

Covert Love

William Roth



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Lab on Phayriph

Jet barreled down the white hallway, muttering “second left” to himself between unsatisfying breaths of thin, sterile air. It’s the next turn in the dizzyingly large mental maze he was required to memorize. He passes the first left, glancing in momentarily to see a huge room, with walls gridded by small shelves. The Phayrin were geniuses, Jet thought to himself as he turned into the next identical corridor. It was admirable before they used that intelligence to enslave their entire solar system.

The hurried stomp of steel boots behind Jet broke him from his train of thought and reminded him that he wasn’t trekking through this lab alone. Phayrin guards trailed behind him, firing rubber-like pellets at Jet whenever they had a clear shot. Usually, they would have no problem shooting lethally at anyone non-Phayrin, but out of fear of destroying their lab, they instead fired these. Jet had already had one such pellet graze his shoulder, a burning sensation that was masked entirely by adrenaline. As he turned the next corner, he glanced down at the stolen object in his hands, if only to reassure himself he still had it.

The portal gun. The Phayrins greatest invention yet. The beautiful white handle smoothly transitioned into the body, underlaid by glowing cyan lines which tracked geometrically along the entire gun until

coalescing at the barrel. Topping the gun was a ten centimeter wide crater held by small inward pointed spikes. It felt heavy in his hand, which he contributed to the fact that it was likely made out of the same marble that covered Phayriph.

Jet wished he could just portal out, but aside from not understanding how to use the portal gun, he couldn't leave his partner behind. Partner. He hated the word, and often asked Ruby if he could just call her something else, something more. Unfortunately, Ruby was a stickler for the rules, so partner it was.

As Jet slid around the next turn (the fourth right), he saw her dashing towards him from down the hall. Immediately, he panicked. She wasn't supposed to be in the lab! She was meant to be with the ship! He was only three turns away from the exit! Up until now, he had been relatively calm; the entire plan was Ruby's idea, they always were and they rarely went wrong.

"What are you- Why aren't you with the ship?!" he shouted as they neared each other.

"There no longer *is* a ship," she replied, with an edge of annoyance in her voice.

They slowed slightly as they reached each other, both glancing back to see guards on either side. With full confidence, she grabbed his arm and pulled him into an intersecting hallway. "New plan."

They dashed through the hallways, Ruby decisively directing each turn as they ran. Slowly, the stomp of boots behind them grew quieter. Until eventually, she stopped and pulled a door open from seemingly nowhere, then shoved Jet and herself into the tiny dark room within. Pulling the door shut, she forced Jet even closer, so that he was pushed awkwardly against her. He could feel the grit on the hip of her usually immaculate uniform against his forearm, and her shoulder pushed gently against his cheek, reminding him of the height difference she liked to tease him about.

“Supply closet”, Ruby whispered, her exhausted breath brushing his ear. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the sensation.

“Oh ok, I thought we were hiding in a hotel suite”, he chided, shifting slightly to stop the portal gun from digging into his thigh.

“Listen. We need to get to the rock room, I think you passed it if you followed the plan right-”

“If I followed the plan? What about the ship?” Jet interjected, annoyed.

“We need to get back there to get out of this-” Ruby was cut off by the stomp of footsteps growing louder. She spoke so quietly that the sound of her lips moving was as loud as her voice itself. “Don’t make a noise.”

The stomps ran past, barking sharp, unintelligible orders at each other before splitting at the next fork. As they slowly grew quieter, Jet let out a breath, trying to match Ruby’s control breathing beside him.

For a short moment, they stood against each other, listening to the cadence of the boots fade until it was completely covered by the sounds of each other’s breathing.

Without warning, Rubys pushed open the door and bolted out of the room, with Jet following her trail. The moment felt like it lasted forever, yet Jet half wished it hadn’t ended. They silently dashed back, passing vaguely recognizable rooms and a wallpaper Jet was starting to get sick of looking at.

As they passed through an intersection, Jet glanced to the side, wincing as he saw a Phayrin guard staring back at the end of the adjoined hallway. Its four eyes glared at him, and its trunk-like nose twitched as it lifted its weapon and fired at Jet and Ruby.

As they ran through the crossroad and out of the barrage of bullets, Ruby turned her head back and shouted, “You need to slow them down!”

“And you said I didn’t read the mission description!” Jet snapped back. “Did you miss the part about ‘avoid all confrontation?’”

“I need time!” Ruby said as she glared at Jet. He always lost these arguments.

“Fine. Take this.” He shoved the portal gun into her hands. “If it comes to it, remember how many people it will save, and do what you have to,” He said grimly, hoping she would argue.

“Very noble” She responded sarcastically. “I’m not going to leave you to die.”

At the next turn, Jet slid to a halt behind the corner. Ruby dashed on.

“See you at the rock room.” she said lightly, and she continued running.

Jet nodded in agreement and pulled open the nearest door, looking for a plan. The room was fairly small, containing a desk in the back corner and a massive microscope in the center of the room. Jet rummaged quickly through the desk, sifting through the stacks of transparent paper-like sheets that filled the drawers. As the footsteps grew frighteningly near, he grabbed a thin pen from the draw and crouched behind the desk. He held it tightly, the criss-crossed ridges digging into his hand.

The footsteps slowed as the Phayrin turned into the office, its heavy breathing producing a light whistling noise that filled the room. Jet fiddled nervously with the lining of his uniform, tightening and untightening his grip on the pen. He tried to visualize where he would hit, or how he would jump, or really anything to focus on to calm his nerves. Too quickly, the Phayrin’s steps moved towards the desk, until the guard looked over.

All four of its yellow eyes narrowed as it whipped the gun towards Jet, but before it could fire, he brought the pen down onto its bulbous forehead. The Phayrin’s deep gray skin split and burst, pink blood showering Jet as he took a step back. He dropped the soaked pen, and with heavy breaths, laid a shaky forefinger on the Phayrin’s lower neck, but felt only stillness. Suppressing vomit, he dashed out of the room.

He was repulsed with himself. He had spent two years as an agent, two years of missions, but never that was the first time he ever had

to... he had learned how to kill six different species with improvised weapons, six tactics he spent every night trying to forget. He was suddenly uncomfortably aware of the blood covering his hand, and the drips and droplets on his face. He wiped at them frantically, feeling tears pushing their way up into his eyes. He suppressed them, trying not to think about the body he left behind, trying not to think of the stillness where the pulse should be. He found himself swinging into a room, panting as he looked around.

"Wow, you look like shit." Ruby said lightly, barely looking up,

Jet just stood there. He wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words. He knew she wouldn't understand, she would say something about it being for the mission and the greater good, so Jet said nothing. Instead, he looked around the room he stumbled into.

It was a storage room; its tall, shelf-lined walls were labeled with jagged Phayrin runes. Ruby scanned the drawers, her long fingers periodically brushing short locks of crimson hair to the side, away from her focused face. Jet watched her green eyes flicker around the labels as she pulled open seemingly random shelves to reveal multicolored rocks. Where she had found the time to learn Phayrin was beyond him.

Jet glanced back at the open door, suddenly noticing the footsteps approaching again. He shifted slightly. "Can you hurry up?"

"I'm trying," She responded, "I can't find one for base."

"Huh?" Jet grunted absentmindedly as he pulled the door shut.

"Whatever, we'll lose them in the crowd." She muttered as she picked a prismatic rock out of a seemingly random drawer. The footsteps were growing closer, making Jet shudder.

"We gotta go, right now- Ruby, there's like 10 of 'em coming!" Jet urged, his voice rising with anxiety. He looked over to her to see her slamming the shiny rock into the crater on top of the gun. Its cyan lines glowed as the rock melted and was absorbed. Ruby held it with both hands and shot at the ground in front of them.

Instantly the room filled with thick, sweet air. The artificial smell of Cloud Candy and Sweet Worms reminded Jet of a fond memory buried beneath years of training. Looking down, his eyes widened. Where the floor had been was now a shimmering window to a busy crowd, who had all stopped to gawk at them. From beside him, Ruby mumbled out a sarcastic “yippee” and let herself fall forward, passing through the pulsating portal seamlessly and appearing on the other side. As she did, its edges shrunk and released a low guttural noise; receding as the dull white floor reformed around it. Jet took one last glance behind him to see the door swinging open before jumping in.

Mall on Ordaza

Jet was nauseous, his body itched, and his eyes felt suddenly moist. He stood up and tried to ignore the splitting lightheadedness that overwhelmed him. It didn't help that they were surrounded by a very large and loud crowd. He felt his stomach churn and he doubled over, as stinging bile slithered up his throat. Ruby stood confidently next to him, albeit breathing heavily. She put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Difference in air pressure, probably," she declared, as her eyes scanned the scene, Jet had no doubt that she already was forming a plan. "Shake it off, we have to go."

He forced himself upright and looked around. The portal was gone, instead they were surrounded by shacks leaned up against each other, built out of gnarled wood and fat, rusty nails. Each structure was different, filled with customers examining colorful garments, foul smelling smoke, or ragtag jewelry. The entire bazaar was enclosed in a circular wall, and above it, he recalled, were more layers of stores.

He had come here as a child, brought along with his clan to buy something. Aside from dragging his elders into every candy booth he passed, his favorite part was the floor; a mosaic of soft blues, yellows, and greens that was so perfectly smooth that he spent the whole day

sliding around in his socks.

“Alright I’m good, let’s move,” Jet mumbled. The discomfort had passed, but he wished he could soak in the bittersweet nostalgia for a little longer.

They walked forward, towards the center of the large floor. Within a couple minutes, the crowds surrounding them return to shopping. The ambiance of unremarkable conversation filled Jet with ease. He glanced over at Ruby, who beamed as she pointed out the architecture of a two-storied store. They stopped to take a closer look.

“We should probably focus on finding a way out of here, we can’t have long before they figure out where we’ve gone,” She said absentmindedly, as she ran her finger along the dark wooden boards within the wall.

“Really Ru-bot? You sure you don’t want to lecture me on the exact subspecies of tree this is?” Jet teased, with a playful grin.

Ruby looked backed at him with raised eyebrows and her own slight smile. “Ok, well first of all, it’s actually a type of large water bush, like the *Aquerbous* genus-” she started, jokingly.

“Ruby, if I wanted to listen to a textbook, I’d re-enroll with you,” He laughed. “Going to classes between missions? Your crazy for that”

“Oh yeah, there’s lots to do on base. Did you know there are libraries? Not just bars and game centers?” She bantered, grinning. He liked when she smiled.

“Library... No, never heard of it,” he deadpanned, “plus the bars suck, not a lot of new people swing by a planet hidden in a fart.” The big green nebula was great for hiding the agency’s plane, but it really was an unattractive sight. Ruby rolled her eyes, and started to say something, before suddenly twisting her head to the side. Her expression shifted to a sharp look under a furrowed brow, and Jet followed her gaze to a large green woman who was pulling two pointing children along. They shrunk as they glanced up and met her eyes. She often had that effect on people. As the family hurriedly shuffled off, Ruby turned to Jet.

“We need to conceal this,” she said, raising the portal gun slightly. Her smile had reverted to an austere glare.

She led as they pushed through the crowds into a small shop, which was filled with loose hanging jewelry and handbags. They approached the front of the store, where a large man with wrinkled green skin stood arguing with a customer, a fat guy with skin the color of seaweed. Jet noticed, looking around, that about half of the people here were these big green bipeds, and that Jet and Ruby were the only humans he had seen so far.

The customer stormed out, and the man behind the counter turned to Ruby, who stood impatient waiting.

“How much for a handbag?” she asked.

“I’ll trade two of ‘em for this,” he said with a nasally voice that matched his thin smile. He reached towards Ruby, who quickly stepped back and clutched her necklace: a thin metal chain with a rough red gemstone as the pendant.

“Hands off, frog-face,” She replied angrily. Jet had asked her about it once, on their first assignment together. She had told him to shut up and focus on the mission, which made him laugh as they were glorified mailmen at the time.

She grabbed a yellow bag off a nearby rack and swiped her wrist over the chip scanner, then shot the man one last glare before spinning around and walking out of the store. Jet scowled and stepped towards the man, but before he could say anything Ruby dashed back in.

“They’re here. We need to move.”

They bolted out of the store and towards the center of the floor, Ruby’s new bag swaying heavily at her side. At the front of the floor, about twenty meters away, a large portal poured out sterile air and armed Phayrin. Despite the distance, they both immediately recognized the Phayrin’s red weapons.

They ran, unanimously deciding to put as much ground between

them and the now very lethal Phayrin.

"You know, I think I liked it better when they were shooting bouncy balls at us," Jet quipped between breaths.

"Yeah, this definitely blows," Ruby agreed as she leapt over a short table covered with strange, spiky fruits.

Several gunshots rang out behind them, and the entire floor became pandemonium. Crowds ran in all directions, often cutting in between Jet and Ruby. A huge man with oily green skin ran right in front of Jet, forcing him to turn suddenly. The momentum instantly tangled his feet beneath him and he crashed through the wall of a tapestry store. His pang of guilt from destroying the wall of the shop was quickly overshadowed, however.

"Ruby?" Jet asked loudly. Aside from the shouts and screams all around him, there was no response. "Oh blast, I'm never going to hear the end of this," he said quietly to himself.

He pushed his way through the beaded strings that marked the intended entrance of the store and continued forward, though he quickly changed paths as he saw a towering Phayrin too few paces in front of him. Keeping his head low, he decided to run left and try to circle around to the middle, hoping to find Ruby somewhere along the way.

From far behind him, a bellowing voice began speaking. It spoke only a few words, in a language Jet didn't recognize, then a similarly lengthed phrase in a language he didn't understand, and then finally it spoke comprehensively, "Come to the front exit; you will be spared if you comply", the voice called monotonously. The crowds that had completely obscured him slowly started dispersing and reforming at the voice, all while still shouting and struggling against each other.

Jet moved discretely within the crowd, slowly treading back to where they had portalled in, and keeping his head on a swivel for Ruby. He didn't see her in the crowds, but he did see a thin figure in a long leather

coat approaching him, clutching a yellow handbag. From beneath its hood, a lock of crimson hair fell out. Jet let out a breath of relief.

“How hard is it to just follow me,” Ruby whispered as she walked beside Jet.

“Ok, I-,” Jet began.

“Doesn’t matter. Put this on.” Ruby produced another long leather coat from within hers and handed it to Jet, who quickly threw it on. “Hold my hand.”

“What? Why?” Jet said, grateful that his new leather hood hid his blush.

Ruby grabbed his hand within her own. The warmth of her hand was blocked, however, by a cool metallic object. She slid her hand out, leaving him with the object and a fuzzy feeling.

“Maybe we should keep, uh, doing that, you know for the mission,” Jet stammered, internally berating himself for the awkwardness.

Ruby laughed a bit, though Jet wasn’t sure if it was with him or at him. “Let’s focus on staying alive,” she replied, though Jet could hear the smile in her voice.

He glanced down at his palm, which was now cradling a short knife. Instantly, uneasiness replaced his brief warmth, and he shuddered as he concealed it under his cloak. His free hand absentmindedly chipped flakes of pink blood from his brown cheek.

Ruby turned behind a booth, and Jet slid next to her. She silently pointed backwards, where a lone guard was herding the crowd to the front of the floor. She pointed at the Phayrin’s gun, then mimed a stabbing motion.

Jet sternly shook his head, and offered a hammering gesture instead.

Ruby rolled her eyes, but shrugged in half hearted agreement.

She stepped out and walked towards the guard. Jet moved opposite from her, and aimed to flank the Phayrin by approaching from the back. They had practiced diversion-based take-down tactics a lot

when they became agents, which helped suppress his rising anxiety. He continuously glanced between the oblivious guard and Ruby, who was standing in an abandoned store, bundling together clothes and blankets. Within his coat, he tightened his grip on the knife, intent to only use the hilt.

Ruby let out a wail of agony, which cut through the shouts of the crowd that was quickly thinning all around Jet. Despite his preparation, the sincerity of her cry made his heart skip a beat. She had always been a convincing actor. She ran up to the Phayrin, cradling the bundle of cloth tightly against her chest and the yellow bag flopping on her side. Jet dashed forward simultaneously, and as the Phayrin turned to see what Ruby was doing, He pulled his small knife out and focused on the spot on the back of the Phayrin's helmet where he would connect.

"Please help! My baby!" Ruby cried as she reached the guard. It glanced at her with unsure eyes, and stuttered as it barked an order at her. As she wailed again, the guard raised its gun. Although it was likely just to gesture, Jet was not going to take any chances; he pushed forward with all his strength. He reached the guard and carried the momentum of his sprint into an overhead bash; the rounded hilt of the knife crashed into the Phayrins head, and Jets' entire body shook with the impact, causing the knife to slip from his grip. The guard fell to the floor, with both hands clamped on the back of its head. It roared out in angered agony, but Ruby gave it a swift kick in the stomach and replaced the ragged bundle of cloth with its long red weapon. She pointed the gun at the Phayrin, but Jet grabbed her by the shoulder.

"We need to take cov-" he was cut off by a sudden hail of Phayrin shouts and gunfire. Bullets cracked the floor and turned chunks of stores to sawdust all around them. Ruby's scream cut through the cacophonous terror as she stumbled behind the stone base of a sturdy booth, with Jet following close and crouching beside her.

"How bad is it?" Ruby winced, locking eyes with Jet. He was terrified

to see panic in her deep green eyes.

"It was at least ten of 'em, but I'm not getting my head blown off to check," Jet said, panting.

"I mean my leg, idiot," Ruby stammered. He could see she was holding back tears.

Jet looked down and recoiled slightly. The calf of her uniform was shredded and oozing blood. Beneath that, all he could see was red. He didn't examine further. "Oh blast, not great," He gulped, trying to keep his voice from shaking. Terror washed over him as his head suddenly swirled with dread. He couldn't lose Ruby.

She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. "Jet..." She breathed slowly, while reaching out and grabbing his shoulder. Her desperate eyes met his. "Will I-" she started, pushing back a rising knot in her throat, "Will I make it out of here?"

"I'm not going to leave you," Jet whispered back. Through a veil of tears they locked eyes, and Ruby smiled faintly.

"Alright." She cocked the gun, let out a long breath, and started to lean around the side of the store, weapon first.

"No!" Jet shouted, tearing the gun from her hands, "What are you thinking!" Instead, he slid the clip out and grabbed a bullet from it, and held it up to her.

She skeptically glared back at him, but took the portal gun out of her bag and eyed the bullet. Between breaths, she muttered, "It's from Ferrumia- something, 5 probably. Do you think it'll work? It's not exactly a traditional rock."

"I don't know how picky the gun is, as long as it gets us out of here!" Jet snapped, handing her the black bullet. She put it on top of the portal gun, and instantly, its cyan lines glowed as the bullet melted and was pulled into the gun. She glanced at him, shrugged, pointed it forward, and fired.

They hacked and coughed as clouds of black fibers filled their lungs.

The portal shimmered in the air in front of them, opening a window into a seemingly endless expanse of black desert. Ruby groaned under her breath as she pushed herself forward and through the portal, falling onto the dunes of black sand on the other side. The gargle of the portal was nearly inaudible as more gunfire roared behind Jet, and he dove in quickly after her.

Swarf Fields on Ferrumia-5

The dunes were crested in the glow of moonlight, or moons-light, rather, seeing as two pale-blue moons peaked out behind the bellowing black clouds. The silence was only broken by a light breeze and stunted breathing. Jet pushed himself slowly towards Ruby, who laid unmoving on the ground next to him. He positioned himself next to her leg, which oozed blood into the black sand beneath them.

Hours and hours of first aid training guided him to tear the sleeve off his leather coat and wrap it tightly around the wound, though it could not stop his hands from shaking as he held her leg, and it could not rid his voice from its tremor as he whispered her name desperately.

“Please,” he mouthed, tears forming in his eyes. He moved up slightly, dreading to check her pulse. But as he approached, her eyes flickered open.

“Hey,” she said quietly, blinking as she glanced around, “oh look, I was right. Ferrumia-5.” She flashed a dumb smile at Jet.

Relief flooded him, and before he could think twice he threw his arms around her and pulled her into a tight hug. “Blast, Ruby, I thought you died!” He laughed.

She stayed in his embrace from a moment before pushing herself up

to sit. Wincing, she glanced down at the bloody mess surrounding her leg; her uniform was shredded and stained a deep crimson. She met Jet's eyes and said quietly, "Thanks, that was... brave. Sorry the mission kinda went to shit, but at least you still have my back." The compliment helped alleviate the maddening anxiety building within him, and simply nodded in response.

They sat and admired the ocean of darkness that stretched out as far as they could see. It's gorgeous uniformity was broken by a smudge on the horizon, identifiable only by the thick plumes of black smoke pumping out of it.

"Alright, you got us here, what's the plan?" Ruby said, turning to Jet.

"Do you feel like walking a 600k?" He chuckled in response, pointing to the far off factory.

Ruby looked up at the sky briefly, then back at him. "We have 14 and a half hours of night time left. Then, the swarf will heat up in the sun and we'll burn," She replied.

"Swarf?"

She held up a handful of sand and let it fall between her fingers. "Metal dust, basically."

"How do you know all of this stuff?" Jet blurted out. Though legitimately curious, it felt awkward to say.

"I study," she remarked, earnestly, "I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm never at all your parties, and I never go out to the bars. I just... study." she looked down as she said it, almost shamefully. Instantly, Jet regretted bringing it up.

"Ruby.. that's fine, I mean, that's just how you are," Jet apologized, unsure of what to say. "I mean, I kinda make fun of you for being a human computer but we both know if you didn't have the brains you do we wouldn't be here. Like, remember on Hathin? I would've never guessed that releasing one of our air tanks would cause an explosion! If you didn't know that, we would've died!"

Ruby spun and glared at him. "But you should've! You should've known! You- you just don't pay attention, or read the mission description! *You* would've died, Jet. Not *we* would've. Do you think I like to spend all day studying? Do you think I'd rather study than go shooting or drinking?"

Jet was shocked. Part of him wanted to fight back. Part of him wanted to cry. "Ruby, I- I don't- You just always did it. You always studied. You always knew things. I don't know, I thought that was just the way things were." He cringed internally at his awful rebuttal. "If you don't like me, why don't you just request a transfer? Why put up with me for, like, two years?"

Ruby had turned back to looking forward while he was talking. She opened her mouth slightly, but closed it and didn't answer. "Let's just make a plan," She said, instead.

Jet was a bit annoyed that she dodged the question. They had similar arguments in the past, where he had asked the same thing, but she never answered.

"Fine, let's make a plan." He looked at what they had with them, and was disheartened at how short the list was. They had the portal gun, two ripped up leather overcoats, the yellow bag, and the Phayrin weapon. He held up the bag and showed Ruby the metal clasp that held it shut. "Will this get us anywhere?"

She looked up and around and pointed at a green dot in the sky. "Ferrumia-2. The atmosphere is so toxic it would melt you like a candle," she replied. He vaguely remembered that from Planetary Science 101, but that class was years ago.

Jet sighed slightly, and lifted his coat to point at a button on it, but was cut off by a loud gurgling noise and the hiss of leaking air. Cursing in unison, they stood up, Jet supporting Ruby as she rose on her good leg. She grabbed the real gun and quickly turned around, her injured leg dragging slightly as she spun. Jet picked up the portal gun, unsure

of what to do.

Between them and their company sat a wide dune, one that wasn't steep enough to provide any cover. They moved backwards, Ruby's staggered steps supported on his shoulder. She aimed the gun at the top of the hill and stared through its sight.

They moved behind a farther dune, and while Ruby watched around the edge, Jet examined the portal gun. He noticed something he hadn't seen before: a dial on the back that shifted from pointing at a small arrow to a large, slightly arched arrow. He spun it under his thumb up from and down and watched the barrel tighten and widen as he did. He had an idea.

From beside him, Ruby fired several shots before pulling herself behind the hill. Next to her, bullets blew waves of sand up at sporadic intervals. She flashed four fingers at Jet, and waited until the barrage to slow. While she sat there, Jet grabbed the portal gun and the yellow bag and rotated around the hill to the other side. Quickly, he tore the clasp of the bag and shoved it on top of his gun. As the cyan lines glowed and the clasp liquified, he flicked the dial on the back to its top height, causing the barrel to narrow very thin. With a deep breath, he popped out from behind the sand and fired at the loose group of Phayrin.

A hairlike shimmer flew out the front of the gun and in an instant it opened up on the sand in front of the guards. Immediately, a whoosh of gas flooded out of the portal and around the confused Phayrins. They reeled back; their veiny hands clutching their faces as they dashed and dove for cover. After just a moment, the rattle of gunfire rang out as Ruby blasted calculated bullets through the thick cloud. As the smoke cleared, all four Phayrin laid in the sand with bubbling blisters and bloody bullet holes.

Jet released a shaky breath looking over them, before heaving and rolled onto his back, taking deep, panicked breaths and trying to rid the image from his head. He couldn't. His mind kept screaming at him,

his thoughts at war with each other. Why should these Phayrin have to die for the crimes of others? Surely, they themselves weren't slavers, he betted they were practically slaves themselves! His vision blurred as tears filled his eyes, but everytime he blinked to clear them he saw the bodies laying in the sand again. He had become an agent to help people. To stop all the terrible stuff that no one wanted to think about. To stop other kids from having to go through what he did. The image of the Phayrin in the sand refreshed an agonizingly similar memory he tried to forget. The day he found his clan laying in the mud. The day he tried to lay next to them, the day he wished he died.

"Damn, they were smart, nothing we could use to portal out," Ruby said from the other side of the hill. As she limped into view, she gasped and dropped a still-glistening gun she had foraged. "Holy shit, are you hit?" she asked with wide eyes as she dropped to kneel beside him, frantically she looked over him, but it was only old Phayrin blood that covered him. "I- I can't find- Jet what's wrong?!" She stammered.

"What's wrong?" He replied in disbelief. "Ruby... Ruby, we just killed four men. And a fifth in the lab. Plus countless innocent people back on Ordaza," he muttered, staring at Ruby. He knew her response before she said it.

"I... I know. But we took an oath that we would do what it takes, and the ends do justify the means. I'm sorry, but the bottom line is we have to finish our mission." she reached over and grabbed the portal gun from where he had unknowingly thrown it, "and that's this. We have to keep going, Jet. Please."

He looked up at Ruby, past her dangling necklace and into her deep green eyes. They were soft as they looked down at him. For once, he saw real, genuine care in them, instead of the cold tolerance she usually gave off.

Without thinking, Jet slowly lifted his hand. He wanted to reach up, brush aside a stray lock of hair. He wanted to hold her, and more so

for her to hold him. Instead, his fingers found their way around the coarse red pendant of her necklace. “We need to get out of here,” He said, disappointed in himself.

Ruby pulled off the necklace and looked down at it. It twinkled slightly as she turned it in her hands, and she sighed. “My dad gave this on my 5th birthday,” she spoke softly, answering the unspoken question. “Red Lung got him a couple months after.” With somber eyes, she took the red rock out of the necklace, and wordlessly placed it into the portal gun. She closed her eyes as it melted and disappeared, then pointed at the ground in front of them and fired.

The air gained a hazy red tint and a stale smell. Jet sat up and they leaned forward to peer into the shimmering circle, but only a void stared them back, a black spot on the dark sand. Ruby dropped both Phayrin weapons through first, and was revealed to hear an immediate clatter on the floor along with the normal guttural noises. She glanced back at Jet, and lowered herself in. The portal released another of its sounds, like the noise of choking on water. Ruby’s voice came from within, “all good.” He crawled to the edge and looked through, but still saw nothing but black. Internally shrugging, he dropped, feet first, into the darkness.

Mining Village on Korun

“Cover your mouth,” Ruby’s muffled voice advised, accompanied by a light echo. “The less you breathe down here, the better.”

Jet pulled the collar of the tattered leather coat over his mouth. “Where are we?” he asked.

“In a mine. Here, hold this,” she responded, shoving a Phayrin gun towards him. He fumbled to grab it in the dark, and found his hand lighting brushing against hers during the exchange. She pulled back quickly. “Follow me.”

With one hand holding both the gun and the coat over his mouth and the other waving in front of him to avoid crashing into something, he followed Ruby’s uneven footsteps. He realized how tortuous this must be on her injured leg.

“Do you know where to go?” he inquired as they continued their blind march. He was disheartened to feel them walking on level ground. At this rate, they’ll never reach the surface.

“Yeah. Put your hand on the wall, there’s a groove that leads to the exit,” she replied.

After poking himself once or twice on the jagged wall, he found the indent. It was probably only two centimeters deep, but once his finger

was in the groove, it was easy to follow.

They walked, Ruby with her lopsided limp, for several minutes, but there was still no discernable vertical increase. Jet dreaded that the tunnel was hundreds of kilometers long, or that there would be a broken elevator at the end. However, his anxiety was alleviated as slowly, the tunnel brightened.

Though still very dim, Jet could at least see what was around him. Ruby walked awkwardly ahead of him, wrapped in her leather coat and carrying both guns under one arm while the other followed the groove. Surrounding them was a winding tunnel, roughly circular, with sharp rocks jutting out of the floor and ceiling as far as his limited vision could see.

Then, after following the curving corridor for another minute or so, they saw a bright, hazy light casting beams through the red fog of the mine.

"Finally," They muttered in unison. As they exited the large mountain, Jet looked around at Ruby's home. There was no nature, no weeds poking between the boulderous landscape and no grass growing on the flattened mud roads. Dotting the valley were clusters of sizable cone-shaped buildings, constructed of gray rocks smothered in gray grout. From within one misshaped window, two frightened eyes stared at him and Ruby. She took the lead, leading him down a barren dirt road.

As they walked, they passed a wide, short building, which Jet would have mistaken for a pointed boulder pile if it weren't for the windows. Glancing in, his heart sunk. Sat around a cup-covered table inside were three Phayrin, dressed in steel gray body armor and black ribbons. Slavers.

He spun to look at Ruby, but she already was looking within, unsurprised.

"You didn't think it would be important to mention this?" Jet hissed

quietly as they walked.

Ruby shrugged. "As long as no one tips them off, there's no way they'll recognize us," she replied coolly, "Just keep your gun under your coat."

"Ruby, I *always* have guns under my coat," He chuckled as he lifted an arm in an exaggerated flex.

She rolled her eyes. "You're going to want to keep the jokes to a minimum here," she responded dryly.

"Great, a whole planet of Rubys," he mumbled to himself.

As they reached the center of the town, they passed a tall rock with a transparent piece of paper on it, visible only by its familiar image and disheartening text. Under a grainy photo of the two of them from back on Phayriph, it read:

ATTENTION ALL
WANTED ALIVE FOR A GENEROUS REWARD
JET HAL'THZAR AND RUBY OLK
ARMED AND BRUTAL
REWARD NULL IF THE
WHITE HANDGUN
IS LOST

Jet carefully pulled off the poster, and folded it into his pocket. He could already picture it hanging in his sleeping compartment.

"They might recognize us," He said, a light smile covering his building anxiety.

"They want us alive, huh?" Ruby pondered, without acknowledging his comment, "They probably want to figure out where the agency is; squash our missions from the source."

"I guess," he replied. The idea of getting tortured skyrocketed his anxiety further.

After a short silence and continued walking, she pointed forward at a cluster of three cones jutting out of the ground, at the end of the firm dirt path. As they approached, Jet could make out "OLK" carved into

the keystone of the doorway, and he considered joking that he would've needed a much larger stone but was cut off; a woman had stepped out of the house, and was watching them.

She was tall and frail, with gray hair and a crooked back. Despite her ailment, her face was stern, mirroring Ruby's expression for the first couple years of training. She led Jet and Ruby into one of the cones and sat them down at the stone table within. Jet glanced around, his eyes following the long shelves, lingering briefly on each empty ration can.

"You must be Mrs. Olk," He greeted, warmly, after a few moments of silence. Ruby had made no attempt to introduce him. "My name is Jet, I'm a friend of Ruby's from the Agency."

"This is my *partner*, Jet," She corrected quickly, shooting a cold look at him.

Mrs. Olk nodded slowly. "He was in your letters, before they stopped delivering them."

Jet was having trouble thinking of something to say, which never happened. "All good things, I hope," he chuckled with a smile. It was not reciprocated.

She turned to Ruby, "You two sleep in your hut, I will bandage your leg."

Ruby nodded, as Jet started to understand where her cold pragmatism had come from.

As night began to fall, they settled in. They sat on stone beds with thin blankets, and didn't talk until Mrs. Olk finished wrapping Ruby's leg and had gone off to bed.

"Not exactly a warm welcome," Jet said, unsure.

"My mom was never the life of the house," Ruby agreed.

He had some questions he considered asking, but instead said, "Let's get some rest. Good night, Ruby."

"Good night, Jet."

He laid in the haze of half-consciousness for hours before sleep finally

took over. The rigid bed was beyond uncomfortable, and he slept curled up, shivering under the stiff blanket.

He woke with a sore hip, instinctively made the bed, and stumbled outside to find Ruby. As he left the cone, he caught the tail-end of a conversation from within the smallest of the huts.

“-Skin and bones! You must, don’t worry about us,” Ruby’s hushed voice was exclaiming.

“Very well,” replied the crackling voice of her mother.

Confused, Jet slid back into the structure he slept in, and sat on the bed to think. Before long, however, Ruby stode in and jumped slightly as she saw Jet. Her limp was far less prevalent now.

“Since when do you wake up before noon?” She asked through a forced smile.

Jet rubbed his eyes, though the grogginess had since been replaced by interest. “I just woke up actually. How are you feeling?” He replied. He wanted to figure out what was going on but he knew he couldn’t. He couldn’t put a split between Ruby and himself, she was all he had, especially now.

“I *feel* like we should lay low for a bit, and not be seen. I’m going to polish up the guns, and you might wanna bathe,” She said, looking at the filth and dried blood that covered him.

The day was slow: a much needed break. Ruby sat in the dining hut, examining the weapons and portal gun. Jet carried a bucket between the house and the well next to the graveyard, each trip reading headstones in the rock field: nearly all simply read a name and “Red Lung”.

After bathing, he soaked his uniform and tried to scrub the blood off. The stains weren’t obvious on his black combat pants, but the pink splatters on his buttoned white shirt were irremediable. A long stain resided largely on his suspenders and completely ruined them. He sighed as he unsuccessfully scrubbed, begrudgingly imagining himself suspenderless. Then all he had to do was unroll his sleeves to completely

match Ruby. After a little over an hour, he gave up, and went to find her out of boredom.

She brought him down a path to a large boulder field, and led him into the rocks. There was a small opening where they could sit next to one another hip to hip. Illuminated by beams of light that fell between the rocks, Ruby pointed at her name, carved on the wall.

"I used to come down here as a kid, to play away from all the noise," she said in a low voice, "People used to be very lively."

Jet drew in the moment, the warmth of Ruby beside him, the soft smile on her face. He wanted to remember this.

"It's peaceful," he breathed back. The only noise besides them was a soft whistle of wind through the stones.

"Yeah," She whispered back.

Side by side they sat, listening, breathing, and enjoying each other's company. Jet wished he could catch a glimpse of what Ruby was thinking, and as she turned to him and smiled, he thought for a second he could. He smiled back, but didn't dare try anything.

After a few minutes, they rose and crawled out, Ruby grabbing his hand in hers to keep their balance. Even after they were both stable, he could have sworn she held it for an extra moment.

By the end of the day, Jet felt much better, and while still anxious, he felt the tension in his shoulders lessen, and the dizzying panic faded. As they curled up for the night, Jet giggled at Ruby for sleeping with one of the guns in her clutches, and drifted into pleasant sleep.

He dreamt of his home, Ca'firr. He wandered through the groves under the tall trees, dancing to the Lullbird's song. Ruby danced with him, at first just alongside him, but after a bit, within his arms. The music swelled, and he was happy.

The melody turned to crashing, and gunshots, and yelling, and Jet's eyes pulled open.

"Get up!" Ruby shouted, tossing him the second of the guns. Before

he fully processed what was happening, he was standing beside the door frame, gun cocked and adrenaline pumping.

He shouted at Ruby, "We have to get your mom!" Glancing through the doorway, he saw about six Phayrins aiming back at him, their black ribbons swaying in the morning breeze.

"Jet!" She yelled back, "We can't fight our way out of this!"

He was slightly bewildered, in all their missions Ruby was never the one who suggested backing down, ever. But now? With only a couple Phayrin aiming back at her? "What? It's gotta be less than ten," He challenged between gunshots.

"Trust me." Before Jet could answer, Ruby grabbed the whitish blanket off her bed and waved it in the doorway, before stepping out with her hands up and dropping her gun. Jet glanced back at the portal gun, which still sat on one of the bedside rocks. Confused, he followed Ruby.

He followed her into the now gathered Phayrin, who patted them down. He followed her into the bar, where the rest of the Phayrin sat, who glanced at them before returning to drinks. And he followed her as the Phayrin barked into a radio and a portal appeared on the excavated floor. With a gun to his back and gurgling portal in front of him, he followed her.

Prison Cell on Phayriph

Their blindfolds weren't taken off until they were thrown into the room. It had padded white walls with soft edges and a toilet in the corner. Each side of the floor were raised beds, without bedding. The door didn't have a handle, only a thin slot with a metal cover. Ruby sat with her head in her hands, unspeaking.

"Alright what's the plan?" Jet asked, a mix of confusion and disbelief in his rising voice, "What's the grand plan? Because now we have no portal gun, no normal guns, and no way to radio home!" Ruby stayed still, silent. He took a deep breath. "Blast, Ruby, I'm sorry but how in the worlds are we gonna get outta here?"

"I fucked up," she answered quietly, "I thought we would be put in a standard prison cell model CX13... but-"

Jet spun around once or twice, throwing his arms up in confusion. "What? What does that mean?"

She looked up at him, and he was taken aback to see tears in the corners of her eyes. "It means we *aren't* getting out of here. This... this is bad."

His anger melted, and he stared blankly back at her. "What?" His voice shook.

“Every book I’ve read has called this thing inescapable. It’s a Lailsin model. I thought they cut off relations with Phayriph, but...” Ruby replied, trailing off.

Jet shuddered thinking back to a mission they had on Lailsin. It was a moon covered in little boxes, where the most horrible prisoners were held. There was a rumor that even if the prisoners escaped, they had nowhere to go, and would just starve as they wandered around. The whole mission Jet was spinning around, trying to prevent some lunatic from killing the two of them.

“There’s always a way out though, right? No such thing as inescapable?” He whispered, pleadingly.

Ruby met his eyes with a mournful look, and sorrowfully shook her head.

He tried to splutter out a question but lost the words. If Ruby was hopeless... he leaned against the wall and slid down. He couldn’t just die in some box. “What about... what if...” He didn’t know what to say, he felt thousands of thoughts throbbing in his head, but incoherency took over. He let out a shaky breath.

It felt like days that they just milled about, lost in thought. Ruby sat still, back straight and eyes closed, with a reserved look. Jet, however, felt himself pacing back and forth, internally arguing. *Could it be a test? Some weird play by Ruby? I’m sure they’re watching us, so maybe? No way. Ruby wouldn’t do that. She’s a great liar. Not that good though, those tears looked real. Well I have to think of something! Maybe the agency will save us? We lost the portal gun, so now we are just two midlevel agents in the heart of the most dangerous slavers on this side of the galaxy. Help isn’t coming. Blast! I’m gonna die in here.* Jet trailed off, and he sat on the bed across from Ruby, bouncing his leg involuntarily.

He had a hard time keeping track of days, so he counted meals instead. They had received two ration pills each, which Jet equated to three or four days. Ruby had been very quiet, but her tearful eyes had since

turned to thoughtful ones. After a tread of disheartening talks, Jet stopped initiating conversation, which led to them rarely speaking for long. Instead, he kept going over the mission, wondering what he did wrong, and trying to figure out why Ruby had surrendered. He asked her a couple times, but of course, she never answered.

He sat in puzzlement, pouring over his memory, trying to remember every detail. He found himself analyzing their days at Ruby's home. Specifically, the conversation he overheard.

"Ruby?" He asked, pausing despite knowing she wouldn't answer. She was sitting on her bed with her eyes closed. "Ruby, do you think they are gonna give whoever sold us out that 'generous reward' the poster promised?" Her eyelids twitched slightly, which was a frequent occurrence, but provoked Jet regardless. "Because I hope so." He didn't want to form a rift between them, but he had to put a theory to rest. Plus, Ruby wasn't being very friendly anyway. "I hope some old woman can get the food she needs because of us. So she's not... *skin and bones*." Jet spat through clenched teeth. He hoped he was wrong.

Ruby's eyes pulled open. "Jet... you saw her..." She said with a pleading voice, cocking her head slightly.

Jet jumped to his feet, his dread becoming fury. "I can't believe you! Ms. Follow-Protocol! Ms. For-The-Mission! Selling us out!?" He could feel his blood boiling, and instead of repressing it like he always tried to, he let it envelop him. "You killed us, Ruby! You literally walked us straight into prison! I mean, I can't think of anything to say worse than the truth! Look at this! We're not gonna die in here, Ruby, WE'RE ALREADY DEAD!" He screamed, his red face spitting as he enunciated the final words. He had seen this side of himself before, and he knew he needed to calm down. It never led anywhere good.

"Jet, I'll find a way out-" she hissed with a sharp voice. "The first step of this 'master plan' is for you to calm down!"

"Calm down?! We failed, Ruby! We can't save anyone! When's the

next time you think The Agency can find a mole in a Phayrin lab! You think you're so smart? Yeah? Well ponder this one over, ok? You're an emotionless bitch!" he huffed, blinking his eyes and looking away in instant regret. She spun away from him, slouched in anger and an unseen tear. biting his tongue, he cocked his head, and reached a desperate hand forward.

"Ruby, blast, I- I'm sorry" he started, desperately. His anger was long lost in overpowering waves of guilt. "I shouldn't've said that, that's not-"

"Whatever," She mumbled bitterly, "It doesn't matter, just shut up and let me keep thinking."

"No, that was wrong of me. But you have to see my side here, ok? I don't know your plan, I don't even know if you have a plan," He backtracked, internally begging her to turn back towards him. She didn't respond. "Ruby, please. I don't want it to be like that in here, I want to have a friend-"

"Shut up."

"Ruby," He pleaded. "Please! I don't wanna die in here." His voice cracked with tears, but she stayed silent.

Days passed, and while only a few words were spoken between them, the sharpness in Ruby's voice had faded, and was replaced by quiet despair. The isolation was becoming painful. It felt like she wasn't even there, and he spent days pacing back and forth, muttering to himself.

The white walls are the worst part, Jet thought to himself. *Look at them, I hate them.* He sat on his bed, with his nose centimeters away from the cushioned white wall. His breathing slowly picked up pace, and his face reddened slightly. Suddenly, he reel back and slammed his fist into the wall, full force. The padded wall indented, but reformed exactly as it was before. Jet started tearing and scratching at it, even trying to bite it, but his attacks slipped off with no avail. From behind him, Ruby watched with a worried look. She opened her mouth, but no words came out, and she turned and slumped over, sealing her eyes.

Jet stopped, mid punch. *What am I doing? What happened? That's... that's not me. I- I- Oh blast, am I losing it? I can't be, not so soon!*

"Ruby, you gotta figure something out, please! I can't-" He started, frantically

"Please, calm down," She said, her soft voice sounding desperate, yet caring.

It felt soothing, and Jets breathing slowed. "Come on, let's brainstorm, there's gotta be a way out," he urged.

She looked down, unanswering.

"The toilet," he suggested. "Do you think we could-?"

"No. The pipes are far too small," She replied, automatically. He knew already. *Of course they're too small, but please. Please, Ruby, please figure something out.*

"Fine. Well, what if when they give us the ration pills-?" He asked, desperate to keep her talking. He hadn't realized how much he had missed her voice.

"What? We bite the hand that feeds us?" She responded with an empty chuckle.

"Come on, suggest something!" Jet begged. *You're the smart one, you gotta get us out of here!*

"I don't know. Nothing seems feasible without major losses. I just need to think," She responded. Jet was mildly pleased to see what he assumed would be his death considered a major loss.

"Well, what are those plans? Maybe I can help?" he continued, hopeful. If Ruby had any ideas, he was all ears. But she didn't answer, which he realized meant she didn't want anyone overhearing. *That means she still is considering it, right? Oh my stars, is Ruby gonna kill me?! No, that's stupid. She wouldn't... Would she?*

To clear his thoughts, he decided to think of his own plan, again. His past couple had fizzled out quickly, but he felt like maybe something had changed. *Rubys not all-knowing, I'm sure I could find something*

she overlooked, he tried to convince himself, but he wasn't so sure. Nevertheless, he gave it a shot. After a while of unlikely hypotheticals, he looked up at Ruby.

"What do you think is in the walls?" he asked, pushing against the white cushion surrounding them. The small indent refilled immediately, like it always did.

She was sitting with her head in her hands, and spoke without moving, "Air, probably. Some gas. We probably can't get to it, though. It's a thick layer of plastic or whatever."

Jet pondered for a second, then wondered, "How strong do you think the door is?"

"We aren't brute forcing through the door," Ruby replied. *Of course we aren't, but give me something to work with!*

Three-ish days later, he decided to try something. After two ration pills were dropped through the slot, he eyed the thin metal plate that covered it. *Those hinges don't look that strong.* He rolled up his sleeves, and Ruby looked over at him, disinterested.

With both hands on the metal sheet, he yanked as hard as he could. Ruby rolled her eyes and returned to thought. Jet pulled again, and felt a slight pop. In an instant, he fell backwards, holding up a slightly bent piece of metal. He looked up at Ruby with a frazzled smile, and handed it to her.

"Here! Pick the lock!"

"You idiot, look at the door." The disappointment in her voice was palpable.

There was no lock. There wasn't even a doorknob. *Blast, you fool! There's nothing there! What are you doing!* "Yeah, I know," he countered quickly, looking around, "It's for... Uhh... This!" He took the piece of metal and slammed it into the wall. When he reeled back to stab again, no mark was left behind.

"Well congrats, Jet. There goes something we could have actually used,

you know, to escape. Just let me think of the plans, ok?” She asserted, her voice rising slightly with annoyance.

“You just want me to sit around all day while you come up with some impossible escape? You know-” He started.

“Yeah, actually, I do! Listen, we can talk, but just know that they are listening, and that every moment we spend talking is a moment I don’t spend getting us out of here!” she shouted, sternly.

I don’t care if I need to spend an extra day in here, Jet thought later, as he laid in bed, *I need to keep talking to Ruby.* He rolled over, and his attention was interrupted by something digging into his back. His first thought was that it was the bent piece of metal, but he had thrown that on the ground in annoyed discouragement. Discreetly, he hunched over where he felt the poke and looked down, before clasping his hand around it. *The bolt! From the hinge I popped, of course! Now that’ll be useful. I need to find a way to give it to Ruby. She’ll know what to do. Wait, do I? Maybe I could use this to get us out of here, that would be impressive, she’s like that.* considering for a moment, he concluded, *No pointing in handing it over right away, I guess,* and slipped it into his pocket.

The next morning, Jet and Ruby awoke to see the metal flap gone, and the slot simply left open. Jet immediately slid a hand over his pants; the bolt was still snugly tucked in it.

Ruby’s face filled with puzzlement staring at where the flap had been. She paced slightly and sat down, eyes closed but twitching. Jet rolled his eyes and flopped back onto his bed.

He asked Ruby about fourteen random things throughout that day (he counted), but none were answered with more than a “shush” or a “shut up”.

However, by keeping up this trend of questioning, they slowly began talking more and more frequently. Though usually Ruby answered with awkward small talk, one night she asked him an unexpected question.

“Why do you keep me around? You put up with me as much as the

other way around.”

Jet, caught off guard, wanted to answer earnestly, but outright telling his cellmate he might love them didn't seem smart. “I need you... to do anything, really. I don't know, I rely on you- and you're reliable, so, usually, it works out.” He hoped she didn't take it as passive aggressive, but she seemed not too.

She contemplated his words deeply, nodding slowly as she did. After more than a comfortable amount of time, she sighed, “Thanks, Jet, I rely on you, too.”

It felt unnatural, and his heart skipped as he considered the possibility that it was her idea of flirting. He doubted it. The conversation ended shortly after, as they always did, with Ruby slipping into unanswering thought.

One day, suddenly, after taking their ninth ration pills, Ruby stood up, with a resolute look on her face. “Jet, I don't want to do this anymore. If we are gonna be stuck in here, we should at least talk to each other, and be honest with each other.” Her voice had a twinge of regret in it, but Jet was more focused on her words. The nervous feeling inside him rose, as it always did when he thought about confessing his feelings to Ruby. *Screw it, I gotta know if she likes me. I'll say something inconspicuous, try to see how she reacts.*

“Ruby, Rhubarb, Ru-bot... There's been something I've been meaning to-” he started, but she cut him off.

“Jet I know I don't always show it, but I like you, I always have. And... I guess-”

“You do?” Jet said abruptly, his confusion masked a swelling warmth pumping through him. “I mean, I-”

“Yeah!” stumbled Ruby with a hopeful smile, “And I guess if we are stuck here-”

“Yeah?” Jet asked with an inquisitive grin.

“Maybe we could talk more... closely? I don't know the word,” She

giggled.

“Yeah! I have liked you for so long! I never knew that you felt the same!” Jet beamed, blinded by excitement.

Ruby let out a breath of partial relief. “I was never sure how you felt so...” she started.

Jet laughed, “imagine how I felt.”

They sat, talking, and Jet confessed he had liked Ruby since they had met during their third year of training, and Ruby responded she had felt the spark when she had fallen out of a tree during a mission on Boscagous.

Jet remembered her yelping as the branch she was climbing snapped. He was in the middle of saying ‘watch out, they’re brittle’ when it happened, and he had finished the sentence, giggling, while catching her. She hadn’t laughed.

“Wow, last year?!” He said, smiling broadly, “I wish I had the courage to say something sooner, but I didn’t think you felt the same. I mean, you can be a bit cold.”

Ruby paused for a second but smiled and replied, “I thought if you found out you would transfer, and I figured our friendship would have to suffice.”

They talked for a couple hours, by far the longest conversation they had ever had. Jet never had a problem talking, but Ruby was showing a whole new side, a talkative one. She even laughed at his jokes, which usually only garnered a groan.

As they grew tired, Jet fell asleep with a smile, barely recognizing the painful white walls around them. Almost every night his dreams reminded him that he was stuck, destined to die, but not this one. Instead, he dreamed of a festival on his home planet, Ca’firr, where he walked with his hand entwined in Ruby’s. Something felt off throughout it, though: Ruby’s hand felt far too cold, and far too limp.

He awoke in a sweat. He couldn’t remember the end of his dream,

but it wasn't a happy one. He glanced at Ruby, who laid, asleep, on the other side of the room.

He looked at her leg, but it had healed for the most part, just a patchwork of scabs and tender skin. He had been asking her how it was every other day, and she always said it was fine. He took deep breaths, and sat down. She was healthy, and slept peacefully with the same resting frown she always did. Reassured, he laid down. *She's ok*, he whispered to himself between yawns. *Everythings ok. We're together, that's all that matters.*

He woke up with a burning thought in his mind. A terrible doubt. Ruby looked at him with a smile but part of him resisted. Conflicted, he looked deep into her eyes. Were they genuine? They seemed dull, less deep green and more dark green. *That doesn't make any sense, though. She's gotta be genuine. Why wouldn't she be? What would she even have to gain?* His mind responds with a suppressed memory.

A couple missions ago, Jet and Ruby were on a recon mission in a large clothing and armor store called "Date Fight". They were supposed to be spying on some alien criminal with a stupid name Jet couldn't remember, plus, he was far more interested in the clothes, anyway. He put on a variety of outfits, but each time Ruby told him he looked like a different subspecies of slug. Afterwards, he asked her what she thought he *would* look good in, to which she had said "you don't have the looks to dress good."

"Ruby, would you say I'm good looking?" He asked through a fake smile.

Her eyes flickered up and down over him, and she paused for longer than Jet would've liked. "Yeah. You've got a strong jaw line and a symmetrical face."

He never knew how to feel about Ruby's compliments, as they were always strangely technical. He wanted to feel good, but no rush of warmth filled him.

What's wrong with me? Ruby just said- Yeah but come on. That sounded fake. She's gotta be acting, look at her eyes! No, that's probably just something weird for being in prison for like a month.

Ruby seemed to think for a minute, and looked at him with slight puzzlement. "Do you...?"

Jet wasn't sure how to word his answer. He thought Ruby was beautiful, but didn't know what to point out to explain it. "Yeah!" Jet said quickly. He was worried for a second that he had paused in thought and didn't want to give off the wrong feeling. "You have awesome hair and eyes that I get lost staring at," He answered genuinely.

She blushed, and looked away to conceal a small smile. *Can't fake that!* Jets thoughts raced. *You complimented her, idiot, that doesn't mean anything. It could still all be an act.* He didn't like that the doubt in his mind sounded like Ruby.

"Well, what now?" he asked, hoping to gain a bit more insight into what she may be thinking

She looked around, as if anything in their plain white room would've changed suddenly. "I don't know. It's pretty hard to go on a date if you're locked in a box, huh."

Jet nodded. *That sounded fake. She's lying! There's no way she would be into me! No, no that's stupid. Think! Why would she even lie? I don't know, but I never know with Ruby. I need to think of something to ask her to check.* "Hey do you remember last mission, we were on Spithis-" he started.

"Spithus, and yeah we were hired as guards to the Merchant Guilds diplomat, Hinery Spec," She interjected.

"Yeah, and before we escorted him you said my hair was stupid." Jet was aware that he was being overly self-conscious, but Ruby rarely said things she didn't mean.

"No, I said to fix your hair because it made *you* look stupid, which was true. You looked like an Apalsian Porcupine," she retorted, looking slightly annoyed.

Jet had no idea what that was, and must have Ruby read his blank stare, because she continued, "It's a black spiky rodent with- nevermind it doesn't matter. I was just saying that if you're meeting a diplomat and a planet leader you should try to look more professional."

The answer hadn't made Jet feel much better, so he quickly changed the subject. "Fine, well what about like six missions ago, we were on that yellow planet and we got in that big fight and you said you wished you weren't forced to keep me around?" He hated even thinking about it. He tried hard to forget about that.

"We all say things we don't mean Jet, I'm sorry. You've said your fair share of insults too, though. It's not important, ok, I didn't mean it, let's just move on," She answered, with a concerned look.

That's not how Ruby talks. She doesn't say things she doesn't mean. Oh, blast, is this like a clone or something?! No, that doesn't make any sense. Why can't I just believe her!

"Yeah, you're right, I guess, sorry. I just didn't think you liked me, honestly," He murmured.

"Well," Ruby got up and sat down next to Jet, hip to hip, "I do." She put an arm around him, shooting a rush of warmth through him. *What if she kisses me?* He suddenly thought, alarmed. *That wouldn't be too bad. Yes it would! I don't want my first kiss with Ruby to feel like a lie! I always pictured it as something more romantic. Something less... stupid. Well then make it romantic!*

He leaned over, so that the tip of his nose was against the bottom of her ear. He felt her draw in a breath and held it. "Hey" he whispered against her neck. She turned slowly, and his nose drew lightly across her cheek and stopped next to her nose. With their lips a breath apart, they gazed into each other's eyes. *Wow.* Her dark green eyes beamed back through half lowered eyelids, and he was convinced. Raising a hand to her soft cheek, he leaned in ever so slightly, and their lips met.

Prison Cell on Phayriph

I KISSED HER! He thought behind a wide smile. She was laying in her bed, presumably asleep, but Jet could barely contain himself. *AND SHE KISSED ME! I knew it! I knew she was being real!* He couldn't believe it had happened. For three years he had dreamt of this, often literally. No little voice in the back of his head could ruin it. He drifted into blissful sleep, his smile never leaving his face.

When he woke, she was sitting on her bed looking back at him. He opened his eyes, and she smiled at him, meeting his gaze. Internally, he squealed with joy.

"Good morning," She said softly, "I had a great idea."

Jet sat up, intrigued. "Yeah?"

"When we get out of here, we should quit. Travel on our own for a bit, what do you think?" She asked, hopefully.

Jet thought for a moment, though not about his answer. *When! She said "When"! She has a plan!* "That sounds awesome," He answered, still distracted by his train of thought.

"Great! I say after quitting we go straight from the Agency to Red Xito for a bioluminescent dinner, and then maybe land in a meteor field and spend the night star gazing," She said. She was talking quickly, like

she had been planning this for a while.

"Uh huh," Jet agreed, "That sounds-"

"We'll take one of the Agency's speeders. We can grab it on our way out when we quit. They won't even notice it's gone. They're great for sightseeing," She continued. Jet didn't even notice he had been interrupted.

He pulled her into a hug, eager to hold her. "That sounds great," he smiled. He was too excited to notice her nervous shaking. *She wants to spend time with me! Oh, I hope her escape plan works, cause I'm going to give her the best date ever.* "I can't wait," he whispered, she pulled back from the hug, staring him squarely in the eyes.

"I can't wait either," she said with a weak smile. *Aww she's nervous to talk to me! That's so cute!*

Jet slid his hand into his pocket and pulled the pin into his palm. *Hopefully, this can help her.* He reached out and held her hands in his, sliding the pin into her grip. She held it tightly and pulled away, slipping it into her own pocket.

"We will find a way out of here," She assured. Her eyes turned from thankful to determined. "We have to."

Jet smiled and nodded but internally his heart sank. *Wait. Wait oh no! Does she not have a plan? What??* He tried to speak but his voice got caught in his throat. *Ruby, you have to get us out of here!*

She laid down on her bed, facing away from him. *Hopefully making a plan.* Jet sat in thought as well, recounting everything that happened in the last day, trying to make sense of it all. *Is she being genuine? She must be, she kissed me! No, I kissed her... Well she kissed back. What was all that talk about stealing a ship? That's not Ruby. Maybe that's her idea of romantic. Maybe it is romantic, I wouldn't know. Blast, why is everything so confusing! I wish there was anything to do here. If I pretend to be dead, they might take my body out, just like they did with the metal. Probably not. Maybe if we wait for them to come get something we could overpower them.*

That could work. I need to get the pin back, then. And I would need to tell Ruby, still though, it could work.

Later, though he wasn't sure how long it had been, he sat next to Ruby and began to whisper, "I may have found a way out of here—"

"They listen," She interrupted, curtly.

Oh, right. Fine, we can do this the stupid way. "I know. Give me your hands." He held out his hands exactly as he did before, she took them in hers with curious hesitation, and gave him an odd look. Neither of them were holding anything. "No, no. *Give me your hands,*" he exaggerated. *That was way too suspicious,* he thought, and Ruby must have agreed because her look turned sour. She laid down and rolled over on her bed, facing away from Jet.

"Forget it," she said, "I need to get some sleep. Just find a way out of here, I'm excited for our date." Her tone was exhausted. *Does she expect me to figure out an escape? Oh my stars, she really is desperate! Does that explain her suddenly confessing feelings? Is she... Are we hopeless? I have to do something.*

"Ruby give me the—" he started, potentially overacting his impatience, "I mean, give me your hands."

She jolted up and stared at him with unsure eyes. He tried to give her a look of reassurance, or confidence, but wasn't sure if it came across that way. With minimal discretion, Ruby seized the object in her pocket and grabbed his hands. "Fine," she snapped. *Is she actually annoyed with me or is she also acting? Why is she so good at acting?!* As soon as the metal pin was in his palm she slipped her hands out and rolled over. *Is she mad at me? I thought she liked me? She's probably just acting. Whatever, I need to focus. It's escape time.*

Jet laid motionless in his bed, the metal pin wrapped in his hand. He felt restless, and it took more willpower than he would have expected to keep himself still. The only movement he allowed himself was slightly loosening his grip every so often. It felt like hours of laying there, but

slowly he let himself open his hand wide enough for the pin to fall out.

It didn't make a noise as it landed on the padded ground. Jet hoped the Phayrin didn't have heart rate sensors, or the drum in his chest would have foiled his plan. He kept his eyes closed and tried to focus on any noise, but there was nothing.

After a painfully long time of waiting, Jet felt himself slipping slowly towards sleep. He forced himself to stay awake, but without moving it was very difficult to do so. As drowsy thoughts replaced focused ones, a sudden sound nearly made him bolt awake: The door creaking open, and heavy footsteps walking in.

Jet watched through trembling eyelashes as an armored Phayrin walked towards him. Through its helmet only two eyes were immediately visible, but they were enough to intimidate. Yellow and bloodshot, the Phayrin glanced at Jet, before turning to examine Ruby.

Jet sprung up and grabbed the edges of the guards helmet, and pulled back with all his might. The Phayrin turned and glared at him, its helmet lopsided, and in an instant both its monstrous hands were gripped around his neck. Jet tried to scream for Ruby but nothing came out. However, she was already awake.

Without a moment of hesitation, she slammed a tightly wrapped fist against the Phayrins forehead, puncturing the bulbous lump the helmet had covered. It let out a terrible roar and kicked backwards, throwing Ruby violently into the wall, but she merely bounced off. Between the streams of pink blood, the Phayrin's eyes began to shake, and its grip began to loosen. Ruby jumped onto it and slammed her fist onto its forehead again and again, even as it fell to a soaked crumble on the floor she stabbed.

Jet gasped for breath, doubled over, and glanced over at Ruby. "Let's move," he croaked.

She stood over the Phayrin, which laid unmoving on the ground, and picked up the pin where it had fallen. She handed it to Jet, and opened

her other hand to show a second pin, covered in pink blood.

"These come in handy, hold on to it," She said quickly, with a hint of a smile.

"What- How-?" Jet started, taking the pin from her. His hands were trembling as he took it. Hers weren't.

"Two hinges, two pins. What did you spend the 23 days looking at?" She asked, looking down at him.

He tried to answer but Ruby grabbed his shoulder with a bloody hand and pulled him through the door. "It's time for the worst kind of escape: running and praying," She mumbled.

They dashed out into the hallway, past the repeating wallpaper that was no more interesting than the first time they had run through it. Ruby led the way through the facility, muttering to herself as she turned into seemingly random corridors. *Does every building on this terrible planet have the same wallpaper? Or- Is this the same lab? Why would they put a prison in a lab? Were they running tests on us?*

"Ruby!" He shouted suddenly, "I figured it out! They were testing us! The pills must have been making us act weird! And that's why-" he stopped himself. *That's why what? That's why Ruby finally liked me? Or maybe she always liked me and that's why she was so weird about it? But everything has been so weird.*

Luckily, Ruby cut off his thoughts from spiraling any further. "There wasn't any big experiment. I know-" she stopped as they turned a corner and stared down a patrol of five fully armored Phayrin, who fired a quick barrage of bouncy balls at them. They spun and sprinted back the way they came, but another patrol had formed behind them. Desperately, Ruby dashed into the only door near them, with Jet on her heels.

The room was massive, and he drew in a sharp breath taking it in. Crates of aliens and animals covered the walls in neat piles, sorted by planet. Each species sat within their cage, staring emptily back at Jet. He barely met their eyes, however, as he nearly instantly fixated on a

group of lab-coated Phayrin pulling a box through a wall of shimmering portals. *Our ticket out of here.*

Ruby grabbed his arm before he could charge them, though. confused, he spun and met her eyes.

“Give me your pin,” She said in a flat voice, her eyes darting around. Whatever her plan was, it was going to need to work quickly, as already the guards behind them were turning into the room. He shoved the pin into her hands, and she turned and ran to the side, towards a pile of crates. “Distract!” She shouted over her shoulder.

Panicking, Jet picked up a small, empty crate at his feet and hurled it at the oncoming guards, who barely had to sidestep to avoid it. They raised their weapons, half toward Jet, half towards Ruby, and fired. Jet dove behind a pile of crates, wincing as he heard several of the inhabitants get pelted. He looked over to Ruby, and it took him a second to find her. She had climbed halfway up a stack, and was holding the lock of a large cage. From within it, a huge, horned animal roared and stomped. He saw her jerk as a stray bullet hit her shoulder, but she continued, nevertheless. Finally, she triumphantly held up the lock in one hand and pulled the door open with the other. The beast within let out a rumbling growl and leapt out of its cage. The Phayrin guards took an unsure step back. Some fired at the beast, but their rounds bounced off. Many turned and ran, finally ending the barrage of bullets. Jet dashed out from his hiding spot, ignoring the roars and screams behind him. Ruby dropped, and with a roll, appeared next to him. Ahead of them, the lab coats had abandoned their spot next to the portals.

“Great distraction,” Ruby smiled sarcastically as they continued forwards.

“It all worked out, didn’t it?” Jet grinned back.

They held each other’s gaze for a moment longer, before Jet gestured to the wall of portals. Ruby chuckled at the implied “after you”, and they slipped through the wall with a gargle.

Hub on Mirog

Jet panted heavily as he stood, doubled over, next to Ruby. After spending so long breathing stale air on Phayriph, every inhale of the humid, swamp breeze was a mouthful of vertigo. Head spinning, he barely felt Ruby's rough hand on his shoulder, only really noticing as she pulled him upright. He looked over at her, trying to meet her eyes, but she was too focused on analyzing their surroundings to catch his gaze. Looking around, however, his intrigue quickly matched hers.

They stood on dark red rock at the bottom of a massive crater. The greenish-blue water that usually covered the surface of Mirog ran through geometrically cut canals around them, each of the angular rivers ending in a metal lip, where the water fell into deep, buried tanks. Between the streams was a ring of white bins, labeled with posts, and filled with the same rocks they were made of: Phayrin Marble. Ruby had moved over next to one to read the label.

"They're random characters, probably names. I think these stones are from different labs on Phayriph, so they can easily portal back easily," she called, "I guess that means you end up wherever the rock you use came from. That makes sense."

Jet walked over, nodding passively to her explanation. Like always, he

assumed she was right. “Probably,” he said as he reached her, “say, any idea on where to find a ship?” He put a gentle hand around her waist. She flinched. “I was hoping- are you ok?” he asked, quickly pulling his arm away, alarmed.

She turned back at him, but didn’t meet his eyes. “Yeah, I- I’m fine. We need to get somewhere safe. They’ll know where we went sooner or later.” She replied, quieter than usual.

She walked up the side of the crater with Jet following, confused, behind her. They tread carefully on exposed roots, and peered between them into the murky water. Despite the lack of ground, gnarled, dark trees still managed to grip the black mud deep beneath. Their wet leaves were fat, porous, and brown, reminding Jet of a sponge. Between the canopy, he watched a bright moon move slowly through the sky.

“Ruby, where are we going? The people here aren’t historically nice, if that’s your plan” he questioned, shuddering as he remembered a story someone had told him a while ago. The details were foggy, but he recalled phantom pains as he listened.

“I don’t know. Somewhere quiet,” she muttered.

He considered for a moment. He wanted to hold her hand, but didn’t think that she would be very enthusiastic about that. “What is going on?” he exclaimed, loudly, “Just talk to me, please!” he didn’t try to shout, but it came off more aggressive than he meant.

Ruby suddenly sat down, head in her hands. After a brief pause, Jet sat next to her, and put a tentative arm around her shoulder. To his relief, she didn’t shrug it off. “Jet, I’m sorry, I thought it would be the only way...” She started quietly.

He nodded slowly, with a mix of encouragement and worried anticipation.

“I thought that if we-” She gulped, and whispered, “If we were in love they might let us escape.”

Jet’s nodding stopped. He looked down, a wave of realization draining

his face of color.

"I did what I thought I had to, but-" she looked up at him for reassurance, but he didn't meet her eyes. "I don't think it was right, even if I thought it was correct."

He looked up at her, and through teary eyes saw a desperate look on her face. "I know. I thought it could be real. I tried to convince myself it was. I just-" he spluttered, squeezing his eyes shut to prevent more tears from sliding down his cheek. He took his hand off her shoulder and buried his face in it. "I thought maybe... I knew it was too good to be true," he mumbled, shakily. He wished she would comfort him, but when she put an unsure hand on his shoulder it only hurt.

"My plan might have actually worked- nevermind. Jet, I'm sorry. I guess I got too focused on saving us and that I forgot to save *us*," she explained, putting a hand on her chest as she did, "I liked our friendship. And I knew you cared about me, but I didn't know what to do about it."

"Yeah, I guess they don't have a lot of books about relationships in the library," Jet said, trying to smile.

Ruby gave him a curious look, grinning slightly, "It would have to be between Interplanetary Relations and Intergalactic Relations."

Jet chuckled, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Let's just pretend it all never happened, just don't do that again, please," he sighed.

She looked at him for a moment, and pulled him into a tight hug. Before he could react, however, she had let go and stood up. "Let's get out of here. I think I have a plan."

Battle on Phayriph

They walked back towards the crater they had come from, careful to avoid slipping on the wet roots. Ruby explained the plan as they walked, but Jet kept finding himself lost in his own mind. He wasn't sure what to do with himself. He always feared that if he confessed his feelings to Ruby and she rejected him that he would be devastated, but it finally happened and he wasn't. He felt a bit aimless, but also a bit free. He usually tried to be himself around Ruby, but now he really felt like he could stop worrying about what she would think. He felt almost like a weight had been lifted, one he didn't realize was there.

"-all designed the same, so we can just find the rock room again, you know?" Ruby was saying. Jet nodded, absentmindedly. He wondered what he should do when they got back to the Agency, maybe there were other girls for him, he had never really considered that. The crater appeared between the gnarled trees ahead of them, and he looked down into it. The lump in his throat returned, and he reasoned with himself this was for the better. Even when he really thought what they had was real, he still was anxious all the time, and he still didn't feel complete. Maybe love isn't like all the stories he had been told.

They were crouched in the bottom of the crater, resting but ready on

the dark red rocks. Ruby was watching Jet carefully, who was staring off into space, unfocused.

"If you want to talk about anything, I can always listen," she started, unsure.

He blinked and glanced around, before looking over at her. "Uh, thanks. I don't know, I spent so much mental energy trying to get you to see me like I saw you, I'm almost relieved that it's behind me, or behind us, I guess," he said, shrugging.

She nodded slowly, "That makes sense." She shifted awkwardly. "You know the plan, right?" she asked.

Before Jet could answer, though, the air in front of them rippled, and tore open. A loud hiss of air spilled out, and four Phayrin stepped through, their red guns aimed forward.

Ruby looked at Jet, drew a sharp inhale, and dove forward, passed the stunned Phayrin and through the shimmering portal. Panicking, Jet dove in after her.

He landed with a sloppy roll, and pushed himself to his feet. Beside him, Ruby knelt on top of a scientist, one hand bashing it repeatedly in the face while the other grappled for something white. The portal gun.

Behind Jet, the portal had shrunk, and a Phayrin was crouching through. He kicked it hard, its helmet ringing out as it fell back through the gurgling portal. Beside him, Ruby stood up, breathing deeply as she pushed her messy hair to the side. The hiss of swamp air stopped as the portal winked close, leaving them alone in the room.

"That went well," she muttered as she peaked out the door into the hallway. "We are in the Guard's quarters, Zelx Wing," She concluded.

"Right. What does that mean?" Jet replied.

"It means I know where to go. Follow me, and let's hope we're alone," Ruby directed, before dashing to the left.

Jet chased after her, only catching up after several turns when she

stopped randomly and tugged on a door handle. So far, they hadn't encountered any Phayrin, which he was very thankful for. He finally reached her, and doubled over, huffing.

"Thanks for waiting-" he started.

"The door is locked!" she exclaimed through clenched teeth. She handed him the portal gun, reached into her pocket, and pulled out three dark red rocks, which she shoved into his hands. She then crouched next to the lock and slid the two metal pins out of her other pocket and started picking. "I knew I should have taken the third lock picking class," she muttered, annoyed, under her breath.

Jet had just slipped the rocks into his pocket when three guards turned the corner at the end of the hall. They barked in Phayrin before raising their guns and firing at Jet and Ruby. Jolted to action, Jet pulled a rock out, loading it immediately into the portal gun. The large rock melted and was pulled into the gun, and as the cyan lines glowed, Jet pointed steadily at the squad of guards and fired.

A shimmer flew out of the gun, and a portal opened with a loud hiss in front of him. Instantly, it rumbled and gargled as the Phayrin's bullets passed through to the other side. Jet gasped as he saw through the rippling window that the squadron they had trapped on Mirog was receiving this onslaught. He considered jumping in really quick to grab one of the lethal red guns they had dropped, but before he could decide, he heard a click behind him, and Ruby grabbed his wrist and pulled him back.

"Not a good idea," she said, sternly, before pulling open the door and standing up. "Let's go, those idiots aren't about to die to- what did you call them? Bouncy balls?"

Jet nodded, looking back. The edges of the portal were receding quickly, and he didn't want to be around when the Phayrin they stranded on Mirog came back.

They dashed through the door, and into a bright room of flickering

lights and projected screens. Jet slowed slightly as he ogled at the myriad of jail cells displayed on the wall, but Ruby pulled him forward and through a door on the other side of the room. Together, they continued sprinting, Ruby leading as they swerved around corners and sped past rooms. Three different times they turned into hallways filled with confused Phayrin, and she would curse as she led them onto another route.

Eventually, she put a hand on Jet's shoulder and pointed forward. "The rock room should be in two turns," she said, breathing lightly.

Jet leaned forward a bit, putting his hands on his knees, and panting deeply, focusing on keeping his breaths steady. "Alright. Let's go." he huffed, rolling his shoulders back.

"When we get in there, I'm going to need to do some searching, so you're going to have to hold them off, ok?" She asked, looking at him in an odd way. Caring, he concluded, though he saw a very large margin of error with his assumption.

"Ok," he nodded. He loaded another rock into the portal gun, and rotated the dial for a longer range. The cyan line glowed and the rock disappeared, and he looked at her and mocked a reload motion. They were going to get out of here, he was confident.

They ran onward, speeding past two corners before finally turning into a large, familiar room. The rock room. Each of its walls covered by stacks upon stacks of shelves, standing on fat legs that dug into the ground. Jet wondered how they even managed to get these massive shelves through the door.

Ruby jumped into action, standing on her tippy toes to make herself even taller as she read the highest labels. Jet stood in the doorway, glancing left and right so much his neck started to hurt. As she muttered to herself, he heard footsteps approaching on his left. He raised the gun and stared at the corner, focusing on keeping his grip steady. All his time at the practice range hadn't prepared him for the stress. The

footsteps grew louder until he saw the sharp toe of Phayrin boot swing out past the corner. Before it could step down, he fired.

The shot shimmered down the hallway, connecting exactly on target. The ground at the corner was instantly replaced with a hissing portal, and before they could notice, two Phayrin fell right through. The guttural sound was answered with the Phayrin barking and shouting at each other. Jet turned over his shoulder while loading the last rock, "We're running low on time, how's it looking back there?"

"Ifadus... Dofadus... Havedus! We have agents there! We're good!" She shouted, ecstatic.

"Awesome!" he exclaimed, stepping into the room. His eyes immediately snapped onto a fat leg of the closest massive shelf. "Let's make sure we're not followed," He smirked, and shot a portal directly under the foot. The shelf heaved and tilted sideways, thousands of rocks tumbling out and rolling everywhere. Several hit Jet and Ruby, but they just laughed. Filled with relief, Jet loaded the portal gun again and fired right in front of them. Ruby grabbed his hand, grinned, and pulled them through.

Epilogue

Jet sat on a bench beside the public radio booth, his eyes shut as he soaked in the feeling of relief. The portal gun laid on his lap, with his hands folded over it. After a long minute, Ruby stepped out of the booth, her boots tapping carelessly on the smooth tan road. She sat next to him, closer than necessary.

“Jet?” she said. He could hear the smile on her voice.

“Mhm?” he replied, a grin of his own appearing.

“Marna said she’d pick us up, she’s got a V13 Luminar, we’ll be back home in no time.” Ruby, reported. She seemed nervous, like she was building towards something.

“Sounds good. I can’t wait to get back, I hope someone fed Fineas,” he chuckled.

“Yeah. Anyway, I was thinking about what happened on Phayriph, and-”

“It’s ok, Ruby. You did what you thought you had to. I’m over it, I promise.” He looked her in the eyes, trying to be as genuine as possible, though he wasn’t sure how genuine that was.

“No, no. I just- I think maybe...” She trailed off.

“Yeah?” Jet encouraged, confused.

“Maybe we could try again sometime,” She finished, nervously.

Jet sat up a bit straighter. “Are you saying our dates back on?” he asked, hopefully.

“Yeah,” She smiled.