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BETH REVIS

**FULL
SPEED
TO A
CRASH
LANDING**

ALSO BY BETH REVIS

FULL SPEED TO A CRASH LANDING
HOW TO STEAL THE GALAXY *
LAST CHANCE TO SAVE THE WORLD *

ACROSS THE UNIVERSE
A MILLION SUNS
SHADES OF EARTH
STAR WARS: REBEL RISING
STAR WARS: THE PRINCESS AND THE SCOUNDREL
THE BODY ELECTRIC
A WORLD WITHOUT YOU
GIVE THE DARK MY LOVE
BID MY SOUL FAREWELL
NIGHT OF THE WITCH
THE FATE OF MAGIC
BLOOD AND FEATHERS
MUSEUM OF MAGIC
HOUSE OF HEX

*Coming soon from DAW

**FULL
SPEED
TO A
CRASH
LANDING**

BETH REVIS



DAW BOOKS
NEW YORK

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Acknowledgments

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to spite, my greatest muse and motivator.

EPIGRAPH

Look, I don't have the cash to pay for a quote from Bruce Springsteen, so just put on "Dancing in the Dark" while you read. It's probably better that way, anyway.

1

S_o.

I'm not in an ideal situation right now.

I've got ten percent of air left in this portable tank. Ship's been decompressed, which . . . not great. Have to rely on the tank. Okay. Okay. I've got maybe an hour of air left.

But I also know for a fact that there's another ship here. It's the competition, sure, but my radar shows they're in range, and surely a fellow scavenge ship wouldn't be so ruthless to ignore a distress call?

"Come on, come on," I mutter, staring at the slowly blinking communication light. I sent out the signal back when I still had half a day of air left. This nearby ship, I can tell on the radar, it's big, so there's got to be a whole operation going on, crew and everything. It's not a little rig like what I have. So, even if I'm the competition to them, I wouldn't be much of one.

Plus, my ship has a hole on one side. A big one.

The air gauge ticks down to nine percent.

The comm light blinks.

Eight.

Blink. Blink.

Seven.

"You have *got* to answer this comm signal!" I scream at it, deeply aware that takes extra air. I'd like to punch something, but gravity's out on the ship too, which means if I hit the console, I'd just fly backward in the opposite direction. Ricocheting around my own ship doesn't seem like a good use of my limited time.

Blink.

Blink.

The other ship is *not* that far away. It's been well within range for the past hour. What are they all doing, just laughing at a distress signal and rubbing their hands with the knowledge that my ship, though damaged, is another one to loot?

They're not going to let me die, right?

. . . *Right?*

Blink.

And then—

"Hello?" It's staticky and dim, but it's an *answer*.

“Hello, yes?” I say. The ship’s signal’s already routed to my earpiece. “Took you long enough to answer!”

“You’re not authorized to be in this sector,” a different voice says, one that rings with authority and contempt.

“Neither are you!” I take a deep breath, then silently curse as the gauge ticks down another percent. “If you’re going to get nitpicky about laws, you ignored a live distress signal for hours.” I can hear them start to answer, but I plow on. “And now I’m down to six percent in my air tank.”

“What?” The first voice again, sounding a little confused. Male, I think. “This is a *real* distress call?”

“It is for the next thirty minutes or so, because after that, it’ll just be body removal,” I snap. “My ship had a breach. I’m in a suit, breathing what’s left of the only tank I’ve got.”

“What are you even doing out here?”

“Can I answer that when I have more than half an hour left to breathe?” I say, eyes wide at the shock of how dim this other crew is.

“We’ve got a lock on your signal. You really only got half an hour?”

“Mm-hm.” I’m too tense to put it into words, but I try to get the full gravity of the situation in that grunt.

“We’ll be cutting it close.”

Great. *Great.*

“I’ll try to hold my breath, then,” I say. Because what the fuck else can I say? I can’t exactly refill an oxygen tank in a breached ship.

Whoever answered my call sends me a locator signal. My radar picked them up in this sector, but they’ve got some basic anti-detection shields up, so I didn’t have an exact location. They really aren’t far, but are they near enough? I check my tank again. I don’t like this. I don’t like cutting it *this* close.

But I can’t risk doing this any other way.

I stare out the hull window. The planet below curves into view. I’ve been in orbit for about a week. First to the scavenge site. Not an easy haul. When I picked up the other ship approaching, I knew I couldn’t compete with them, even if I’d only finished half the job.

A breach in my cargo hold followed by explosive decompression and total life support failure hadn’t exactly been in the original plan. But what’s a girl to do? I know how to improvise.

The air tank gauge flashes red before my locator shows the larger ship moving closer to me. I’m at two percent by the time they’re in sight, and I’m taking shallow sips of air, keeping still, trying my best to convince my body that oxygen’s optional.

I was right. Not about oxygen; things are going to get real dicey soon on that front. I was right about the other ship. It’s a big one. Maybe even government-issue. It’s not a looter, that’s for sure; it’s far too sleek and new. I bet every part of that ship is original, not held together by cheap welds and luck like my little *Glory*.

Another voice clicks onto my comm. “D-class, our scans show your breach.”

“Did you think I was lying?” I mutter.

“Do you have a port for our cofferdam?”

“Yeah, that’s part of the problem,” I say. The breach broke the airlock system. Again, plans awry, improvisation, the usual.

“How are you going to—”

I do not have time to mince words. “Get as close as you can,” I say. I had my foot latched to a hold bar, but I let go and twist around, already heading aft, using the bars to propel myself through the micrograv as I float down the corridor. I go through the bulkhead door, the heavy metal seals wide open to allow me passage. Straight to the ripped-out hole blown in one side of my ship. “If you pull up starboard and open an airlock transfer, I should be able to get to you without a cofferdam.”

“Without a . . . D-class, how are going to—”

“I have a name,” I say. “Ada Lamarr, nice to meet you, thank you for saving my life.” I’m already at the hole in the side of my ship, careful to avoid the sharp edges of metal that could compromise my suit. I stare out at the massive A-class vessel sidling up alongside my little bird. Dozens of positioning thrusters blow out, edging the leviathan a little closer to me. I scan the side of the ship. Various portholes, a few cargo loader arms, a large shuttle bay—there. An escape airlock hatch for emergency use.

“D-class—Lamarr, exactly how do you intend to reach the *Halifax*?”

Halifax. Old name. Classic. Maybe not government-issue.

“I’m at one percent,” I mention as if it weren’t my life with minutes to spare. “Can you maybe just trust me on this and open up a door?”

I hold my breath—ironically—and count a few more seconds down. Midship, the airlock door on the side of the *Halifax* pops open.

“Thanks,” I say. “See you in a bit.” I check my suit and fling myself into the void.

An object in motion stays in motion, that’s what Newton said, and the proof of it’s here in space. As I kick off the side of my ship, past the jagged metal edges of the hole, I would keep going forever through the black at this exact same speed and direction if I didn’t hit something. I mean, I’m *hoping* I hit the *Halifax*, which is absolutely my intent, but if that fails, I’ll either get sucked into the gravity of the planet below us—unlikely, given my weight compared to the planet—or I’ll, you know, float in the empty black void of space until I die.

Which, according to my air gauge, is any second now.

I’m missing my target. The *Halifax* is coming at me a little quicker than I’d thought. Turns out flying through space without a tether can fuck up your concept of relative locations. Also, while it looks pretty certain I’m going to hit the side of this other ship, I’m not at the best angle to hit the open airlock, which is what I need in order to actually *board* the ship.

My O₂ tank may be almost empty, but my propulsion tank is aces. I ignite the jetpack, which does speed me up but at least also speeds me up in the right direction. That little door open on the side of the *Halifax* is calling my name, and even when I reverse the thrusters, I still come in

hot enough to slam into the interior door. I would've bounced right off it, but I have the wherewithal to grab on to the latch and hold as the outer door seals shut behind me.

I get a blur of faces at the porthole, a flurry of movement behind the interior wall. This is a classic hyperbaric chamber airlock—a tiny room with one door that opens to the outside, one door that opens to the inside. The inside door won't open until the chamber is repressurized and air's pumped back in. Even as the outer door seals shut, I'm still floating. There's no gravity, no pressure, no air.

Which is a damn shame because there's also no oxygen left in my tank. I suck at nothing, my lungs left wanting. I get up to the porthole window, and through the heavy carbonglass and the thick protection of my helmet, it's hard to see too clearly who's on the other side. I bang on the window with a gloved fist, but I know it's pointless. They can't hurry up a hyperbaric chamber. It's a failsafe to prevent someone from getting the bends and gravity sickness with the artificial grav generator, but at this point, I'd trade that for some air. Black dots dance behind my eyes. *Glory's* chamber can take up to five minutes to normalize, but she's an older model. I can probably hold my breath two minutes?

My feet hit the floor, then my knees. Gravity's back on. I can barely think; my body keeps trying to breathe air that's not there. My panicked heartbeat in my ears doesn't distract me from the *emptiness* of my lungs, a sensation I've never had before. Screw decompression sickness—I rip my helmet off. Bent over, my body makes a gagging-gasping noise. The air is too thin. *But there is air*, I think, registering that I can actually hear that dying-choking sound streaming out of my raw throat—no sound waves without air.

My arms give out, and I fall fully on the floor, face against the metal. My body bucks, my shoulders spasming as I gasp at air too thin to fully inflate my lungs. My vision goes red.

The last thing I think before it all goes black is:

Fuck.

2

I'm so *cold*.

No, wait. It's just my nose that's cold. That's odd. I squint my eyes open a fraction, then immediately regret that choice and also every choice in my life that led up to this moment of lights so blindingly white that they pierce straight into my brain and fry whatever remaining thoughts I might have.

"Ama Lamarr?" a voice asks gently.

"Ada," I correct automatically.

"Wow, she's alive." A different voice, one a little farther away, mildly surprised.

"I'm not too certain of that," I grumble. I lift an arm, but that arm feels like a million pounds, so I drop it again. My mouth feels weird. I flop my tongue out—too dry—and try to figure out why everything feels cold again.

Hands grab for me and pull me to a sitting position, a croaking groan escaping my lips. I risk opening my eyes again. It still hurts, but it's better than being in the dark.

I'm on a floor, legs splayed, and a small bald woman with dark skin is crouching in front of me, eyes concerned. She nudges my shoulder gently, and I realize there's a wall behind me. I lean against it, slumping immediately. That takes a lot out of me, so I suck in some air, and that's when I realize where the weird cold is coming from—a nasal tube is blowing pure oxygen into me.

"Here," the woman tells me, thrusting a bottle into my hands. I chug it, and icy liquid slithers down my throat. I'm so tired of cold. I'm so tired in general.

"My name is Nandina Mohammed," the woman says. She's the gentle voice. I like her a lot.

"Nice to meet you," I croak. "I think my eyes have hemorrhaged."

She nods. "That was a close call."

I gulp some more water. "Don't get me wrong, super grateful to not be dead," I say, "but what the fuck took so long?" I tip my head back, thunking it against the metal wall, and peer up at the other people. While Nandina is now on her knees, scanning me with something white and flashy and important-looking, there are three other people standing nearby, scowling as if they're deeply perturbed by the inconvenience of my rescue.

"Hello," I say, waving cheerily at them with my left hand as Nandina scans my right arm.

"Pulse elevated," Nandina mutters.

"It's been an exciting evening." I think I see her bite back a smile. I glance up at the other

people still staring down at me. No reaction. Tough crowd.

The short white woman in front stands with her legs apart, arms crossed, taking up as much room as her petite frame is capable of. Unconsciously, I think. She wears a tight-fitting jacket that has a line of red at the collar. Noted. This ship is large but not large enough for the captain to literally wear a badge of her rank, just the color stripe. She's got a hard face. Looks like a planner, and I didn't file the triplicate form to be added to the agenda.

The person just behind her and a little to the left has broad shoulders and big muscles. Seems a little jumpy, eyes darting around, looking for danger in this well-lit corridor tastefully tiled in white enamel and accented with chromium. On the captain's other side is a man with unkempt hair. Average size, average build. Totally forgettable. Except for the sharpest, clearest hazel eyes I've ever seen. I shudder. From the cold air, obviously. Then Nandina rips off the nasal tube, and I flinch at the sudden movement.

"You're back up to normal levels," she says.

"That's me," I say. "Normal." I've got my eyes on the trio looming over us. The captain ignores the big person—despite the military bearing, they seem to be a subordinate. She keeps turning to the other man, and I'm starting to think maybe the captain's not as in charge as she wants to be.

"Well, not quite normal." Nandina's a smiler. She looks to the captain. "I'd like to get her to the med bay."

"I'd like to get her off my ship," the captain says.

"Got any mechanics who can fix *my* ship's life support and also the three-meter hole in the side?" I ask.

Her eyes flick to the airlock. Just a quick movement, nothing more, but the meaning is clear. She doesn't need to fix my ship to toss me back outside. It's an idle threat.

Probably.

"This is going to be a fun stay aboard Hotel *Halifax*." I attempt a grin, but it costs too much energy to sustain for more than a second.

"This is a working mission that cannot afford to be interrupted by—" the burly person starts, and then the captain interrupts them.

"First, take our 'guest' to the med bay for Mohammed."

I push against the wall, trying to get my legs to work enough to get me into a standing position, but my feet slip. When I got into the *Halifax*'s hyperbaric chamber, I was wearing a full suit. Now my boots are gone. I took my helmet off myself already, before I passed out. Panic flares inside me. I *need* my suit. *My* suit. I whip my head around as the first officer steps closer to me, the effect making me dizzy. Bile rises up in my throat, but I swallow it down, frantically trying to see through the red haze.

Light fingers tap my hand. My head sashes forward, looking down at Nandina's touch, then back up into her concerned face.

"My boots," I gasp.

"Right over there," Nandina says, pointing. My helmet's beside them, and so is my LifePack.

Shit, I was panicking about boots, and they're nothing compared to the backpack-like device I have to attach to my suit that holds everything I need to not die out in the black. Air, the jetpack, temp and pressure units. Worth more than the boots. And I've upgraded that shit, personalized the rig to hit my every need.

"First," the captain says impatiently. I assumed the person was the first officer, but I wonder if it's actually their name? Perhaps they prefer the title to a name. Either way, First scoops me up, arms under my knees and around my shoulders, like I'm a fussy baby.

"Hey!" I say.

Nandina stands too, as if this is all perfectly routine. She starts down the corridor, First following behind, stoically looking forward to pretend I'm not flopping around in their arms. "I'm coming back for my stuff!" I say as loudly as my ragged voice can allow. "Do *not* steal my stuff!"

The captain's eyes widen just a little, which, frankly, is rude. That's a good suit. It saved my life. I mean, it also almost killed me when it ran out of air, but *before* that, it saved my life. Plus, the jetpack cost extra. It's really fancy, if I do say so myself.

Behind her, the man who doesn't seem to miss a thing pushes forward and follows First. I rest my head on First's shoulder and blink up at the man trailing behind us. He's dressed in a brown shirt, simple but neat. My eyes slowly glide up and down him, and they find nothing at all objectionable. He's so average—height, weight, everything—but there's something about him that tells me he's the most interesting person aboard this ship. After me, obviously. I don't know why I keep looking at him. Tan skin, brown hair cut neatly. If I had to pick a word to describe him, it'd be *trim*. But he's got this air about him, like he knows how the whole universe fits together, and that makes me wonder how I might fit into his carefully organized world. Does he have a slot for chaos, or am I going to have break some stuff to make room on the shelf for me? Either route poses fun and exciting possibilities.

"Hello," I tell the man trailing behind us. I try to sound casual, like this is a routine day, being cradled by a big hulking person on my way to a med bay while I have hemorrhaged eyes and a mouth that had all the saliva boiled out of it, but my voice is still all scratchy and raw and my ears are slightly ringing, so I'm not even sure if I got both syllables out.

The man smiles. "Hello," he says back. Oh, good. He's going to pretend this is normal too. I immediately like him even more.

"You know," I say, wiggling so I don't have to crane my neck around quite so much, "if you'd waited, I bet First would have carried you to the med bay, too."

First grunts.

"I don't mind walking," the man says.

"But consider this: you could be *not* walking. And carried. Like a baby."

"It does look comfortable."

First turns a corner, and glass doors slide open. I'm trying to think of something quippy and witty and charming to say about how comfortable First's arms are, but then they dump me on a table that's lacking in the padding department, and my breath comes out with a little *oof*.

After dropping me, First heads back out the door. The man who followed us here looks around, unsure of where to stand, but eventually leans against the wall, watching us. Nandina is already at the table by the bed, various scanners beeping and, presumably, scanning.

“You’re recovering just fine,” Nandina says. She holds up a small bottle. “You want to do the eye drops, or would you like me to?”

“Ugh,” I say, but I take the bottle.

“Three drops, each eye.”

I lean back and put the medicine in my eyes. It feels slimy for an instant, but the more I blink, the better my vision seems. Less red, anyway.

My suit is already partially exposed, the seal-tight released and the inner zipper showing the top portion of my chest.

“This is a good suit,” Nandina says.

“Thanks. It was ridiculously expensive—”

“Now strip.”

I blink at her. “Not even dinner first?”

She chuckles. “You’ve got some mild muscle tears. And a little atrophy. How long have you been in space this round? You really need to have some proper gravity every three turns.”

“Medics always say that.” It wasn’t hard to guess what Nandina’s role on the *Halifax* is, but I appreciate the twinkle in her eye at the acknowledgment.

“I’m guessing you’ve not seen solid ground for at least six turns.” Nandina gives me a stern look, hands on her hips.

Beyond her I catch a glimpse of the good-looking man, gaze as razored as ever. “Seven,” I say, watching him even as I answer her. It’s like I can see tiny gears inside his brain, winding around everything I say. “Or eight? Maybe five. Who can remember, really?” I wait until he focuses on me and shoot him a grin.

Oh, a poker face. Nice. Totally gonna break that.

“You take your vits, right?” Nandina says. “Also, I wasn’t joking.”

“About what?”

“Strip.”

She’s the doc, but a quick glance at Eyes tells me he has no intention of leaving, and there’s not a curtain for privacy in this med bay. It’s all bright white lights and exposed beds.

“Dinner after,” Nandina promises.

I have to lean back to get the next part of the seal-tight open. “If you’re getting a sneak peek, at least let me know your name,” I say, my tone light. I shrug out of the shoulders of my suit and meet the man’s eyes.

“Rian White,” he says in a voice that counteracts all that cold that had been coursing through me.

Some men have the attitude that there are no bras in space. Which is bullshit. But while Sharp-Eyes Rian White may keep a stony blank face, there’s a nice little flush when I don’t break eye contact with him as I push my suit down to my hips.

“Good enough,” Nandina says. She slaps a few med patches on my mostly bare back, which stings for a second, but there’s some excellent stuff in those things. My body gets all good and woobly. Nandina helps me get rid of the rest of the insulated thermal radiation suit. I have the thin version, which is nice, but it’s still clunky, and we have to take our time, not risking a tear. I could do it all by myself, but it’d be rough in my current condition. And slow. There are times when stripping slowly is preferable, but now’s not it.

First walks back in, sees me half-undressed, and immediately looks up at the ceiling. They’ve brought my LifePack, helmet, and boots, and they hold both laden arms out until Nandina relieves them of the burden, stowing them in a storage locker. The medic hands me some standard-issue—a tunic-style shirt that hangs loosely on me and drawstring pants. Rubber-soled slide-ons are the final touch. It’s all a lot more comfortable than my suit and boots, but comfort doesn’t matter. After folding my suit up and stowing it with the boots and helmet, Nandina starts to hook up the intakes and chargers on my LifePack, starting with the O₂ tank.

Nandina pauses after that, the fuel charger in one hand. She glances back at me, a question on her lips that I answer before she can ask. “That’s a jaxon jet,” I say, smug in the knowledge that everyone in the room will be suitably impressed. I take a quick glance around. Maybe they didn’t hear me. “A *jaxon* jetpack.”

“Oh,” Nandina says, but it’s clear she doesn’t understand the depth of importance that type of jetpack entails. Jaxon fuel, found on the terran worlds in at least two colonial systems, is extremely difficult to mine, but the best of the best. Most suits have basic units, but a jaxon-fueled jetpack burns cold and lasts forever. It’s stable, efficient, and reliable, with precise positioning controls. Other jets can get you up in the air; a jaxon lets you soar like a dragon.

Nandina looks at the charger unit in her hand, the one that doesn’t have anywhere to go. “So, does that mean I don’t have to hook it up—”

“Yeah.” I glance at the others. “It’s fine; you can leave it.” No one here appreciates good tech. Nandina closes the locker door after connecting the other elements of my LifePack to the recharger.

First is still staring at the ceiling, waiting for me to give them the all clear that I’m dressed. “Are you going to carry me to dinner?” I ask. “Because that would be nice.”

“You can walk now.” Nandina’s reading those scanners again.

“Just because I can doesn’t mean I should.” My words are slurring a little. I bat my eyes at Rian. “Or you can carry me.”

“I didn’t take you for a damsel in distress,” he comments. Nandina puts some more patches on me—two just under my clavicle—and I start to feel a little more sober. Caffeine patches, I think, or maybe some adrenaline to counteract the relaxers. Up and down, up and down.

“Damsel, yes,” I say. “Distress? Never.”

“Not even when you’re running out of air?”

I flash him my best grin. “Not even then.”

3

Nandina wasn't lying. Dinner waits for me in the mess hall. Real food, too, an *actual* meal.

It comes with an audience. The captain's there, and First takes up a position right beside her, at least until she tells them to go back to the bridge and "monitor." Which means, of course, there's something—or someone—to monitor. I tuck into the tray in front of me—there's protein goop in the slop, but the bumpy bits have to be actual, real lentils, which is nice, and whether the leaves spotting the mix are rehydrated or not, I absolutely appreciate the chance to eat something green that's not a by-product of recycler worms.

The captain talks to Nandina, who, after assuring her I'm healthy, not carrying some weird alien plague, and unlikely to die anytime soon, is sent away. I wave at her, and she waves back. Such a nice doctor.

Rian White stays. He sits down across from me even when the captain remains standing. And the captain doesn't like that. And he doesn't care. And these lentils are really good.

"Are there seconds?" I ask.

Rian looks like he's going to offer more, but the captain snaps, "No."

I lick my spoon. "Any hot sauce?"

"No," she says again.

"Ah, you guys get real food on the regular, then. If you were using worms, you'd have a whole tank of hot sauce."

Rian cringes, the look of a guy who knows how little hot sauce does for the aftertaste but how important it is anyway.

"What are you doing in this sector?" the captain asks.

"You can sit, you know," I say, gesturing with the spoon. "It's a little awkward just staring up at you like this." I said that to be nice, because she's short enough to not hear that kind of thing often, but she just keeps scowling. "I don't even know your name."

"I'm the captain of the *Halifax*," the captain of the *Halifax* says.

"Yes, but Captain *what*?" I ask. Her jaw tightens. Oh, this one does *not* like being questioned. Not even for a name. I wonder if she's had interrogation training. I wonder if she's *just* had interrogation training for this mission.

"Ursula, just sit," Rian says.

I shoot him a grin. "Yes, please do, Ursula."

"Captain Io," she snaps. But she does at least sit.

“So, I’m guessing I’m here for the same reason you’re here,” I say cheerily, scraping the spoon along the bottom of the tray. “Salvage. The UGS *Roundabout* is not going to loot itself, after all.”

“You are not supposed to know about the UGS *Roundabout*,” Ursula says.

I give her an exaggerated wink. “And neither are you.”

“How did you get here so quickly?”

I pick up the metal tray and lick the bottom. When I put it down, Ursula and Rian are both waiting for my answer.

“I didn’t get here any quicker than my ship can go.” I shrug. “Then again, I think I blew a fuel line, so maybe I ran a *little* hot.”

“Ms. Lamarr,” Rian starts.

“Mr. White.” I match his deep tone.

“How long have you been at this site?”

I shrug. “Two standard days.”

“The UGS *Roundabout* only crashed ten cycles ago. This is not a typical route. From almost any port, you’d have to have come here within hours of the crash to be here before us.”

“Look, you know I’m not going to tell you my source,” I say, leveling with him. “Looters’ code.”

“Looters don’t have a code,” Ursula protests, a distinct snarl to her voice.

“Are you saying you don’t have a code? No wonder you almost let me die before deigning to rescue me.” There’s an edge in my voice now. “Because, see, the law says a ship crash can be scavenged if it’s not reported by the government as off-limits. And *Roundabout*’s not been reported. So, I’m in the right here, and just because you don’t like that don’t mean I’m breaking the law.”

My gaze slides from the captain over to Rian. “But *you*, on the other hand, ignored a distress call for *hours*.”

And that *is* against the law. Any ship within range of a distress call must answer the distress call if they have the means. And clearly, *Halifax* has the means.

The captain squares her shoulders, her eyes narrowed, but I glare right back at her. She has the grace to shrink a little. “There was some . . .” She swallows. “Some debate about the validity of your call.”

I raise both my eyebrows. I’m not seeing everything in a red haze anymore, but I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror in the med bay, and I know my eyes are still crimson from the burst blood vessels.

“You have to understand how unlikely it was that you were here,” the captain continues. She doesn’t like being in the wrong, and she’s the type of person who wants to talk her way into being right. She’s had too many people believe her just for speaking, and it shows. “It seemed clear that a distress signal from this location, at this time, would be sabotage, and . . .”

“And yet it wasn’t,” I say simply.

Her mouth closes.

“Do you know what it’s like to count each breath?” I continue. “Do you know how it feels to pick up a ship’s signal, to *know* it’s in range, and to be ignored, all while your last oxygen tank gets lower?” I huff a bitter laugh. “I’ve always known the risks out here. You think I haven’t considered them when I’m a single person on an old ship? Something goes wrong out here . . . I know how that ends. I just . . .” I shake my head, the tip of my tongue on my teeth. “I expect to die alone if something goes wrong in the black. I just never thought I’d have an audience who watched without even answering my distress call.”

I’ve made Ursula realize the full depths of how wrong she was. I’m not sure what Rian’s role on the *Halifax* is, but no one has higher authority on any ship than the captain. It was her call.

And she made it wrong.

And we all know it. Without question. Even her.

“Ms. Lamarr, I cannot express how sorry I am—” she starts.

“And you won’t even give me seconds.”

The captain blinks at me, stunned, and there’s little nervous tic near her left eye as she stands up, grabs my food tray, and goes over to the dispenser to get me another round of those lentils. “And some leaves!” I call to her.

“It’s spinach,” she says.

I shrug. A leaf is a leaf, but green stuff? Damn, that’s expensive. “Double spinach, please!”

Rian smirks at me. “You’re good,” he says while Ursula busies herself with the dispenser.

“I am.” I grin at him. “At what?”

He doesn’t answer. Those eyes of his. They don’t miss a thing. I shovel a spoonful of lentils into my mouth as soon as the captain drops the tray in front of me.

“How did you know that the *Roundabout* wrecked?” Rian asks. He doesn’t seem impatient that I have to chew; he speaks like this is idle conversation.

“Looter to looter?” I motion him closer, as if I’m going to whisper a secret, then shake my head. “I’m not telling.”

“We’re not looters.” The captain’s voice brooks no argument. “We’re here to salvage—”

I shrug. “*Salvage* is just a few letters away from *scavenge*. I bet they have the same roots. Probably French. Wild that a country that doesn’t even exist anymore can fuck up our language so much.”

Rian frowns, and a cute little wrinkle forms on his brow. “I don’t think you’re right about that.”

“We are not here to argue etymology.” The captain’s voice rises a notch. She can’t stand this. She’s so to-the-point about everything. She may be short, but even I didn’t realize it was going to be this easy to take her measure.

I cut her a little slack. “*Roundabout* wasn’t reported. That means it’s up for grabs.”

“Yes,” Rian allows. “But not by you.” When he sees my expression, he grins. “Perhaps if your ship hadn’t been breached, maybe you’d be our competition.”

“Maybe?!” I gasp, clutching my chest with one hand and scooping up more goop with the other.