His legs were nearly twice as long as hers and he had on rugged boots. She had on shiny pink shoes that were wholly unsuitable for doing anything outdoors. They looked like the kind of thing a woman would wear with a dress.

He frowned at her lack of preparation and hoped this wasn't a sign of flightiness. Judging by the state of the other women, it seemed more likely that the officials running the Grab hadn't properly advised them what to expect. It was yet another issue he would be reporting to the Grab committee aboard the Valiant.

The snap of two blocks of wood slamming together startled him. A man opened the gate and the women rushed out of the pen. The clock started on their short head start. Venom didn't linger on the stage. He hopped down into the muck and trudged to the gate. A handful of the other soldiers and airmen followed him.

With his gaze fixed on the pale-haired woman, he watched her fight through the ankle-deep snow. His gut soured with worry. He glanced at his watch and read the temperature and wind chill before hastily calculating the amount of time she had before suffering from frostbite. He made a quick estimation as to how long the women had been exposed to the elements. The numbers he arrived at didn't make him happy.

Around him the other men seemed to be doing the same mental calculations. There were grunts of annoyance as the seconds ticked down to their release from the pen. Antsy and on edge, they fidgeted and flexed to release some of the anxiety.

The moment the blocks clapped together again, Venom shoved off the slick, muddy ground and raced onto the field. He tracked the woman he wanted as he sprinted to intercept her. She was in the middle of the pack but seemed terrible at navigating. From what he could tell, she was angling for a section of the woods clear off the course. His lips twitched with amusement. He'd have to make sure to program her personal tablet with a map app for navigating the ship.

Venom noticed another man closing in on him. He shot the guy a hard look to warn him off the prize he had selected. The airman put up both hands to show he wanted no problems and pointed to a brunette nearing the tree line. "I'm after that one, sir."

"The blonde's mine." He kicked his pace into high gear and started to gain on the woman he wanted. She had disappeared into the dense woods. Panic gripped his gut. Would she evade him now?

Considering the way she had been unable to even run in a straight line from the starting point to the forest, he doubted it. When he hit the tree line, he slowed his speed just enough to get his bearings. He scanned the snowy forest floor and found her tiny footprints. With a path to follow, he hurried after her.

Another minute into the pursuit, Venom spotted the bright-pink shoes discarded near a tree. His heart leapt into his throat. Didn't she realize how dangerous it was to run barefoot in the damned snow?

"Shit." Growling, he surged forward in search of her. He had to find her quickly and before she got frostbite.

So focused on finding her, Venom missed the telltale sign of a hunter's mark on the trees surrounding him. His boot hit the spongy trigger of a trap a millisecond before his brain alerted him to the mistake he'd made. With a chilling snap, two metal halves of the trap slammed shut on his leg.

"Fuck!" His pained shout ricocheted off the trees. Caught, he fell forward onto his knees and hands. His jaws ground together at the excruciating bite compressing his leg. The reinforced webbing and nanofibers of his boots kept the gnarly metal snare from piercing his skin and crippling him but the terrible squeezing grip knocked the air right out of his lungs.

A wave of panic seized him. Despondence quickly overwhelmed him. He had two choices now. He could try to jerk the chain free and bust the trap or he could use the signal flare tucked into the pocket of his pants to call for help. Once the flare was lit he was officially disqualified from the Grab. Even if he had his collar around her neck, they would set her free and send him home empty-handed.

Either way, he had lost his reward. He had lost her.