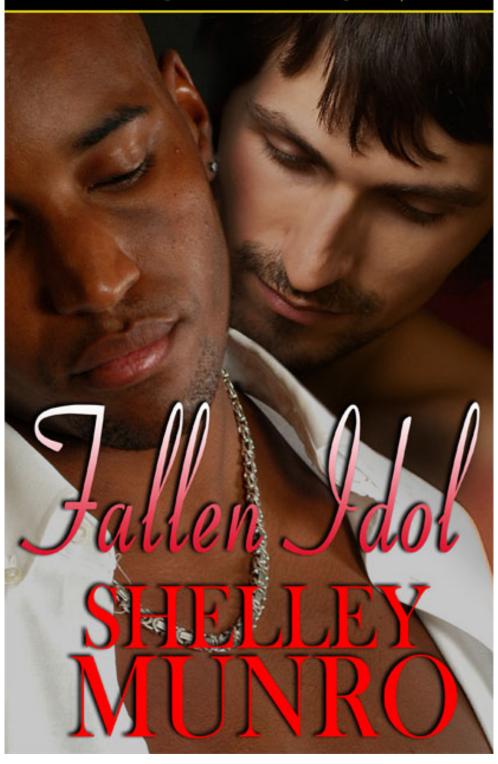
Ellora's Cave Presents



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Fallen Idol

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FALLEN IDOL

Shelley Munro

Chapter One

Rafi Mura parked his hired sports hover outside the dilapidated apartment building on the Sydney waterfront. The throaty roar of the engine died when he switched off the power, leaving ringing silence.

What a dump.

Rubbish littered the rutted street. Paper. Food containers. And a few things he didn't want to study too closely. The smell was overpowering, making his eyes water. Rafi breathed through his mouth while surveying the rest of the street. The wreck of an old hover vehicle lay on its side, pushed up against the warehouse opposite the apartment. Overhead a spaceship flew in a holding pattern, waiting to land at the new spaceport on the outskirts of sprawling Sydney. The screech of the engines set the buildings vibrating and shook his hover and the road beneath his feet. A hint of rocket fuel filled the air.

His eyes narrowed, his attention caught by movement at the far end of the street. Four youths loitered, sending him and his hover surreptitious looks. They were rough street kids, the sort who preyed on the young, aged and unwary. He didn't fit any of the categories and knew he was safe but wouldn't bet on his hover remaining untouched if he left it unguarded.

Shit, what the hell was Roberto thinking living in a neighborhood like this? It was a dump. A ghetto. And as a successful sex circuit competitor, he could afford better, even if he were off injured at the moment.

Rafi climbed from his hover and slammed the door. The sharp sound was like a gunshot in the silent street. One of the kids dove behind a rubbish skip. His friends' raucous laughter rang out making Rafi grin.

"Hoy," he shouted. "Wanna earn some currency?" Rafi waited while they nudged each other and decided how to proceed. Slowly they edged closer, closing the distance between them.

"Whatcha want us to do?" The clear suspicion in the kid's voice told Rafi of the rough life they led, the dangers.

"Nothing illegal," he said. "Keep an eye on my hover while I visit a friend." Rafi dug in his pocket and pulled out four small denomination currency discs. He tossed one to each of the kids. "I'll give you more if my ride is intact when I come down. Deal?" Rafi looked each of them in the face, maintaining eye contact for an instant, long enough to let them know he was sincere.

"That's all we gotta do?" The bravest of the kids sniffed and swiped the back of his hand over his runny nose. He sniffed again and hitched up his baggy black trousers. "Make sure it don't git stolen?"

"Yeah. That's all you need to do. Deal?"

Their self-imposed leader considered his request for a fraction longer before nodding. "Deal."

"Thanks," Rafi said, holding his hand out to seal the deal. "What's your name, kid?"

The leader hesitated, his eyes widening. He stared at Rafi's hand before glancing up at his face.

"Don't worry," Rafi said, working hard to keep the bite from his voice. "The color won't wash off and stain your white skin."

"Jeez, I don't care about your color, man," the kid said. He stepped from foot to foot indicating his unease and hitched up his trousers again. "I...I...dammit, man. No dude ever wants to shake hands with the likes of us."

Rafi laughed with understanding. He knew about discrimination. Although he was pretty thick-skinned these days, there was still the odd remark that jibed the wrong way. "I thought a handshake was the best way to seal our deal."

The leader stuck out his hand and they shook. "My name is Akio." He indicated the others. "This is my brother Junzo. Able and Rick."

"I'm Rafi. I'm not sure how long I'll be. I'm visiting a friend."

"No problem, man. We'll be here guarding your ride."

Rafi nodded and strode over to the main entrance to the apartment. It was a nondescript building made of concrete and steel. Lurid tags in neon-colored paint covered the walls of the apartment. An old advertising screen hung drunkenly from the wall, ripped loose by people objecting to soy protein foods, judging by the tags. He scanned the wall for an intercom system to announce his presence but couldn't find one. Finally in frustration he decided to try the door. It swung inward at his touch.

His palms were sweaty so he wiped them on his black trews. Rafi laughed at himself, his nervousness at seeing Roberto again. They'd been friends since they were kids growing up in Melbourne and had met at the education center. Roberto hadn't cared about the color of his skin or about his mother's racy reputation. They'd liked one another immediately, having a lot in common. One of them more so than the other, Rafi thought with a wry twist of his lips. He'd fallen in love with Roberto while his friend had fallen in love with Fifi Da Groux and gone out on the *Sex Idol* circuit with her. Roberto had broken Rafi's heart and hadn't even known it. They hadn't seen each other for two years, but Rafi had thought of Roberto every day since they'd said goodbye. Sap.

"Nah," he muttered, shaking his head to negate the thought. "Just goes to show you I have good taste." And was weird for talking to himself.

Rafi entered the apartment foyer, wrinkling his nose at the scent of overcooked vege rations and scorched soy meat. The interior wasn't much better than the outside. Rundown and only suitable for those on the lower income scale. Rafi couldn't understand why the great Roberto Azam was living here when he could afford so much better.

Roberto. Rafi pictured the man he loved. Tall and golden-skinned. Broad shoulders. A slim waist that tapered down to a tight butt. Rafi imagined stroking his hands across Roberto's golden skin and shivered. His cock chose that moment to react to his lusty thoughts. Ah, but Roberto was worth it. His muscles rippled when he moved and Rafi knew his friend didn't go in for body sculpting salons and artificial stuff. Those hard muscles were a combination of good genes and honest exercise in his father's warehouse when he was a teenager.

Rafi thumped on the button to call the lift but nothing happened. Shrugging, he searched for a stairwell to reach Roberto's flat on the fourth floor. As he climbed the stairs, Rafi thought about the amount of fuel he'd need to fill his spaceship for the trip to the outer territories. Anything to help his erection subside and save embarrassment. Roberto didn't know how Rafi felt about him, and Rafi intended to keep the status quo. All he needed to do was get through this visit. Masochist that he was. Roberto was his friend. He was happy with Fifi. Rafi needed to accept that and move on with his life.

After climbing the dark stairwell, he exited on the fourth floor. There were six apartments on each floor. Rafi stalked down the wide passage toward number four, anticipation and apprehension skipping around inside him. Hell, seeing Roberto again was going to put him back at square one, ripping the scars from his wounded heart. But the idea of not seeing him—that was even worse.

He turned the corner and came to a halt. A pyramid of empty vroom flasks littered the passage outside number four. Rafi frowned and strode to the door. Vroom was a rough liquor produced on the planet Marchant. People became addicted to it if they weren't careful. Eyesight was affected. In extreme cases blindness occurred along with lack of coordination and muscle wastage. The muscle melted away, replaced by excess fat. Rafi checked the pile of bottles again and shook his head. Surely this pile didn't belong to Roberto. He knocked on the door.

"What the hell do you want?" a masculine voice demanded. "Go away."

Rafi pounded a little harder, a tiny grin playing across his lips. Roberto's voice. Familiar, it brought back memories. The husky growl still made his cock jump with anticipation. Rafi's grin died. *Friend's box, remember?* Roberto wasn't interested in him in that way and all the wishing in the world wouldn't change the facts.

"Go the fuck away!" Roberto's rough voice rumbled through the door, slightly slurred but definitely recognizable.

Rafi shuddered at the abrasive texture of his friend's sexy reply. He'd never met a male who turned him on so quickly with just a word. After taking a deep breath, Rafi knocked again.

The door flew open.

"I told you before, man. I have nothing left. You've taken everything."

Rafi gaped at his friend. He was still tall and dark, but the bronzed god from his memory had vanished. Roberto was pale as a ghost. An overweight ghost. His muscles had disappeared, sinking into inches of blubbery fat. The sight of Roberto's bare chest and protruding gut made Rafi faintly nauseous so he glanced at his friend's face instead. His dark hair was long, scruffy and lank as though it hadn't been washed for weeks. And his face—hell, his beautiful face was bloated and puffy. One bloodshot blue eye scowled at him while the other was black and almost swollen shut. Roberto's jaw was swollen too, and when Rafi studied his body again, he noticed bruises. Someone had bashed his friend and done a pretty good job of it.

"Roberto," Rafi said. He stood in the open doorway, uncertain for once in his life. He still didn't know where to look. Didn't Roberto have some clothes? That belly...it... Hell! It needed camouflage. Really badly. Rafi stared with fascinated horror as Roberto's belly jiggled when he inhaled.

His crew would have gaped with open mouths if they'd seen their captain appearing so indecisive. In the past, the two men would have exchanged a quick hug and clapped each other over the back. Rafi would have savored the moment as he usually did. He'd imagined the feel of Roberto's arms around him from the moment he'd decided to look his friend up between trips to the outer territories. Instead, there was awkwardness. Rafi didn't know what the hell to do. It was difficult looking at that blubber, but touching it? He shuddered inwardly and continued to hover outside the apartment. Part of him wanted to leave, to run away, but no, he couldn't do that. He refused to run away. His legs remained firmly planted outside the apartment while his mind told him to deal with it. No matter what, or how he looked, Roberto was still his friend.

"Rafi?"

Rafi tensed and steeled himself, forcing his real feelings deep so nothing showed from the outside. "Yeah, man. I stopped by the Gratham Apartments. One of the security men said you'd moved here." Not bad. His voice had sounded calm. Even.

"I don't suppose you'd leave if I asked you?" A tinge of shame colored Roberto's cheeks and his gaze slid away to stare at the floor.

Rafi forced himself to look his friend in the face. He was so...so... Hell, he reminded Rafi of a bloated whale. His gaze flitted across Roberto's face before darting over his friend's shoulder to study what he could of the apartment. Another heap of opaque vroom flasks lay beside a wooden chair. The apartment was filthy and offended Rafi's nose. Soy dog wrappers littered the cheap plastic table. An open suitcase lay on the floor and the contents were strewn across the grubby gray floor in haphazard heaps. Rafi gave a cautious sniff before frowning. The smell could be coming from Roberto. He wasn't certain, but whatever the source, it was disgusting.

Rafi straightened and forced himself to look Roberto in the face again. "Why would I leave? Roberto, I came to see you." Roberto was his friend, and he was a friend in need.

Roberto didn't look convinced. "My name's Bob," he said. "I was born Bob and looks like I'll die Bob." Bitterness shaded his voice. "Call me Bob, like you used to when we were kids."

"Ah, sure." Rafi frowned. What the hell was going on? What had happened to his friend since his well-publicized injury? Roberto had always acted with confidence and known what he wanted from life. Ambitious from childhood, he'd set his mind on becoming a successful sex competitor and focused on his goal one hundred percent until he'd succeeded. He hadn't minded when Bob had wanted everyone to call him by his stage name. Rafi knew about being consumed by a dream, wanting to live it and become immersed in the success, which is why he'd understood Roberto. Rafi had always wanted to explore the uncharted territories. Maybe one day.

Since it didn't look as though Bob was going to let him inside, Rafi took matters into his own hands. He stalked past Roberto—Bob—and recoiled at the stench. Gasping, he headed straight for the window.

"Won't open. It's nailed shut," Bob said seconds before Rafi attempted to open it.

Rafi turned to glance at his friend again. "Man, you need to do a little cleaning." His eyes streamed and he breathed shallowly through his mouth, trying to filter out the worst of the smell. Didn't work. "And you need a bath."

"Keeps the debt collectors away." Bob's top lip curled upward and he shrugged with unconcern. "Most of them." His blasé attitude was spoiled when he winced. Obviously the bruises on his body were still painful.

"Get cleaned up and I'll buy you a meal." Rafi was starting to feel pissed with his friend. He'd been looking forward to seeing Roberto, and even though he'd known Roberto wasn't interested in him in the same way, he'd expected to slip right into their easy friendship. Rafi's gaze slid across Roberto's pale, bloated face. This man was a stranger.

"Go out?" Bob made a theatrical gesture with his hands and struck a pose, one Rafi had seen him make onstage. He remembered the surge of jealousy he'd felt when Roberto's female partner had trailed her hands over Roberto...ah...Bob's tanned, muscular body when he'd stood in exactly the same way. Yeah, they'd looked great together on the stage but it hadn't lessened Rafi's longing. He'd imagined thrusting into Bob, running his hands over the smooth muscles, clutching the weight of his cock in his hands...

"I don't have a thing to wear," his friend said in a harsh voice.

God, just when he'd been getting into his imagination and had managed to filter out the stink, he was dragged back to the present. His friend's bloated body with its rolls of fat and the stench... He suppressed a shudder and reminded himself this man was his friend. They'd made a promise when they were kids—friends to the end—and

he wasn't going to walk away just because Roberto had fallen on bad times. "Roberto, quit the bullshit, man. Go shower and get dressed." Rafi's eyes narrowed and his gaze flicked down to the dark skin on his forearms, the same dark skin that covered all of his body. "Unless you're worried about being seen with me."

"It's Bob. Roberto doesn't exist any longer," his friend said in a hard voice. He must have sensed Rafi's ruffled feathers because he forced a conciliatory smile. "Ah, man. It's not what you're thinking. I don't care about your color, your religion, your profession or who your parents were. You could be black with white stripes and I'd talk to you. I'm worried about you and your image. I didn't think you—a successful businessman—would want to go out in public with the 'Fallen Idol'."

Rafi scowled at the reminder of his privileged upbringing in the royal concubine quarters on Maxis before his mother had moved to Melbourne, Australia. "You're my friend. You've stood behind me all these years. Why would I turn my back on you?" It was true, but in truth, he was having trouble reconciling the bloated man in front of him with the sex idol champion Roberto and his confident friend. "I'm not here for long. I have a trip scheduled for the day after tomorrow."

Bob sighed. "Wish I could run away."

"Go and have a shower," Rafi repeated. "We can talk over a meal."

Half an hour later they exited the apartment and walked over to Rafi's car. Bob limped noticeably and his breathing was hoarse, reminding Rafi of a sick man on a ventilator. Bob's shirt was clean but it strained over his gut. He hadn't been able to find another pair of trousers so he wore the same pair of baggy black sweats he'd been wearing when Rafi arrived. At least he smelled better. What the hell had happened to his friend? Rafi remained silent instead of firing the questions burning inside and slowed his pace to match Bob's. He opened the passenger door of his hired hover and waited for Bob to climb inside. Rafi's lips curled in a self-mocking smile. Bob couldn't have found a better way to make sure Rafi kept his libido under control. Instead of thinking about sex and being anxious about giving his feelings away, he was concerned about his friend and Bob's obvious bad health.

Rafi dug into his pockets and flipped the street kids several currency discs. "Thanks, Akio." He lifted a hand in farewell.

The kids nodded and waved in return. Rafi could tell they were pleased but it wasn't cool to show it. They sauntered away, nonchalant to the end.

Rafi took a deep breath and opened the driver's door to his hover. A mixture of feelings assailed him. Discomfort. Confusion. Yearning. The need for love. It would be so easy to walk away but he couldn't, no matter how uncomfortable this situation made him. Yep, no doubt about it—he must really love Rob...Bob if he were willing to push to find out what was troubling his friend. Yes, for a brief instant he'd thought about leaving and spending his leave on more pleasurable endeavors, but when it came to the doing, he'd found he couldn't. Rafi climbed inside the hover and slammed the door. In

the filtered sunlight of early morning, his friend looked even worse, if that were possible.

"What's up with you, man?" he demanded as he switched on the ignition and pulled out and upward.

"You don't have to go out with me in public." Bob swallowed loudly. "No one else wants to know me."

"Fuck, stop feeling sorry for yourself. You're talking to me. *Rafi*. Just tell me the truth. What's up?"

Bob glanced out the window. His meaty hand curled to a fist on his lap before he started to talk. "I was injured during training. We were practicing a move for a special display—an exhibition for some important bigwigs. It was an advanced move from the Kama Sutra with four of us participating. I'm not sure what happened or how. One moment everything was fine and the next, I was at the bottom of the pile with my leg sticking out at a weird angle. The bloody thing was broken." Bob's hand clenched even tighter, the tension evident in his shoulders and face. "In two places. Things went downhill from there. My sponsors pulled out of the sponsorship deal because I was off the circuit. Fifi told me she didn't love me anymore and moved out of our apartment."

"Fifi is a bitch," Rafi snarled. The two had never liked each other. Rafi thought Fifi had sensed the depth of feeling he'd had for Roberto. Shit, Bob. It was going to take some doing to remember to call his friend by the different name. Yeah, jealousy. Fifi had sensed it and Rafi understood the emotion all too well, how it ate at a person. "Go on. That doesn't explain why you're living in that dump."

"Fifi and I were leading the *Sex Idol* competition. The bookies reckoned we'd win. At the time of the accident we'd reached the quarterfinals. We were living high. It didn't matter. The money was easy because we were doing well. After the accident, the debts started to catch up with me. They were more than I'd expected. Fifi—no matter. The creditors wanted their money."

In other words, Fifi had screwed him in all directions. Rafi slowed to turn onto the main highway. He merged with the other hovers, taking the Passover route. Everywhere he looked advertising hoardings displayed the latest in sex toys from Robinson's. They were a mega company worth millions since the success of the *Sex Idol* contest and resulting spin-offs and merchandizing.

Below the highway, the sprawling city of Sydney bustled with activity. As they headed away from the waterfront and the ruins of the historic Opera House, the buildings became smarter. The advertising hoardings were fewer in number since strict local council laws meant they could only be erected in specified areas. Tall glass apartment buildings sparkled in the sunshine and Rafi felt a sudden desire to go to the beach, to feel the cool sea air on his face and the sand beneath his bare feet. A little sunshine and exercise wouldn't hurt Bob either. Coming to a decision, he took the next turnoff and headed up the winding coastal hover route. He knew just the place, about an hour up the coast.

"Sounds like a tough time. You should have called," Rafi said.

Bob snorted. "Yeah? And what would you have done?"

His tone pissed Rafi. He might love the man but he wasn't going to take any crap either. "I don't know," he replied in an even tone. "I would have been a friend at least."

"I hear you've done well building up your freighter business."

Rafi fought to maintain his composure. Bob had cared enough to keep up with him and the progress he'd made. Rafi's breath eased out. "Yeah. I have a loyal crew. We make a good team. What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" There was bitterness in his tone and that pissed Rafi too. This was crap. There were always options.

"Pick yourself up and start again. Man, you were born to perform out on the stage. The viewers love you. That's what you should be doing. Using your natural talents."

"Like this?" Bob gestured toward his fat belly, the movement setting his rolls of fat jiggling.

Rafi frowned as he glanced at the obscene amount of excess flesh. Bob had a point, but it was nothing training, exercise and a better diet wouldn't take care of. "Go back into training."

"I have scars on my leg. Doctors say I'll always limp. They couldn't repair it straight away because it was a bad break and there was so much swelling. After my contract was canceled I didn't have the money for corrective surgery." He snorted. "Of course I could have it done now, but the chances of coming up with the money at this moment are nil to never."

"Use a strategic costume to cover them. They're on your leg anyway. I don't think it matters." Rafi smirked. "You still have a penis."

Bob snorted. "Sex competitors have to be perfect. Besides, I don't have a partner." A flash of pain contorted his face before it smoothed away.

"Find one." Hell, he didn't remember his friend being so negative. This fall from grace had really hit him hard. Hell, if Fifi Da Groux had been present, he'd have wrung her scrawny neck.

"It's not that easy. All the good females are taken."

"So? What about a male? Last I heard it doesn't matter which sex you partner with."

Bob's head snapped around and he stared at Rafi in shock. To his horror, Rafi felt the tips of his ears heat. Luckily, it wouldn't show too badly on his dark skin, but Rafi cursed himself. What the hell was he thinking saying something like that?

"I suppose I could," Bob said slowly.

Rafi's breath eased out when he spotted the turnoff to the beach he'd chosen. He took the turning and tried to concentrate on the road, the scenery, instead of the wrenching in his gut. The idea of someone else partnering with Roberto...Bob, dammit!

"You should think about it seriously," Rafi said, even though the words almost choked him. It wouldn't take Bob long to get back in performance shape. If that was what he really wanted. He bit down on his tongue in an effort to stop the swell of jealousy inside. They could never be more than friends. After all, he was leaving in a couple of days. He had a job, crew to take care of, a business to run. True, he didn't have sex or someone to love him, but he could start searching. Somewhere there must be a lover for him, someone who would love him back and accept him for what he was—the black-skinned son of a royal concubine.

Chapter Two

Bob thought about Rafi's suggestion. He sifted through the names of possible partners and couldn't come up with a single one. Everyone who was any good was partnered up. Hell, he didn't want any partner except Fifi. Although she'd left him hanging, he still loved her. They'd both invested a lot of time into the relationship—both business and personal. Bob shoved aside the slash of pain that seared him when he thought of Fifi and grunted inwardly. Guess that made him sad. And desperate.

Rafi pulled up in a hover park not far from a beach. Bob scanned the area and frowned. God, he hated going out in public, the way people looked at him with such pity on their faces. Not that it should surprise him. It was one of the reasons he'd remained holed up in the hovel of an apartment. Embarrassment. Shame. A shred of false pride.

He had let himself go a little.

But the idea of starting at the beginning again. It scared him. The idea of performing in the regional shows and clawing his way up to the top again...

Bob shook his head, not sure he wanted to go through that again. Maybe he'd sleep on it and see if the idea sounded remotely interesting the next morning.

Rafi switched off the ignition and the rumble of the hover engine died away. "Come on. There's a great café down near the water. After we eat, we can go for a walk along the beach. I've been dreaming of the ocean for months." His sensual lips kicked up in an engaging grin, reminding Bob of how much fun it was to spend time with his friend. He'd missed Rafi and hadn't realized it because he'd been so wrapped up in Fifi. Unfortunately, his lover and his friend weren't comfortable with each other and the last time he'd met with Rafi, Fifi had flown into a jealous rage insisting he choose her over the son of a concubine.

"Sounds great." Not. He could see a couple staring at him with a mixture of shock, horror and disgust and wished he'd thought to bring a hat, some glasses. A disguise of sorts. Bob ignored them—or tried to—but he felt their gazes burning into his back when he limped after Rafi.

If he went back out on the circuit, he'd have to face a lot more of the same sort of reaction. He followed Rafi, deep in thought, wondering if he really wanted to go out on the circuit again. Nah, too much trouble.

Rafi stepped into an expensive café and asked for a window table. After a brief glance at Bob, the waitress acquiesced, showing them to a private table at the far end of the café with a view out over the ocean. The windows were wide open and the scent of the briny ocean filtered inside to Bob. A white bird of some kind hovered on the air currents, letting out a caw of warning when another flew too close. A family was

having a picnic farther down the beach. Bob watched a young child attempting to build a sand castle from the white sand. As she industriously filled a bucket with sand, he was reminded of when he was a kid growing up in Melbourne.

"Are you going to do it?"

Bob knew what his friend was talking about. "I don't want to go out on the circuit."

Rafi shrugged. "It was just an idea. I'm sure you know best. What are you having for lunch? I'm going to have seafood and salad. You have no idea how tiring it is to eat dehydrated rations for months at a time while we're out in space. I've been craving fresh food."

Bob opened the menu and gave it a cursory glance. "I'll have the same with a side of double fried potatoes. A vroom to drink."

Rafi nodded and signaled the waitress over to their table.

Bob looked at his friend, really looked for the first time since he'd pushed his way into his apartment. He was tall, an inch or two taller than his own six two. His dark hair was cut brutally short, but it suited him. With his dark eyes and dark skin, the man was handsome. Despite Rafi worrying that people looked down on him because of his color and upbringing, he was a striking man. Attractive. Bob would bet he had sexual partners lining up to service him and felt a flicker of envy. The idea of sex... Hell, he hadn't had sex since the morning of the accident, and it hadn't been that great. He'd sensed reluctance in Fifi. Yeah, should have listened to his gut instincts screaming at him that Fifi needed to talk more than she needed sex. She was confused about Roger, their manager, thinking she loved Roger more than she loved him. Instead, he'd ignored them, supremely confident that Fifi and he were great—in both their personal and professional lives.

Not that his cock was up to the job of pleasuring anyone. He couldn't even jack himself off. Just showed how low he'd fallen. He'd need to purchase shares in an erectile dysfunction company just so he could afford the pills to do the job for him.

The waitress arrived with their drinks—a vroom for him and a fresh pineapple juice for Rafi. Bob seized the vroom, suddenly desperate for a drink. Anything to dull the pain that seared his gut. God, he'd lost everything he cared about and he was frightened, too scared to try again. He couldn't do it, so why bother trying? Bob emptied the flask of vroom in one long gulp. The harsh liquor burned all the way down to his gut. He set the empty flask on the table with a thump and glanced about for the waitress to signal his need of another drink. When he caught her attention, he indicated his empty flask, and she nodded.

"Do you need another vroom right now?" Rafi asked, his dark brows arching in a chiding manner.

"You're not my mother," Bob muttered.

"No, but you need a keeper. That stuff rots your body and steals your eyesight. If you keep drinking it, your chances of making it on the circuit will be nil."

"Don't hold your punches," Bob said, attempting a mean sneer. Rafi didn't appear impressed, but then he didn't have crushing failure sitting squarely on his shoulders. "I told you I don't want to go out on the circuit again." Not until he'd convinced Fifi they were good together. She'd allowed Roger to sway her good judgment and entice her into overspending. Bob didn't blame her—he understood. They needed to talk and straighten things out then everything would be fine.

"Fine. I heard you. So what will you do? Drink and eat yourself to death?" "As if you'd care."

A pained expression flitted across Rafi's face before he blanked it. "Whatever."

The expression of anguish stayed with Bob, diverting him from his own problems of Roger and Fifi and his...condition. He knew Rafi swung both ways but preferred men. Surprisingly, the idea of Rafi having another man in his life hurt. Bob leaned back on his chair, cringing at the protesting squeak of the high-tech plastique joins that held it together. "That's my decision. I'm finished with the circuit." As he said the words, his chest ached. He'd loved performing and missed it like hell, the adrenaline high, the rush of being in front of a huge audience and feeling his cock pump into Fifi...

His shoulders slumped. Nah, it was a waste of time even thinking about a return to the circuit at the moment. Fifi first. The waitress arrived with their meals and another flask of vroom. To Bob's relief, they discussed happy memories from the past and Rafi told him a little about his adventures in space as captain of a freighter. The afternoon disappeared all too quickly. Rafi dragged him out for a walk on the beach even though Bob protested he felt unwell. The wind blew though his hair, blowing the long strands into his face. His leg ached fiercely, shards of pain radiating from his knee with each jarring step, but he enjoyed the outing, the change in routine despite his grumbles to the contrary. Bob knew he'd sleep through the night for a change instead of suffering nightmares about the day he'd broken his leg.

A strident beeping ripped Bob from his thoughts.

Rafi grabbed a communicator from his pocket and stabbed a button. "Mura."

Bob eavesdropped unashamedly. Rafi had always been assured and went after what he wanted. It was no wonder he was so successful. Dressed in casual trews and a T-shirt to suit the warm summer, he still projected power and competence. Yeah, Rafi had done well for himself despite the naysayers who had predicted the son of a royal concubine would come to nothing.

"Early? Tomorrow night? Yeah. Okay, Henry." Rafi ended the call and turned to him. "Sorry about that. I have to get back to the ship. We need to leave earlier than I thought and there's lots to do." Rafi had purpose. Goals. He knew his place.

"No problem." Bob quashed the sliver of jealousy because Rafi had his shit together while he was so lost and dithering about how to win back Fifi. He limped after his friend, thoughts sprinting through his mind. Maybe Rafi was right. Maybe it was time to stop feeling sorry for himself, but where the hell did he start?

* * * * *

The following day, Rafi organized the loading of the cargo onto his ship and pitched in with the crew to get the job done more quickly. They finished a full three hours before they were scheduled to leave.

"Okay, you're all free for two hours. I expect you onboard one hour before liftoff." Rafi scanned the faces of his crew, making sure he'd impressed upon them the importance of being back on the ship at the specified hour.

"Sure, boss," Henry said.

Barker and Mac nodded before hurrying off to make the most of their free time.

"Catch ya later." Rafi lifted his hand in farewell before striding off to his quarters for a quick cleanup and change of clothes.

Ten minutes later, he collected his hired hover from the parking area and decided to drop by to see Bob before he returned it to the rental agency. He took the hover highway, turning off on the inner city ramp. Roberto, no, Bob. Rafi grunted, acknowledging that seeing his old friend had unsettled him. Even though Bob hadn't looked quite the same as the vision from his memory. Somewhere in that mountain of blubber was the man he loved.

The inner city was just as depressing as it had been the day before. Sighing, Rafi pulled up outside Bob's apartment building. The wrecked hover vehicle had vanished, but its disappearance didn't improve the look of the street. A dead animal of some description lay in a gutter near the wall of the neighboring building. It seemed to be rubbish collection day since piles of refuse were stacked outside each door.

Rafi climbed from his hover and glanced about for the street kids. Two boys melted from the shadows, recognizing Rafi and reading his request before he asked.

"Hey, Akio. Junzo." Rafi flipped them some currency discs. "I'll be half an hour," he said.

He pushed through the front door and hurried up the stairs to the fourth floor. When he arrived at Bob's flat, the door was ajar. A pained animallike moan made him pause. A trick? Rafi tugged his weapon of choice—a lethal flick knife from Venetian—from his pocket. With his left hand, he shoved the door open. He scanned the apartment. Empty. Apart from Bob lying in the middle of the floor. Rafi entered the apartment but kept his wary surveillance despite Bob's obvious injuries. He didn't want any nasty surprises. He scanned the other rooms, which didn't take long since the apartment was minuscule, and hurried back to check on Bob.

"Bob? What happened?" Rafi closed his knife and returned it to his pocket.

"Rafi?" Bob's eyes flickered open and he whimpered when Rafi shook his shoulder.

"Yeah, what the hell happened to you? Are you okay? Do you need to go to a medical facility?"

Bob laughed, a barking, cynical sound that broke off halfway, transforming into a pain-racked cough. "God, that hurts."

"Can you sit up? Where's all your stuff? What happened?" He was starting to feel like a damned parrot.

Bob struggled to sit up, giving a weak groan. "Debt collectors." He inhaled and exhaled on another groan.

"Let me help you stand and I'll take you to the nearest medical facility."

Bob attempted a laugh. "No point. They're coming back tomorrow for the rest of the payment." His breath was a pained wheeze. "Nothing left to give so they'll bash me again."

"Can you stand?"

"Maybe," Bob panted. "Give me a sec."

Rafi scanned him, assessing his injuries visually. His other eye was almost swollen shut and his nose dripped blood. From the sound of his breathing, his ribs were cracked or maybe broken, and whatever they'd done to him seemed to have aggravated Bob's leg. It dangled uselessly when Bob attempted to stand.

Rafi slipped his arm around his friend's shoulders to support him. "How much money do you owe?"

Bob attempted a laugh but it emerged as a croak. The sum he named made Rafi wince. "That much?"

"Yeah. Fifi had expensive tastes. Not all her fault. I wasn't much better."

Rafi checked his timepiece. He had to go or else he'd arrive back to the ship late. He'd never hear the end of it if he were the one to lose their takeoff slot. But he couldn't leave Bob like this either. "Come on. You're coming with me."

"They won't like it," Bob said.

"Who?"

"They've probably left someone to watch the apartment so I don't do a runner without paying the rest of my debts. They won't let me go."

"We'll see about that." Rafi didn't like the idea of leaving Bob in Australia. But he didn't know what to do. He'd spoken without thinking. It was one thing to yearn for Bob when there was a galaxy or two between them, but if that barrier didn't exist... Rafi shook himself. Dammit, he'd thought he was over Bob but it still hurt like a bitch knowing his friend didn't have an inkling of his feelings.

A timid knock sounded on the door. "Yo!"

Rafi tensed, reaching for his knife before relaxing and tucking it away again. It was one of the street kids.

"Them dudes coming," Akio said, glancing uneasily over his shoulder. "Two of them. They mean. Kill."

Rafi understood without further interpretation. He released Bob, wincing at his friend's groan of pain when he attempted to balance without his support. "Thanks. Here." Rafi tossed the kid several currency discs. "For you and your friends. Be careful,

huh? Which direction are they coming from?" He followed Akio to the door and peered up and down the corridor.

Akio pointed to the lift. "They have a key to make it work." The kid hurried off and ducked into an apartment at the far end of the corridor. Rafi returned to Bob's side.

"Anything here you need?" he asked in an urgent tone.

Bob's shoulders slumped in resignation. "Fifi...no. You go, Rafi. This isn't your fight."

"I'm not leaving you here." It was going to be bloody difficult to get Bob out without running into the debt collectors. Perhaps they'd try the way the kid had gone rather than the stairs. There must be a fire escape of some description. "Come on." Rafi propelled him from the apartment, using his greater strength to force his friend to move.

The journey down the corridor to the apartment the kid had disappeared into was excruciatingly slow. It had been bad enough watching Bob navigate the stairs the previous day but this was much worse. A thin film of sweat beaded his friend's forehead, mingling with the blood that dripped on the floor. A trail. Shit, they were leaving a trail. Rafi forced Bob to move even faster, ignoring his moans and hoarse breathing. If they didn't get out of there before the debt collectors arrived, they'd both be the worse for wear. In the past, they would have taken on the two thugs but with Bob in this state, flight was the much better option.

The instant they reached the apartment, Rafi thrust Bob inside. "Find the fire escape exit the kid used."

Rafi whipped off his shirt and gave Bob a slight push when his friend hesitated. "Go." Rafi used his shirt to wipe up the telltale trail of blood before returning to the apartment. He shot inside and locked the door. It was empty, the inside destroyed by vandals or former tenants. "Bob?"

"In here."

Rafi followed the sound of his friend's voice. He was hanging out a window, his breathing like a set of old-fashioned bellows. "You go, man. I don't think the fire escape will take our combined weight. Leave me here. This isn't your fight."

Rafi glanced out the window, cursing inwardly when he saw the fire escape. The whole building was a deathtrap. "You're my friend. I'm not leaving you here." Rafi checked his timepiece and cursed again. There wasn't much time to waste. "Get your butt out the window and move down that fire escape as fast as you can. I'll be right behind you."

Bob glanced at Rafi. "I guess the worst thing that could happen would be a fall. No matter what I do, I'm screwed." A glint of humor flashed in his friend's eyes, a glimpse of the Bob of old. "Friends forever, right?"

A lump built in Rafi's throat. He nodded, unable to choke out the words.

Luckily Bob didn't seem to require an answer. He crawled from the window and gingerly stood. The steel framework creaked but held.

"Go as quickly as you can," Rafi said. He peered from the window, watching Bob's progress. Rafi glanced over his shoulder and noted the trail of blood. He retraced his footsteps and wiped it up, wanting to give them the best chance of avoiding a face-to-face confrontation with the debt collectors. Some of those blokes were mean suckers.

When he returned to the fire exit, he saw Bob was slumped halfway down and not moving. Rafi leapt through the window, pausing to pull it shut before he made his way down the fire escape. The metal escape route whined and groaned like a Marchant whore negotiating price. Rafi moved faster, knowing they didn't have much time. As he reached Bob, one of the supports fastening the fire escape to the brick of the apartment pulled loose. Rafi's heart leapt in a surge of alarm. He shook Bob's shoulder. "Move it. Bob?"

Damn. His friend had passed out cold. Another metallic creak galvanized him into action. Rafi grabbed Bob's shirt and hauled him upright. Shit, he weighed a ton. Rafi heard a shout from above on the roof of the apartment. A gun barked out a vicious warning, the bullet thudding through the framework with a tinny ping. Gritting his teeth, he attempted to flip his friend over his shoulder. Another gunshot hastened his pace. God, Bob weighed a ton. An uneven step made him trip. Rafi staggered, almost falling. A harsh grunt emerged as he scraped his bare shoulder against the wall. He hauled and shoved his friend the rest of the way down to the ground. They'd almost made the bottom when the last remaining top support gave away. Like a slow toppling pack of cards, the remaining supports gave way one by one. The two at the midpoint. Rafi kept moving as fast as he could, even though he knew he wouldn't make it in time. The supports just above his head separated from the wall. The metal shrieked when it bent and peeled away from the building. Off balance with his friend's weight, he didn't have the same natural agility he normally would. They fell the last remaining feet when the very last supports pulled free of the brickwork.

Rafi twisted so Bob fell on top of him rather than taking the brunt of Rafi's weight. They hit the ground hard. Bob groaned and Rafi knew just how he felt. God, he couldn't breathe. He pushed weakly at Bob, knowing they had to hurry. Luckily they weren't far from his hover and unbelievably, they'd fallen sideways rather than into the middle of the street. The shooters wouldn't be able to see them easily since some of the apartments above where they'd landed had balconies. Rafi wriggled free and left his friend lying where he'd fallen. It would be easier to get the hover and park next to Bob.

A shout came from the rooftop. Rafi glanced up and saw one of the thugs. He flipped him off and ran for the hover, forcing away the pain that rippled from his left leg and traveled all the way to his hip. The gun barked again, the rat-a-tat sound and the thud of bullets biting into the dusty road sending desperation through him. Faster. They had to move before one of them were shot. Rafi stumbled, a searing pain in his thigh letting him know he'd been hit.

Rafi fumbled with the door of the hover and slumped into the driver's seat for an instant, gasping for breath. Urgency propelled him to haste and he started the hover with shaky hands, pulling up beside Bob seconds later.

Akio and Junzo appeared from the shadowed alley not far from where they'd fallen. They were dressed alike in scruffy black jeans that rode low on their skinny hips, ripped shirts and caps pulled low to hide their faces.

"Hurry, man," Akio snapped. He was the taller of the two.

"Don't help if it will cause you trouble," Rafi said. Ignoring his aching leg and the burn in his thigh from the gunshot, he jumped from his hover, leaving the engine running.

"No problem," Akio insisted. "Can't see us from this angle. Hurry. Open the door."

Rafi gave up arguing, knowing he couldn't manhandle Bob into the vehicle by himself, not easily since he was injured too. He ripped open the door of the hover and grabbed Bob by the shoulders. "Take his legs."

The two kids did as he ordered and they all lifted together.

"Damn, he's a whale," Junzo, the shorter one, said.

They weren't wrong. Rafi had no idea how he'd managed to get them both down the fire escape.

Bob came to when they almost had him inside the hover. He struggled weakly until a sharp word from Rafi made him still. With a final shove from the kids and a lift from Rafi, they managed to force him into the vehicle.

"Thanks, guys," Rafi said, slamming the hover door closed. "Here's some currency for you." He dipped into his pocket and came up with a couple of small discs.

"Don't want currency. Want a job," the older of the two kids said.

When Rafi looked more closely at their faces, he saw they were very alike. Two brothers, and by the looks of them, they were living rough on the streets. No telling where their parents were.

"We know who you are—a space jockey. You can give us jobs."

"How do you know?" Rafi asked.

"We checked up on you. Followed you to your ship. Give us jobs."

A bullet whizzed past their heads and the two kids leapt in the back of the sports hover before Rafi could say yes or no. Luckily they were small kids since there wasn't much room back there.

Rafi ran around to the driver's side, splashed through an open drain and jumped in. The kids were right. They could discuss the matter later. Right now they needed to get out of there in one piece before reinforcements arrived.

The kids watched the main entrance to the apartments and shouted a running commentary. "Hurry, man. They're coming."

Rafi jammed the controls into drive and shot upward so fast it felt as though his stomach was still on the ground. Another shift of controls and they screamed away from the apartment, going much faster than the speed limit. Rafi thought they were safe from cops though. He hadn't seen a cop since he'd left the spaceport over an hour ago. He checked his timepiece and cursed. There wasn't much time to waste. After thinking rapidly, he decided what to do.

Rafi took a right and then a left turning, not going directly to the hire hover place but heading for the spaceport first. He grabbed his communicator and put a call through to Henry, his second-in-command.

"Henry, meet me at the entrance to the spaceport, will ya? I need you to do me a favor." Rafi glanced at Bob's white face and said, "Bring Barker and Mac with you. I'll be there in twenty minutes." Hell, the debt collectors were a determined bunch. They'd try to find Bob. Rafi hoped they wouldn't think to look off-planet but couldn't discount it.

"You hiring us?" one of the kids demanded above the rush of air and the roar of traffic.

"I don't know. Where are your parents? How old are you?" They didn't look old enough to be out on their own. Life on the spaceship was demanding and dangerous.

"Our parents dumped us on our grandparents. They died and no one wanted us. We're old enough. We risked our lives for you."

Rafi didn't have to turn his head to know the kid's eyes were narrowed, the expression on his face pugnacious. The kid's accusing tone said it all. They had one spare berth on the ship. Rafi frowned. Damn, this was meant to be a simple visit to see a friend. He shied away from thoughts of anything more than friendship. Instead he'd found himself responsible for three extra people and ended up with a bullet graze on his leg that hurt like hell. The way his luck was going, he'd crash the hover before he returned it to the hire company. He'd certainly need to pay extra for soilage. Bob had dripped blood on the interior while the two kids had splashed through the drain as well and dragged mud through the rear.

"Well?" Akio demanded.

He owed them since they'd helped with Bob. Rafi decided on compromise. "You can come with me for this voyage and I'll reassess before we head out for the next contract."

The two kids glanced at each other before turning back to Rafi and nodding.

"We're good workers. You won't be sorry," the older kid said.

Rafi hoped not. He slowed his speed once they hit the main roads leading to the spaceport despite his need to hurry. Things would become worse if he were pulled over by the cops. The sedate drive chafed at him. He kept checking behind to see if they'd been followed. Nothing obvious leapt out at him but it didn't settle the worry in his gut.

The spaceport came into view and Rafi took the turning to the crew area. Henry, Mac and Barker were waiting out front as he'd directed. He pulled up with a shriek of brakes.

"I haven't much time. Take Bob through to my quarters. Barker, he needs medical attention. The two kids are signing on as junior crew. They can take the spare berth. I'll be back as soon as I return the hire." Rafi waited for his crew to lift Bob from the passenger seat and for the two kids to jump from the rear. Henry looked as though he wanted to protest and ask lots of questions. Rafi didn't give him a chance. He took off, darting into a gap in the traffic, leaving Henry to deal with his problems for the moment.

Chapter Three

Rafi made it back to the spaceport with five minutes to spare. He paid the cab driver and sprinted for the ship, trying to ignore the throb in his leg. Barker would look at the injury once they were safely en route for Patigous.

"About time," Henry snapped. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" He turned away to seal the door before nailing Rafi with a glare. "We don't need any more crew on this voyage. They're only teenagers. And where's your shirt? Aw, man. You stink. Whatcha been doing? Rolling around in the drains?"

Rafi ignored the comments about his appearance. Teenagers? That old? It was better than he'd thought. He'd had visions of the authorities charging him with child slavery or worse. He nodded at the grizzled male who had been with him from the start. "Yeah, I know they're just kids. Long story. The shirt is in the story as well." Now that he'd stopped his headlong rush, the pain seemed to have caught up with him. His leg throbbed, his shoulder ached where he'd scraped the skin off and his head hurt. "Where are they?"

"I told Mac to look after them. She's a female. She knows about kids."

Rafi snorted, trying to imagine the blonde temptress from Dalvine looking after the two street kids. She might look like centerfold material but all she really cared about was the spaceship and the engines that drove them. Fortunately for him, she was bloody good at her job. "Did you inform Mac she's meant to know about kids?"

"Do I look stupid?" Henry's grin bloomed to display a sapphire in his front tooth as he scrutinized Rafi carefully. They shared a knowing smirk. Mac was not a typical female. Henry's humor faded, his brow crinkling in worry. "Hey, man, you okay? You don't look so good."

Rafi ignored the query, concentrating on more important things instead. He couldn't believe he'd brought Bob and two street kids aboard the ship. The two street kids he could handle—he'd just delegate responsibility—but Bob was different. Bob had the ability to create turmoil. Hell, the man had him tied in knots of confusion already. And worse, it was difficult to reconcile the yearning inside with Bob's physical appearance. Rafi swallowed and glanced at his second-in-command. "How's Bob?"

Henry rolled his eyes in clear contempt. "The whale?"

"He's my friend," Rafi snapped, drawing up tall and threatening. Regret followed immediately since the movement stretched his thigh and hurt like a bitch. Rafi relaxed his body deliberately but his glare was designed to make Henry back down. "He's going through a rough patch. He used to do well on the sex circuit. Bob has won lots of competitions."

"Sorry," Henry said, holding his hands up in a sign of surrender and apology. "We should be used to your strays by now. He's going to be okay. Barker took care of him. Said he's going to heal up fine. He's in your berth, strapped in, ready for takeoff. I think Barker gave him something to knock him out because he'd started shrieking like a baby."

Rafi swallowed and tried not to think about Bob lying in his bed. His berth was Spartan with not much in the way of personal touches, not that it usually mattered since Rafi spent most of his time up on the bridge or in the recreation room with his crew. Having Bob around was going to make his life difficult. Rafi pictured Bob as he used to be, regret at the forefront of his mind. Thoughts of Bob's current appearance blotted out everything good. Difficult? Hell, make that impossible. "Where is Barker now?"

"Getting ready for takeoff," Henry said.

Rafi nodded. "I'd better head up to the bridge now." Damn, his thigh was hurting. It throbbed with each stride he took and he also gagged at the stench coming from his body. Too bad. Both a bath and medical attention would have to wait until they were out of Earth's atmosphere and safely on autopilot. He headed down the short and narrow passage toward the bridge, limping as fast as he could. Beneath his feet, he could feel the rumble of the ship's engine. The smooth purr was a credit to Mac, their engineer. Rafi grinned. Those two street kids would be driving her nuts.

"Captain. 'Bout time you arrived." Mac scowled at him. "You almost made us lose our slot. Where is your shirt?" Her dark stormy eyes said a lot more and Rafi knew he was in for a tongue-lashing later on once the complexities of liftoff were out of the way. "You look like you've been rolling around the gutter with all that muck on you and the torn trews." Her perfect nose wrinkled. "You honk like a pack of dog-rats."

"Sorry. It's a long story. Plenty of time for that later."

Barker and Mac were at their stations when Rafi slipped into the pilot's seat. Everything looked set for takeoff. Mac had the two street kids strapped into the spare seats on the far side of the bridge. Wide-eyed and unable to hide their excitement, they gaped at the black and silver interior of the bridge. Colored lights flashed on the console. Henry communicated with traffic control and each member of the crew went through final preparations for takeoff. A huge porthole filled the area in front of the bridge, giving a view out over the busy spaceport. Henry slid into the copilot seat beside him and patched through to main control. The two kids took in everything, reminding Rafi of his first voyage into space, the exhilaration, the excitement and knowledge that this was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. It didn't seem to bother the kids that they had no luggage or were with people they didn't know. They seemed to trust him—another weighty responsibility he wasn't sure he wanted.

Mac increased the power of the engines and after the last muffled instructions from control they soared upward into the Earth's atmosphere. They shot through fluffy white clouds, continuing upward at a steep incline. In a short time, the color of the sky darkened and they blasted out of the atmosphere into dark space.

"Wow!" one of the kids said.

Rafi smiled, trying hard to concentrate on the instruments. Difficult when his leg ached so badly. He scanned all the readings and nodded slightly when he saw everything was working smoothly. Not that he'd expected anything else since his crew was topnotch. The ship leveled out and they headed out on the flight path they'd filed.

"On to autopilot," Henry said.

As one, the crew relaxed and soon banter filled the bridge.

"Hey, Barker," Rafi called. "You got a minute?"

"Sure, Captain." Barker was a fearsome sight—a huge bear of a man with a scar down his left cheek, but he was the best medic Rafi had ever met. Barker strode over to Rafi, his right eyebrow rising in a question.

"I took a gunshot to my thigh."

Henry's head whipped around. "Why didn't you say so?"

"It's not bad. I stopped the bleeding at the hover hire place but it stings like the devil."

"I'll get my bag," Barker said. "Sit on the captain so I can clean his leg," he said to Henry.

Rafi spluttered before saying dryly, "Oh yeah. Like that would work."

"Leave me out of this," Henry muttered.

Mac sniggered. Henry, much older than the rest of the crew was also half their size. They were a crew of giants compared to Henry.

Barker returned and squatted by Rafi. "Stand and hold on to me for balance." Once Rafi had followed his orders, he tugged down the dark trousers and removed the strip of cloth Rafi had acquired at the hover hire offices. It had stuck to the wound and started bleeding when Barker tugged it away.

"Mac, you could look the other way," Rafi said. "I don't like the way you're looking at my black ass."

"And a very pretty ass it is too, but I don't care about the color or the view. It's the underwear I'm interested in. Barker design those?"

"Yeah. I tried to get him to make black ones but he insisted on red." Rafi felt his cheeks heat to the same color as his support underwear.

"You know, Barker. You can make me a few sets after all," Mac said in a gracious tone. "I don't believe you were overstating your expertise in the design field."

"Told ya." Barker bore a satisfied smirk.

"How is he, Barker?" Henry asked, his brow puckering even more than normal from squinting at the wound on Rafi's thigh.

"Yeah, Rafi is right. It's not a bad wound. The bullet has cut a bit of a furrow but it should heal quickly enough." That said, he poured a cleansing solution on the wound. Rafi gritted his teeth but not before he bit off a string of Martian curses.

"Captain," Mac said. "You can't swear in front of the children."

Akio unfastened the straps holding him in his seat. "We're not kids."

"Point taken," Rafi said with a tired sigh, ignoring the kid's protest. He probably shouldn't curse in front of Mac either. "Sorry."

"Akio. Junzo. You can help me down in the engine room," Mac said. "I'd like blue," she said to Barker before sashaying out with the two kids in her wake.

Rafi nodded approval at her taking the kids with her. "Fuck," he said, wincing when Barker gave him a shot to combat infection. He shot a guilty glance in the direction Mac and the kids had disappeared before turning back to Henry. He'd have to watch what he said with the kids around. He'd stolen them and now they were his responsibility. "Do we have enough supplies onboard for three extra people?"

"Yeah. No problems there. We can stop en route at a trading post if we need to."

"All done, Captain," Barker said.

A high-pitched scream echoed down the passage. Rafi jumped as did the rest of the crew left on the bridge. They stared at each other in uneasy silence.

"What the hell was that?" Henry asked finally.

The scream sounded again and Rafi took off at a fast jog toward his quarters after pulling his trews back up, gritting his teeth at the sharp throb in his thigh. The clatter of running feet told him the rest of the crew followed. He burst into his berth just as a third primal scream unleashed. Bob thrashed and fought against the harness restraints, too panicked to understand he could unfasten himself if he wished. The stench of vomit filled the room, making Rafi swallow in distaste.

"What's wrong with him?" Henry asked, peering past Rafi.

"Vroom withdrawal," Barker said in a terse voice. "He denied drinking the stuff when I asked him earlier but I thought I was right."

"Yeah," Rafi said with a heavy sigh. Hell, one problem after another. He'd seen vroom addicts out on the streets. It was a nasty way to die. In the final stages of the disease, the user had vivid psychotic visions. Often they became violent and suicidal. There were calls for the authorities to ban the alcoholic beverage but the income from duties plus profits for manufacturers meant a slow reaction. Although he'd seen the empty flasks outside Bob's apartment and inside, he hadn't displayed any of the worst symptoms. "Can we deal with it?" he asked Barker. Guilt assailed him because he'd foisted his friend on his crew. Bob was his problem to deal with and fix.

"No problem. Nothing I like more than a good challenge," Barker said. "The rest of you are too damned healthy for my liking. Nah, you're no challenge at all."

* * * * *

"Damn, that male kept me awake all night. If Barker doesn't watch his patient carefully I'm going to do him in myself," Mac said as she strode into the recreation room.

Rafi yawned, not having the energy to voice any of the smart comments that popped into his mind at Mac's words. He stored the pallet he'd been sleeping on away in a storage chest and yawned again. "Did Bob holler last night? I didn't hear him."

"That was the problem," Mac ground out. "He was quiet and I've become used to all the racket he's been making. I can't sleep without all the noise. It's too damned quiet!"

Rafi chuckled and poured Mac a mug of coffee, placing it on the smooth surface of the plastique table before shunting it her in direction. They were two months into their voyage to Patigous. A rough two months for all of them. Except Barker. Barker was in his element with someone to care for and was zealously guarding his patient, keeping them all away. Meanwhile Bob had been very vocal while the vroom leached from his system and Rafi, like the rest of his crew, had suffered from lack of sleep. Luckily the situation seemed to have improved recently.

"Damn male," Mac muttered, repeating her complaint. "I kept waking up because I expected his screams and hollers. The silence drove me nuts." Mac took a sip of her coffee and groaned her pleasure. She dropped into the chair beside Rafi and they both stared out the porthole at the vast array of stars, comfortable with their silence.

Rafi glanced to Mac and smothered a smile. If he were inclined that way, he'd snap up Mac in a second. All the single males who looked past her beauty and were put off by her blunt attitude and love of engines were missing out. Mac was unique. "I'm sorry. I know it's my fault Bob is on the ship, but at least the episodes are fewer now."

"True," Mac conceded. "What about the two kids?"

"What about them?" Rafi asked, steeling himself for more complaints. "Are they causing trouble?"

"They're no trouble at all. I think you should keep them on, if you can. Akio is a natural engineer and Junzo follows Henry around like a bad smell. The kid's not bad in the galley either. They have raw talent and enthusiasm. That's rare. We should foster it."

"At least I've done something right," Rafi said. It was good to hear his thoughts about the two kids reinforced. He'd been watching them and was pleased with their progress. They were eager to learn.

"If they stay, we'd have enough crew to man a larger ship," Mac said, a flame of hope suddenly blazing in her eyes. She stood and rummaged through the snack galley, finally fishing out three breakfast bars. Mac tucked one in her pocket, tossed one to Rafi and ripped open the packaging of the third.

Rafi opened the breakfast bar and bit off a mouthful of fruit and grains. He understood Mac's motivation in asking. She coveted a larger engine, being of the bigger-is-better persuasion. "True, but I don't have the currency yet. We need a couple more good runs before we can move up to a bigger ship." He was tempted to borrow the currency to make up the difference but was loath to risk losing everything when patience would drive him in the same direction. His dream of traveling into deep space

where few had journeyed before was one shared by the rest of his crew. One day... The sound of footsteps had Rafi reaching for the coffeepot and more mugs.

"Holy shit," Mac breathed. The awe in her voice snapped Rafi's head around and he stared at the two men standing just inside the open doorway.

"Bob?" Realizing his mouth was hanging open, Rafi snapped it shut and tried not to stare. It was difficult. The difference in his friend was amazing.

Barker steered his patient to a chair. "Sit. You don't want to overdo it."

Rafi couldn't help staring at his friend. Bob looked...he looked great. He was still limping but the pounds had melted off since they'd left Earth. Although he'd lost his golden glow, the bloom of health shone from his pale face. His eyes were a clear blue and his hair and body clean. Barker had found him some clothes to wear and he looked so much like the Roberto of old that Rafi wanted to grab hold and hug him. A lump grew in Rafi's throat while a bolt of lust seared straight to his cock. Oh man. He'd thought he'd be able to control the feelings he'd harbored for his friend. It had been easy when Barker refused to let any of them see Bob. Although Rafi had worried, he trusted Barker implicitly and had decided not to push, but to let the medic work his magic on Roberto.

"You look great." Mac looked Bob up and down, a familiar glint in her eyes.

A surge of jealousy made Rafi want to shoulder Mac aside and stand in the way so she couldn't see Bob. "Roberto... You sure do," Rafi croaked, striving for normal. The sharp look Barker sent him told Rafi he'd failed, but at least the medic didn't start teasing.

"I feel great." Roberto patted his gut. "Apart from a bit of a jelly belly, I'm almost back to normal. And keep calling me Bob. You know it's my real name. Roberto was a weak, pretentious idiot." He scowled, his brows drawing together. "I was like a prima donna insisting everyone call me by my stage name. I don't intend to do that again."

Oh man. That voice. It did sinful things to Rafi, flowing over him like rough silk. It made him want so much...

"I thought over what you said when you visited me, Rafi," Bob said. "I'm going to go back out on the circuit. Barker said I should be fit enough to start training next week. It won't be easy training on my own but at least it's a start. I might be able to hook up with someone on Patigous."

Rafi thought about Bob with another woman and an aching shaft of pain rippled through him. He couldn't do it. He couldn't stand by and lose Bob. Not again. "I'll help you train," he blurted. "I have time."

"You?" Mac said, her brows rising and disappearing under her blonde fringe. "Training for the sex circuit is different from being with your male lovers. It's not easy!"

Hell, now he'd done it. They were all staring at him as if he'd sprouted an extra set of ears. Heat coursed into his cheeks and Rafi gave silent thanks for his skin coloring. Embarrassment didn't stand out so obviously on his face. His gaze danced across Mac's

face followed by Barker's and finally Bob's. The one thing common to all was doubt. "What? You think I can't do it?" Rafi demanded.

"Of course you can," Barker hastened to assure him.

"Yeah. Damn straight." But whether he could help Bob with his training and not become emotionally involved was another matter.

"Not much to do on this run," Mac said. "We can judge your performances if you need some help."

"No." The idea of performing in front of his crew stopped him dead. "I don't think so. I'm not waggling my naked arse in front of the lot of you. The training sessions will be private."

"Do I get a say in this?" Bob asked.

"Yeah," Rafi said. He risked a quick glance at his friend. "Of course you do. If you think it's a bad idea, tell me. I won't be offended." Relieved actually. And the minute they reached Patigous he was going to go hunting for a willing male to warm his bed during the layover before they returned to Earth.

Bob couldn't believe Rafi would offer to help him train. After dragging his butt from Earth and giving him an opportunity to claw free of the influence of vroom addiction, Rafi was still willing to give more and help him train to competition fitness. Rafi was a real friend—he always had been from the day they first met. "You'd really help me train?" Bob had difficulty hiding his elation. Fifi couldn't help but be impressed if he found a training partner and was sharp and ready to go the minute he talked her into taking him back.

Rafi shuffled a bit before shrugging. "Yeah. I said I would."

"Great." Bob couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. He owed Rafi so much he'd never be able to repay him. Thanks to Rafi and Barker he felt great and knew he looked good too. A hundred percent improvement on a few months ago and he owed it all to Rafi and his crew. Excitement thrummed through him at the thought of competing again. He'd do some research before they reached Patigous and work out which elimination contests were best for him to enter while he was preparing to hit the stage with Fifi. "Would I be able to do some research via the interplanetary web?" Yeah, he'd contact Fifi. Mend some of the old hurt and rifts. Once he applied a little of his charm, Fifi wouldn't have a chance. She'd dump her current partner and take him back in a heartbeat.

"Tomorrow. Check the web tomorrow," Barker said in a firm voice. "I don't want you to overdo things on the first day out of your berth."

"Okay," Bob said. He could use the rest of the day to plan. While he'd been tormented by vroom withdrawal, he'd come to a few decisions. He knew exactly where he'd gone wrong with Fifi and what had pushed her into Roger's arms. They shouldn't have performed and lived together. It put too much pressure on their relationship. Yeah, this time he'd do everything right. He'd enter a few contests under another stage

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name so his return to the circuit remained a secret until he was ready to disclose it. Once he'd managed to get his professional life in order, he'd sort out his personal life with Fifi. They were meant for each other.

Chapter Four

Nerves stalked Rafi during the rest of the week and when the agreed day to commence training arrived, eating breakfast was impossible. He couldn't believe he'd agreed to help Bob train, and now that he'd made the offer, he couldn't rescind it without looking foolish. But along with the nerves, there was excitement. Rafi had taken to wearing loose-fitting syn-cotton trousers and long flowing shirts that covered a multitude of sins including a cock that wouldn't behave.

But the biggest change had occurred in Bob. He looked so happy and Rafi had difficulty reconciling his changed appearance with the blubbery whale he'd seen at the apartment in Sydney. Bob's chirpy demeanor rubbed off on the rest of the crew as well. Usually by this stage of the journey they became snappy with each other and ready for socializing with other beings, sick of the same familiar faces. Instead, they were helping Bob with costuming and ideas for routines along with the important decisions regarding which contests to enter.

"Ready to go?" Bob asked, coming up behind Rafi without warning. His warm breath puffed over Rafi's neck and cheek when he leaned past him to grab an empty mug for coffee.

A shiver racked Rafi's body and his cock jumped beneath the loose syn-cotton of his trews. Rafi's eyes squeezed shut for an instant and immediately his nose seemed to work overtime. Bob's clean, soapy scent hit him, carrying a sensual punch that ricocheted right to his toes. Rafi held his breath until his chest hurt and he was forced to inhale. He was never going to get through the first training session without losing his sanity. "Yeah. I'm a bit nervous," he added, deciding if he gave his friend a partial truth, he might not seem quite so stupid in the final summation.

"Don't be. Do you want a refill of coffee before we go through Barker's training suggestions?"

Rafi's brows shot upward. "Barker? What does he have to do with the training?"

Bob turned away to fill his mug along with Rafi's. "Barker is a medic. He knows all sorts of tricks and ways to help hold erections without resorting to drugs. And he wants to monitor my health."

Rafi's gaze dropped to his friend's butt. It was tight and trim beneath the close-fitting black trews he wore. Delectable. Rafi still had no idea how Bob had managed to get back in such great shape. His fingers tingled with the need to touch. From where he was looking, there was nothing wrong with Bob's health, no matter what he said about his jelly belly. Rafi thought the slight paunch was cute.

"Here you go." Bob turned around to hand Rafi a coffee before he could drag his gaze away. Bob grinned. "Don't look so nervous. If it makes you feel better, Barker and

I have come up with a few ideas. We thought it would be easier on you if we tried lots of role-playing. I'm going to enter a contest on Patigous while we're there and probably wear a costume. That's allowed in the rules. I can cover my face but the rest of my body needs to be on display for the audiences to view easily. Mac suggested I reinvent myself so that's what I'm doing. All I need to do is think up a name. And find a steady partner so I won't have to put you out."

If only he knew. Rafi was beginning to regret his offer to help. Sure, he'd enjoy it. That was a given. But afterward, when Bob moved on... Rafi sighed heavily, feeling like a rat caught in a trap with nowhere to go. "We're not going to perform in front of everyone." He'd meant it as a question but it came out as a statement. Although he wasn't a prude and nakedness didn't bother him, the idea of his crew watching brought acute alarm. His crew was like family. They knew him well and he worried about giving away his feelings regarding Bob. The last thing he wanted was their pity.

"No, Barker has rearranged your berth so we can train in there."

Rafi scowled and folded his arms across his chest. He didn't want Barker to watch either. "I'm not training with an audience. I won't do it."

"Barker said you'd say that. The vroom has messed with my heart a bit and Barker wants to monitor my progress."

"I thought you were okay." Rafi waited anxiously for Bob's reply.

"It's just a precaution."

"All right. Fine." Rafi knew when he was beaten. He'd have to try like hell to keep his feelings submerged. Luckily an erection was expected since he didn't think he could fake that bit. Hell, how had he managed to land himself in the middle of this mess?

"Really?"

Rafi gave a curt nod when what he really wanted to do was run. No point attempting that since there was no place to hide.

"Good. Let's do it then. Barker is waiting." He threw a companionable arm around Rafi's shoulder. "I appreciate you doing this for me. Some day I'll repay your kindness."

Oh yeah. He was a real saint. Rafi's cock chose that moment to react to Bob's closeness. He allowed Bob to guide him along the narrow corridor that led to the sleeping berths. Bob pushed the black button on the wall and the door to Rafi's berth slid open. His eyes widened. Barker and Bob had gutted his berth and instead of the single berth sleeping bay, there was a makeshift bed large enough for two on the floor. Barker had found a tech-plastique chair to sit on and he'd set up a music system.

"Great, you're here. I've been reading up on the rules. There are various categories and competitors either specialize and concentrate on one category or else they compete for the best all-rounder." Barker glanced up at Rafi and Bob. "For the upcoming contest Bob has decided to enter the self-pleasuring and male-only categories so those are the ones we'll rehearse. Maybe you should enter the toy category as well?"

"Okay. I've always liked toys," Bob said. "Sounds great."

Rafi swallowed, casting an uneasy glance at Barker. And Barker sensed his discomfort, dammit. He could see the glint of humor in the medic's dark eyes.

"Might as well get started." Bob shrugged out of his shirt and tossed it aside. Calmly he removed his footwear, peeled down his black trews and the brief cock cover beneath and bent to pick up all items of apparel and fold them neatly. He placed them in a pile against the wall before glancing at the petrified Rafi. "All right, Barker. I know you said you wanted to monitor me but Rafi looks terrified. I think we'll do better if it's just the two of us for this first session. We'll start out with basics, practice touching each other for maximum arousal and playing to the camera. How about giving us an hour alone and then you can come back?"

Rafi pleaded silently to all the deities he could remember. This was going to be difficult enough without Barker grinning like a loon throughout the ordeal. His gaze skimmed across Bob's naked body and his heart jumped anxiously. *Please leave*.

Barker stared at them both, a small smile playing across his big lips. "I don't think it's a good idea but I'll do it. Don't lock the door," he added.

"We won't," Bob assured him.

Damn. Rafi swallowed a silent curse. Barker was treating them like kids. They'd both had sex before. But not with each other, a voice whispered in his mind. This would change their friendship. Rafi knew that. He'd argued with himself all week, listing the bad aspects of his decision. Even though they far outweighed the good, he was still here waiting to start—to have sex with his best friend, the man he loved way more than a brother.

Bob waited for Barker to leave before turning to Rafi. "You don't have to do this, you know. You've already done so much for me, helped me turn my life around. I can make do until we get to Patigous and find a training partner there."

"No!" Rafi lowered his gaze and Bob heard his audible swallow. He wondered what his friend was thinking. He always used to know but Rafi had changed. "I said I'd help and I will. This is just a bit strange, that's all."

Bob placed a finger under Rafi's chin and lifted it until his friend looked him straight in the eye. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Come here," Bob said, taking charge. He decided not to undress Rafi yet. Instead he'd concentrate on getting his friend to relax. It would help him as well. He hadn't had sex let alone thought about the act for months. Hell, his cock had only just come back to life. Vroom emasculated a man. He knew that now and since he was clean, he wasn't going to touch the stuff again. In fact, each time he won or placed in a contest, he was going to donate to the Anti-Vroom Foundation. *That* was a promise.

Rafi took half a step and stopped. They stared at each other for a long moment. Slowly, so as not to alarm his friend, Bob placed his hand on Rafi's shoulder, intending to draw them closer. A frisson of electricity arced between them. Bob blinked in astonishment when his cock reared with enthusiasm, the innocent touch echoing through his body. Wow. That was unusual. Unexpected. His gaze drifted to Rafi's full lips and dallied, taking in the sexy shape. He'd never noticed before—the plump curves just made for tasting and sucking.

A soft sound, almost a moan, whooshed from Rafi.

"Right here," Bob murmured, urging him near. When he looked at Rafi his stomach contracted to a tight ball of apprehension, surprising him. Awareness rippled through him, prickling across his skin in an enticing manner. Bob inhaled and let his breath ease out slowly. He'd trained at one of the best schools, learning every sexual technique from self-pleasuring to toys and different positions a good sex performer might need onstage. Bob knew theory and practical methods inside out and had performed with both male and female partners before. His preference was for a feminine partner. He stared at Rafi while his friend prevaricated. The jump of sexual arousal, of lust, had to be caused by deprivation. Yeah. Lack of sex would do that to a man—make him desperate.

Rafi took another half step, looking as though he might bolt at any moment.

Bob chuckled and grasped Rafi's broad shoulders, took control, drawing him firmly against his naked chest. Rafi shuddered, his pupils contracting an instant before his eyes snapped closed. Bob chuckled again. "You know this won't work if you freeze up every time we touch. It's not too late to change your mind."

Rafi groaned an instant before his mouth slammed down on Bob's.

Bob froze, taken by surprise yet again at the surge of excitement that zipped through his own body.

Rafi froze too. He pulled back and they stared at each other.

"That's the way," Bob whispered in encouragement. "But not quite as hard. I'd like to keep my natural teeth if I could."

"Sorry."

"It's not as if you haven't done this before. You prefer men."

"So?" Rafi's jaw tightened and lifted in a pugnacious manner.

"Lighten up. Use the kisses to arouse me." Bob glanced down at his cock. It was there but wasn't in full working order. Yet. "Help me get ready. It's known as warm-up out on the contest circuit. Some people call it foreplay."

Rafi's jaw worked and a flare of irritation lit his dark eyes. "I know what foreplay is," he gritted out.

"Then get with the program," Bob snapped. "Kiss me, dammit. Arouse me."

"Fine." Rafi jerked his hand off Bob's shoulder and glared at him. "I'll turn you on." He trailed his fingers across Bob's chest and leaned in to kiss his neck. His lips nuzzled

the skin below his ear and Bob felt Rafi's tongue lick a slow path downward, the brush of stubble. Rafi pulled away. "How's that for a start?"

Pretty damned good. But an imp made him want to needle his friend and pretend that the reaction in his body came about because of Fifi. Suppressing a smirk, he glanced down at his cock before meeting Rafi's dark gaze. "Nothing much stirring."

Rafi glanced down as well. Bob literally felt his friend's gaze tracing his cock. He tried really hard to control his reaction but his dick jolted, lengthening while they both watched. Shit. That reaction hadn't been anything to do with Fifi. He couldn't seem to hold her image in his mind. Rafi's handsome face kept intruding. Bob shivered, his blood pumping hotly through his veins as he bit back the need to beg for Rafi to touch him more intimately.

Rafi laughed with a trace of smugness. "You don't say? I think there's a bit of reaction in the old boy."

"Shut up," Bob growled.

And just like that, the wall of apprehension seemed to disappear in Rafi. His dark eyes sparkled and the corners of his eyes crinkled. Rafi leaned over and pressed a kiss to his lips. Slow. Soft. Thorough. The touch reverberated through Bob. His dick snapped to attention and a groan escaped. Bob tilted his head to change the angle of the kiss, nipping at Rafi's full lips and paying particular attention to his friend's sensual lower lip. Closing the slight gap between them, Bob ran his fingers through the short hair at the back of Rafi's head. The hair prickled across the sensitive pads of his fingers, the contrast in textures arousing. Bob explored further, running his hands over Rafi's broad shoulders and opening his mouth at the same time to encourage a deepening of the kiss.

Rafi shuddered beneath his questing hands and suddenly Bob wanted more. He wanted—needed—to feel warm skin. He wanted nothing between them. Funny. He'd never wanted to explore Rafi before. Yes, they'd been friends forever but they'd never pushed past friendship. Bob stilled for an instant. The last thing he wanted was to kill their friendship. It was important to him. Very important.

Things were going well for him again and he felt as though he'd finally managed to turn his life around. Fifi was finally communicating with him again via interplanet webmail. Bob was taking things slowly—they were getting to know each other again. But he hadn't mentioned he was intending to train with Rafi. Fifi was funny when it came to Rafi. Maybe later...

Greedily, Rafi stored up sensual feelings. The smoothness of Bob's fingers when he ran them through Rafi's hair. The feel of his lips when they moved beneath his and the seductive scrape of stubble against his skin. His heart pumped faster and his cock pushed insistently against Bob's thigh. Rafi didn't care about embarrassment anymore or giving away his feelings. He went with honesty. He needed this closeness with Bob. Hell, he'd wanted it for what seemed like forever.

Bob pulled back and Rafi stared mesmerized at his friend's wet lips. He'd done that. Satisfaction made him smile inwardly. They were a lighter pink than his and finer. Almost pretty. His eyes were certainly pretty now that he'd recovered from his addiction to vroom. They sparkled like the blue of the ocean on a sunny day and were surrounded by thick, dark lashes that would have looked better on a girl.

"You have girly eyelashes," he murmured.

Bob snorted and grinned before batting them at Rafi in a flirtatious manner. "Yeah, but I don't have pretty skin like you."

"I'm black," Rafi said. "What's so pretty about that?"

"Take off your shirt."

"Avoiding the issue?" Rafi demanded.

Bob sighed. "I wish you'd take that stick out of your arse. You're black. I'm white. So what? You're my best friend in the whole world. What does that tell you?"

"You have no taste?"

"Man, you have a smart mouth."

Oh yeah. And Rafi knew just what he'd like to do with his mouth.

"Take off your shirt."

Rafi hesitated and it had nothing to do with their being at opposite ends of the color spectrum. His cock was at full extension. Bob would know how turned-on he was just from kissing. The last thing he wanted was for his friend to laugh at him.

"Off."

"Yeah. All right." Rafi shrugged from his friend's touch and inhaled, concentrating on what he wanted. Visualizing. He might never have this chance to show Bob how much he loved him. It was there for the taking. All he needed to do was play things cool. Take things easy. Much easier thought about than carried out. *Go on. Just do it. Bob's seen an erection before.* Rafi took another breath and yanked his shirt over his head.

"Wow." Bob's eyes widened as they gazed at him.

The weight of the stare had a corresponding effect south. Rafi shifted uncomfortably at the insistent throb of his balls and cock. *Man*.

Bob glanced downward before moving toward the bed. "Wow again. You always were well-hung. Might as well get naked so we can compare notes."

Nothing to hide behind. Hell. Rafi hesitated.

"We're not going to do anything, if that's what you're worried about." Bob strode over to the makeshift bed and lay down in the middle of it. "All we're doing is a warm-up. Sort of a getting to know you session so we're both comfortable when we're trying for advanced techniques."

It was the thought of the advanced techniques that was getting Rafi all hot and bothered. One glimpse of Bob's teasing face and he knew his friend wasn't going to let him get by with keeping his trousers. It was what he wanted, but still he hesitated. Once

his trousers were removed, there was no going back. His heart would be firmly on the line. Panic tore through him for an instant. He stared at Bob through narrowed eyes while he attempted to decide one way or the other.

Bob grinned. He was sprawled comfortably on the bed with one hand behind his head. The other worked down his body and casually pumped his cock. Like all sex performers, he had nil body hair. Every fold of skin was clearly visible. Rafi swallowed, his gaze taking in the sight of his friend's cock. It was long and slightly curved, not quite as thick as his but mouthwatering to look at. His skin appeared silky smooth despite his recent run-in with vroom, and Rafi wanted to touch and explore so badly his fingers itched.

With an inward sigh and knowing this was the point of no return, Rafi kicked off his shoes and pushed his syn-cotton trousers down his legs, maneuvering the fabric over his erect cock, and removed the pair of red support briefs designed by Barker. For an instant he stood there like a model posing, letting Bob look his fill and tamping down on his nerves at the same time. Like a sex competitor, Rafi thought with wry humor.

"Come here."

Rafi couldn't have stopped himself if he tried. The need to touch and taste was a siren song in his blood. He dropped to the bed at Bob's side. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I want you to become familiar with my body, work out what arouses me and makes my dick jerk," Bob said, letting his hands drift down his body.

Rafi nodded, suppressing a shudder of desire. His friend's rough, husky voice was back—the one that made him hot and needy every time he heard it. Bob had just given him permission to touch and explore. Rafi licked his lips in anticipation. If a job was worth doing, it was worth doing well. His new motto, he decided, eyeing Bob's hand where it lightly circled his cock.

Forcing his gaze away, he decided to go for the less obvious. He'd enjoyed their kissing. He'd do that again and experiment a little more. He dropped down to his friend's side and leaned over him, pressing him into the mattress. Yes, his skin was as smooth as it looked. Warm to the touch, it sent shock waves through Rafi. He tugged at the band holding Bob's long hair away from his face. Bob turned his head slightly, giving him easier access. Slowly he freed the long dark strands of Bob's hair. It was as dark as deep outer space. Sexy. And clean. He leaned over to bury his nose in the strands and smelled his soap, his shampoo. The scent was different on Bob. Not quite as earthy. It smelled good. Lightly he massaged Bob's scalp, smiling slightly when the other man let his weighted lids sweep down to screen his eyes. Perfect. Somehow it was easier when Bob wasn't watching him, measuring his every move.

His face was beautiful, finely chiseled and still pale at the moment. No doubt, Bob would hit an artificial tanning studio when they arrived at Patigous since all the most

famous sex performers sported golden tans. "You know, your skin looks good this pale. You should leave it this color instead of going to a tanning studio."

"I think it's the contrast between our skins. Black and white. It's hot." Bob's voice sounded relaxed and his eyes remained closed. "I don't know how it would go over with the audiences though. All the contestants who have won recently have had a similar body type and coloring. Probably better not to screw with a proven success."

Rafi stroked Bob's smooth cheek, the contrasting roughness of his jaw and traced the outline of his lips with a forefinger. Without warning, Bob opened his mouth and took Rafi's finger inside. He sucked and ran his tongue over Rafi's fingertip then increased the suction. Rafi felt it clear to his groin. His balls tightened and his cock pushed insistently against Bob's hipbone. The sensation became a twin one, coming from both the slight friction against his cock and the suction of Bob's talented mouth. Rafi shivered. He could hardly wait to see what else Bob could do with his mouth. Bob shifted a fraction and the sensation became too much, too tempting. "Enough," Rafi growled. He pulled his finger from Bob's mouth and wiped it against his forearm.

Bob frowned and opened his mouth as if to speak. Rafi stopped his first word by kissing him. Instead of slamming his mouth down and thrusting his tongue greedily inside Bob's mouth, he held back. He lazily explored, moving his lips slowly, sipping and giving rather than taking.

A groan reverberated against his mouth and inside Rafi smiled. Maybe Bob was right and this going slow thing could work. If it didn't drive him crazy first.

Time to taste. He licked Bob's lower lip, taking time to catalogue his taste. Coffee. A hint of mint. And that same earthy scent translated to smell—just as he'd imagine it would taste when he smelled the scent. Raw. Masculine. Seductive. Oh yeah. Seductive. The blood had pooled in his groin. Bob's too, since his friend's cock rubbed against Rafi and left a damp mark of arousal against his belly. Bob lazily moved his hips, grinding his cock against Rafi and letting out a hum of pleasure.

"Feels good," Bob whispered.

Rafi copied Bob's move, shifting his hips in a leisurely move so their cocks collided and rubbed and slid together. Bob hummed a little louder. It made Rafi feel good to know he could gain a sexual reaction from the man he loved.

But Bob could hurt him. He pulled away, frowning inside at the knowledge. The idea of losing their friendship worried Rafi the most, but he acknowledged to himself that the thought of backing away would hurt just as much.

No, he must concentrate and protect his heart. He could do it. Rafi nudged his sensual attack up a notch. He pushed the tip of his tongue into the corner of Bob's mouth, keeping with the slow and easy approach since it made him hot. Rafi figured that what turned him on would have the same effect on Bob.

Bob's arms came around Rafi and they sank deeper into the kiss. The dreamlike quality was the hottest thing Rafi had ever felt. Urgency pulsed through him, but he held himself under rigid control, allowing their tongues to tangle lazily and arousal to simmer. Needing to breathe, he eased away and ran his lips over Bob's cheekbone, the tender skin beneath his eyes and his eyelids.

"Ah, man. Stop," Bob whispered.

Rafi froze, concern racing through him. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"Hell, yeah," Bob muttered. "I can't take much more of this. You're wringing me inside out." He flashed a sudden grin. "You better leave off with the kissing for a while so my dick calms down."

Rafi relaxed, understanding finally that Bob was teasing him. Damn, he was out of practice with this stuff. Intimacy. He hadn't had a relationship for a while. Since it was difficult to maintain a relationship when he was away in space for months at the time, he'd stuck to casual. "What do you want me to do?"

"Lie back and let me do the work for a while." Bob waggled his brows. "I want to check out the goods."

Rafi felt his face go slack with surprise and shock an instant before heat crowded into his cheeks. Even the tips of his ears were warm. He swallowed and pulled away from Bob. "Go easy on me. I'm a novice at this stuff."

"Flat on your back," Bob instructed. "I want to demonstrate to you how to arouse a partner without kissing. Depending on how you manage and your body responds we might head into lesson two."

"Which is?" The words emerged as a croak.

"A little cock manipulation. I can't let you leave this lesson without some sort of reward."

Chapter Five

"Fuck, Bob," Rafi croaked. His friend was gonna kill him, making statements like that. Rafi trembled, unsure of whether to run or whether to stay and see exactly what Bob had in mind.

Bob grinned and trailed his fingers across Rafi's chest. He plucked at a flat nipple, manipulating it with his fingernails until it stood erect.

Rafi held his breath, trying not to react when what he really wanted to do was grab Bob and have his way with the man. The bastard knew exactly what he was doing to him, torturing him in this way. Bob's hands trailed lower, across his rib cage and belly.

Rafi couldn't watch any longer. He attempted to relax against the mattress and closed his eyes. A mistake. Shutting down his vision intensified everything else. Harsh breathing sounded. His. Blood crowded into his cock while his balls hardened under his friend's ministrations. Bob removed his hand and Rafi sensed he'd sat back on his haunches. Watching him. Fear suddenly stalked Rafi. What was he thinking? Half of him wanted to open his eyes to see Bob's reaction while the other part wanted to hide and never find out. Cowardly, he went with the second option.

The silence seemed to go on forever when it was probably no more than a few minutes. His skin itched all over, feeling too small to fit over his bones and muscle. He was bigger, more solid than Bob even though they were of a similar height.

"You...you're gorgeous." Bob sounded breathless, his voice lower than normal.

Rafi gave in to temptation and peeked.

Approval shone in Bob's face along with distinct interest. "You'd beat them hands down on the circuit. Your body is perfect—all bulging muscles and gleaming skin. And this..." Bob circled his cock loosely, giving a lazy pump.

The air whistled from between Rafi's lips at the acute pleasure and he couldn't help the upward surge of his hips to take better advantage of Bob's grip.

A smirk danced across Bob's face. "Yeah, a real natural."

"I have no desire to strut my stuff out in public. I leave it up to the pretty boys. Like you," Rafi said. He waited in tense expectation for Bob to repeat the move. Hell, he was almost ready to beg or finish the job himself. Just when he was about to jerk free of Bob's grasp, his friend worked his dick in another long stroke, his talented fingers branding his burning flesh. Rafi groaned. "Shit, keep that up and I might change my mind."

Bob stopped pumping and freed his cock after a final teasing stroke across the velvety head.

"Dammit, don't stop," Rafi protested.

"Warm-up, remember? I don't want you to come yet." But he smoothed his thumb over the broad head of Rafi's cock with tantalizing slowness. "Are you sure I couldn't persuade you to perform with me on Patigous? Look at the contrast of our skins. It's amazing. We look really good together." Bob stared down at his hand and smoothed his thumb across Rafi's slit. A drop of pre-cum lubricated the seductive slide across the broad head.

Rafi took one look and promptly looked away, but the vision was seared to his retinas. Bob was right. The contrast was so damned sexy, such a turn-on—the dark skin and wiry hair at his groin, Bob's lily-white hand and the dark brownish-pink tones of his cock. He shuddered, the thought of the Bob's hand pumping... God, the only thing that would make it better at the moment was his mouth. Rafi felt his balls tighten and draw up. A tingling sensation started at the base of his cock.

Bob laughed softly. "We're going to need to work on your staying power." He circled Rafi's erection with his fist and expertly pumped.

Rafi didn't care for the teasing because it made him feel vulnerable. But he didn't exactly want his friend to stop either. Bob massaged the sensitive head of his cock and ran a finger down his perineum. Rafi held his breath, feeling his cock jerk. Then the rush of semen up his shaft told him he was going to come. Briefly, he thought about trying to hold back, make it last, but Bob drove him on mercilessly. Rafi gave up the fight. He came in a blistering wave, shooting semen over his belly and Bob's hand in strong spurts. The pleasure was intense. Powerful. Addictive. Damn, he was weak. With a soft groan, he relaxed to face the condemnation he was sure he'd see in Bob's face. "Sorry." He was next to useless if he couldn't hold back long enough. They couldn't train properly without erections.

"No problem. My fault. I shouldn't have teased you." He climbed off the mattress and grabbed a towel. After wiping his hand, he chucked it at Rafi so he could clean up and sat on the edge of the bed. "Man, you need to do something with your berth. It's as dull and dreary as hell. White walls." Bob shook his head in mock dismay. "Boring. Maybe I could spice things up a bit."

"Yeah. Whatever."

Uncomfortable didn't begin to describe the way Rafi was feeling, but to his relief Bob seemed to have finished with his teasing. Avoiding Bob's gaze, Rafi wiped his stomach and dropped the towel beside the makeshift bed. "What do you want to do now? I can give you another half-hour before I have to take care of business." Running away. He admitted it. Rafi was in desperate need of time to think the situation over and reconcile how his feelings came into the equation. And before the next session he'd jack off so he didn't rise to the occasion quite so prematurely.

"Sure. No problem. I understand you have a business to run. I could help if you want." Bob flopped over on his back and lay at ease beside Rafi. "I'm a whiz on the computer."

"I'll think about it." Thoughts of work were preferable to sex. Thinking with his cock was the reason he was in this mess.

"How about if we run through the rules for competitors until you have to leave?"

That sounded safe enough with no embarrassment potential that he could see. "I'm listening."

In truth, Bob was glad Rafi agreed. His heart still hammered and it was difficult to stop looking at Rafi. That body. Those muscles. And his cock. Bob licked his lips. He'd lost control and that had been a first for him. Once he'd seen Rafi in the nude, he'd wanted him. He'd had to touch, to tease, and yeah, get some hands-on action. But he didn't understand why he was attracted to Rafi when Fifi had almost agreed to compete with him again. It was only a matter of time until their relationship reverted to how it had been before the accident. Of course, they'd live in separate homes this time. Bob was convinced that's where they'd gone wrong. They'd become too casual and hadn't spent time on romance, feeding their relationship.

But Rafi... Confusion brought a frown to his forehead. And he'd suggested they perform together. What was that about?

Sex withdrawal. That was his problem. He hadn't had sex for so long or even masturbated. No doubt his sperm were jammed up in there just aching to escape, to go forth and multiply. In puzzlement, he cast a surreptitious glance at Rafi, his gaze skimming downward to his friend's flaccid cock.

Feelings more than friendship filled him along with confusion. His own cock lengthened, the rush of blood leaving him giddy. Weird. Sure, he'd had sex with men before. It was part of training and competing, but he'd never suffered this driving urge to touch and explore, to give more pleasure than he received. He still loved Fifi.

"Clock's ticking," Rafi murmured.

"What? Oh yeah. I should have asked before. Are your shots up to date?"

"Yeah. All the crew is inoculated against every known disease as well as the electives like contraception. We don't get a chance to forget when our shots are due either. Barker has us organized. He takes his job seriously."

"I noticed," Bob said, his tone dry. "He checked me for every known sexual disease this last week and gave me an inoculation even though I told him my shots were up to date. I've even tested clean for the kissing virus." Bob turned his head, bringing his face close to Rafi's. "Told me he liked this job and wanted to keep his captain healthy so he could keep it."

"We've been together since I purchased the ship. The four of us together. Henry, Mac and Barker are like family."

They'd been like family once until Fifi had come between them. Fifi didn't like Rafi so Bob had drifted away from his friend. He was enjoying spending time with him again. Except he didn't think they were family any longer. Family didn't lust after each

other! Bob had the strange desire to run his lips across Rafi's face and take his lips again. His cock jerked once more and he hurriedly turned his head back to stare at the ceiling. It was just as white and boring as the curved walls of Rafi's berth.

"Technique," he said hurriedly, forcing his thoughts away from Rafi's mouth and his tempting body. "Competitors need to play to the cameras and make sure they arrange their bodies so the audience can view the sexual act easily. That's why body hair is removed." Unbidden, Bob's gaze wandered to Rafi's groin with its dark wiry hair. It was so damned sexy—a real turn-on. With a male, the cock stood out. Bob wondered if removal was the right way to go. It was too late for him since he'd had his body hair removed permanently. He frowned at the way his thoughts were wandering and strove for control. "It's all about showmanship. Did you ever see Antonio Perez and Sasha Greenacre perform during the inaugural contest? They were pure magic. Innovative too. They didn't follow along with everyone else. I should see if I can find a recording of that year's competition. They always inspire me."

"They were good. Have you contacted anyone about partnering you yet? Barker said you'd drawn up a shortlist."

"Yeah. I contacted a couple of them but I've left it late. Most of the competitors have partnered up. It's possible to use a competition droid but the audience likes the real thing better. I do too. I don't care what the company that sells them states in their publicity blurbs. It's like thrusting your cock into an icebox."

Bob grinned when he caught Rafi's wince but he didn't take the chance to tell Rafi the exact truth, that he was still hoping Fifi would ditch Roger and join him out on the circuit again. He didn't take the opportunity to analyze his behavior either because each time he thought about it, he felt a trace of shame, as if he were kicking his friend in the gut. He hurried into speech while attempting to outrun his thoughts. "This year they have a new category. Essentially, they're bringing warm-up into the contest. The audience likes to see how we do it."

"They like to go straight home and get their rocks off," Rafi said bluntly.

"Of course they do. If I haven't turned them on while performing onstage, then I don't deserve to win. We're in the business of entertainment."

"I need to go," Rafi said.

Bob nodded. "I'll work on a routine for us to do tomorrow. I've decided to enter the new warm-up category, self-pleasuring, toys and traditional. At least there are no surprises this year and I can enter the categories I choose rather than the lucky dip system they used to have."

"You won't need me for warm-up or self-pleasuring," Rafi said.

Alarm surfaced, something akin to panic. "I will need your help. I want to flow them into one long sequence. It's the best way to train." Rafi couldn't chicken out now. He needed him. Rafi was like his good-luck charm, or at least he had been so far.

Rafi pushed to his feet in one smoothly coordinated move. He padded into the small vac-shower cubicle. A whoosh sounded when he switched on the cleaning fluids.

Bob held his body tightly, trying not to react to the sight of taut buttocks and long muscular legs. Screwing his eyes shut he pictured Fifi in his mind, her golden hair and bright smile, her curving body and plump, luscious bottom. Rafi kept intruding, leaving Bob confused and wanting. He shuddered and cast a glare at his straining cock. Warmup in one fast, easy step.

The piping system clanked when Rafi flipped off the cleaning fluids. A soft whirr of the driers sounded for brief seconds before Rafi ambled out and headed to a wooden chest bolted to the one flat wall of the berth. He pulled out a clean set of clothing and started dressing. Bob watched him every step of the way. He was spare and economical with his movements, with none of the frilliness Fifi used to insist on. Rafi moved well too.

"You're a natural," Bob said, not bothering to stifle his admiration.

"In my own berth. If I had to get up on the stage I'd freeze."

"Pity."

"I'm sure you'll find someone to perform with, someone better than me. With your reputation and experience you're sure to have competitors lining up."

* * * * *

Bob sat at the communication console and stared at the screen. He'd gone through his A-list and the B-list with no success. There were two names on his C-list. He knew them both and wasn't even going to bother. They'd hinder his chances of advancing to the final. If only Fifi would come 'round and make a final decision, but she was busy playing games at his expense. No, he'd be better off sticking to the solo events. His jaw firmed as he rolled the idea around his head. No good. There was a certain prestige attached to the couples scene in the competition world—ever since Antonio Perez and Sasha Greenacre had made it glamorous. And Bob admitted it. Fifi wouldn't consider anything other than the couples competition.

"Any luck finding a partner?" Barker asked. The medic dropped into the seat beside him and peered at the screen. "Ouch."

"Yeah."

"It's a pity Rafi won't consider it. At least you know each other."

"Rafi is adamant. Besides, he's a bit stiff. I don't understand it."

Barker chuckled. "I thought that was the whole purpose. If you can't get it up, you might as well head for home."

"Ha-ha. Very droll." Bob leaned back in his chair in a dejected slump. "I'm going to have to give up on the idea of performing in the couples section."

"That's a shame. The prize pool is huge even though it's a smaller contest." Barker turned to Bob suddenly. "Does Rafi know what the prize is?"

"I think so."

"Are you sure about that?" Barker asked. "Did you know Rafi's ambition is to own a fleet of ships? He's saving up to buy a larger one first so we can travel farther into the outer territories and hold larger cargos. Plus he's always wanted to explore deep space."

"Rafi's always had a good head for business. I remember he used to talk about the uncharted territories when he was a kid." He smoothed a lock of hair away from his face. "With me it was the *Sex Idol* contest. Knowing Rafi, he'll get there."

"Not without currency," Barker inserted smoothly. He paused to let his words sink in.

"Wait a minute." Bob chewed on his bottom lip while he considered what this new information meant. "No, it smacks of bribery. I can't do it."

"Who said anything about bribes? Lay it out for Rafi. The captain likes to know the facts. Trust me, he might say no at first but he'll come 'round."

"What do you get out of it?" Bob asked. Barker was too persuasive, too persistent. The medic had an agenda.

"Rafi has said we can all invest in the new ship. We discussed it this morning while the two of you were training. There's a ship for sale on Suture, the planet next to Patigous. It's perfect—exactly what we want. Rafi needs a push. You need to push him."

"The sacrificial lamb." Bob rolled his eyes at Barker's unrepentant grin. "Great."

"So you'll do it?"

"I'll think about it," Bob corrected.

"Can't ask for more than that." Barker wandered off, a cheerful whistle following in his wake.

Bob stared after him, a wry smile playing around his lips. He'd been played by a master. He knew it. Although Barker's suggestion made sense, even if he hated to be the one who dangled the bait in front of Rafi. It was the only option he had if Fifi turned him down. Suddenly irked with Fifi's games, he decided to have it out with her now, to push for a decision. If she prevaricated or worse, said no, he'd go with Barker's suggestion.

Bob signed on to the private comm messaging, so his call couldn't be intercepted by any of the crew and hurriedly punched in Fifi's code. A swift glance over his shoulder confirmed the door was closed and no one else was present. Bob shoved aside his doubts and fears and the knowledge he was betraying Rafi.

"Roberto," Fifi purred, her golden hair in disarray around her beautiful face.

Bob had given up trying to get her to call him Bob. And besides, he didn't want to irritate her. "Fifi, you're looking beautiful."

"Roberto, you really need to go to a tanning station," she chided, licking her lips. The move directed Bob's gaze. Fifi's lips were swollen, a deeper pink than normal. Bob's eyes narrowed. He'd thought Fifi had said Roger and she were finished.

"There's no hurry for the tanning," Bob said. "The competition isn't for a few days. Have you made a decision?"

Fifi studied the fingernails on one hand before peeking up at him through her eyelashes. "I'm still thinking about it. That's not a problem, is it?"

"The competition is coming up soon. We need to train together and go through the routine." Bob kept his voice even, his face expressionless. No way did he want Fifi to see how irritated he was with her noncommittal attitude.

"But it's such a long journey to Patigous."

"You could take one of the express flights and be here in a couple of days." While Bob waited for her answer, he caught a flicker of movement in the corner of the screen. Fingers. Masculine, judging by the broad fingers and the heavy ring worn on one. Enlightenment struck hard, like one of the body blows from the debt collectors. Fifi and Roger were still together, despite her denial. Hurt and anger combined to create a huge knot in his stomach. He felt sick. All this time she'd been stringing him along and he'd bought into it. Stupid. Stupid. "You know what, Fifi," he said. "Don't worry about it. I'll find another partner." And he depressed the halt call button on the comm unit, wiping her beautiful face off the screen. He felt...used.

Just as Rafi would feel if he knew about his communications with Fifi.

The realization hit hard. He was no different than Fifi. Rafi had saved his butt, his crew had befriended him and Barker had helped him kick vroom and regain health. He could never repay their kindness in full. Barker's words played through his mind. Rafi wanted a new ship. If they won a few contests, Rafi could go a long way toward fulfilling his dream.

He could help him and at the same time, he'd cancel out the horrid betrayal he'd almost gone through with. Bob's heart and mind ached at the thought of Fifi, her traitorous lies. Hell, he owed Rafi big time.

No time like the present to start repaying the debt. Bob headed down to the bridge where Rafi was industriously lining up the next job. As he stared at Rafi, who was concentrating fiercely on whatever was on the screen, he decided he'd have to ask him straight-out.

"Damn and blast," Rafi cursed, pounding his fist on the desk. His mug of coffee jumped and moved along the tech-plastique veneer, stopping alarmingly close to the edge.

Bob rescued it, shunting it toward the center of the desk. "Something wrong?"

"I thought we had the contract all done apart from the signing. The company has just informed me the contract is going to one of my rivals." Rafi cursed again. "Damn, I was counting on that contract."

"Can't you get another one?"

"Probably. Maybe. But it will mean sitting around while I negotiate. I have other contracts signed but this one was to plug a gap. We can't afford the downtime."

"But you will be able to get another contract?"

Rafi shrugged in a clear show of irritation. "Yes. It usually takes a couple of weeks when something like this happens."

The timing couldn't be better!

"I have a suggestion then." Bob didn't wait for Rafi to show his interest but blurted it out. "The first prize in this heat of the contest is 500,000. If you partner me and we win, I'll give you forty percent of the prize."

Rafi swiveled in his chair and gaped at Bob. "But I can't compete on the sex circuit."

"Why not?" Calm, logical arguments, Bob counseled himself. He wanted to perform in public with Rafi. There was magic between them even if Rafi preferred to ignore the fact. When he forgot whom he was rehearsing with, there were sparks. Sparks and friendship and real affection. Who'd have thought?

"The companies I do business with are traditional with family values. They won't welcome the publicity of one of their captains strutting his stuff on the stage. I'd lose more of my contracts. Besides, we're not exactly doing a great job when we practice." Rafi refused to look him in the eye, picking up his coffee mug instead to stare into the murky liquid.

"A great job? Says who?" Hell, didn't Rafi feel the sexual tension, the fireworks, between them? Bob thought about the pleasure he'd felt this morning when they'd gone through the warm-up and self-pleasuring routines. A shiver of delight ran through his body like an out-of-control wildfire. "Why do you say that?"

Rafi's eyes widened. "It doesn't feel comfortable when we rehearse. Besides, I don't want my face beamed all over the universe. I'll never be able to negotiate contracts. Everyone will laugh at me. I have a hard enough time with the gossip about my mother as it is."

"I think you're overreacting," Bob said. "But if it worries you, wear a mask. Wouldn't the currency buy you time and the luxury to wait for a contract? Hell, you could put a deposit on a new ship with that kind of currency. You could travel into the uncharted territories and fulfill your childhood dreams."

Rafi did look at him then, his dark eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Who have you been talking to about a ship? No, wait. Don't tell me. Barker."

Play it casual. He's interested. Don't scare him away. Dangle the bait. Entice him. "Barker might have mentioned it."

A scowl pulled Rafi's handsome face tight.

Oh man. Dress him in tight leather and the audience would love him.

"What makes you think we'd win? I've never done anything like that before. I'd fuck it up for you. All that risk with no gain is worse than waiting and negotiating for a contract."

Bob shook his head. "Ye of little faith. Stand up." He grabbed Rafi's hand, tugging him past the control consoles into the clear floor space in the center of the bridge. "Look

at us. We're practically the same height, but we're such a color contrast. Together we're striking, and as long as we worked on a routine, we'd be great. See?" He clasped Rafi's right hand in his left and held it out in front of them. "Black and white. We could both wear costumes to emphasize our coloring. You wear white and I wear black. Or the opposite. We could even use stage names." He clicked his fingers, excitement bubbling up the more he brainstormed out loud. "Ebony and Ivory. That's what we should call ourselves." Bob stopped when he saw that Rafi didn't share the same enthusiasm. He inhaled deeply and played his winning card. "Oh man. I know this is a little out of your comfort zone but take it from a professional. We'll win. We really are that good together. Please let me give you this chance to fulfill your ambitions." He studied Rafi carefully, wondering if he'd laid it on a little thick.

Rafi jerked his hand from Bob's. "I'll think about it."

"And tell me when?" Bob blinked when he replayed his words inside his head. Good grief. He sounded exactly like Fifi when she wasn't getting her own way. "Never mind. I need to know by tomorrow morning so I can enter and get the early entrance fee rate. It saves a lot of currency that way." He knew Rafi appreciated thriftiness. Without another word or attempt to sway his friend, he walked away.

"Bob?"

"Yeah?" Bob let out a slow breath. He sensed Rafi's weakening but didn't want to scare him off.

"Are you sure we'd win?"

"Yeah."

"And the prize money is really that good?"

"It's really that good." Bob had difficulty speaking past the lump of tension in his throat. Silently, he waited.

"I'll do it on one condition. Actually make that two."

Hope surged inside Bob. "Anything, man." He'd promise Rafi anything for this chance to show Fifi what a huge mistake she'd made.

"One, we keep our identities secret while we're performing and both wear masks." Bob nodded. "No problem."

"And second, I want to go through the traditional category tonight." Rafi's face tightened into determination. "I want to make sure I can fuck my friend and not feel weird about it. Let me know by dinner." This time it was Rafi who walked away and didn't look back.

"Well," Bob muttered wryly, once his friend had disappeared from sight. He glanced down at the bulge in his groin with a slight grin curling his lips. There wouldn't be a problem rising to the occasion, but it remained to be seen whether Rafi would consider that weird or not. What the hell constituted weird?

Chapter Six

Rafi wasn't sure what had made him issue that challenge to Bob. Maybe it was the fact that his friend kept pushing or maybe it was frustration on his part. The truth was, he was finding it bloody hard to hide his real feelings for Bob. And it wasn't as if familiarity and living together in such a confined space had tamped his love for Bob down. If anything, living in such a close proximity had made it worse, his feelings had deepened and he thought about Bob constantly. Rafi didn't think he could bear to see another man or woman with Bob even if it was just a performance in a competition. The idea of them touching him...

"Face it, Mura. You're jealous." Rafi stomped down to the cargo bay, ostensibly to do his daily check on the cargo, but really he wanted time alone.

The time until the dinner hour seemed to drag despite the many tasks Rafi performed to keep busy. The same refrain echoed through his head. What the hell had he been thinking? This could wreck their friendship.

Or make it better, a tiny voice answered inside his head.

"Yeah, right," Rafi muttered in disgust. "Wishful thinking, man." He tried to push the voice aside but was only partially successful. A vision joined the voice. Bob's studly image pranced through his mind—tall and muscular with a tasty-looking cock bobbling with each strutting step. Rafi groaned softly, closing his eyes when his body reacted to the provocative image. And to think, in the matter of a few hours, he would be fucking that tight butt. He groaned again and decided to head for the rec room. He'd go and kick ass in the hologram section—a little one-on-one combat might help drive away the sexual edginess or at least hold it at bay.

* * * * *

"What the hell were you thinking?" Bob demanded. "You're covered with bruises. Why didn't you use a lower setting or use a hologram program where you wouldn't get beaten to a pulp. Man, I don't think you're up to a full sexual session." He ran his hand down Rafi's naked spine, finishing with a lingering touch on his bare buttocks.

Rafi's cock gave a feeble twitch and even that seemed to hurt. Thankfully Bob wouldn't notice since he was lying facedown on the bed. He wanted to laugh hysterically and not with amusement. Right now he was too close to the situation to appreciate the full irony. Give him six months and he might laugh at how he'd tried to stave off his sexual desire for Bob and done the job so well it hurt to breathe let alone think about fucking. Too bad. They had to finish this before they reached Patigous. "We

need to do this," he said, striving for calm and strength in his voice. He thought he did a credible job.

Bob ignored him and tsk-tsked instead. "A female. You let a female hologram kick your butt. Barker gave me some special massage oil. He said you'd want to go ahead with the trial no matter how much you hurt. In fact he bet me." Bob knelt by Rafi's head and leaned close so they could see each other clearly. "You're going to let me lose a bet because you're stubborn."

"You should know Barker never loses a bet," Rafi mumbled, turning his head so he could glance at his friend. Man, Bob had such sensuous lips. He could eat him up. "Come here and kiss me better."

Bob laughed. "Barker said to make sure I rubbed the oil into all the places that were bruised before we started on any routines. He said it's a new recipe he's been working on. It should heal as well as stimulate. He's hoping to make a killing with his inventions on the sex circuit."

"Barker's guinea pig. Great. The male wins doubly. It's punishment for not letting him watch." Rafi turned his head away from Bob and attempted to relax into the mattress. It wasn't easy. He could sense Bob's gaze lingering on his body, his back, his legs, his butt. A shivery breath eased past suddenly dry lips.

"You're going to need to get past the voyeur thing. It's part of performing. When you're onstage, your image will be beamed out to millions of viewers and there's always a live audience. Believe me, it's a real turn-on—all those people cheering and watching, wanting you to get your rocks off."

God, that was embarrassing. Bob had read him without difficulty. He tried to take comfort from the fact that he knew what Bob was thinking. Mostly.

"Easy for you to say. You're used to it." Rafi scowled inwardly at the memories of his early childhood before they'd arrived on Earth. The harem of Maharajah Jasilmer had been full of intrigue and corruption. Even though the occupants of the harem and their offspring were meant to be protected, there was always a way. He remembered the eyes watching—always watching—and the whispered voices and the intimate touch of hands when they thought he was asleep. When the incidences had increased, Rafi had told his mother. Luckily, she'd believed him. They had run from the harem not long afterward, flown to Earth and settled in Melbourne. Life hadn't been easy for his mother but Rafi had flourished. Rafi blinked. Shit, he hadn't thought about that for a long time. Nothing had happened. Not really. They'd escaped in time before the situation had progressed into a nightmare. From what he'd learned in subsequent years, he was one of the lucky ones. His mother had truly cared for him. He screwed his eyes shut for an instant before opening them again. It was a pity she wasn't still alive to enjoy the success, the sweetness of not needing to worry about where the next currency disc was coming from. He missed his mother.

And he loved Bob.

But not enough to risk his business and livelihood.

"Can you guarantee my identity will be kept secret? It's bad enough that my personal history does the rounds and scares away prospective employers without adding more fuel to the fire." Reactions within the freighting community and the Federation to rumors regarding his mother and speculation about his father were difficult to deal with especially when it meant he lost a contract. It was amazing the way society had split naturally into two factions—one that was ultraconservative and one that was crazy and carefree and embraced the *Sex Idol* contest. Rafi tried to straddle both groups without upsetting anyone. Much better for business that way.

"I'm sure we can arrange something. We'll discuss details later," Bob murmured in a soothing tone. "After you give me your decision."

Huh! "No pressure, right?" Rafi's smile was wry. His friend knew a little of his past but not the reasons they'd fled in the middle of a solar storm. It wasn't something he wanted to remember.

Bob chuckled. "That's right. No pressure except the right kind, the pleasurable kind."

"Promises, promises." Flirtation. That was a new one. His body tensed while he waited for Bob's reaction. The involuntary movement hurt like hell and he bit back a moan of pain. Mac had tinkered with that hologram machine. The assassin had Mac written all over her. The same evil grin. Rafi glowered into his pillow and considered payback. He'd used that particular program before and the female assassin hadn't been that good. Today, she'd been one step ahead of him the whole way but he'd been too stubborn to call it quits. He'd bide his time and make Mac nervous. Payback was worth the wait. "Well?"

Instead of replying, the mattress moved when Bob shifted his weight to reach for the massage oil. Rafi caught the flash of Bob's pale forearm in his peripheral vision. He imagined those lily-white hands gliding over his body and his breath hitched. Smooth skin with no calluses. He tensed again in sweet anticipation and didn't even wince.

The top popped on the malleable plastique container Barker had used to bottle his massage oil. Instantly the smell of the jungle filled the room—a touch of greenery with the underlying rich soil. A hint of vanilla orchids, from the newly discovered plant on Marchant as well, if he wasn't mistaken. His blood seemed to thicken inside his veins, flowing slowly and sensuously like syrup on a cool day. It pooled in his groin. His cock lengthened and he shifted slightly to ease the ache that sprang to life.

"Whoa, heady stuff," Bob whispered. "It tingles a little on my hands. Smells good. It reminds me of sex outdoors." He placed his hands on Rafi's shoulders and glided them across tense, sore muscles. They ached under Bob's massaging fingers, gradually loosening and releasing held tension. The scent of the oil seemed to intensify, filling his berth and his every breath. Rafi didn't think he'd ever smelled such a seductive aroma. It wound through him, relaxing yet enlivening at the same time.

"Feels good," Rafi purred, his voice low and almost a grunt of relaxed pleasure. His eyelids slipped to half-mast. Sex outdoors. Oh yeah. He'd like that...if it were with Bob.

"The stuff looks good on the skin. It has a slight glitter to it that would catch the lights while we are up onstage."

"I haven't agreed yet." Rafi heard the whoosh from the bottle when Bob squeezed more oil out. Seconds later oil drizzled into the crack between his buttocks. Oh man. A groan slipped out as the oil coated his butt hole. He didn't know what Barker had put into his massage oil but the pain from the bruises faded into his distant memory. Instead, pleasure tingled through his body everywhere the cool oil touched. His cock pushed insistently against the mattress and he had the desire to thrust and hump his way to climax. Not imperative yet, but he could see that the urgency wouldn't be long in coming especially with the way Bob was touching him, the way his fingers followed the rivulets of oil.

Bob concentrated on massaging his butt for a while, dipping his fingers down to press against his opening but not lingering or pushing inside as Rafi was silently urging him to. Instead, Bob stroked his fingers lazily down his perineum, working the fragrant oil into his skin. Back and forth until all the rich nerve endings twitched with delight. "Are you forgetting your aches and pains yet?"

"Yeah." Hell yeah, except the aches had moved to more interesting places.

"I thought that might be the case." Bob moved down the bed, parting Rafi's thighs with firm pressure of his hands so he could kneel between. "Barker said the stuff would be okay for lube as well, but he gave me a slightly different one to trial for him as well. You game?"

Rafi attempted to turn over but Bob stayed him with a firm hand in the middle of his back. "But I—"

"You're in no condition to fuck me. Tonight, we're going to do it my way. Besides, this way I remember to keep my gut sucked in so my paunch isn't so obvious."

"It's not that bad." Rafi stilled, conflicting emotions running through him. He preferred the dominant position, yet Bob was right. And no matter which way things panned out there would be pleasure. And Bob knew what he was doing. It wasn't as if either of them were inexperienced in this arena. "I guess," he said finally, a blip of excitement skipping through his belly at the thought of being filled. Yeah, okay. Having his ass fucked would work. He was desperate. He'd take it any way he could, crumbs if that was all Bob intended to offer.

"Good."

Huh, no mistaking that for anything but satisfaction. Maybe Bob was in league with Mac. He was certainly tight with Barker. Not in a sexual way, since Rafi would have spotted that, but they were friends. Rafi would have been pissed if he hadn't known his crew so well. They were family and were showing him they accepted Bob without reservation. It made him worry that he was wearing his emotions openly for everyone to see.

"Let me do your legs first before we start running through the routine. Barker said it would speed the healing since you refused to go down to the medic center."

"Can't we have sex first?" Hell, that had emerged as a whine. He squeezed his eyes shut in embarrassment. An alien had taken over his body. That was it.

"Why? You ready for action? You have an erection?"

Rafi snorted, shoving aside his discomfort at not being the one in control. "Hell, yeah. Let me fiddle about with your ass and see what happens to your cock."

Bob laughed, a low, sexy rumble. "Nah, not me. You're just easy."

Rafi didn't believe that for a minute. There was nothing easy about his character. Swallowing, he lay on the bed, getting harder and harder with each touch of Bob's talented hands. The swirl of fingertips across his upper thighs. The impudent touch that trailed over tight balls and the seam between. And then lower, the glide of hands over knotted calves. Throughout, the scent of the oil filled the air, relaxing Rafi as much as Bob's hands on his body. Well, as much as he could relax with his hard-on.

"Turn over," Bob said finally when Rafi quivered all over in expectation. The thick, rusty voice thrummed through Rafi and brought satisfaction as well as longing. Bob was just as turned-on as he was.

His friend moved out of his way and Rafi turned slowly onto his back. His erect cock pointed toward his stomach, the head flared and red and leaking pre-cum. He lay quietly, studying Bob's face. His gaze drifted downward to take in all of his friend's body. Oh yeah. He wasn't the only one who wanted a good fast fuck.

Rafi reached for Bob, desperately wanting to touch. His friend darted out of reach. "Oh no you don't." Bob shackled Rafi's wrists with his hands and pushed them down to Rafi's side. "Leave them there or else I'll cuff you. Barker gave me some sex toys as well. There will be restraints in the box." The corners of his eyes crinkled in silent humor. "I'm sure Barker wouldn't let me down."

"Sex toys?" Rafi muttered. "Wait, don't tell me. Barker invented them and he wants us to test them out."

"Clever boy." Bob squirted oil onto Rafi's chest and set the bottle aside. With gentle, smoothing motions, he spread the oil across a bruised pectoral muscle before scraping a fingernail across his nipple. Rafi gasped, the small pain shooting pleasure down to his groin. "Barker said this stuff tastes good. I have a mental checklist of the things to test for him."

"Humph," Rafi squeezed from between gritted teeth. The oil burned but in a good way. His muscles no longer screamed in bruised agony. Instead he trembled and desire thrummed through him. He needed Bob's hands on him, creating a sheath to pump his straining erection inside. And Bob's mouth. Yeah, his friend could put that to good use as well instead of talking. Rafi imagined thrusting into his mouth, being swallowed and the resulting pressure on the sensitive tip of his cock. A shudder ripped through his body.

"You cold?"

Rafi slowly shook his head, allowing his friend to see the heat and need banked up inside. "No, I'm not cold."

"Ah, still being driven by your cock. You need to learn to pace yourself." Bob lowered his head and flicked his tongue across a peaked nipple. His hands drifted across Rafi's ribs and hipbone.

Rafi panted, riding out the exquisite sensation and trying not to writhe. "Jeez, Bob. You try having this oil rubbed over every inch of your body and see how much staying power you have."

Grinning, Bob repeated the move but sucked toward the end. Rafi's hips rose sharply. He managed a little friction, nudging the head of his cock against Bob's hip before his friend caught on to his subterfuge.

"Enough of that. Let me finish rubbing the oil into your bruises."

"Go slower," Rafi snapped with a trace of sarcasm. "We have plenty of time."

"Yeah, we do. Tonight you're all mine." Bob grinned, his tongue snaking out to lick his lips.

Rafi's heart kicked into a crazy beat. He'd always liked Bob's mouth. Full. Sensuous. A little pouty at times with the top lip slightly thinner than the bottom. Talented. Bob knew exactly what to do with that mouth and Rafi wished like hell he'd hurry. A groan emerged when Bob stroked oil-slicked hands over his chest and shoulders before moving down his rib cage. He paid particular attention to Rafi's belly but skimmed his groin in favor of his legs.

Finally Bob sat back on his haunches, his gaze taking in Rafi's contorted face. "Barker wanted to know the exact sensations the oil produces."

"Fuck Barker."

"A threesome? I don't know, Rafi. We haven't managed a trial run for a duo act yet. I don't think we should complicate matters."

"Fuck you too," Rafi growled. "You want to know how I feel?" His chest rose and fell rapidly while he ground out the words. "I ache."

"The oil is meant to fix that."

"I ache for sex, lug head. Gimme. Now. Before I take matters into my own hands. You want to practice your act, you do it now before I lose control."

"Aw, you poor baby."

"I ain't no one's baby," Rafi gritted out. He glared at Bob but his friend remained unrepentant.

Bob's mouth twitched and his blue eyes danced with silent laughter. "I think I can give Barker a favorable report. On the oil, at any rate. And since you're becoming so bloody impatient and grumpy, we'll try the lube next. I'm going to talk you through the routine. At this stage we'd have gone through warm-up. We will both have a buzz along with an erection." His gaze dropped to Rafi's groin and Rafi felt his engorged cock twitch under the attention. "Some bigger than others," he added. "The crowd will cheer and we'll run a skit. I thought we'd go with two strangers meeting in a bar and having sex in a public place with the fear of being caught adding to the spice."

"Huh, I'd say out on the stage is fairly public. It won't take much imagination."

"You think? We have to keep in time with the music. What do you think of 'Strangers in the Night'?"

Rafi felt his mouth drop open. "Too obvious. Too corny."

Bob nodded, his eyes gleaming with silent laughter. "Probably, but that's why it will work. Everyone knows the song since that hot new band The Bongos re-released it late last year."

"Okay. You have your scenario, your song. Then what?"

"Then we fuck. Go with our routine and turn the crowd into putty with our dazzling performance."

Rafi gazed skyward, looking to the gods of space and travel. "At last. Thank you."

Bob climbed off the bed and pulled Rafi with him. "Barker lent me his sound machine. We downloaded the music earlier."

"Barker's very handy, but you tell him from me he's not getting a raise," Rafi said.

"He won't need one. From what I can see, his inventions will make him a mint out on the sex circuit. He'll never have to work again. Every time you use one of his products, you'll be paying his wages."

Rafi frowned in surprise. "Are they that good?"

"His oil worked on you. I'd say it's a safe bet everything else will be of the same high standard. Barker's a conscientious guy."

"Yeah. Yeah, he is. That's what makes him such a great medic." And Rafi would miss him if he decided to leave. So would the rest of the crew. For an instant Rafi considered sabotage just to keep Barker with them, but the thought died almost as soon as it formed. He couldn't do that to Barker. He was all for a man following his dream. It's what kept him going after Bob had teamed up with Fifi. His dream would keep him busy once Bob found another partner. "This scenario in the bar. How's it gonna work?"

"I thought we'd be two men sitting at opposite ends of the bar. Our gazes meet across the crowded room, maybe dart away then return. You flirt with me—"

"Flirt? Me? Do I look like the kind of guy who flirts?" Rafi demanded.

Bob rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "I should have gone with the puny guy who answered my ad for a partner."

"You had replies for your ad?" Jealousy gripped like a vise around his heart.

"A few. But none of them had the experience I was looking for."

"I don't have any experience."

"Nah, but you're pretty." Bob grinned. "And you're my friend. I trust you."

Rafi snorted. "I guess I can try to bat my pretty lashes at you." He screwed up his eyes and made a few tentative blinks.

Bob chuckled. "Not like that. You look like you're in pain."

"My point. I should be the dominant partner. I'm no good at submissive."

"It's not about who's dominant. It's a partnership. We have to function as a team not act as though we're in competition all the time. Try this. Picture the most luscious hunk you've ever seen. This guy is a god. He's your mate. He makes your heart go pitter-patter and you'd do absolutely anything to attract his attention. Close your eyes for a few seconds, visualize this man and then open your eyes and flirt with me."

Hell, too easy. Rafi's heart thumped while his cock seemed to lengthen even more. Bob. He dreamed about Bob every night now. He was addicted. Taking a deep breath he opened his eyes and sought out Bob. His friend was standing with nonchalant ease over at the other side of the room, one arm raised above his head as he leaned against the wall. Bob mimed taking a sip from a flask, tipping his head back, his throat working as he swallowed.

Competition mode.

Hot. Rafi wanted to fan his face, to drive the heat and nervous anticipation away. 'Cause, God's truth, he was nervous. Excited. Rafi caught Bob's gaze, held it for a long, pregnant moment before closing one eye in an audacious wink. Bob's eyes darkened. He sauntered the length of the imaginary bar and finally stood beside Rafi.

Rafi's breath caught. Bob was magnificent when in competition mode. His pulse rate sped up as Bob leaned close. He spoke in a whisper, the warmth of his breath caressing the delicate whorls of Rafi's ear.

Determined to do his bit in this role-play, Rafi signaled to the bartender for two more drinks. He moved closer to Bob's muscular body, crowding him against the imaginary bar. Their erections brushed when they moved and it was like a lightning surge through his body. A soft moan escaped unbidden. His head jerked up, his gaze anxiously seeking Bob's.

A grin, tender and loving slipped across Bob's lips, quirking up the corner of his mouth. "That's it, baby."

Rafi wanted to protest. He loathed the lovey-dovey nickname. The complaint was on the tip of his tongue but he fought to contain it, determined to help Bob. This was his friend's dream and he should help him. He would help him. Rafi tilted his hips to the right and their erections moved together more firmly. It wasn't enough. He needed more, and as if Bob could read his mind, he reached down and curled his hand around Rafi's penis. After one slow drag of his hand that sent a tremble through Rafi's massive shoulders, he loosened his grip. Before Rafi could protest, Bob had gathered up his own penis, mashing their erections together in a tight grip. With an easy pumping action, he massaged their dicks, allowing the flared heads to pop through the top opening of his hand.

Good positioning. Rafi remembered Bob talking about that. He threw his head back, allowing an expression of extreme pleasure to show on his face. In truth, it wasn't difficult because the feel of Bob's hand on their cocks, almost brutally tight felt like heaven. It was a relief not having to hide his feelings.

"Yeah, that's good," he murmured.

"Thought I'd throw that one in to relax you," Bob drawled. "Remember we're in a bar? We'd get arrested by the law for engaging in sex in a public place." Bob pumped again firmly from tip to root. Rafi gasped, the sight of Bob's big hand working both of them at the same time enough to make him start leaking pre-cum on a huge scale.

"Mighty peculiar when you think that sex shows are legal," Rafi muttered.

"Yeah, well. That's reality shows for you."

"Can we move this outside now?" Rafi asked in a strained voice. "To an alley or wherever this scenario is taking us?"

"Yeah, baby. We can do that."

Rafi snorted and leaned over for a bit of payback. He took Bob's lips in a full-out kiss, carnal with no pretensions of gentleness. Rafi's tongue flickered out and thrust into the warm depths of his friend's mouth, keeping time with the pump of Bob's hand. Bob chuckled against his mouth and released their cocks without warning. His hands pushed against Rafi's shoulders.

"Baby, you want to take this outside?"

Rafi cringed inside but didn't react apart from the nod of his head. Hell, yeah. He wanted to move along with this party. A fine layer of sweat coated his body, the heat rising off his skin seeming to intensify the scent from the oil.

Bob sauntered a few feet, his cock bobbing in an enticing way as he passed, making Rafi's mouth water. Then he was treated to the sight of tight buttocks. Lily-white. Sexy. Tempting. The big white man turned and crooked his finger, dragging Rafi from his daydreams. Damn, he loved this man even though he knew how hopeless it was to dream of them being together. He needed to savor every moment. This was as good as he'd get.

Bob turned back to grab up the tub of lube. He unscrewed the lid and set it aside, placing the tub on the shelf Rafi had attached to the wall above his bed. "We'll have to improvise a little, but I don't think that will matter." His whisper was laced with dark promises while his blue eyes darkened with amusement. "Hands on the brick wall in front of you, baby."

Rafi hesitated, his eyes narrowing before slowly turning toward the wall of his berth and placing one hand after the other on the white wall in front of him. Brick wall. Rafi snorted silently. How could he convince himself that was a brick wall in front of him when all he could think of was Bob touching him? Intimately.

"You're trembling," Bob whispered next to his ear. Another dark whisper that sent longing rippling the length of his body. He could have sworn his skin pulsed all over in a frenzy for the touch of Bob's hand. Rafi swallowed, struggling to keep his reaction passive.

Rafi refrained from checking out Bob's expression. He suspected it wouldn't be a good move on his part. Not with every emotion skating through his mind and no doubt showing on his face. "I'm cold," he lied. "Can't you hear the whistle of the wind? Feel the icy wind blowing down this alley?"

"Poor baby. Perhaps I'd better warm you up."

Hell, if Bob called him baby once more, he was gonna deck him. He was no one's baby, dammit. "If something doesn't happen soon I'll die of pneumonia out in this bloody alley. The law will find my frozen body."

"A body with a hard-on. They'll send you straight to a museum."

"The Reality Show Museum," Rafi deadpanned.

Bob spluttered, the blast of humor sending warm air skimming across Rafi's naked shoulder. Bob was still chuckling when his hands dropped to palm Rafi's ass.

Not Rafi. This was a scenario. He held his breath, his heart pumping strongly while he waited for Bob's next move. Finally, he was going to get some. Finally.

"When I saw you across the bar I wanted you."

"And now you have me. What are you intending to do with me?" Rafi asked. He could flirt if he tried.

Bob leaned over, letting his chest brush against Rafi's back. "I'm going to fuck you and make us both come. That's what I'm going to do."

A promise.

"Sounds good." Oh yeah.

Bob's soft smooth hands cruised over his shoulders and down his spine. With his knee, he shoved Rafi's legs farther apart, pushing him hard against the wall at the same time so only Rafi's upper body strength stopped his face from hitting the rough brick of their imaginary scene.

"It's going to feel good," Bob purred right next to his ear. His hands glided over Rafi's butt again before snaking over his hips and upward over his rib cage.

"Tease," Rafi muttered. Sweet agony. God, he wished Bob would hurry to the main event.

"I want to make you hot. Desperate."

Shit. "I have a long memory," Rafi finally murmured, the warning coming through clearly.

Bob merely laughed. His hands smoothed across Rafi's pecs and when he located flat nipples, he scraped his fingernails across. A gasp whispered past Rafi's lips before he could stop the telltale sound. Bob pinched both nipples until they burned. Rafi grunted as the sensation echoed in his cock. He bit back a protest when Bob's hands moved, the surge of blood back to the area where he'd pinched making him gasp again.

A wet kiss on his shoulder soothed him. For a brief second. Rafi wanted to take this scenario to its natural conclusion. Sooner rather than half an hour later. "Isn't there a time limit on each competitor?" he blurted.

"Shhh." Bob nibbled at the cords of his neck and nipped the flesh where his neck met his shoulder. Maybe he shouldn't try to hurry his friend. It would be something to remember when they were voyaging through space. Bob kissed and nibbled again. Rafi sighed his pleasure, shoving aside his complaints to enjoy Bob's touch. He tipped his neck to give his friend better access. Bob tilted his neck a fraction more and plundered his mouth, thrusting his tongue inside. He explored the hard edge of his teeth and probed at the softness of his inner cheek and tongue. Rafi luxuriated in the kiss, content now to let Bob taunt and tease him to the point of madness. What a way to go.

Slowly Bob pulled away and licked his lips. His blue eyes glittered and he smiled before he reached for the lube. Excitement lurched in Rafi's gut. At last. He reached down to soothe the ache in his cock but the steel grip of Bob's hand prevented him.

"Mine," he snarled. "Hands back on the wall."

Rafi stilled, his eyes narrowing. He maintained eye contact for a while before lowering his gaze. If Bob wanted submissive, he'd give him that—for the moment—but heaven help him if he didn't deliver after all this teasing. Without haste he placed his hand back on the wall. Sighing, he closed his eyes and waited, clinging to the pleasure that writhed through him. The anticipation. The wanting. The need.

He sensed Bob move. He heard breathing and imagined the sound of laughter coming from inside the bar. His cock jerked at the thought of discovery. Rafi grunted inwardly. He'd learned something about himself. Although his mind might recoil at the idea of sex in a public place, his body had no such qualms.

A hand caressed his butt, the fingers moving to trace the seam between his buttocks. Cool gel flowed from the fingers, icy and shocking when it hit his warm skin. Rafi tensed, only relaxing when the initial shock passed. Bob traced his finger across his entrance, teasing the puckered hole. His finger probed, slipping inside and retreating. The gel warmed, bringing with it a pleasurable tingling. More gel. More teasing. Bob prepared him carefully for his possession, adding another finger and pushing past the ring of muscle inside. His finger rubbed delicately across the firm mass of his prostate before pulling out.

Rafi wanted to protest but Bob stilled him. "You have to feel this on your cock, baby."

"Don't call me—" Ah, hell. Talented fingers spread the cool gel the length of his cock. The sensation was slightly different than before—a mild but pleasurable shock. When Bob's hand slid over the flared head of his swollen cock, it was like the moment just before coming, the full tingling expectation of pre-ejaculation. He held his breath, certain he was going to come but he didn't. Rafi panted, a sweat breaking out on his forehead. Amazing. He quivered, anxiously waiting for Bob to touch him again. It didn't happen. Instead he felt more cool gel on his butt hole and then the blunt head of Bob's cock. Excitement zapped through him hard and fast. He groaned, half of him wanted Bob to hurry, but the rest of him savoring the slow and careful entrance. Rafi pushed back and made a conscious effort to relax his muscles.

"Aw, man, that feels good," Bob said.

So good he'd forgotten the taunting *baby*. Rafi kept his eyes closed, wallowing in the sensations. The tingling of his cock, the slight burning as Bob pushed inside him and slowly retreated. His fevered imagination added in the sound effects again. He heard the footsteps of people entering and leaving the bar, felt the soft breeze blowing across his body and smelled the massage oil and lube and the contrasting dirt and mustiness in the alley.

Bob kept his pace slow and leisurely, letting Rafi adjust to his size, and finally he was fully seated, the smooth skin of his groin and balls pressing against Rafi's ass. He stilled, breathing slightly harder than normal. Bob shifted his weight, placing his left hand over Rafi's where it rested on the wall. His right hand curled around Rafi's erection. Somehow he managed to set up a slow and steady rhythm, thrusting and massaging in counterpoint, driving Rafi higher. Each pass across his prostate ratcheted up the pleasure and excitement. Rafi's breathing grew harsh. The burning in his butt was a good pain, anchoring him yet also tossing him about in a sea of pleasure. Hell. He was turning into a poet. He'd be singing about hills being full of music soon. Gradually Bob increased the speed of his thrusts. Rafi groaned as the pleasure of the gel application amplified tenfold. It was the real thing. Pleasure shot down his spine and seconds later, he felt the rapid surge of semen shooting toward the tip of his shaft. Climax exploded through him, dense streams of cum splattered the wall and he hung his head, breathing heavily. Hell. Incredible.

Bob continued to move inside him and amazingly his cock hardened again.

"Come again for me, baby. Come again," Bob whispered.

The sound of his voice, rough and low, and the pleasurable feel of Bob surging and retreating brought another erection. Yeah, amazing. Bob curled his hand around his flesh, pumping. Thrusting. Rafi's large body shook. He wanted. He strove for more. Pushing against Bob. Shivering at the feel of that blunt head massaging his sensitive inner muscles. Bob thrust a little harder, three short, choppy moves that made Rafi's head thunk against the wall. A flood of warm cum filled his ass. Bob leaned against his back and pressed a kiss to his shoulder, his neck, still breathing harshly. His hand continued to glove Rafi's cock. With expert attention, he worked him, smoothing his fist across the delicate underside. Rafi tensed, the climax hitting him suddenly. Less intense but still pleasurable, his cock jerked with explosive contractions and a raw and guttural groan filled the air. His.

Bob pulled from him and a trickle of semen dribbled down his thigh.

Rafi turned his head and let his eyes pop open. The first thing he saw was his friend's grin. Instinctively Rafi turned and hugged Bob, taking his mouth in a rough kiss. He eased away from the kiss and stared at his friend for a long moment.

"If you want me to do that with you again and help you train, don't call me baby. I don't like it."

Chapter Seven

Two weeks later Rafi waited for Bob to arrive for training and studied the new sex toys that Barker had handed him. Nipple clamps that glowed, flashed and worked via voice control rather than manually. A butt plug that also worked on voice control. According to Barker it widened and lengthened for the perfect fit. When Rafi had expressed his doubt and asked about overexpansion or lengthening by a mistake or because of an ambitious lover, Barker had laughed and said there was a built-in safeguard. This little baby wouldn't cause any ruptures or injuries to put a sex competitor out of commission. Yeah, like he believed that. Rafi was much happier having the real thing inside him. As far as Rafi was concerned, improving on Bob's cock was impossible.

Rafi was sort of becoming used to the idea of performing, despite his lingering worries about their identities becoming public. Although late yesterday afternoon, he'd let his doubts get the better of him and told Bob he couldn't go out onstage after all. He'd felt guilty ever since and hadn't slept well worrying. It was easy for the others to say everything would work out. Rafi scowled at the box of toys. They hadn't suffered through malicious gossip since childhood. They couldn't know what it was like to fall under the public spotlight for the wrong reasons, how the attention became overwhelming if allowed to play upon the mind too often. Rafi sighed. Bob and his crew were full of excitement and sweeping aside anything that might get in the way of them competing.

This morning the two brothers he'd brought from Earth had stopped by to give him a set of intricate body tattoos, designed they said to attract the audience's eye to noteworthy body features. Mac had delivered beautifully embroidered wraps, one white and one black with the same tattoos decorating the hem, sleeves and yoke of the garments. One by one the crew had come by bringing good-luck charms and items to use during tomorrow's performance. He could tell by their faces that Bob had told them he'd changed his mind about performing, yet they didn't say a thing.

Nothing like a little subtle pressure.

Aside from confidentiality problems, Rafi still worried about taking to the stage and laying down his emotions for everyone to see. He was sure the audience would see through the bullshit bluster and guess how much he cared for Bob. Once the truth was discovered, he was sure Bob would leave. His friend had told him that after Fifi he wasn't interested in setting up house with anyone. Lessons learned and all that. The certainty he'd witnessed on Bob's face was still etched in his memories. There was no doubt in his mind. The second Bob learned about Rafi's feelings for him, he'd walk. Rafi would lose everything.

And then there was the thought of hundreds and thousands of eyes peering at his body that spooked him. It reminded him of his childhood in the harem, the whispers, the touching...

Rafi shook his head to clear away the past.

A tap sounded on the door.

"Come in."

The door opened and Bob stepped inside followed by Barker and Mac—make that the whole crew. They filed into Rafi's berth and moved behind Bob, crowding together so everyone could fit inside the small room.

"What is this? A mutiny?" Rafi strode for humor since he couldn't believe his crew would turn on him, not after all they had been through together.

"Of sorts," Mac said, taking the position of spokesperson.

Bob turned to face his supporters. "This isn't necessary."

"Of course it is," Barker spoke up. "If we left it to you, you'd compete in the show with a droid."

Rafi let out a slow breath. "What's this all about?" Unfortunately, he had a fair idea what they wanted, but he intended to make them spell it out.

Bob walked across the berth and stood shoulder to shoulder with him. Rafi suppressed a shudder at the feel of Bob standing so close and held his breath so he couldn't smell him either. Bob seemed unaffected by Rafi's presence. Damn him. His friend folded muscular arms across his chest and stared the crew in the face, a smile tugging at his lips. "I didn't realize this was an open training session."

"If you don't agree to partner Bob during the contest, he'll have to use a droid. It will hurt his chances of winning and moving on to the next round of competitions." Barker appeared stern, his dark bushy brows drawn together. "You have to quit the dithering. Yes or no?"

"You could be his partner. You know the routines," Mac said, the glower on her face indicating she was ready for an argument if that's what Rafi wanted. "Bob said you're good enough. You have to make a firm commitment, Rafi. It's not fair on Bob otherwise."

Rafi glared back at his engineer. "If you're so worried about Bob, you perform with him."

Mac and Barker glanced at each other. Mac spoke. "You know that the prize package is huge even for the heats? You did remember that, right? You'd have enough for a down payment on the ship you want."

"Bob told me that before." Okay. He was trying not to think of that, the temptation to agree because of the money and what it might mean to his future. Their future. He scanned the faces staring intently at him before glancing at Bob. "I wouldn't be the one winning the currency. Bob's name is on the entry form. Roberto Azam." Rafi shrugged. "Nothing to do with me."

"It's normal for the partner to take a cut," Bob inserted smoothly. "And I'm not competing under the name Roberto Azam. I was serious about using my real name on all the paperwork."

"What? What name are you competing under?" Rafi asked faintly. He couldn't imagine any name other than Roberto. It had taken him ages to become used to Bob.

"That's not important," Henry said from the back. The sapphire in his tooth caught the light and sparkled.

"Yeah. Are you going to partner Bob or not?" Mac demanded. "Stop trying to change the subject."

"We're all counting on you," Barker inserted smoothly.

"Everyone out." Bob moved toward the door and opened it, standing aside so they could all file out. There were grumbles aplenty but they started to leave. When the last crewmember left, Bob shut the door and leaned against it. He smiled at Rafi. "Have I shown you my costumes for the acts? Mac made them for me."

Rafi shrugged and turned away. Guilt at his behavior yesterday afternoon bit him on the butt. Okay, so early this morning he'd decided to tell Bob he'd definitely perform but something—maybe sheer terror of making a fool of them both—held him back. Since that first night when they'd made love, Rafi had continued training with Bob but he'd prevaricated about performing in the contest. He admitted it.

"I don't care about costumes." Rafi found himself pacing across the berth and made himself stop before he gave away his unease. His crew was right. He wasn't being fair. "They were trying to blackmail me. My crew. For you." Rafi made no attempt to hide his irritation. "They're my crew, dammit. Where's their loyalty?"

"Okay, here's what I thought," Bob said. "You perform with me and I'll give you half of the prize money, that's a bit more than I suggested earlier. If you and the crew decide to go ahead with the purchase of the ship, I'll kick in as well."

Rafi's mouth dropped open in shock. Bob's offer was extremely generous and tempting. Rafi had long dreamed of expanding. But foolishly he'd discussed it with his crew and they'd used his dreams to blackmail him! He inhaled deeply while he fought his impulse to agree. "What about your debts?"

"The prize money will cover some of the debts—that's if I manage to win." Bob glanced at Rafi. "If I have to perform with a droid, I won't have a chance. With you, I'll be in the running."

"But what about our friendship? I don't want to mess with it." Liar. Liar. He was already so messed up and confused a little more wouldn't matter. *A new ship*. Tempting. Definitely tempting. He allowed himself a little hope then snorted. God, why not call him a prostitute and have done with it?

"You pulled me up from the gutter, man. I owe you." Bob appeared pensive before adding, "I'm going to contact the guys I still owe money to and arrange to pay off the balance by installments. I hope they go for it. I don't want to spend my life looking over my shoulder."

"You're my friend. I couldn't leave you in Sydney like that."

"And I appreciate it. I want to help you with your dream, Rafi. Let me give you this—I don't have any other way of showing my thanks."

"You don't owe me anything." Guilt surfaced in Rafi yet again. He wasn't exactly a saint here. The lure of becoming physically close to his friend had sucked him into this mess. In hindsight, he'd do things differently. Protecting his heart a little better being the main one. "Besides, I can't believe my presence onstage would help."

"You underestimate yourself. You're a natural. What do you say?"

Rafi struggled with a decision. He weighed the chance to have the new ship, one that both he and his crew coveted, against the discomfort of performing in public and having everyone looking at him and maybe loss of his business reputation. Then there was the emotional risk...

"I'll do the first show with you, but you should keep looking for a suitable partner. And you should know that I'm not comfortable with millions of people watching me have sex." Rafi paused to marshal his thoughts. "What if I can't get it up?"

"Ah, never you mind about the details. I'll take care of those. All you have to do is turn up on the day." He paused to waggle his brows. "Your gorgeous body will do the rest."

* * * * *

Rafi, Bob, Mac, Barker and Henry piled into an overhead flyer, much like the huge people movers on Earth, and headed for the stadium. The two boys Akio and Junzo were off to take a tour of a new theme park with one of the other pilots and his brood of kids. Rafi hoped they enjoyed their outing more than he was looking forward to his upcoming hours. He sat at a window seat, nerves sitting like a solid lump in the pit of his stomach, and tugged his hat lower so it concealed more of his face. He couldn't believe he'd agreed to go through with this. Mad. He was bloody mad.

Most of the passengers exited the flyer at the city center stop, leaving the compartment empty apart from an elderly couple sitting at the far end. A bag stuffed with shopping and market supplies sat on the seat beside them.

"You okay?" Bob murmured, shifting closer to Rafi so none of the crew could overhear them. He also wore a hat and had tucked his hair underneath out of sight.

"Fuck no," Rafi said. "I think I'm gonna throw up." He didn't take his gaze off the window and the clusters of shiny green buildings below the flight path. They passed a small spaceship towing a sparkling banner advertising the *Sex Idol* heats.

"Our final rehearsal last night was fine."

"Yeah, well." Rafi cast an uneasy glance toward Mac and Barker. "I can't believe I let you talk me in to performing in front of my crew. I'm never going to be able to look them in the eye again."

"Remember what I said about creating a fantasy in your mind. Remember the costumes and the names we're performing under. Use them to enhance the fantasy and we've a good chance. Think about the ship you want. Visualize." Bob paused to grin, his blue eyes twinkling. "Think about that mystery man you love."

Rafi's gut hollowed out in shock. His head whipped upward so sharply he partially dislodged his hat. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not stupid. I know I probably killed off a few brain cells with the vroom and my eyesight has suffered a bit, but even I couldn't miss the signs."

"The crew gossiped," Rafi said. He only hoped they hadn't discerned the truth.

"Yeah. But they don't know everything. Go on. Tell who the man is."

"I'd like to keep something private," Rafi snapped. A trace of panic tinged his words.

Bob just smiled. "I'll pry the man's identity out of you. Eventually."

Rafi schooled his face, making sure none of his dismay showed. Now that would be the final straw. He might manage to get a ship out of this fiasco but he'd lose his friend and the man he loved in one swoop.

Concern rippled through Bob but he concealed it. In truth there were a few nerves dancing around his gut so he guessed Rafi was entitled to his share. He really wanted a win so Rafi and his crew had a start in buying the ship they wanted and he could start paying off his debts. But he couldn't do it without his friend's total concentration. This really was a team effort. Somehow he had to help Rafi get past his nerves and apprehension. Maybe he felt as though he was being disloyal. Bob tossed that idea through his mind and admitted it had merit. He and Rafi worked well together. When the final product was put together onstage, they were going to win audience support. They were magic together, or they could be if Rafi's mysterious lover didn't get in the way.

Bob glanced at Rafi's fists. They were clenched in his lap, clasped tightly enough to turn his knuckles white. A surge of jealousy caught him unawares—the idea of Rafi with another male. He thought about Fifi for an instant, her ongoing relationship with Roger and the way she'd strung him along. The contrast between Fifi and Rafi was huge. Rafi had spoken honestly of his doubts while Fifi attempted manipulation. Yeah, maybe he'd been slow to realize she'd never change but he'd received the information now. He wouldn't forget again.

"We're almost there," Mac said, leaning forward to pop her head between the seats. "This is going to be so cool."

"Fine for you to say," Rafi snapped. "It's not your butt being shown in public and beamed across the galaxy."

"You'll be fine," Barker said, and Rafi looked up in time to catch the warning glare he sent the ship's engineer. "Besides that hat hides most of your face. No one will recognize either of you."

"Wow, look at the crowd waiting to get into the stadium," Mac said.

"Are you trying to make him leap from the flyer?" Barker demanded. "Damn, maybe I should give him a relaxation tranq."

"No drugs," Bob said, his tone sharp. "They do random drug tests. I don't want him to test positive for an unknown substance."

Barker nodded. "Good point. I know my tranqs are safe but they have substances in them that are probably unknown here."

"You're lucky we let you use us as test subjects," Mac said.

The two started bickering, taking the attention from Rafi. Bob could have kissed them.

The flyer slowed and came to a protesting stop at the stadium station.

"Make sure we get everything," Bob reminded them. He seized the precious costumes, not wanting to leave them behind. "This way."

The crew split up. Mac and Henry headed for the spectator entrance after wishing them good luck while Barker followed Bob and Rafi.

At the security checkpoint Bob signed in and produced the entry number he'd been issued via communications mail. The security guard directed them to another desk and they were issued with a dressing room.

"This way," Bob said, after checking the signs.

They passed other competitors. Most of them bore humanoid faces since traditionally the Earth voters preferred this body shape. He noticed a few Martian Irklings with their three sets of arms and extra mating opening. Probably entering the BDSM or ménage category, but he could be wrong. Times were a changing.

The stadium was purposely built for sex competitions. Behind scenes was like a maze with lots of passages and dressing rooms. At the end of each passage a screen was fixed to the wall. Competitors could watch the onstage action and assess their competitors. Bob checked the numbers on the doors and stopped outside the changing room halfway down the dingy passage. He opened the door and stood aside for Rafi and Barker to enter.

When they stepped inside the lights came on automatically.

"Not too bad," Bob remarked, taking in the narrow bed and the cubicles to store their costumes and makeup. A door revealed a bathroom facility, but to shower they needed to go to the main shower-vac room, a communal one, farther down the hall. Out in the main part of the dressing room, a large looking glass filled most of one wall so competitors could check positioning and costumes before they went onstage.

"What's this?" Rafi asked, gesturing at a series of buttons and a compact black box. He took off his hat and tossed it aside.

"That's the communication system for competitors." He pressed a series of buttons and a tinny voice boomed into the room.

"Number?"

"213," Bob said.

"Chosen categories?"

"Traditional, self-pleasuring, toys and warm-up."

"Names?"

Bob glanced at Rafi and gave him a reassuring smile. Now that they had arrived, his nerves had settled. This dressing room was comfortable, like every other dressing room he'd been allocated. Familiar. "Bob and partner. Performing onstage as Ebony and Ivory."

"Thank you. Please check into the competitors' warm-up room at 21:00."

Bob repeated the check-in time back and signed off. He checked the crystal timepiece on the far wall. "One hour to go."

"It will take half an hour to apply the makeup," Barker said. "We'd better get started."

Bob glanced at Rafi. His face was pale, his brown eyes huge with a glint of fear.

"Don't worry. You'll be fine. No one will recognize you by the time our costumes are in place."

Barker's eyes gleamed. "They'll remember your fine butt after they see the tattoos we're going to apply."

"We'll do some warm-up here as well. I wonder which category of the four we'll draw. At least the preliminary contests are quick with only one round. It's when we make it to the finals that we'll need to perform two categories."

"Humph," Rafi said. "What if I make a mistake and blow our chances?"

"You won't," Barker answered. "The routines you performed for us on the ship were magic. We could see you were nervous but once you forgot we were there perving at your fine butt, it was a beautiful thing. You're a natural, Rafi."

Rafi scowled. "Nothing natural about letting it all hang out in public."

"Strip." Bob stooped to remove his shoes and socks. "We don't have much time." He removed his hat, yanked his shirt over his head and stepped out of the loose tunic trews he wore. Underneath, he was naked. He caught the quick flicker of Rafi's gaze over his form and his cock reacted with a furtive twitch. "Do you want to apply my tattoo first?" He turned away from Rafi, something akin to surprise shifting inside. He'd come to enjoy his sessions with Rafi. And he never had a problem getting it up, not as he had with Fifi toward the end of their partnership. One look at his friend and he was revved and ready to go. Somehow when they had sex together, they invested their friendship and loyalty into the routine. Bob had never felt the like before. He smiled ruefully. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was becoming addicted or developing a crush on his best friend.

Hell, wouldn't Rafi laugh at the irony of that.

They'd decided to apply the tattoos that Akio and Junzo had designed for them, and they'd taken the design and made it into a theme.

"Rafi, you get the paints out for me while I apply the design to Bob." Barker frowned at Rafi. "Go on. We don't have much time." He waited for Rafi to turn away before winking at Bob. "Then strip off so I can get you ready for your performance. I think I'll apply the dark gold tattoo paint. It picks up the light better and the gold shows up on Rafi's skin best."

At the end of half an hour they were ready. Not bad. The tattoos covered the worst of his scar although an observant viewer might notice. Since helping Rafi and repaying his debts came first, cosmetic surgery on his scars would have to wait. Bob had smoothed his hair away from his face, securing it firmly at the back in a queue. Yep, they'd do.

They stood side by side with Barker slightly off to the side critiquing their appearance. He stepped up to Rafi and tweaked the dark mask that covered the upper portion of his face. His dark eyes glittered through the holes while he held his body stiffly.

Bob frowned, worried about his friend's state of mind. He hoped like hell they had the warm-up room to themselves because he needed to put Rafi at ease. He was so tightly strung he looked as though he might break if he moved too quickly.

"The costumes are spectacular," Bob said. Yeah, he was chattering but he needed to distract Rafi somehow.

And they were. Mac and Barker had dreamed them up with a little input on his part. They were playing on their differences in color and had decided on the masks since Rafi didn't care for flaunting his identity and Bob had wanted to start all over without his past failures catching up with him.

Bob grinned. Not that anyone would recognize him with his current pale skin. Normally he'd color his skin to a fashionable golden color but they had a black and white theme going so he'd stayed unfashionably pale. The contrast in their skins would make an impression on the audience—a bit of a stir. He couldn't wait to see and hear their reactions.

They'd dressed Rafi in supple black leather—a jerkin, trousers and knee-high boots, all designed for quick but strategic removal to entice the audience into giving them a good score. As long as Rafi didn't freeze up. A matching black mask covered the upper part of his face. Bob glanced at his contrasting white costume, the exact duplicate of Rafi's apart from the color, while pondering on how to put Rafi at ease. He remembered his first performance vividly. While he hadn't made a mess of it, the reviewers had labeled him wooden. Luckily he'd been a quick learner. As long as Rafi kept his cool, the audience would love them.

Their communication console squawked. "Number 213. Please move to the warm-up area."

"Showtime." Bob grabbed Rafi's black robe and handed it to him. After shrugging into his white robe, he grabbed their box of toys and other props. "We'd better move it."

"I'll be out with the others in the audience," Barker said after applying their competitor numbers to their left biceps. "If you need me for anything, ring me on my communicator." He paused. "Good luck."

Rafi watched Barker stride from their dressing room and continue down the passage until he disappeared around the corner. Trapped. Hell, he was scared stiff and didn't mind admitting it. "We'd better—"

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"Rafi?"
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"Yeah?"

"Just do the best you can. That's all I ask."

Rafi gave a curt nod. *That was a given*. He wanted to do well for Bob. His friend studied his face then squeezed his shoulder and headed down the passage. They passed other competitors, both male and female in various states of dress. Maybe that should be undress, Rafi decided, as a woman with large breasts strolled past. She wore a strip of cloth that covered her mons and little else. Her breasts jiggled in an enticing manner and she winked when she saw Rafi gaping. The flirtatious closing of her eye revealed a line of colored gems on the lid. When Rafi glanced downward, he noticed gems in other strategic places.

"Hi, mystery man," she cooed.

"Eyes forward, partner," Bob said, amusement in his voice.

"They...she..."

"It's always like this behind stage. I don't notice anymore."

Rafi tried not to stare at a male with two erections. The male sauntered past, uncaring about his state of undress. Rafi had heard about the race and the female equivalents but had never seen them in the flesh. He glanced back at Bob and saw his friend bore a wide smirk. "Hell, I am so much out of my element. Are you sure I can do this?"

Bob nodded. "Yeah. I'm sure." He stopped at the entrance to the warm-up room. "Ebony and Ivory. Competitor number 213."

"What's in the box?"

Bob set it down, opened it and showed the security guard the contents.

"That's fine, sir."

Rafi could hear the audience as they watched the competitors currently onstage. Their cheers. Their laughter. The heckling.

"More rumpy pumpy!"

"Show us your stuff!"

"He's got a pimple on his butt. That's gotta lose marks for him!"

Holy shit. Rafi frowned and when he thought about it, he didn't know what his butt looked like let alone if he had blemishes. "Have I—"

"Nothing wrong with your butt," Bob said, his eyes twinkling. He ran his hand down Rafi's back, cupped his bottom and lightly squeezed. He chuckled when Rafi jumped. "Come on, let's hear what our category is and warm-up so we're ready to go onstage."

Rafi nodded dumbly, shock waves from Bob's unexpected touch still rumbling though his system. Man, he was sad. He trailed after Bob once his friend had picked up the box of toys and special lotions Barker had developed for them. This was it. He thought about Bob. He thought about his crew and the way they believed in him. Rafi took a deep breath and let it ease back out slowly. It was too late to back out now and besides, his pride wouldn't let him. They were all counting on him.

"What's first?"

"We draw for one of our chosen categories." Bob shut the door after them, set down the box of toys and stalked over to the far wall.

The scent of antiseptic cleaner was heavy in the air. Rafi remembered Bob saying they had household droids who cleaned the warm-up rooms between performances. There was an alcove with another communication console similar to the one in their dressing room. A low bed, large enough for several people filled most of the room. There were several hooks on the wall and cubbyholes for competitors' belongings. A large screen filled another wall. The action out on the stage showed on the screen. The couple performing at the moment looked very professional even if one bore a pimple in an unfortunate place. There was no sound apart from soft background music. Rafi couldn't hear the audience or the competitors and their backing music.

Rafi watched his friend plug in their competitor number and waited for the category choice to come up on the screen. "Toys," Bob said. "Grab our collection of toys from the box."

Rafi did as instructed, the physical movement helping his nerves settle a fraction. "What now? Is that good?" Although Bob had explained what happened he needed the words again. He was having trouble remembering everything his friend had told him.

Bob shrugged off his robe and hung it up on a hook. "Off with the robe. We warm up. A one-minute warning bell will go off when it's almost time for us to go onstage. The competitors will finish and go off. They usually have a message from the sponsors. Then our music will start and we go on and strut our stuff. Simple."

Maybe it was simple for Bob but he was feeling increasingly edgy. Rafi tugged off his robe and turned away from Bob to hang it on a hook. His stomach had started to churn again. Rafi swallowed in an attempt to moisten his dry mouth.

"Rafi?"

"Yeah?" He turned around and found Bob right there. A flash of panic must have shown in his eyes. His friend smiled and leaned toward him. He took his head between his hands and kissed him. Panic of a different sort rushed through Rafi. Just breathing in Bob's clean scent and having his friend's hands on him made his body react. His eyes drifted shut and he let Bob take control. The kiss held a dreamy quality and sent shafts of longing slamming through Rafi. This was the kiss of a lover—a real lover. Bob's tongue pushed slowly into his mouth and the dreamy quality dispersed, replaced by urgency and need. Bob pulled back and Rafi's eyes opened slowly. He blinked at the expression on Bob's face—one of hope and wonder—and then decided he'd been seeing things.

"Do you want to run through the routine again or are you okay?" Bob's voice seemed huskier than normal.

"I'm fine." Apart from the racing pulse and an erection that felt as though it was going to blow. Man, wouldn't that be embarrassing.

Bob glanced at Rafi's cock. It was pressed against the leather of his trousers in a large and obvious bulge. "No problem getting it up. That's good. I remember I had huge problems getting an erection during my first time out."

"What if I come too soon?" A distinct possibility since it was Bob touching him, making love to him. His erection twitched as if agreeing with Rafi's worried assessment of his staying power.

"You won't, but if it would make you feel better, Barker included a couple of cock rings."

"Yeah. A cock ring sounds like a plan." And he'd have Bob's hands on him.

"We'll put it on as part of the act. There should be a silver tray... Ah, there it is." Bob grabbed it from a shelf. "We need the butt plug, the nipple rings and the cock ring. The massage hand."

Rafi handed him the items and Bob placed them on the tray.

"Lube. Okay. That's it. Hell, you look nervous again," Bob said. The one-minute warning bell sounded in the warm-up room.

To his chagrin, Rafi started. Heat crept into his face and he gave a self-conscious laugh. "I am nervous."

"Your erection has gone too."

"Thanks for pointing that out." Rafi tried to think about sex but the fear of facing the audience forced its way to the forefront of his mind. His erection died completely.

Bob took in the situation with a glance. "Come here, man. I'm going to kiss you and I want you to imagine that you're with the man you love, the man you want to build a future with. Can you do that for me?"

Rafi swallowed an ironic laugh and managed to nod. If only Bob knew. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Good. You know what, Rafi?"

"What?"

Shelley Munro

"The mystery man in your life is one lucky bastard." And seconds later, his mouth on Rafi's stopped any sort of reply.

Chapter Eight

The hostess tottered into the warm-up room on high heels and Bob pulled away from Rafi, breathing hard and with his body on fire. Heck, he was ready to explode. A premature explosion wouldn't be a good look. Bob concentrated on the woman while trying not to think about sex too hard. As with many of the other hostesses, she was a sex competitor wannabe. Glamorous. Sexy. Attractive.

"Wow," she said in a breathy voice. "You two look great!"

Bob smiled and inclined his head, thankful his cock had stopped throbbing so badly. He still had an erection but the pressure against his leather trousers had eased. "Thanks." Bob glanced at Rafi. They did look good together. He stalked over to where he'd placed the tray and after finding the domed lid, he handed her their props for the upcoming act.

"I will leave them on the pedestal table out on the stage." She hurried from the room.

The opening bars of their music started. Bob nudged Rafi. He saw Rafi's broad chest rise as he took a huge breath. He waited to see if Rafi would hesitate, if he needed to nudge him to action, but it seemed as though Rafi had taken his words to heart. Jealousy slivered through Bob without warning. Envy. Sex with Rafi was damned good—the best he'd had for ages. He looked forward to being with Rafi. And now that they'd started training together he didn't want to lose him as a partner. After Fifi's theatrics, working with Rafi was so easy, with none of the tears and drama that had characterized his previous partnership. No, he didn't want to lose Rafi and especially not to another man.

Rafi nudged him in the ribs, jerking Bob from his surge of jealousy. Chagrined, he offered his friend a weak grin. *Concentrate*.

"Sorry. Last-minute nerves. Let's do this."

"And here are our next contestants. They're new to the circuit," the emcee said. "I'm looking forward to seeing what they can do. Remember the scoring procedure. Use the voting computer in your armrest to jot notes and post your final score. We're going to see a performance featuring toys. Put your hands together for Ebony and Ivory!"

As one they strode onto the stage, the music blaring and a woman singing about the boys being back in town. They strutted in a tight circle around the stage letting the audience see them from all angles before meeting in the middle of the stage. As one they ripped off their vests and tossed them aside. The music eased into a softer, cheeky little number that made the audience straighten and really pay attention. There was nothing an audience liked better than a fun act where they could interact a little.

"Oh man. Look at the muscles. I want some of that," a woman shrieked from the front row. "Gimme! Gimme!"

"Look at the tattoos," another cried. "Hot stuff."

"Who are those masked men?" a woman hollered.

Bob grinned and blew her a kiss. In his peripheral vision he checked on Rafi. He was doing fine, his mouth creased in a smile as if he were truly enjoying the experience. They flowed into their routine. Bob tugged his boots off and cast them aside while Rafi indulged in a little body play. Kisses. Trailing hands across chests and a playful pinch of Bob's butt.

"Oh yeah!" a man screamed. "Show us some skin."

"Ebony, they wanna see skin." Bob's voice carried over the speakers, allowing the audience to hear their byplay. "Shall we give them skin?"

Rafi's grin widened. Bob was pleased to note the bulge in his trousers. His friend was getting off on the attention. Thank goodness. The knowledge that Rafi was coping well set his mind at rest and Bob threw himself into the routine. The crowd hooted and cheered. Bob strutted over to their props table and lifted the domed lid off the silver tray.

"What do we have here?" he asked.

"Toys!" the audience screamed.

Bob grinned and picked up the nipple clamps. Barker had made them with a long thin silver chain. It attached to both clamps and then the chain was draped around Rafi's waist and shoulders or however Bob desired.

"Ebony," he whispered, loud enough for the speakers to pick up without difficulty.

Rafi strutted over to him, stopping close enough that Bob could feel the heat coming from his body. Bob pinched one of Rafi's dark nipples, teasing it to prominence. He heard Rafi's sexy groan, the sound rich and dark. He wanted that sound again. Bob leaned over and nipped, his reward another startled moan of pleasure. After licking across the flat disc, Bob fastened the nipple clamps. Once fixed in place, they sent out flashes of white and silver lights, making the audience ooh and aah.

Things were going so well he decided to improvise. Rafi's reaction would be unrehearsed but would probably score more marks, since he'd apparently taken Bob's suggestion to heart. He was fantasizing about his mystery lover and doing a damn good job of it, Bob decided after glancing at Rafi's groin. He shoved aside his flare of envy and placed his hands on Rafi's shoulders. Then he closed the remaining distance between them and pressed his lips to Rafi's.

The audience let out a collective sigh. Kissing during a performance used to be a taboo until the winner of the first ever *Sex Idol* contest, Antonio Perez, and his partner had kissed onstage. These days due to medical advances there was no danger of becoming ill from kissing but most competitors seemed to shy away from the intimate contact. He'd never kissed Fifi while out onstage. Heck they'd never kissed much in

private either—a pity because he really got off on bumping lips with Rafi. There was nothing like it. The intimate slide of tongues as they slid together and the way their lips shaped together to make the perfect fit.

Bob felt his cock strain against the white leather trousers he wore and knew he had to move the routine along before they ran out of time. Without taking his mouth off Rafi's he ripped his friend's trousers loose and tossed them aside. Startled, Rafi stepped back. Bob gestured at his boots and Rafi tugged on the sticky fast tape holding them to his legs and it released with a ripping sound. He kicked the black boots aside and strutted over to stand in the middle of a spotlight. The light reflected off the chains and the clamps. He posed, one hand stroking his erection.

Bob strutted a circle around Rafi and came to a stop behind him. He moved close and rubbed his groin against Rafi's butt. Bob's hands wrapped around Rafi's as his friend stroked his cock. Together they pumped Rafi's cock to greater prominence, rocking in time to the music. Bob paced himself, not rushing but enjoying the routine and being onstage as he hadn't for a long time. He did a slightly jerky twirl, a lurching dance step and grabbed the cock ring off the tray. Not too bad. He still limped but his leg was becoming stronger and the faulty gait less noticeable. Barker said it would continue to improve.

Bob stepped over to Rafi and smoothed his hand over silky buttocks. Not a blemish in sight. Rafi really was in stunning shape. He ran a finger between Rafi's buttocks and rubbed his finger back and forth. Rafi moaned loudly and the audience loved it. Bob leaned forward and kissed Rafi's butt before tapping his friend on the shoulder. Rafi turned and Bob grinned before smoothing the cock ring over his friend's cock until it sat firmly at the root of Rafi's erection. Once in place it flashed, the light somehow blinking in time with the lights flashing from the nipple clamps. Bob had no idea how Barker had managed it—all he knew was the man was a genius and he had really lucked out on the day Rafi had come to his door. Sidling up to his friend, he waggled his butt in the direction of the audience. They roared.

He rapidly removed his remaining clothes and boots.

The audience cheered.

Bob grinned.

"Ebony! Ivory!" the crowd chanted.

Bob strolled over to their tray of supplies and picked up the tub of lube. He lubed his cock with careful attention to detail, making sure the audience saw and appreciated the sight.

Pretending to debate over what to do next, he picked up the "amazing massaging hand" that was Barker's latest invention. He whistled at Rafi and made a "come here" sign with his finger while winking at the audience. Rafi frowned, walking over with apparent unwillingness.

"Go!" a male voice shouted from the audience.

"Yeah. Bet he has something *goood* for you!" another cried.

"Ooh, pick me! Pick me!"

Bob stroked and kissed and fondled Rafi until he could hear the man's gasps and see the uncontrolled pump of his hips. The audience loved it, chipping in with advice. Bob fastened the transparent massaging hand around Rafi's erection and flicked the tiny battery that made the toy pulse and massage. With each pulse, a silver light flashed. They'd complained about looking like Christmas trees but Barker had said he liked Christmas. It was his inspiration.

"Hurry," Rafi muttered, the cords on his neck standing out. The speakers caught his plea and the audience shouted encouragement. Bob grinned. They had the audience—now all they needed to do was finish with an explosion. Or two...

With a flourish, he picked up the plug and showed it to the audience before coating it with lube, moving back toward Rafi at the same time.

"Ebony! Ivory!"

Rafi accepted the butt plug from Bob and moved behind him. They stood side on to the audience and their images were beamed up on the huge screens showing multiple angles at once. When Bob felt the heat of Rafi's hand on his butt, he waggled it again in a "come on" wriggle. His cock stood out from his groin, already leaking pre-cum. A good sign. It glistened with the coating of lube he'd added and longing to push inside Rafi thrummed through him urgently.

Rafi teased his opening, dipping a finger inside and stretching him before carefully inserting the plug. Sensitive nerve endings hummed with pleasure as his body adjusted to the intrusion. He sighed, feeling really good. Once the plug was fully seated, Rafi strutted around the stage like a proud peacock displaying his flashing lights.

The crowd cheered and Rafi blew them a kiss.

"Go, Ebony!" a familiar voice hollered.

Rafi responded by swiveling his hips in a circular motion. The lights flashed again, alternating between silver and gold. He blew a kiss in the direction of his crew without a hint of embarrassment.

After a quick glance at the time clock, Bob knew it was time to go into their finale. He reached for more lube and coated his fingers before beckoning Rafi. Rafi grinned at the audience and fluttered his eyelashes. "Wonder what he wants?"

"I know!"

"Yeah. We know what he wants."

"You should go," a woman screamed encouragement.

"Okay," Rafi said. "If you say so." He walked slowly toward Bob, his gaze catching his friend's. He winked. He paused to steal a kiss before striding over to two sturdy bars placed on the stage for use as a wall. The glance he sent over his shoulder was flirtatious and made the crowd roar with delight. He gripped the bars and Bob closed the distance between them. Bob palmed Rafi's butt cheeks. Aware of the seconds ticking away, Bob ran his hands over Rafi's back, tracing the dark gold swirls of the tattoo with

his fingers. Unable to wait an instant longer, he pressed his cock to Rafi's opening. He pushed slowly inside, savoring the clenching and the tight sensation squeezing his cock. Rafi pushed back against him, forcing Bob's cock deeper.

"Faster. Harder," Rafi whispered.

The soft words let him know that Rafi was close.

The audience offered vocal encouragement.

"Faster!"

"Slower!"

"Harder."

"Make him come."

Bob quickened his pace, letting the pleasure wash over him.

"Yeah. That's it," Rafi said.

Amazing. They were going to come almost at the same time. Bob could count the number of times that had happened during a competition on one hand. They were going to score highly for this round—he just knew it.

The sensation gathered momentum at the base of his spine. Rafi let out a low groan. In his peripheral vision Bob caught the rapid flash of lights and the change in color. The audience roared. A feeling of awe took Bob unawares. This performance was one for the records. He sensed people would be talking about it for long after. Bob felt the roar of semen as it raced up his cock. Then seconds later Rafi tensed. An arc of semen shot through the air and an E followed by an I formed on the target set aside for those competitors who wished to display some showmanship.

The audience burst into applause.

Grinning, Bob withdrew and took Rafi's hand. They bowed to the audience and then straightened. They waved and the curtain came down.

Bob turned to Rafi, his grin still wide. "Ah, man. That was plain awesome. You're a natural."

Rafi's return grin was a trifle shaky. "I can't believe I just did that—had sex in public. I need to sit down before I fall down."

"You'll have to wait until we get back to our dressing room. The housekeeper droids want to clean up for the next competitor. Come on." Bob grabbed Rafi's arm. "Take the plug out for me."

"Sure." Rafi eased his hand across his butt and withdrew the plug so slowly that Bob's heart pounded, arousal pulsing through him. Only the hovering droids stopped him from taking things further.

"They're waiting for us."

Rafi set the plug down with the rest of their props. "What about our costumes?" he asked, stooping to pick up his boots.

"They'll be delivered back to our dressing room by one of the droids. Don't worry." Bob scanned his friend's face. If he weren't mistaken, Rafi was in shock. Hell, he was in shock. That performance, it had been incredible. The magic between them and the way they'd worked together so flawlessly. It was incredible given the short amount of time they'd had to practice and perfect their routines. This heat was theirs. Bob knew it deep down in his gut and he couldn't suppress the emotion, how good he felt knowing he was back on track.

Fifi would pay attention to the win.

Rafi and his crew would have currency to go toward their purchase of a new ship.

And best of all, he had his confidence back.

Ah, life was good.

Just offstage a droid handed them robes. Both of them drew the robes over their bodies.

Bob glanced at Rafi and chuckled. "I don't know how Barker made those sex toys but they're still flashing. I can see them right through your robe."

Rafi looked down and rolled his eyes. "Looks like a marker beacon. Have to confess I'll feel a lot better once I'm cleaned up and dressed in my own clothes."

"You can take a shower but we'll have to change into our costumes in case we need to go out onstage."

"What for? I thought it was only one performance," Rafi said with a trace of horror in his voice.

"I mean if we win and have to go onstage to collect our prize," Bob said.

"Right. You think we have a chance?"

Bob smirked at his friend's unusual uncertainty. "Hell, yeah. We have an excellent chance. Come on. If we hurry we can watch some of the performances on the big screen in our dressing room."

Rafi nodded, although the idea of watching others performing tied his stomach in knots. Nerves. He still had them big time. They passed several other competitors on the way back to their dressing room. Their reactions varied from worried frowns to outright speculation. Rafi heard a few whispers when competitors and backstage crew wondered who they were. Thank goodness for the mask that covered his face. He knew that without the anonymity he'd never have found the guts to go out on that stage and bare his butt for everyone to see. *Never*.

"Grab your wash-up gear and I'll show you where the shower block is," Bob said. "And make sure that no one sees your face."

"Yes, sir," Rafi said, giving Bob a snappy salute. He removed the nipple clamps, massaging hand and cock ring and set them aside.

Within half an hour they were showered, changed and back in their dressing room. Rafi watched the various competitors on their viewing screen with growing nerves. No matter what Bob thought, there was no way the audience would give them top marks.

He watched the smooth moves of a male from Dlog. His golden skin contrasted wonderfully with the blue of his partner. They were professionals. It was obvious in their polished performance.

"Not bad," Bob conceded. "The final voting will probably be tight. I didn't think the competition would be quite as good up here. Usually the top performers prefer to strut their stuff in the Earth competitions since the finals take place in San Francisco."

The knots inside Rafi's stomach seemed to pull tight. Part of him wanted to do well since it would mean he could continue to train with Bob and get his cheap thrills where he could. The other part wanted it all to stop so he wouldn't endanger his heart any more than he had already.

"They're going off," Bob said.

"All competitors to the backstage collection point," a voice boomed through a loudspeaker in the corner of their dressing room.

"This is it." Bob looked as if he were about to head out the pub for a drink. Calm and collected with not a single nerve showing. "Don't forget the mask."

"Right." No way was he forgetting that. If any of the other ship owners learned he was strutting his naked butt out onstage, they'd never let him hear the end of it. His reputation would suffer and he might never earn it back.

Rafi followed Bob down the corridor to the rear of the stage. Twenty couples waited for the final voting results to be announced. The top three couples would take the prize money and advance to the next round of competitions.

The emcee ran through the names of the contestants and reminded the audience which routines they had completed. "Cast your votes now!" he shouted full of enthusiasm.

Rafi wished he could feel the same way. He just felt sick. The music and message from a sponsor pumped out over the loudspeakers, making his head ring.

"Don't worry," Bob said, seeming to sense his turmoil.

"Humph," Rafi grunted. Easy for him to say. He was used to this stuff.

Another ten minutes passed before the emcee returned to his podium. His assistant, an attractive brunette dressed in a tight bronze-colored dress, sauntered up to him bearing a silver tray. On the tray were three envelopes. "Competitors come out here on the stage where the audience can see you."

Rafi swallowed to shift the lump of tension in his throat and filed out with the rest of the competitors. His gaze shifted to the tray. Those three envelopes would govern his future. They lined up, facing the audience. Rafi pasted a smile on his face even though it was the last thing he felt like doing.

A roll of drums blasted through the speaker system. The audience silenced while they waited for the results.

"The second runner-up is Marios and his partner Katrine."

A howl of shouts and cheers filled the air and the named couple stepped forward to receive their rosettes and currency coupons.

When silence reigned again, the emcee reached for the second envelope. "The first runner-up is Arawa and her partner Ngataki."

Once again cheers filled the air as the couple stepped forward to receive their rosettes and currency coupons.

"Now, the moment you are waiting for...the winner of the Patigous heat is Ivory with his partner Ebony. Put your hands together, folks. Ivory and Ebony gave a masterful performance today and I'm sure we'll see more of them in the future."

Bob threw his arms around Rafi and kissed him soundly on the lips. The kiss was over almost before he had a chance to react. Bob strode forward toward the emcee. Rafi felt a hand push him forward. He moved automatically, stunned they had actually won. They'd actually won.

He'd be able to go through all this again...

Chapter Nine

Three days later, with their cargo loaded, they flew toward Merriam, which coincidentally was hosting a qualification heat for the *Sex Idol* contest. Bob exited Rafi's berth and hurried toward the rec room. His body ached after their morning training session and there was a slight hitch to his gait, but Barker assured him the limp would improve even more if he continued with stretching exercises each day. Right now he had more important things to worry about. Bob had hunted down the contact comm number for the crime boss he owed money to. Now, if only the man would listen to him.

Bob headed straight for the comm unit and sat on the chair in front of it. His hand trembled as he plugged in the number. He switched to privacy mode and smoothed his sweaty palms down the legs of his trews while he waited for the call to go through.

Footsteps sounded behind him. He glanced up from the comm and saw it was Rafi. His friend stood out of range so his visage wouldn't appear on the screen on Earth, but his silent support warmed Bob and gave him courage.

The face of an elderly man flickered on the screen in front of him. "Ah, Mr. Azam. My men have been searching for you."

Bob kept his face impassive and his gaze on the boss of the crime syndicate that had bought up his debts. He noticed the flicker of the man's eyes to the left as though he were signaling to someone out of shot. Probably an attempt to locate him.

"Mr. Calderone, I would like to apologize for skipping out on my debt. That is why I am contacting you." Bob decided there was nothing to do but lay out his scheme. If the man said no, he'd have to keep running. "I can't afford to pay you in full at present but I would like to offer you payment by installments."

The man stared at him with his dark eyes for so long that Bob wanted to squirm. He squelched the notion and maintained eye contact, striving for calm even though he felt faintly nauseous. His need for success was even stronger. Memories of the "Fallen Idol" tag the broadsheet reporters had branded him with after the accident still hurt. Bob inhaled and let his breath ease out slowly. This time he was aiming for success and nothing else would do.

"You're either very brave or very stupid," Mr. Calderone said finally. "I admire your balls in approaching me." He paused, ratcheting up the tension inside Bob. Finally, he said, "I agree. My assistant will discuss terms with you, and of course, interest has accrued."

"Thank you, Mr. Calderone." His relief echoed in his voice.

The man gave a clipped nod. "Don't let me down."

"I won't, Mr. Calderone. I won't." Bob took a moment to glance at Rafi. His friend gave a thumbs-up sign and indicated he was heading for the bridge. *Good*.

He spent the next half an hour hammering out the terms of payment for his loan and discussing how the payments were to be made. Bob canceled the call and frowned at the schedule of payments. It wouldn't be easy to keep up, but if he lived frugally and they managed to place in the heats he'd entered, he should manage. Maybe he'd offer to take training seminars if they were in one place for long enough. That would bring in more currency in case they didn't place in some of the contests. And luckily for him, Rafi had finally agreed to continue as his partner. With Rafi at his side, they had an excellent chance of progressing to the finals.

Barker walked into the rec room carrying a large box. "Do you have a moment? I need you and Rafi to test a new product I'm working on."

Bob grinned. "Have you informed Rafi? I thought he was busy."

"Henry wants him off the bridge. He said he was getting in the way."

"Rafi's nervous about the contract negotiations, huh?"

Barker nodded. "Henry is ready to throttle him. Says he doesn't need Rafi to help him land. You'd be doing us all a favor if you distracted him with sex."

A snort escaped Bob. "Looked to me as if Rafi wanted to work. We can't practice all the time. The body has limits. Besides we practiced this morning and the competition is in two hours."

"True, which is why I've been working on a potion to extend a man's erection. It's made of natural herbs and is easier on the body than the chemicals most people use."

"Interesting." Bob's brows rose. "Do you want to bet on how long it takes us to convince Rafi to leave the bridge?"

Barker's look held speculation and a trace of cunning. "I'll take that bet."

"Not currency," Bob added. "I need to save all that to pay off my debts."

Barker huffed. "You're no fun. Just go and distract Rafi before Henry decks him."

Bob thought about Henry's diminutive size and Rafi's solid build and had trouble picturing the situation. Grinning, he shook his head. "I'll do my best." He followed Barker down to the bridge. They could hear the argument before they arrived.

"Dammit," Henry roared. "Get off my bridge."

"I'm captain," Rafi said.

"See what I mean," Barker muttered as they entered the bridge. "There's gonna be a mutiny soon."

"I heard that," Rafi snapped.

Bob noted the strain on Rafi's face, the shadows under his eyes because they were spending a lot of time practicing. He knew how important it was to Rafi to land these freighting contracts especially since the crew had persuaded him to place a down payment on the new ship. Hell, he admitted it. He'd encouraged Rafi to go ahead with

the purchase too. They had calculated with three more contests, provided they won or placed, along with what they'd saved already, would be enough and they could take delivery of the ship. The crew had kicked in their savings as well. The commitment had meant extra stress because Rafi had needed to look ahead and tender for contracts for the larger ship.

"Rafi, ease up," Bob said.

"Yeah, let me do my job," Henry said. "I keep telling you the contract is in the bag. I'm physic."

"And I'm Mother Goose," Rafi snapped.

For an instant they all stared at him. Even Akio and Junzo, who had been keeping low profiles, gaped in astonishment at Rafi.

"Well, your feathers are definitely ruffled," Bob said finally. "But that's about the only similarity I can see."

Barker sniggered, triggering an outbreak of laughter that pierced the tension. Even Rafi's lips twitched.

Air control squawked instructions through the comm unit.

"Everyone buckle up," Henry said. "We're going to land."

They all moved to their assigned positions and Henry slotted the ship into the correct holding pattern.

Ten minutes later they were on the ground.

Barker stood abruptly. "Move it, people. We have a contest to attend and you need to get ready."

"Don't remind me," Rafi grumbled, but he stood and headed for their berth.

Bob followed, allowing Rafi some time. *Their berth*. They'd started sharing since it seemed the logical thing to do. Each night they practiced routines and fell asleep in the same bed, waking up all tangled together. Rafi hadn't said anything so Bob had stayed.

Inside the berth, they dressed in their costumes and covered them with long black jackets that hid all but their lower legs and boots.

"Barker and the boys have made us new hats to cover most of our faces until we get into the private hover we've hired. We figured if we all dressed the same way, people would look but wouldn't click that we might be Ebony and Ivory."

Rafi grunted a reply and accepted the hat that fit closely to his head and swept low over his forehead and eyes.

Bob put on his hat and after picking up a bag containing their makeup, toys and the rest of their costumes, followed Rafi out the door.

The rest of the crew was waiting to disembark with them and all wore matching coats and hats.

"I hope this works," Rafi said.

"It will." Henry hit the button to disengage the door.

"When are we going to the zoo park?" Akio asked.

"Now," Henry said. "While the others go to the contest." He waited for everyone to leave the ship and engaged the locking system again.

They moved down the ramp and into the spaceport.

A droid stood at attention, surveying the faces of the exiting passengers. He was designed to blend with the local population, his gray skin covered with tiny black spots. His eyes scanned faces and compared them to the one on his image machine.

"Debt collector droid waiting for his prey," Barker said in an undertone.

"It can't be me," Bob replied. "I'm all sorted as long as I keep up with my payments."

"Have you seen this man?" the droid asked, shoving an image machine in front of Mac.

"Never seen 'im," she replied without hesitation.

"You?" the droid asked, showing the image to Bob.

Bob froze for an instant. That was him on the image, albeit not one of his better shots. The droid was searching for him! "No, he's not familiar." And that was the truth. Bob hoped that fat whale of a man would *never* reappear.

The droid stared at him for an instant before studying the group of people from the ship that had landed straight after them. They moved on through the spaceport toward the waiting hover. After waving farewell to Henry and the boys, the rest of them piled into the hover and headed for the stadium.

"That droid was looking for you," Barker said.

Bob nodded, his thoughts churning in all directions. "Yeah."

"I thought you'd made arrangements for payment," Rafi said.

"I have."

Rafi's dark eyes narrowed. "So, wouldn't they recall all the collection droids?"

Bob nodded again. "I would have thought so." He frowned, trying to puzzle the situation out. Of course, Mr. Calderone might have gone against his word that he'd call off his dogs, but Bob didn't think so. He'd received the impression that the man had admired his effrontery in approaching him. And he wouldn't have had time to arrange the droid to intercept him. That left one other alternative. No one knew of his intended destination except...except Fifi.

Bob waited for the hurt but it didn't come. Instead anger and irritation arrived. Fifi had sold him out, probably for a large sum of currency. But he couldn't tell Rafi or the others because then everything would come out—the way he'd wanted to get back with Fifi and had initially taken Rafi because he was desperate and determined. If he told them that, it wouldn't matter that he'd changed, that he couldn't imagine performing with anyone else except Rafi. Hell, he didn't want anyone else except Rafi. They were good together and he trusted his friend. Rafi would never betray him as Fifi Da Groux had.

"I'll contact them again after the competition. Maybe they haven't had time to update all their droid collectors yet."

"We've arrived," Mac said. "Masks on."

Bob and Rafi both removed their hats and replaced them with golden masks.

"I like the new look," Barker said.

"Let's hope the audience like it too," Bob said, feeling uncharacteristically nervous.

* * * * *

"Next onstage is the new act that's creating such a buzz. Put your hands together for Ebony and Ivory performing in the self-pleasuring category!" the emcee shouted.

"We should have warmed-up," Rafi whispered, glancing down at his groin. He froze when the mikes picked up his words. "Shit," he mouthed, a chagrined expression on his face.

Bob grinned and made an okay sign with his fingers.

The curtains swished aside to reveal them standing in separate spotlights facing each other.

"Ooh, look at the pretty gold tattoos," a woman shouted.

"Never mind the tatts. Where are their erections?" another woman screamed. "Can't you get it up?"

"Yeah," a man yelled. "Where's the fun in that?"

Bob grinned again and winked at Rafi. The music started, a sultry soul number with a male singer who sang in a deep voice. Each time he heard the song, Bob thought of Rafi—he thought it was the huskiness of the voice. He stared Rafi deep in the eyes and blew him a kiss, excitement building inside him. As he'd told Rafi when he'd complained about rehearsing the same routine yet again, their bodies would remember and react automatically. His gaze drifted across Rafi's body, past the formfitting mask to study his lips. Those lips were so talented. Bob imagined those lips wrapping around his cock, he imagined the suction, gentle at first until need made him beg for more.

His gaze drifted farther down Rafi's body, over a broad chest decorated with swirling golden tattoos. As he watched, Rafi stroked his hands down his body. He swiveled his hips, showing the audience that they had nothing to worry about. They were going to see some action.

Rafi closed the distance between them while Bob stroked himself with slow, lazy moves. Although they didn't make contact since it was against the rules, they mimed touch. They swayed together, their moves identical while stroking their own bodies, their cocks and balls.

At the back of his mind, he realized the audience had stopped with their heckling and instead were watching in silence. Bob continued working his cock, savoring Rafi's gaze on his body and the steady rush of blood, taking him to the edge of control. Bob's

gaze dropped to the velvet flare of Rafi's cock, the pearl of liquid on the tip. The clawing tension inside him increased and he eased back on his strokes, not wanting to spoil their performance by coming too soon.

Rafi also eased back and they improvised, waiting for their music to reach the point where they'd decided to come. Rafi danced around him, the raw, primal clench of his mouth telling Bob how close and how desperate he felt. Bob felt the same way.

Finally, the singer reached the end of the third verse and started crooning the chorus. With a slight nod, Bob signaled Rafi it was time. As one they, increased their strokes, allowing their fists to tease delicate flesh beyond the point of no return.

The singer sang and held the last note and as one Bob and Rafi orgasmed, hot spurts of cum arcing and spraying over each other. While the audience watched, more golden tattoos appeared on their chests.

The audience gave a collective sigh when the music trailed off and Bob and Rafi bowed. A cheer broke out when they straightened.

The emcee arrived back onstage. The curtain swished down and giving into temptation, Bob grabbed Rafi and kissed him hard. Lips sucked and tongues tangled together when his friend participated with enthusiasm. When they pulled apart they were both breathing heavily and Rafi's erection brushed his hip.

Bob pulled away, feeling slightly confused and unsettled. "We'd better go so the droids can clean up for the next competitors." What he felt for Rafi was friendship. He was grateful to his friend. Yeah, that was it.

* * * * *

"Third," Barker said. "I thought you'd place higher than that."

So had Bob. "At least we placed. The prize purse isn't too shabby."

"At least we're closer to the final. That's the goal, right?" Rafi asked.

"Nah, show us the money!" Mac tossed her head and gave them all a crooked grin.

"Yeah," Barker said. "We need the money."

"Aye, there goes that pressure again," Rafi said. "I told you we should have waited before committing to purchasing the new ship."

Henry entered the rec room. "Bob, there's a comm call for you."

"Who is it?" Bob asked.

"I don't know. They wouldn't say." Henry shrugged. "Some guy."

"Probably a reply about the debt droid," Bob said. "I'll take it in private. You guys don't want to hear about my debts." He hurried to the far end of the rec room and entered a small cubicle, activating the privacy screen.

"Azam," he said.

"Roberto," a feminine voice purred.

Bob tensed. Fifi. What the hell did she want now? "What are you communicating with me for?" he demanded.

"Lover, don't be like that," she cooed. "I thought you'd be pleased to hear from me."

Why would she think that when she'd set the debt collector droid on him? "What do you want, Fifi?"

"I've thought long and hard about your suggestion," Fifi said. "And I've decided you're right. I agree. Where is your next contest? Let me know and I'll join you so we can start rehearsing."

Bob stared at her green eyes, her earnest expression and pouty red lips. The woman was beautiful and he didn't feel a thing. He shook his head, trying to work it out. When had he changed?

"Roberto?" she purred, her confident smile telling Bob that she was in for a shock. "I thought I recognized you on the broadcast and the scars on your knee and leg clinched it. I know what name you're using. You're doing so well in the competitions. Once we're back together again we'll blitz all the competition. I can't wait!"

"I don't think so, Fifi."

"What?"

"No, Fifi. I'm not going to perform with you again. I'm happy with my current partner."

"What?"

"I said no."

"No?"

Fifi seemed to be having difficulty comprehending his rejection. "That's right."

Her mouth pinched tight while the expression in her eyes grew cold. For a moment she stared at him, but finally she must have realized that he meant every word he said. "Bastard, you can't reject me."

"Fifi, I'm not interested."

"You'll be sorry," she hissed, her eyes flashing with fury and she disconnected the call before Bob had a chance to comment.

Chapter Ten

Rafi stared out the porthole. Another planet. Another competition. The third one so far and they weren't getting any easier. It was becoming harder to hide his feelings, harder to keep from letting his hands linger, his mouth taste when they weren't training... Hell, he'd found himself reaching out to cop a feel of Bob's butt. They hadn't been training. It hadn't been a competition. Rafi cursed under his breath. If he loused up now, Bob would leave and he'd lose everything, including their long-running friendship.

He didn't want Bob to leave or worse, find another partner. Rafi scowled and cursed again. Just the thought of Bob with someone else, male or female, was doing his head. "Damn," he muttered. "I don't think I can do this."

"Don't worry. You only need to make the top three," Barker said. "The way you two look out onstage it should be easy."

Mac tweaked Rafi's vest into place. "That's better. Yeah, you can do it. Of course you can."

"Glad you think so," Rafi muttered. The normal pre-contest flutter of nerves gripped his stomach. He couldn't eat and he hadn't slept well the previous night.

"You look tired," Barker said.

"I am. Luckily we wear a mask." Rafi's mouth opened in a wide yawn. "I wouldn't want to scare the audience. Is Bob ready to leave? Is everything in the box?"

Barker smirked. "Yes and yes. You're not still nervous, are you?"

Rafi sighed, his gaze going from Barker to Mac and back. He sighed again and settled for a half-truth. "It's not your butt that's on display. You don't have fans trying to rip off your clothes."

"Just think about all the beautiful currency that's accumulating in your account. Our accounts," Mac said. "So what if the fans are fervent."

It was easy for Mac. She hadn't experienced the worst of it—the pushing and shoving. The women and men who tried to rip off his mask. The sly pinches and groping hands. The rabid fans were something Rafi hadn't expected. The day after the first contest the headlines in the news circulars had exclaimed, *Black and White take the contest*, or Mac, Henry and Barker's personal favorite, *Ebony and Ivory—who are these masked men?*

Frankly, the adulation made Rafi uncomfortable. He was the captain of a space freighter. That was what he wanted and he enjoyed his chosen path. This...this was different. Insane and crazy. It felt as though his life was spinning out of control and he wasn't sure he liked it. They'd gone out to dinner the previous night in a group to

celebrate landing a big contract. Rafi had caught the other diners staring at him because of his color. Instead of the normal reaction, they'd stared, trying to work out if it were possible, if he might be Ebony. The whispers had swelled. When a group of space pilots had entered, Rafi had waved. They'd waved back but the pilots hadn't taken long to start whispering and repeating rumors. Bob had ignored it all while the rest of the crew had swung into control mode, asking Rafi about their next job. Gradually, the whispers had died but Rafi hadn't enjoyed his meal.

Bob prowled into the room, interrupting Rafi's stressing. He slung his arm across Rafi's shoulder and gave a slow grin that lit his face. Rafi blinked and tried hard not to react but his cock acted independently, rearing up and pressing insistently against his trews. He felt heat collect in his face and silently thanked the gods he'd worn a long tunic top.

"All set?" Bob's warm breath wafted across Rafi's cheek. If he leaned a little closer...

"Rafi's scared," Mac taunted. "He listened to all the whispers last night from the pilots and it's freaked him out."

Bob scanned Rafi closely before nodding, whatever he'd seen reassuring him. "It's better than being overconfident. If we can make the top three in this heat, we'll go through to the quarterfinals."

"Nothing like a little pressure," Rafi said, his tone wry. He swallowed because his mouth was as dry as the solar-swept deserts on the planet Arrid. He knew the others had heard the gossip last night. When would it end?

"He's the son of a royal concubine. He doesn't know who is his father is – could be any one of the princes from the palace."

"Do you think he has his own harem?"

The pilots' words from the previous evening echoed through his mind, making Rafi cringe. Would he never leave his past behind?

"Yep, we're all set. We have our plan worked out to get into the stadium without being seen," Mac said. She tossed Rafi a sharp glance. "Don't worry about the gossip. Those men are scum."

"It was a masterstroke to hire those look-alikes," Barker said, changing the subject. He glanced at Rafi. "They're set up in the hotel and will leave when I give them the word."

"Yeah, well. I'm sick of having my bum pinched. I don't like the attention." *Or the gossip*. Rafi frowned at Bob and shrugged off the arm that still weighed on his shoulders. "We had to do something to stop all the fans following us back to the spaceship."

Bob maintained his grin but inside his emotions were anything but calm. Nervous energy zapped the length of his body and back. This was their biggest test yet. He'd

heard that talent scouts from Earth were making an appearance and bringing some of the top stars with them, which made it doubly important they put in a solid performance. Bob knew what fame tasted like and he wanted it again. "You get used to the attention after a while. Besides fame has its plus side. We've been offered advertising and sponsorship deals. You should consider them. You'd earn enough currency to buy two ships. Hell, a fleet of them."

Akio knocked on the door before pushing the external control to make it slide open. He skipped through, excitement brightening his face. "The private limousine has arrived. Why can't I go to the performance?"

"Because you're not old enough," Rafi said.

"I've seen worse out on the streets," Akio countered.

Bob waited for Rafi's reaction although he knew exactly what his friend would say.

"You're not out on the streets now," Rafi said. "You and your brother chose to sign on with me. Since you're not of legal age that makes me responsible for your wellbeing."

Akio pouted. "Aw, man. Not fair. Not fair."

Bob nodded, agreeing with everything his friend said. It was a pity Rafi didn't have children of his own. He would make a wonderful father. Of course, he might decide to have children with his mystery partner. It was easy enough for a male couple to arrange to have children nowadays. Not for the first time Bob wondered about Rafi's mystery lover. It was strange, Rafi never directly mentioned the man. It was plain to see he was smitten. Bob bit back envy. Hell, he should be a man and admit the truth. He'd started to feel more than friendship for his friend. Each time they were together, it became harder to separate performing from making love. Bob studied his friend after admitting the truth to himself. He doubted he'd ever have the guts to admit it to Rafi. Rafi was so honorable. His crew loved him, including the two boys he'd brought from Sydney. He was a combination of friend, brother, father and uncle to them all.

As Bob had predicted to himself, Rafi remained firm despite the beseeching expression on the boy's face. "I'll tell you what," he said. "If Bob and I make it to the next round, I'll make sure we have time to stop off at Pleasure Planet during the next voyage to Earth."

"Really?" Akio's dark eyes had popped wide open as he stared at Rafi.

"Really," Rafi said. "But only if you and your brother behave and complete all your assigned tasks."

"We will!" Akio said vehemently. "Oh we will. I will go and tell Junzo." He skipped from the room only to reappear a few seconds later. "Good luck!"

"Thanks." Bob waited until the boy disappeared before turning to Rafi. "You're a fraud. You always stop at Pleasure Planet because you like trying out all the new rides."

"You wound me," Rafi said. "It's true we always visit, but it's for Mac's and Barker's benefit, not mine."

Mac snorted while Barker let out a roar of laughter.

"The driver is waiting," Rafi reminded them. Bob noticed the darker color in his friend's cheeks and the uncomfortable set of his broad shoulders. Oh yeah. His friend might act the big tough space captain but he was really a big softie.

Bob piled into the limousine with Rafi, Mac and Barker and they headed for the stadium. Largos was a newly inhabited planet. Instead of hover paths winding between and around the buildings, the city planners had affixed them to the ground. Identical obsidian buildings gleamed in the bright light. Tall and austere, they were the perfect foil for the profusion of trees, plants and flowers. Wide boulevards ran between the buildings, which were arranged in clusters instead of taking up every inch of ground space.

The flora and fauna and the planet's inhabitants were brightly colored, so dazzling in intensity that Bob wished he'd remembered to bring his sunglasses. It must be hell for someone suffering from a night of drinking vroom. Thank the goddess he didn't do that anymore. He owed Rafi so much he'd never be able to repay him. Hopefully they'd make it to the next round of competition and collect another prize purse. It was the only way he could think of to help his friend. It wasn't as if he had any money left to gift since the majority of it went to repaying his debt.

"I think that's the stadium over there," Mac said. "It's hard to tell on this planet when every building looks pretty much the same."

"I'm just thankful I don't have a hangover," Bob said.

Barker laughed. "The scenery is a bit bright. With your use of black and white onstage you're going to stand out. It will be interesting to see how the locals score you."

"It is a risk," Bob said. "But a worthwhile one, I think."

"I feel ill," Rafi muttered.

Bob trailed his hand across Rafi's shoulder and forced the surge of disappointment away when his friend flinched. "We'll warm up first to help calm the nerves."

"Don't forget with this new product I'm trialing, you need to take a shower first," Barker said. "We've arrived. Masks on so the guard doesn't see your faces."

Bob and Rafi tugged the masks over their faces as instructed. The limousine pulled up at the barrier to the competitors' entrance and the driver wound his window down to present the identity card Mac had given him. The guard peered inside the limousine before lifting the barrier and waving them through. The driver pulled up outside the competitors' entrance.

A bunch of broadsheet reporters surrounded the hover when it drove past the dedicated press area, some of the more adventurous tapping on the windows.

"Are the rumors true?" one of them demanded, raising his voice above the others. "Are you Roberto Azam?"

"Shit," Rafi said. "How do they know that?"

Bob glared through the shaded windows of the hover. "I don't think they know for sure. The male is guessing." Bloody hell. It seemed as though Fifi hadn't wasted much time in causing trouble. "Drive on," he said to the driver. "It's all right. Even if they discover who I am, they won't know who you are." He hoped. Fifi might not know for sure but she probably could guess.

"But what if they start speculating in the broadsheets?" Rafi demanded. "Once the rumors start flying, it will only be a matter of time before my name comes out."

Mac and Barker exchanged worried glances with Bob.

"I'm sure it will be okay," Mac said. "Besides, it's too late to worry about it now. You're due onstage soon."

"But we've only just won the shipping contract from the Federation. We can't lose it," Rafi said.

"Don't worry about the contract," Bob said. "Just concentrate on the performance." Fifi was a loose cannon. Somehow he needed to stop her. He was convinced she'd set the debt collector droid on him and since he'd turned down her offer of a partnership, she was probably out for revenge. Bob cursed inwardly. He needed to confess before Fifi did any more damage. Damn, how the hell had he managed to get in this mess? Rafi wouldn't like it. "That's the only thing we can do—put in a good performance so we win big."

"Easy for you to say," Rafi grumbled.

Ten minutes later, after passing through security again, they were in their dressing room.

"This is luxurious," Mac called over her shoulder as she prowled into the en suite. "Oh you lucky things. A shower with real water instead of a dry vac. Wow!" She came back out carrying a pair of monogrammed robes. "Can I have one of these when you're done? I don't mind if I get the Ebony or the Ivory one."

Barker peered over her shoulder. "I'll take the other one."

"Whatever," Rafi muttered.

Bob took one look at his pale face and decided they needed privacy. His friend looked even more nervous than usual. "Out," he said. "Rafi and I need to warm-up."

Mac frowned. "But—"

Barker grabbed her upper arm, just above the elbow, and steered her toward the door. An imperceptible nod later, he pushed Mac out of the dressing room and before shutting the door tossed the two robes back in, leaving a tense silence behind.

"You okay?" Bob asked.

"Nerves."

Judging by his expression it was something more than nerves. But unless Rafi wanted to talk to him there was nothing he could do. They weren't kids anymore. Bob stooped to remove his boots and socks then shrugged out of his shirt and stripped off the rest of his clothes. Naked, he padded into the en suite and flipped on the shower.

The shower area was huge. Situated in the corner of the room, it didn't have solid screens or curtains. Light-colored stone lined the walls and strategic drains, both decorative and functional, carried the excess water away. The official timekeeping clock that connected to all the dressing rooms, backstage and onstage glowed from its position to the left of the shower. A large mirror filled most of another wall and the low hum of extractors carried away steam before it had a chance to fill the room. Thick towels hung over a rack while products made by the sponsor filled a small shelf near the freestanding hand basin. As far as changing rooms went this was really luxurious and, compared to their last one, positively palatial.

"Coming?" he called. "Might as well warm up at the same time."

Bob jumped under the warm water and let out a groan of pleasure. "Man, this is the life. Real water." He tipped back his head and let the water flow over his face and hair. A hand sliding around his waist made him start. "Shit, Rafi. Don't give me a heart attack like that before a contest. I can't perform if I'm shaking with nerves."

"Yes, you can," Rafi murmured as he brushed a fleeting kiss over Bob's shoulder. Bob suppressed a shiver. As far as kisses went it wasn't a carnal one, but the unexpected nature of it turned him on more than any of Fifi's calculated touches.

Rafi's hand brushed the strands of Bob's hair off his face, baring his cheek and ear. Bob couldn't halt his shiver of pleasure this time. The blood flowed to his cock and when Bob glanced downward, he saw his rod gradually lengthening. It was the sexiest thing he'd witnessed for ages and he realized in that blinding instant that the friendship he'd felt for Rafi had deepened to something more. He was coming to crave Rafi's touches, to treasure them. During the last performance where they'd placed third, it hadn't been Fifi he'd fanaticized about while out onstage. It had been Rafi, one hundred percent all the way. Bob let his eyes drift shut and turned his head a fraction in a silent hint for Rafi to continue. Luckily his friend wasn't short in the brain department. He moved closer so his chest pressed tight to Bob's back. His cock prodded Bob's backside with pointed urgency. One thing was for sure—neither of them had trouble getting it up with each other.

The broadsheets called what they had together chemistry.

Bob was ready to admit it was a hell of a lot more.

Rafi breathed a stream of warm air across his earlobe. While Bob was dealing with the sensual fallout on his body, Rafi upped the stakes, using his tongue to lave the whorls of his ear. Once again, a fairly innocent touch but one that left a trail of chill bumps across his arms and legs. His dick jerked while another dip of Rafi's warm tongue wrenched a moan from deep in Bob's throat.

"Like that?" Rafi's whisper was laced with sin.

Oh man, Bob wanted to sin. "Yeah."

"I have more."

"Yeah? Surprise me."

Rafi chuckled. "Surprises I can do."

Suspense and the anticipation of pleasure thrummed through Bob. He kept his eyes closed to deepen the sensations and enhance his other senses. Rafi shifted his weight and his erect penis found the crease between Bob's buttocks. A puff of air exploded from between Bob's pursed lips, the sound covered by the splatter of warm water on his chest.

Rafi's hands gripped his biceps for an instant before he levered his lower body away from Bob. Bob wanted to protest the loss of contact but he contained himself when he heard Rafi's footsteps. He returned mere seconds later. The slap of a storage tub, the small size one that Barker kept his concoctions inside, sounded when Rafi returned. Bob guessed he'd put Barker's new product on the shelf next to the shower.

"Barker said we needed to make sure we were wet all over," Rafi said. "Turn around."

Bob turned at the demand, his eyes opening enough that he could see Rafi's face. The passion and naked wanting on his friend's face took him aback. On instinct he squeezed his eyes closed again. His heart pounded while he tried to digest what he'd just seen. Love. He'd seen love and pure, unselfish wanting.

There was only one conclusion.

Rafi was imagining his mystery lover, the lover he refused to identify when Bob had asked him earlier. A lump formed in Bob's throat along with the ever-present envy and a trace of jealousy. Hell, a lot of jealousy. Bob wanted Rafi's love.

He wanted it all.

Bob stood under the water with his eyes still shut. His hands curled to fists at his sides, and he was breathing hard, as if he'd run a race. Pain at losing something he hadn't known he'd valued washed through him. As much as he hurt, he was glad Rafi was happy and so much in love.

Without warning, something hot closed over the crown of his cock. A tongue slid over sensitive flesh and Bob's breathing stalled. By the goddess, that felt good. Rafi's mouth. The man was talented and knew just what to do, at the right time. Bob kept his eyes shut but stepped closer, forcing Rafi to take a little more into his mouth. An anchor. He needed an anchor before his shaky legs failed him. Bob's hands sought Rafi's shoulders but he misjudged and grabbed at his head instead. Instantly Bob cupped his head, the bristles of Rafi's short hair tickling his fingers, and held on tight without restricting his friend's movements.

Rafi licked, taking his time with his talented tongue. He sucked, gradually increasing the pressure while his hands fondled Bob's tight balls and shaft. Bob groaned, unable to maintain silence when the blood rushed through his veins and headed south.

Rafi pulled away, leaving Bob panting and aroused. He opened his eyes and glared at Rafi. "God, don't stop now." His voice was husky and a little needy. Hell, why not call it desperation and be done with it. "You can't."

"I'm not going to stop," Rafi promised, his dark eyes lit with laughter. "I want you to watch me. It makes me hot."

"Anything." Hell, anything, just so long as Rafi sucked him off. He forced a smile when what he really felt like was grabbing his friend's head and directing his mouth back to his aching cock. Finally impatience jumped into the fore. "Dammit, Rafi. Suck me off. Let me explode. Don't leave me hanging like this."

"Not much hanging from what I can see," Rafi said, the corners of his sexy mouth tilting up in the beginnings of a grin. "Seems like there's a whole lot of pointing going on."

"You need to wash your mouth out with soap," Bob grumbled. He struggled against the grin fighting for release.

"Hey, man. Why would I want soap when I can have your cum?"

Bob snorted. "Hell, beats me. Soap. Semen. Semen or soap?"

Rafi stopped the argument by guiding Bob's cock to his mouth and going to work. No teasing this time. Bob watched, entranced by the sight of Rafi's lips encasing his cock, the contrast in colors of light and darker and the way Rafi's cheeks hollowed when he sucked. And then the acute prickling at the base of his cock drove everything from his head. He felt the exquisite rush of semen an instant before he exploded, spasming with a heated blast into Rafi's mouth.

A harsh sound of animal enjoyment came from deep in his chest. The sight of Rafi's throat as he worked to swallow made him sigh and realize all he'd lost. Rafi had been there all this time and he hadn't known. Too engrossed in the chase for fame and riches and chasing Fifi's love—that was his problem.

Bob sighed when Rafi pulled away, thinking it all over, but his friend stood in one smooth move and seized him by the shoulders. Seconds later, his mouth slammed down on Bob's. It was a kiss of possession, a kiss of ownership, and Bob loved every minute of it until he remembered Rafi was imagining he was with his lover. A sense of betrayal washed over him. Rafi was doing him a favor, but instead of feeling thankful he...hell, he was a self-centered bastard.

If he felt this way, how must Rafi's lover feel?

When Rafi's mouth opened, Bob took advantage, letting his tongue sweep inside to taste. He tasted himself—his cum—and the exotic spiciness that was Rafi. Slowly, he gentled the kiss and eased away. In an impulsive move he kissed the tip of Rafi's nose. "Thanks, that was incredible. Amazing." Nothing less than the truth. "I'd like to do it again." Bob met Rafi's startled gaze and held it.

"I..." Rafi hesitated, and Bob watched the ripple of his throat as his friend swallowed. "Ah, better not do it now or else you won't be able to perform onstage."

"Good point." Unfortunately.

They stared at each other for a moment longer before Rafi glanced away. He flicked off the shower and the resulting silence was thick with hidden meaning. Bob just wished he knew what it meant because he was plain confused.

"I'll rub the amazing lubricant goop over you." Rafi's matter-of-fact words acted as a tension breaker.

Bob checked the official clock and nodded. "Yeah. Don't want to miss our performance time."

Rafi's heart thundered. He shot a quick glance at Bob to see if his friend had noticed but he seemed deep in his own thoughts. Well, he'd done it. Stepped over the line and made love to his friend. Openly, without hiding a thing, not an emotion or a single urge. A smile tugged at his lips. Bob had wanted to do it again. A compliment. He might walk away from this alone but he'd have memories. Hot, decadent, bloody good memories to keep him warm at night when he jacked off by himself.

Aware that time passed, Rafi grabbed Barker's goop and unscrewed the lid. "You'd think he'd give his inventions better names," he said. "Goop doesn't do much for me."

"You lie." Bob's husky and knowing chortle made Rafi grin.

"You know I didn't mean that. I meant the name. There's nothing wrong with the result." Rafi recalled the way the goop heightened each touch and made their bodies glow. It was a lubricant and an aphrodisiac all in one.

"Barker is talented. The man is going to make a fortune with his inventions."

Rafi nodded while he worked the goop over Bob's broad shoulders, down his back and flanks. "Yeah, I know. Some big corporation will probably offer him big bucks and I'll have to find another medical officer." Excellent muscle tone. Once Rafi had finished spreading the colorless gel over Bob's butt and down the back of his legs, he turned Bob around. Barker's exercise program had Bob in great shape now apart from a bit of a limp and gut. Rafi thought the faults endearing because it made Bob seem ordinary instead of the star. The star who was out of his reach. After exhaling softly, Rafi continued smoothing the gel into Bob's limbs, moving up toward his hips.

"I don't think so," Bob purred. "Rafi, you missed a bit." He smirked when he tilted his pelvis toward his friend.

Shaking his head, he gave in to temptation and stroked a few drops of goop around the base of Bob's cock. Immediately Bob's shaft grew in length. Rafi smoothed goop along the throbbing length, stopping short of the flared head because he didn't want to push Bob into another orgasm when they were due onstage shortly. "Don't think what?" he asked. Rafi stood and spread the goop over Bob's belly and over his smooth chest.

"That Barker will leave you. He loves working with you and the rest of the crew. Besides, traveling to different ports and through different galaxies gives him a chance to gather the raw materials for his sexual aids. If he worked for a corporation, he wouldn't

have the same freedom. That's what he told me when I asked. Mate, you missed a bit." Bob rotated his pelvis in a lazy circle to emphasize the overlooked area.

"Nope, did it on purpose," Rafi said. "Don't want you to deplete your reserves. There. All done." He handed the container to Bob and turned to present his back. Bob's strokes were firm. Rafi's cock jumped at his touch. Not long to go now. The final was in two months. If they qualified today, they would move on to the quarterfinals. And after that, all going to plan, there would be two more performances and of course the training. Two months—they were going to be the longest two months of his life and the most precious.

Once they were covered with goop, they applied tattoos. The tribal-inspired patterns curved over their right hips and behind to cover one buttock. This time they weren't putting them on their legs.

"Looking good," Bob said with approval. "Barker's inventions are exciting. None of the other competitors have the same advantage."

Rafi checked the time clock. Fifteen minutes to go. "The goop is dry." Rafi handed Bob his monogrammed robe and shrugged into his own. "Grab the box of tricks Barker has packed for us and let's go."

They both pulled on their masks, special masks that bore matching tribal patterns but didn't bother with footwear. Barefooted, they headed for the preparation area behind the stage.

A hostess sat by the entrance to the prep area. "Competitor number?" she asked, looking up when they approached.

"Number 213," Bob said.

The hostess checked them off before directing them to a warm-up room.

"Don't we have to choose a category today?" Rafi asked.

"This competition is designed to throw the competitors into a stress situation. We won't know which of our chosen categories we're performing until the emcee reads it out onstage."

"But I assumed... Why didn't you tell me before?" God, he'd forget all the moves. Every single memory would drain away just when he needed it. Rafi felt the fringe of panic starting to sweep through him. There was so much at stake. Hell, if they failed because of him, Mac and Barker would never let him hear the end of it.

"I thought you might stress," Bob said in a dry tone.

Rafi narrowed a glare on his friend. "Yeah?"

Bob closed the distance between them until each exhalation he made brushed across Rafi's face. His lips curved in a grin. "Yeah."

"Humph!" Rafi spun away and paced the length of the room. His body warmed and the goop started to make his skin tingle. His cock rose beneath the robe. Agitated, Rafi untied the tie at his waist and flung the robe off. "What?" he demanded when he heard Bob's snigger.

"I was thinking you're a natural. You're pumped and raring to go." His gaze zoomed in on Rafi's erection and with a surge of embarrassment, Rafi realized he was reacting to Bob's words and gaze. His cock grew even longer and fuller.

Rafi gave a snort of disgust. "If you think I like parading my butt around on the stage for the world and everyone else to see, you can think again."

"That's just nerves talking."

Bob had that right. It was nerves and terror. Rafi knew he was wearing his emotions close to the surface. Despite trying to hide his feelings for Bob, he feared they were there for a perceptive viewer to discern.

A knock sounded on the door and the hostess stepped inside. She clapped her right hand to her heart and fluttered her long eyelashes at Rafi. "Oh my! Aren't you the handsome one," she cooed.

Rafi folded his arms across his chest and ignored Bob's snigger. "Would you like to see my tattoo?"

The hostess missed his sarcasm and said, "Yes, please!"

Bob sniggered again. Rafi scowled and rotated slowly. Hell, willingly displaying his butt. It was truly love if he were willing to display himself to help Bob.

A burst of applause from out onstage dragged the hostess to professionalism. "You're on in three minutes. Here is your category." She handed Rafi a sealed envelope. "The emcee will introduce you. Give him the envelope to open. He will announce the category. You will have one minute to confer and choose your stage setting then the clock goes for your fifteen-minute segment. Any questions?" she purred, her gaze on Rafi.

"No, thank you," Rafi said, uncomfortable with the way the hostess was licking her lips. On the plus side, at least she wasn't ogling Bob.

"What about our props?" Bob accepted the sealed envelope from Rafi.

The hostess smiled at Rafi before turning to Bob. "Give them to me and I will make sure they are placed onstage ready for you."

Bob handed over their precious props and grasped Rafi's shoulder in silent reassurance.

"Good luck," she cooed. "I can't wait to see you in action." Her gaze brushed Rafi's chest and headed south before she sighed and left the room.

"You have a fan," Bob said.

"Humph!"

The emcee ran through a sponsor's message and announced their names.

"Let's do this," Rafi said, grabbing his robe. His gut tightened and his cock withered. Great. That was all he needed. He thrust his arms into the sleeves and shrugged into the robe, hoping to hide the reducing evidence.

"We should leave the robes here," Bob said.

Silently, Rafi removed his robe again. A wry glance down at his penis wasn't too reassuring. "What if I can't get it up?"

Bob shrugged off his robe and chucked it on the warm-up bed. It fell on top of Rafi's robe. "I'm confident you'll rise to the occasion." He grabbed Rafi's hand and tugged him out onstage.

The warmth of Bob's hand within his gave Rafi confidence. His friend thought he could do this. The crew was counting on him to succeed so they could all make their fortunes.

Bob handed over the envelope. Nerves gnawed at the interior of Rafi's stomach while the emcee ripped it open.

"Ebony and Ivory will perform a traditional routine."

Rafi sucked in a deep breath. He hadn't been this nervous last time but supposed it was understandable given that there was more at stake with each successive performance.

Their chosen music for the traditional category started playing. The audience clapped and cheered.

"Go Ebony!"

"Show us ya butt," a woman screamed.

Bob gripped his forearm lightly. "Don't freeze on me now, Rafi. You can do this. Imagine you're with your lover. I know that's what you normally do when we're performing and rehearsing."

Alarm shot through Rafi. His gaze jerked to Bob's face. "I—"

"No, you don't have to tell me anything. You'll tell me when you're ready." And with that said, he strutted over to the middle of the stage.

Rafi followed, operating on automatic pilot. Traditional. Right. He remembered that routine. They'd chosen a bedroom setting to go with the traditional. Kissing. They started with a little kissing, some touching and groping. Yeah, he could do that with his hands tied behind his back. Rafi stepped into the faux bedroom and kept walking until he was close enough to Bob to touch him.

Yep. Okay. The nerves dispersed as he flowed into the routine. He trailed his hand across Bob's shoulder and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

"Mystery lover," Bob said, his husky voice loud enough for the onstage microphones to catch. He turned within Rafi's arms and kissed him full on the lips. Tongue action followed, taking Rafi by surprise. Slowly, he pulled back and cupped Rafi's face in his hands. "We'll improvise," he whispered so only Rafi could hear. "You do me. I'm all yours."

Rafi's heart jumped and knocked against his ribs. Fifteen—no, fourteen—minutes to let loose and not worry about pretending, to love Bob as he really wanted. Without further urging, Rafi took the lead. He nipped Bob's neck then soothed it with his tongue while smoothing his hands over his friend's chest and shoulders, activating the goop

with the touch-generated heat. His own body heated and the gel goop made his skin tingle. Rafi turned Bob away from him so the audience could appreciate the tattoos on his ass.

"Hoy-oy-oy!" a man shouted. "I'd like a piece of that."

"Sorry," Rafi replied. "It's all mine."

The audience laughed while Bob darted a look of surprise in his direction.

Rafi gave a tiny shrug and knelt in front of his friend, taking his erection into his mouth. The goop he'd applied tasted of beer, beer that was full of complex fruit flavors and reminded him of carefree summer days. He licked and sucked and Bob cupped Rafi's face, holding him in place. He glanced up at Bob's face, knowing just how to pleasure him and how far to push. Bob's slumberous gaze made his own cock swell.

Bob shuddered when Rafi let his tongue wander across the sensitive under tip. "I love it when you take me with your mouth." His eyes darkened with passion and Rafi had difficulty looking away. There was something more than friendship in Bob's gaze. Much more. Rafi wondered and hesitated. Could it mean what he hoped or was he reading more into the situation than was warranted? "It feels amazing. You know just how to lick me, suck me."

"I aim to please, lover," Rafi drawled, unable to believe the words coming from his mouth.

"You're pleasing us!" a man yelled from the rear of the stadium.

"We love watching," a woman screamed. "Give it to him. Make him come!"

Rafi blocked the audience's comments out and concentrated on Bob. After one final lick across the flared head of his friend's cock, he pulled away. "On the bed," he ordered.

Bob tipped him a wink and lay on the middle of the bed, grinning up at him, his hands pillowing his head while his eyes held messages—secret messages. "Come get me," he whispered.

The audience roared encouragement to Rafi.

"He's a hunk."

"Go get him before he changes his mind."

Rafi sauntered toward the bed, stopping at the small table where the hostess had left their props. He snagged the tub of lube, figuring a little more lubrication wouldn't hurt matters, especially since they hadn't tried this way before. Forging new territory so to speak. With an excited spring in his step, Rafi hurried to the bed. He dropped down to the bed and waggled his ass at the audience in a piece of showmanship.

They clapped and cheered.

Aware of the need to hurry, Rafi opened the tub of lube and hurriedly spread it over his erection.

A woman in the audience leapt to her feet and ran down the aisle toward the stage. "Oh man. He's greasing up. I gotta see."

From the corner of his eye, Rafi saw two of the security team intercepting her before she could leap onto the stage. He kept going with the routine, blocking the comments and activity out and concentrating on Bob. A rush of emotion stabbed him in the heart, the suddenness of it making him grip his erection painfully hard. *Pretend*. Bob had said to imagine he was making love. He could do that. His broad chest rose in a deep inhalation and he was there—in competition mode with a twist. This time he was going all out to love Bob as a lover. No holding back.

Rafi's smile was slow. Easy. He saw Bob blink and knew his friend had noticed the difference in him, his new resolve. Slowly, he leaned over Bob and pressed a teasing kiss to his lips. Rafi's tongue flicked out, sweeping across Bob's lower lip before pushing in a silent bid for entrance. Their tongues danced together, slowly and with carnal intent. Bob moaned and Rafi pulled away. He scraped his fingernails over Bob's flat nipples and pulled a gasp from his friend.

The need to string the loving out ate at him but Rafi ignored the siren need to linger and forged ahead. He lifted Bob's legs up onto his shoulders and with his right hand he reached for more lube. Rafi stroked the nerve-rich area of the perineum before spreading lube across Bob's puckered entrance. Just the knowledge that he would soon be inside, with Bob's muscles clinging tightly to his penis made his cock jump and precum leak from the tiny slit.

"How's that feel, lover?" Rafi murmured.

Bob's eyes blazed with passion beneath the mask. "Ah, man. Push inside me. I need you inside me."

Rafi slipped a finger past the tight muscles and felt Bob pushing back, allowing him easy entrance. After working his finger in a little farther, he pressed down firmly on Bob's gland, pushing him closer to orgasm so they could come at almost the same time without faking it for the audience.

Bob's large frame shook and Rafi saw his eyes had fallen closed. He took that as a sign he should move on with the routine. After removing his finger, he placed more lube on his cock and gripping his erection firmly in his fist, he pumped several times, throwing back his head to enjoy the sensations taking him by storm.

"Look at their bodies glow," an excited woman shouted. "That's so sexy. I could just eat them up."

"Both of them," a man hollered.

Rafi placed the head of his cock at Bob's entrance and pushed until the tip of his cock rested inside. A shudder swept his body and he had to force himself not to thrust hard and fast. Taking his time, he pushed inside, working with Bob's rectal muscles. Finally fully seated, he leaned over Bob's chest and kissed him. It was a slow kiss, a deep kiss—a kiss full of meaning and subtext. It was Rafi telling Bob he loved him, that Bob was the only man he'd ever love.

Bob gripped his head, moving his hips while he took over the kiss. Rafi set a steady rhythm, letting the heat grow between them. Bob reached for his cock and pumped in

time with Rafi's thrusts. Gradually, they increased the speed. Heat and passion arced between them. The hotter they became, the brighter their bodies glowed.

"Oh hell. Hell, Rafi," Bob shouted, his jaw held tight as he shot his load. "I love you."

The passion and beauty of Bob's words yanked Rafi over the edge mere seconds later. He felt the rush of semen up his cock then he exploded, flooding Bob with his cum.

When the contractions ceased, he leaned over Bob and they kissed, embracing tightly before slowly separating.

Rafi felt a moment's disappointment. Not the perfect routine they'd envisaged but Rafi guessed the audience would have seen it as a seamless blend—Bob's climax merging into Rafi's. Competitors didn't go shouting that they loved each other though. They'd probably lose marks for that. As one, they stood and bowed. When they straightened, Rafi was surprised to see the audience springing to their feet and cheering. Confused, Rafi looked to Bob and arched his brows in a question.

Bob laughed out loud and threw his arm around Rafi's shoulders. "Come on. Let's watch the rest of the contestants from our dressing room. I could do with another shower." He turned, waggled his butt to the cheering audience and dragged Rafi from the stage.

"What's up with the audience? I didn't think our performance was that good."

"You're kidding, right? We both came almost together. It was obvious by the glow on our bodies that we weren't faking it and I lost control. That has got to be a first for me. I have never done anything like that before."

"But you didn't mean it," Rafi said. "The audience knows that."

Bob's smile slipped away and he glanced across to Rafi, an unfathomable expression on his face. "Didn't I?" he said finally.

Chapter Eleven

"And the winner is..."

Rafi stood onstage with the rest of the competitors, Bob at his side. The second and third place-getters had been announced already. Bob reached for Rafi's hand and squeezed it tightly in reassurance. Rafi stared at the emcee as if he could force the man to say their names by telepathic powers. Ironic since Rafi didn't have any. The fact was that if they failed here, there would be no more sex with Bob.

Rafi snorted. Pitiful. Absolutely pitiful. Bob had told him he loved him and Rafi didn't know if his friend meant the words or not. He was scared. Terrified. Rafi knew that the time had come for a serious talk between them. Hiding his feelings all the time was doing his head and he couldn't—he refused—to carry on in the same manner. It was too bad if the partnership failed and plans for a new ship were put on hold. There came a time when a man just had to put himself first.

"The winner is Ivory with his partner Ebony!" the emcee shrieked.

"Yeah!" Bob punched his fist in the air.

They'd won! They'd actually won. In a daze, Rafi allowed Bob to draw him forward. They stepped onto the winner's dais and accepted red rosettes from the hostess. She pressed them to their shoulders so they stuck and kissed them both on the lips before an assistant handed them bouquets of native flowers and herbs. As one, all the place-getters acknowledged the audience, waving and blowing kisses.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Bob muttered. A curse followed swiftly and Rafi strained to see who the particular she was that Bob was cursing.

"Who?" he asked, seeing nothing but a sea of cheering faces in front of them.

"Fifi, my ex-partner."

"Fifi? Here?" That couldn't be good. Rafi thought the woman was selfish and the fact that she'd had Bob hadn't helped matters. Rafi had cut the last visit short on the pretext of business because he couldn't take Fifi for a minute longer. Bob and he had drifted apart after that.

"She's probably here on behalf of the sponsors," Bob said.

The curtains swished across the stage and the finalists left, all heading for their dressing rooms to pack up and prepare for the quarterfinals on Earth.

They'd packed most of their belongings earlier. After a final check of the room, they headed for the exit, their masks in place in case fans lingered waiting for the competitors to leave.

"Wait!" The hostess who had flirted with them ran down the passage, tottering on her high heels. "Fifi wants to meet the winners. She wants to compliment you on your performance."

"Tell her to write a letter," Rafi muttered.

"We have a flight to catch," Bob said, smiling at the hostess. "We appreciate Fifi's interest but we can't afford to miss our flight."

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to catch another flight." One of the organizers and local sponsors sauntered down the passage toward them. He'd obviously been close enough to hear their conversation. "We have difficulty attracting the stars since we are a new franchise. Please, I'd appreciate your cooperation. Perhaps we can expedite your prize package if you stay a little longer. I understand all the committee members will be present and we can sign your currency transfers immediately."

Rafi scowled and opened his mouth to tell the man to take a hike through a swamp infested with dangerous croco-gators. He'd love to tell Fifi where to go as well. Bob squeezed his shoulder in warning.

"Thank you," Bob said. "We would be honored to meet with Fifi."

"Good. The hostess will show you how to get to the reception room." The man disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

"This way," the hostess said. For a female wearing stilts on her feet, she moved with speed.

"I don't like this," Rafi whispered. "What does she want?"

Bob shrugged but he couldn't hide his sudden tenseness. "Maybe it's innocent and she really does want to meet and congratulate us on our win."

"Oh yeah, and Barker and Mac are a couple and want to perform out on the circuit," Rafi snapped. "The woman wants something." Probably Bob since he was winning again. She'd work her wiles on Bob and he'd leave. Again. Rafi would be left alone with his broken heart—the one thing he'd told himself would never happen.

Together, they followed the hostess into the reception room. It was a luxurious room with soft floor coverings that their feet sank into with each step. Rafi saw all the place-getters were present and his suspicion seeped away. Maybe he'd overreacted. Several women circulated, carrying trays of bite-sized food while young men dressed in tight black leather delivered golden goblets full of sparkling cacjuice to anyone who desired a drink. One whole wall was clear and the view over the sparkling obsidian city buildings and the profusion of bright plants and flowers was spectacular.

"Ah, there you are," an elderly male said. His broad forehead dominated his face while his large ears gave away his planet of origin. Rafi had only seen ears that large on citizens of Pluto. His black button nose confirmed Rafi's supposition. He was definitely from Pluto. The male shook their hands. "Let me introduce you to our guests and the rest of the committee."

Gradually, they made their way around the room, making chitchat and discussing their performance until Rafi wanted to curse out loud. He was beginning to hate the fact that the only way he could make love to Bob was in public. Was it too much to ask for real love – the sort that happened in private?

"Ah, Fifi. Meet the winners of our contest. This is Ivory and his partner Ebony."

Fifi smiled and instead of taking Bob's hand, she stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on him—an intimate kiss right on the lips.

Rafi wanted to howl his frustration. Dammit, Bob was his lover. He didn't want anything to do with Fifi. The woman was poison. Hell, Rafi had known that from the moment he'd first met her.

Fifi's eyes gleamed when she pulled away. "Roberto. It's wonderful to see you again." She turned to Rafi and held out her hand. "You look familiar. Have we met before?" Her words after Bob's kiss felt like a kick to his gut. What the hell game was she playing?

"Ebony, I wondered if I might introduce you to our chairwoman. She wished to discuss technique with you."

Rafi couldn't do anything except agree to the meeting, leaving Bob and Fifi alone. As he crossed the room at the male's side, he glanced back. Bob and Fifi had their heads close together and they were speaking softly. It was an intimate conversation and made Rafi feel like an outsider again. Dispirited, he went off to discuss a technique that he didn't care about. It wasn't as though he'd have a chance to use it again if Fifi took his position as Bob's partner.

"Roberto," Fifi said. "I've missed you." She frowned. "Why are you wearing that ridiculous mask? Everyone knows the audience likes to see all facial expressions during the routine."

Bob forced a smile at his ex-lover, knowing better than to react from the gut and let her glimpse his feelings for Rafi. If anything, seeing Fifi in the flesh had ripped away his final reservations. He didn't love her anymore and he'd wondered about that. No, he was sure now.

"I felt it was time for a change," he said, keeping his voice casual.

Fifi's eyes narrowed. "I want you to partner me for the rest of the competition. Reconsider."

"No, I don't think so. I'm happy with Ebony. I told you that before. You didn't need to visit me in person."

A snort escaped Fifi. "Oh please. How stupid do you think I am? You shouted out Rafi's name while you were performing tonight."

"Yeah, I know." Rafi hadn't said anything and Bob hoped he hadn't noticed the slip.

"That was silly, although I think you gained votes with your sentiment." She pursed red lips before saying, "It was a good move."

That was Fifi all right. All cool calculation, but she wasn't going to get her way this time. "Thanks for the offer but I don't want to mess with karma. Rafi and I are doing really well. I think we have a good chance of making the finals."

Fifi moved close and brushed her breasts across his chest. Bob stepped back. Funny, that move of hers hadn't caused a blip on his personal love radar. Not a single one.

A flash of annoyance tightened Fifi's face. "You will go out on the circuit with me because if you don't, I will sell your story to the broadsheets. I presume there's a reason you chose to perform under assumed names since it would have been much easier to use your existing persona." Triumph filled her cheeks with attractive color but Bob felt nothing except fury. If she went to the broadsheets with her story, Rafi might lose his contract. And he'd lose any chance he had with Rafi. Frustration battled with the need to strike the smirk from her face.

"I'll think about it," Bob snapped. He needed to talk to Rafi, to the rest of the crew since this affected them directly. He cast her a snide look but it didn't put a dent in her satisfaction. Bob scowled and turned away. Damn the bitch.

"Don't walk away from me, Roberto. I'm not joking. If you don't take me on as your partner, make no mistake—I will sell a story to the circular broadsheets and anyone else who will pay for the pleasure of some juicy gossip."

Bob whirled back to face her, not bothering to hide his anger. "I said I would think about it."

"Fine," she snapped. "Don't take too long. I'm staying at the Palace Hotel. If I don't hear from you by mid cycle tomorrow, I will contact a reporter I know."

They exchanged a final measuring look before Bob turned away in disgust. He walked over to Rafi, his gut roiling with unease. If Fifi went ahead with her threats, Rafi would be ruined. The Federation that ran the shipping for this galaxy and the next would blacklist him because his reputation wasn't spotless. And he didn't have enough currency to pay off his debts yet. The debt collectors would be on his tail before he had a chance. Mr. Calderone wouldn't enjoy being made to look like a fool for a second time. He'd want to make an example of him.

"Ebony," Bob said, unable to resist sliding his hand over Rafi's butt. To his delight, Rafi pressed close, silently encouraging the touch. "Something has come up."

A wicked snort emerged from Rafi and he glanced at Bob's groin.

Bob shifted his weight when the pointed look produced a rising. "Dammit, Rafi," Bob snapped.

Rafi's eyes widened behind his mask and Bob realized he'd slipped. Again. Hell, he was going to be the death of them. Fifi wouldn't need to sell the story since he'd blow their identities out of space himself.

"What's up?"

"Fifi. We need to talk but not here. Back at the hotel," he said, aware of possible eavesdroppers. The last thing they needed were reporters following them back to the spaceport.

* * * * *

Rafi stormed into the ship in front of Bob, displeasure written in the tight line of his body. "Where's the key to the alcohol cupboard?" he demanded. "I need a drink."

Bob prowled past, folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the curved wall of the spaceship rec room. "Don't mind me."

"I'm not an alcoholic," Rafi snarled. His chest rose and fell rapidly while his hands fisted. Bob knew he wanted to hit something. He just hoped he didn't end up as a punching bag before he managed to get through Fifi's demands and threats.

"No, you're not," Bob answered. "I am. Can you pour me a marjong fruit juice please while we're waiting for the crew to arrive?"

"I haven't called them."

"You're shouting loud enough that you won't need to use the comm unit," Bob said.

"Sorry." Rafi poured Bob a juice and handed him the goblet before pouring a stronger cacjuice for himself.

Not long after Mac and Barker appeared with Henry arriving seconds later.

"Great performance, guys," Mac said.

"I was pleased with the way my goop performed. I'll need to ask you both some questions," Barker said, whipping out a sheet of paper.

Bob knew it would take at least an hour to work through the details that Barker expected from them. "We have a problem," he said. "My former partner was at the competition tonight. She wants me to drop Rafi and partner with her for the rest of the contest. If I don't go ahead, she's threatening to leak our names to the broadsheets."

"The bitch," Barker growled.

"But we'll lose our contracts," Mac said. "All of us will lose everything if we can't get contracts for the new ship. We're committed now."

"I thought she had a partner already," Rafi said.

"She wants a replacement. Me." Bob didn't like the scowl on his friend's face. "She said she intends to win the competition. And I have to admit that it's partly my fault. I contacted her when I was looking for a partner and tried to persuade her to take me back. She said no." He waited for Rafi's reaction, knowing he deserved everything his friend cared to dish out.

"I told you she's a bitch," Rafi snapped. Bob thought he saw a flicker of hurt but wasn't sure. He'd apologize later in private. Dammit, he'd grovel if he had to. He owed Rafi so much and he'd happily pay for the rest of his life.

"So she's going to drop the poor sap because it suits her better to be with Bob." Mac sniffed and stomped over to the bar. She poured two goblets of cacjuice and handed one to Barker.

"What are we going to do?" Barker asked. "We can't afford to let the Federation get wind of how we've earned the currency to buy the new ship. They're so pompous and old-fashioned. We'll lose everything."

Rafi glared at Bob. "As I see it, there's only one thing to do. We'll have to give Fifi what she wants."

"No! No, dammit, I'm not letting Fifi get away with blackmail. She made my life hell with her hysterics when we were together and she dumped me without looking back when I was injured. Besides, the thought of her touching me and having to touch her makes me sick to my stomach." Bob glared at them all in turn to make sure they understood how decided he was about Fifi. The woman was a bitch. It had taken him a while to see past the mask she wore but now that he had, he didn't intend to make the same mistake again. Besides, he loved Rafi. And if there was even a chance they could make it work, he was grabbing the opportunity with both hands.

"Are you sure? You seemed okay with her touching you tonight," Rafi snarled.

Bob blinked before a slow grin grew, spreading from one side of his face to the other. "You jealous?" The two men stared at each other and Rafi was the first to look away.

"No," he muttered.

"A pity," Bob said. "I sure as hell wouldn't want anyone touching you."

Rafi's gaze snapped back to Bob.

"Apart from me," Bob added.

Rafi's heart thumped so loudly he had difficulty concentrating and stringing thoughts together.

"By the goddess!" Mac snapped. "Will you two admit you love each other and get it over with? Any fool can see you're crazy about each other."

"Yeah," Barker said. "We have more important things to worry about."

"You love me?" Rafi was convinced he was dreaming then rational thought returned. Hell, this was only his second cacjuice. He wasn't drunk.

"Yes. I love you, Rafi. I don't want Fifi or any other woman or man. You're the only one I want."

"Me?"

"Hell, he said so, didn't he?" Mac scowled at them both. "Kiss and make up. We've got things to do, decisions to make. We don't have time for this mumbo jumbo crap."

"Better do what the lady says," Barker said dryly. "You know she has a temper."

"I must be dreaming," Rafi said.

"No." Bob grinned, suddenly looking happier and years younger. "I love you and I want to be your partner."

"I love you too." Rafi took the final step to close the distance between them and hauled Bob into his arms. A rough growl vibrated in his chest seconds before he plundered Bob's mouth. It wasn't a gentle kiss but to Rafi it was an affirmation of their love. Bob really loved him and he loved Bob. A violent spasm of pleasure zapped through him as he inhaled aftershave and hot male. His male. His lover. Hell. Bob didn't care about his color or the taint Rafi's dark skin often carried in the business world because of the rumors concerning his mother. He pulled back and whispered, "I love you." Rafi felt the sting of moisture at the back of his eyes and didn't care about showing emotion.

Bob gave him a sappy grin and ground his cock against Rafi's leg and belly. An answered surge made Rafi's dick rear to readiness. Good thinking. They could go get physical...

"Hoy, you two." Mac's voice cut through the sensual haze surrounding them. "Celebrate your love later. In private," she added. "We have a problem to deal with first."

"Oh yeah." Bob sounded dazed.

Rafi attempted to concentrate.

"These are our problems," Barker said, and he listed them on his fingers. "One, Fifi is attempting to blackmail you. Two, if the story of your identities gets out, Rafi's cover will be blown and we'll lose the contracts from the Federation because they're so conservative."

"And three, I don't have enough currency to pay off the debts I owe," Bob said. "You can bet the debt collectors will be out for my blood."

"We're all in debt after putting a down payment on the new ship," Rafi said. "We'll lose everything if we can't fill the ship with freight."

"Anything else?" Henry asked.

Bob shook his head. "Nope, that about covers the crap we're standing in."

They all stared at each other in silence.

Mac broke the quiet with an audible hiss. "Okay, people. I think I have a plan."

Chapter Twelve

"Spill," Rafi said, narrowing his eyes. "If you have a way to rid us of that poisonous viper I want to hear it."

"This is all my fault," Bob said. "I'm so sorry."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Rafi snapped. "If it weren't for Fifi, we wouldn't be together now."

"Yeah, give the woman credit where it's due," Henry chimed in, his grizzled face lit with amusement.

"Okay, here's my masterpiece of an idea." Mac paused, allowing the tension to escalate before saying, "I think we should give the broadsheets an exclusive. Sell our story to the highest bidder and use the money to pay off some of what we still owe on the ship."

They all stared at each other with varying degrees of reaction.

Bob's mouth dropped open. "You're kidding! Sell our story? That will give us more problems than what we have now. Rafi will lose all the contracts he's won."

Mac waved away his objections with a flash of her hand. "And maybe that's not the problem we're making it. With the new ship, we have the capability to journey farther into space. We'll be able to scout out new trading opportunities. Maybe we should take a few risks instead of relying on Federation contracts. What's the point in being conservative when it's so much more fun to live life on the edge?"

Rafi frowned. "But what about the *Sex Idol* contest? Bob and I have made the quarterfinals."

"Bosh." Mac waved her hand again while Barker merely smirked. "You hate showing your bare butt onstage. If it weren't for Bob, you wouldn't have agreed to enter the competition anyway."

"That's true," Rafi said, infusing his words with a great deal of feeling. "Bob? Henry? Barker? What do you think?" Rafi paced across the floor of the rec room trying to work out what they should do for the best. There was only one certainty in all of this. He loved Bob and wanted to spend his life with him. And while he hated showing his butt out in public, he couldn't regret taking part in the competition that had brought them together. Which brought him back to the subject of money. "I don't think we should scratch ourselves from the contest yet. It might end up being our only source of income."

"If we traveled to the outer territories, I could do more research into the plants and natural tonics," Barker said, his tone thoughtful. A blaze of excitement took over. "Robinson's Toys approached me about working for them."

Disappointment filled Rafi along with excitement for his crewmember and friend. They'd been together for so long. Barker was like a brother. "That's great, Barker. We'll miss you."

"He told them no," Mac said.

Relief replaced the disappointment. Barker wasn't leaving. "You should grasp this opportunity. Chances like that don't come along every day." Rafi couldn't act the selfish friend either. "You should do it."

Mac grinned. "Oh he did."

"I can speak for myself, woman," Barker said. "I signed up as designer and inventor for them. They'll take a look at any products I design but I stipulated that I must have my own office and routine. My office is on this ship. I'm good," he said without the slightest trace of modesty. "I'm so good they agreed to everything. They're actually paying me a fee—a large fee in order to retain my services. They're calling it a research and development cost. I hope they know what they're doing!"

"Of course they do," Mac scoffed. "They're lucky to have you."

Bob walked over to Rafi and touched his shoulder before letting his hand slip to Rafi's butt. "Stop your pacing, man. I don't care about the competition as much as I once did." He smiled and Rafi felt the chains of tension fall away. The possessive touch didn't hurt either. "What we have is special. Your crew is close-knit and looks out for each other. They're like family. I'd rather follow you. If that means exploring uncharted galaxies, then I'm there. If it means competing on the *Sex Idol* circuit, then that's what I'll do. Are we going to go ahead with the broadsheet interview?"

"It would stop your ex-partner," Mac said. "It might even make her look stupid."

"Hell, I'm all for that. The woman is a witch." Rafi glanced at Bob before scanning the others for their reactions. He prowled across the rec room and back, dodging the table near the kitchen area. Pacing seemed to help him think. Mac was right. It was the only way to stop Fifi, and at least they'd earn a little currency at the same time. Either way the Federation would hear and come to a decision. He strode the same path again before definitely deciding. Pausing, he said, "Yeah, I think we should do it."

"I'll contact them and negotiate," Mac said. "We'll do the interview tonight before Fifi can do any damage."

"Go ahead. I won't pretend it will be easy, especially if we lose the contract. I guess we'll manage somehow." He glanced at Bob. His lover. A lump of emotion choked Rafi up then he was moving, closing the gap between them. Happiness assailed him—the sort that comes when a man realizes how lucky he is. Rafi knew luck when it bit him on the butt. He had Bob as his lover, a man who loved him unconditionally and was willing to follow him to the depths of uncharted space, and he had a crew who loved him like family.

Yeah, he had it all.

He threw himself at Bob and his lover's arms came around him, holding him tight. Their mouths connected and Rafi heard the background cheers and excitement from

Mac, Henry and Barker before he blocked them out and concentrated on the man he loved.

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Rafi stood in front of Bob and grasped both of their cocks in one hand. He pumped them slowly, taking pleasure from Bob's carnal expression and the feel of his lover's cock when it moved against his. Pre-cum lubricated his hand, making the slide of hands slick and sensual. Slowly the pleasure built. Fire licked through his veins, his pulse pounding faster and faster. Bob's hips jerked upward and his large frame trembled, indicating he was close to exploding. Part of him wanted to thrust into Bob but he resisted. They were both a bit sore after the previous night of excesses. He ached and his butt was sore. Rafi knew if he hurt then Bob probably did too. It was best if they took things easy. It wasn't as if they'd miss out on pleasure.

"Oh yeah, Rafi. Just like that," Bob gasped. His head dropped back and his entire body tensed. Then he exploded, his cock jerking with explosive contractions. Rafi pumped one final time, the tight squeeze of fingers pushing him into orgasm. Dense streams of cum squirted across his belly and chest. Rafi's breathing was ragged, almost panting while he luxuriated in the pleasure of aftershocks.

"Well," Bob said. "Maybe we should shower, lover."

Rafi nodded, too lazy to do more. After holding an impromptu auction, Mac had arranged a late-night interview via the interplanetary web. The amount of currency they'd received for the exclusive was even bigger than they'd expected and was already in their account. It would pay off a large portion of the amount they owed on the new ship. Rafi could scarcely believe their story was worth so much, but the broadsheet owners had paid without a qualm.

His identity was no longer a secret.

Everyone would know the truth and whisper. They'd gossip. Old fears and uncertainties gripped Rafi for an instant before Bob cupped his head and pressed his lips against his. His moist, firm mouth demanded a response, driving the worry away.

A thundering knock sounded on their cabin door. "You two awake in there?"

"Yeah, Mac," Rafi said, pulling away from Bob with regret. "Is there a problem?" He felt the steady throb of the ship's engines beneath his feet—nothing unusual in that since they were en route for their next destination. One last stop on Earth to front up to the Federation then they were off to chase freighting contracts. Of course that could change if they decided to definitely continue with the *Sex Idol* contest. Rafi wasn't sure what he thought about that option. His preference was to continue working for the Federation, but he had to be practical. He had to look at the contest as a means to an end. A quick grin surfaced. There were positive fringe benefits with the training. "Have we gone off course?"

"No, I thought you might want to check the messages on the comm unit," Mac said.

The evil yet satisfied tone of her voice grabbed Rafi's attention. "We'll be there shortly."

They took a quick shower rather than the leisurely one they'd planned and half an hour later strode onto the bridge.

"What's up?" Rafi asked.

"Fifi is on the line," Mac said. "She wishes to speak with Bob."

Bob grimaced. "Why didn't you tell me she was waiting?"

"She was rude to Mac," Barker said. "We didn't see a need to hurry. Besides, it sounded as though the two of you were busy. We didn't want to interrupt."

Rafi signaled to Bob that he should take a seat in front of the comm unit. He leaned over his lover, and unable to stop himself, he brushed a kiss over Bob's lips before flipping the privacy switch and bringing Fifi's face up on the screen.

"I told you what would happen if you refused to partner me," Fifi screeched. Her blonde hair stood up in untidy tuffs as though she'd repeatedly run her hands through it in frustration. Her eyes flashed in a manner that made Rafi glad there was distance between them while bright spots of red decorated her cheeks. Talk about a pissed woman.

"I don't wish to partner you. Been there, worn out the T-shirt."

"Right," Fifi hissed. "I'm contacting the local broadsheet reporters immediately."

"Go ahead," Rafi said. "Do your worst."

"Don't you care?" Fifi shrieked. "I'm going to drag both your names through the drains of the universe."

"Which is a good recommendation for being your partner," Bob said. "I can't trust you, Fifi. You kicked me when I was down. I may be a little slow," he paused to smile at Rafi, "but once I make up my mind I don't change it, even if there are tough times ahead. I know who my friends are, my family."

"Ohhh! You'll be sorry. You...you... Ohhh!" Fifi glared her frustration before cutting all contact with them.

"Aw, shucks," Mac said. "I didn't get a chance to tell her the reporters already have the story and paid us lots of lovely currency for it. That wasn't very polite of her."

Rafi chuckled. "Mac, you have a real vicious streak. Remind me never to get on your wrong side."

"Are you all sure about this?" Bob's face held trepidation and worry when he vacated his seat.

"Too late now," Rafi said, shrugging. "Think of it as an adventure."

The comm unit buzzed, signaling another call.

"That will be your call to the Federation," Henry said.

Rafi nodded, attempting to force away his sudden attack of nerves. He wiped the palms of his hands down the legs of his black trews before nodding at Barker and sitting ready to take the call. The screen flickered before a face appeared. Rafi straightened abruptly, coming to attention. Shit. Haut, the second-in-command of the Federation. He'd expected to be fobbed off on one of the senior admin staff.

"Good morning, sir," Rafi said.

"Mura." The man inclined his head in greeting. "We received your private transcript late last night."

"Yes, sir." Rafi felt the tension in his friends. The same tension made his gut tighten. It was too late to backpedal now. They had made a combined decision and would stick by it.

"Switch to privacy mode," the man instructed.

Rafi followed the instruction, flicking the switch that would scramble the communication so it couldn't be intercepted.

"I applaud your honesty, Mura. It is true the Federation have been outspoken in their condemnation of the *Sex Idol* contests. We believe sex is something to be enjoyed in private. While I am part of the Federation, I also believe in freedom of choice. I might not agree with your personal choices but as long as discretion is used I do not have a problem with others enjoying participation."

Rafi frowned, unsure of the man's meaning. "Sir?"

"Officially, I accept your resignation from the Federation. I must since you have ceased to use discretion."

Rafi's shoulders slumped. Even though he'd known it was coming, he hated being cut off from the security that the Federation offered. "Thank you, sir."

"I am sorry it has come to this. I checked your records. You are a good captain, Mr. Mura. Please stop by Federation offices to receive your final currency payments. I will make sure it is ready for you. Good luck, Mura."

"Yes, thank you." Rafi was acting on auto. He'd suspected this would happen, had prepared himself for it—or so he thought. The reality was so much worse than he'd imagined. He felt as though he'd been cut loose from his moorings. His plan. He'd wanted to slowly increase his business and one day explore the uncharted territories. Rafi sighed, knowing he'd allowed his friends to influence him against his better judgment. He should have listened to his gut instincts.

The comm unit disconnected with a crackle.

Rafi bowed his head, attempting to breathe through the searing disappointment. He couldn't pretend this wouldn't make things difficult in the future. The shock of defeat brought a sense of desolation, a feeling of loss.

Bob's hands curled around his shoulders and squeezed in silent comfort. "I'm sorry, man." Concern shaded his voice and Rafi knew he understood.

Straightening, Rafi clenched his jaw and imposed an iron control on his disappointment. The others had hinted at this being an opportunity. They were right. This was no time to accept defeat. He was better than that.

"It's all right." Rafi covered Bob's hand briefly with his own before standing to face them all. Hell, that was a lie. Nothing was right about this situation. It was discrimination. Not that he should be surprised since he'd fought discrimination in one form or another for most of his life. "We should continue with the competition and reconsider some of the advertising promotions we've turned down."

Bob cocked his head to one side. "Are you sure?"

"Not really." Rafi gave a bark of laughter when Bob's brows rose. "I don't enjoy performing, not as much as you, but I admit I'm curious to see how far we can go."

"You waggle your butt enough," Mac said dryly. "You look as though you're enjoying it."

"Shut up," Rafi said in a mild voice that belied the mixture of emotions buffeting him. Was he doing the right thing? He wouldn't know until he tried. "I dare you to go out onstage."

"A threesome?" Barker asked, smirking. "Mac, you should consider it. I have some great sexual aids especially for females."

"Not going to happen." Mac shuddered theatrically. "No way. I like private loving."

"Okay. Let's do it," Bob said. "I think we have a good chance."

Rafi searched the faces of his crew. He nodded at what he saw. "Okay, here's what I suggest. Bob and I will continue with our training and take this contest as far as we can, Henry can search for contracts and keep an eye on Akio and Junzo, Mac can negotiate any suitable promotional opportunities and Barker can continue with his inventing and help us train. Hopefully that will give us enough working currency to finish paying off the ship. Any other alternatives? No? Let's vote on it. Mac?"

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"I'm in," she said.
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"Henry?"

"I'm in too." Henry grinned, his sapphire catching the light and sparkling.

"Barker?"

"Hell yeah," Barker agreed, enforcing his words with a vigorous nod.

"Bob?"

"I love you. I say yes."

Grinning, Rafi gestured at Bob and his lover stepped close and slung his arm around Rafi's waist. Mac, Henry and Barker joined them in a celebration huddle and the five of them whooped and hollered, bouncing up and down like excited children. Akio and Junzo ran onto the bridge.

"What's happened?" Junzo demanded.

"Are we going to Pleasure Planet?" Akio asked.

"Yes," Rafi said. "We'll be there in a couple of hours."

"Yay!" The two boys leapt up and down, whooping and hollering.

Rafi grinned at Bob and saw the love reflected in his lover's eyes, the same love he felt next to his heart. He glanced at Mac and Barker and Henry, basking in the warm glow of friendship and team spirit. They'd fail or succeed together. Succeed if he had anything to do with it.

Ah, life was good.

No kidding.

He, Rafi Mura, son of a royal concubine, had it all.

Epilogue

Argus Broadsheet

The final in this year's *Sex Idol* contest is one people will talk about for years to come, and it has certainly set the benchmark for future competitors.

Winners Krystal Cameron and her partner Justin won the title by the narrowest of margins. One point! Second place-getters Bob Azam and Rafi Mura, better known as Ivory and Ebony, are philosophical about the narrow loss, stating the contest has given them myriad opportunities and options for the future. While they gave it their best, Krystal and Justin were better on the night and deserved to win.

At the celebration after the crowning of the winners Krystal and Justin, Bob Azam and Rafi Mura announced their retirement from the circuit. They acknowledged the debt they owed to the organizers of the contest and how it had brought them together, changing friendship to love.

Rafi and Bob intend to journey to the uncharted territories and have received several commercial offers from local companies wanting a piece of the action. It is even rumored the Federation, who are staunchly against the *Sex Idol* contest, have offered them a lucrative contract. Their manager Mac refused to confirm or deny this rumor.

One rumor that was confirmed is the appointment of crewmember Barker to Robinson Toys Research and Development department. Barker will journey with Mura and Azam in the hope of discovering new plants and herbs for use in the booming sexual aids industry.

The final, rather cryptic word of the night went to Rafi Mura who was asked why they'd kept their identities secret for the first rounds of the contest.

Rafi smiled at his lover Bob before saying, "Everyone has secrets. Some are good. Some bad. Some come back to bite the unwary on the bum while others are necessary. They help you kick ass and grow as a person. Our secrets were the kick-ass variety. They forced Bob and me into an intimate situation. We grew together, faced problems together and realized we loved each other. Once we learned the truth, the secrets were no longer necessary. Love rules."

Their arms were wrapped around each other when they left the celebration. The couple waved at the public and reporters and was relaxed and obviously happy, stopping to pose for photos and sign autographs.

Sex Idol organizers have confirmed a slightly changed format for next year's contest. Celebrity judges will give their opinions on each competitor's performance, a new twist to an already successful formula. Prospective contestants can collect entry forms from retailers who stock Robinson products. Apart from the excellent prizes, Rafi Mura and

Shelley Munro

Bob Azam confirm entering the contest was an amazing experience, one they will cherish for years to come.

About the Author

Shelley lives in Auckland, New Zealand, with her husband and a small, bossy dog named Scotty.

Typical New Zealanders, Shelley and her husband left home for their big OE soon after they married (translation of New Zealand-speak: big overseas experience). A yearlong adventure lengthened to six years of roaming the world. Enduring memories include being almost sat on by a mountain gorilla in Rwanda, lazing on white sandy beaches in India, whale watching in Alaska, searching for leprechauns in Ireland, and dealing with ghosts in an English pub.

While travel is still a big attraction, these days Shelley is most likely found in front of her computer following another love—that of writing stories of romance and adventure. Other interests include watching rugby and rugby league (strictly for research purposes *grin*), being walked by the dog, and curling up with a good book.

Shelley welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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