

Siren Publishing

Ménage Amour

Lara Santiago

Dark Colony 1

**SEX
OR
SUFFER**

The book cover features a futuristic, brightly lit hallway with a metallic floor and walls. In the foreground, a muscular man with short dark hair and a serious expression looks directly at the viewer. He is shirtless, showing his well-defined muscles. In the background, a woman with long dark hair is embracing a man from behind. The overall aesthetic is clean and industrial.

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DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this book to my fabulous husband. He's my friend, my soul mate and he never makes me suffer for any reason. After twenty amazing years together I look forward with enthusiasm to the next twenty that we'll share. Thanks for agreeing to play house with me for all these years, honey.

Lara Santiago
December 2008

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LARA SANTIAGO

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Chapter 1

“I just need you to fuck me,” the woman dressed in red screamed. “Don’t you get it? I’m in pain.” She ripped off the silk, scarlet robe she wore revealing her naked body.

Karl, the man who’d volunteered to help alleviate her anguish, scanned her from face to knees. Zeroing in on her lush breasts, he absently began to unbutton his shirt.

The woman launched forward, grasped the lapels from his fingers and ripped his shirt wide open. Buttons flew in four different directions. Karl’s eyes widened as she pressed herself against his body. They widened further when her hips began a seductive gyration up and down, back and forth across his groin. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pushed his button-less shirt off of his frame.

“Okay, I get it. You need sex.” Karl shucked his trousers down where they bunched at his ankles. His fully erect cock sprang free from his loosened pants. He kicked the tangle of fabric at his feet off to one side. The woman grasped his shaft one-handed and stroked his cock up and down vigorously.

“I need you now.” Her body visibly shook only ten minutes after Karl’s scent triggered her need to copulate. A bead of perspiration pooled at her temple and rolled down her face. She panted wildly, her

face a contortion of pain-ridden fear. She pulled Karl flush against her body still gripping his cock in one hand as if he might try to get away.

Backing up with him clutched in her arms, she fell to the bed as soon as the mattress brushed the backs of her calves. Her legs fell open and without further coaxing, Karl sank his cock deeply inside her body as she bucked and grabbed his ass with both hands as if to propel him to go faster. He pumped inside for several more steady thrusts before he stiffened and grunted.

The woman mashed her eyes shut still trembling against his stiff body and groaned in audible relief the moment he climaxed. Seconds later, she stopped shaking and slumped against the bed pillow. Karl pulled away with an expression like he wanted to say something tender, but the woman jerked away from the intimate connection, curled into a ball and ignored him.

Disregarding her very obvious desire to be left alone, Karl asked, “Alice, are you—”

“Get out,” she uttered between clenched teeth, cutting off whatever tender question Karl was about to ask.

From the observation booth in the next room, Dr. Penelope Drake watched Karl back away from her patient, Alice. Through the two way mirror, she watched the pain and suffering of the woman carrying the dreaded Sex or Suffer virus.

Penelope wanted to use the intercom to tell Karl to shut up and get out, but figured it would only make an already horrid situation worse. Alice didn’t need to be reminded she was being watched. She’d already suffered tremendously with this abhorrent illness.

Eyes wide, Karl tried again to soothe her with another soft query. “Do you feel better—?”

“I said get out!” She cut off his quiet words as a sob escaped from her throat. Alice clutched the pillow to her chest and buried her face in one corner as tears slipped down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry.” Karl backed away from her, treading on his discarded pants. He scooped them from the floor and hurriedly drew them on,

grabbing his ruined shirt in one fist. After a sorrowful look over his shoulder, Karl left the room now filled with the heartbreaking sounds of Alice's misery.

"That was really fast." Penelope closed the view of the window to the observation room. With the press of a button, the opaque cover slid closed. Still a little embarrassed to have watched the violent sex, Penelope sighed and wished she had a better plan to help Alice conquer this disease.

"She grabbed his ass. He couldn't help it. Still, if it had been me, I'd have taken much longer to come." Damon Kaslan smacked a hand to his chest likely to enforce his foolish point and turned from the now hidden window.

Penelope resisted the strident urge to thump him in the head. "Well, now taking your time to climax would be cruel, wouldn't it? Besides I wasn't referring to Karl's performance. I was talking about how fast the virus acted. Alice suffered serious pain after only a few minutes of exposure to a man fitting her personal criteria for arousal."

Damon shrugged. "It's not a surprise. The other chick was the same way."

Penelope turned sharply and strode towards him. "Yes, until she killed herself."

"I still don't get why she did that." Cocking his head to one side, Damon's eyes narrowed as if in speculation as to why a woman wouldn't love to beg for sex twenty-four hours a day.

"Quit being such a prick," Penelope snapped. "You can't seriously be so dense. A virus that makes a woman burn in pain until she has a man fuck her until 'he' climaxes? This isn't some laughable sex story to be shared in locker room. It's depraved. And certainly not a positive step for humanity regardless of the attitude to the contrary in this society."

Two days after being assigned the case, Penelope was already out of bright ideas as to how to cure this vile disease. Yesterday, they'd tried to administer a shot of semen into Alice's vaginal tract to sooth

the virus, but it hadn't worked.

Apparently, the SOS virus tapped into complex cerebral functions associated with the sexual act. As a consequence, the friction of a penis thrusting inside the vagina was required for temporary suppression of the pain and even that method only lasted a few hours. How many hours depended on the individual patient suffering.

Damon's expression became instantly contrite. "I'm just saying the one who killed herself should have waited until we tried the cure. She'd only been here a day."

His ignoring the fact that the first victim, Cora, had suffered for six weeks prior to her arrival on Bravura pissed Penelope off. She turned away to hide her disgust. "I did try the cure on Cora. It didn't work. Apparently, it was too late. The virus had incubated in her system for too long. She killed herself because she didn't think a permanent non-sexual cure was possible. I find it hard to blame her."

"You used the last of the cure on the crazy woman who killed herself?" Damon crossed the room and grabbed her shoulder.

"Her name was Cora. Try saying it once." Penelope leveled a look that said he better watch what words he uttered next.

Wheeling her to face him he asked a question instead. "Did you get authorization to give 'Cora' the cure?"

Penelope heaved a deep sigh and shifted her gaze. "No. I didn't. Besides, it wasn't the last of it. There's one more dose left. I plan to use it on Alice. I want to hurry and test the existing cure before it's too late for her too."

"You can't do that!" Damon's shock propelled him closer. He breached the arm's length gap between them, crossing dangerously into her personal space, his open jacket brushing her sleeve.

"I'm not asking for permission." Penelope did her best to ignore his close proximity. "I'm in charge."

"The Science Group will never approve it. Not if we only have one dose left. They're already going to fry your ass for using the second to the last dose on the first hopeless case."

“Well, I didn’t know it was hopeless, did I? At least I tried.” Penelope backed away from him. “If the cure works on Alice, then we can contact the lab on the Parsec Colony and have them begin manufacturing more.”

“Parsec Colony is on the other side of the galaxy, for Christ’s sake. Who’s going to pay for more to be made? The SOS virus cure was expensive shit three hundred years ago. Not to mention the cost of a minimum three week round-trip transport to get to the Parsec Colony. That’s expensive too.”

Penelope crossed her arms and glared. “Are you asking me to do nothing? Dr. Ledreder gave me this case the day before yesterday with instructions to try and find an alternative cure.”

Damon pursed his lips in an unattractive moue. “It’s an isolated case of two women. The labs on the Parsec Colony won’t manufacture more of this ancient cure unless there is an epidemic. Bureaucratic red tape is the only reason we had the few doses of cure to begin with. They only keep any cure in inventory at all because they weren’t sure what impact the SOS virus had on men. They wanted to be prepared to cure any males afflicted.”

Penelope snorted. “Or all men are already permanently infected and the reason why most of them are such revolting swine.”

Damon grinned, but didn’t disagree. “Calm down, Dr. Penny. Your harsh opinion of the male species is very narrow-minded. Maybe you haven’t been with the right man yet.” He took a half step closer. “I could change your mind.”

Penelope didn’t voice the words, “I seriously doubt it,” out loud, but she wanted to.

Ignoring his smug, inappropriate attitude and his close proximity, she murmured, “Well, if you’re right, the Parsec Colony must have at least a few doses in stock to protect any afflicted men. I’m going to speak to Dr. Ledreder first thing tomorrow morning to determine if there is any grant money available to research this travesty further. Perhaps given time and some resources we could develop and

produce our own cure here on Bravura. That's my goal."

Lifting his hands into the air as if he had a direct line of communications to the heavens above, Damon sighed deeply and added, "There isn't any money for the SOS virus, Dr. Penny. It's an ancient virus that nobody cares about. Don't waste your time and effort on only one remaining unimportant victim."

Penelope tightened her hands into fists and silently counted to ten to temper her anger. Assaulting Damon wouldn't do any good.

Dr. Ledreder had pulled her off of her regular duties to see to this case. She wasn't about to throw in the towel on day two. "That's just it, Damon, what if it happens to more people? No one has discovered how these two women got infected in the first place. Therefore, anyone could breeze in here suffering at any time."

"Dr. Lead-ass set us up in this lab to hide away an insignificant problem from the general public. He won't authorize a single credit unless it becomes a planet-wide epidemic or someone important is stricken. And it won't. According to the tests we did yesterday when the two women first got here, once the patient is exposed and catches it, she isn't contagious. The only way to get this strain of virus is direct contact by airborne means or skin contact with the liquid virus from the initial source. The original virus was stored in small encapsulated ampoules. But there aren't any left."

Penelope hated when Damon used unflattering nicknames for their superiors and peers. She wondered briefly what he called her behind her back. "Someone has this virus. And that 'someone' gave it to poor Alice and the other victim, Cora."

"No one will admit to having this shit. No one even knows if there is any virus ampoule containers left anywhere and they wouldn't admit it if they did. Didn't you say this disease was eradicated over three hundred years ago? An old ampoule of virus from forever ago was probably discovered by accident. End of story."

"That doesn't mean we should ignore it. We should work on finding a new cure."

“I think you’re wasting your time, Dr. Penny. Alice is the only remaining known case and one case isn’t enough to warrant further new study. Besides there’s already old data to analyze.”

“Yes. The old data is limited. Except for some initial trials by the barbarians who created the virus, there are no other records of the disease. Hardly a plethora of information.”

“It’s enough for a single case.” Damon huffed. “No one’s even seen one of these virus ampoules for a couple centuries. Given that it’s supposed to be colorless, odorless and lasts less than ten minutes in open air before disintegrating and becoming inert, means waiting for an epidemic is a lost cause. I don’t know why Dr. Lead-ass put us in charge of this stupid case in the first place.”

“He didn’t put ‘us’ in charge. He put ‘me’ in charge.” Penelope also hated that Dr. Ledreder put Damon on this case with her. “And regardless of the circumstances of the virus, Alice is not a lost cause. We need to do something for her.”

“Don’t squander the last dose on her, Penny. You aren’t even sure if she’s past the incubation period and if she is, you will have wasted it.”

“Do not call me Penny. My name is Dr. Penelope Drake, in case you’ve forgotten. You may call me Dr. Drake. Dr. Ledreder put me in charge of this case with you as my assistant. As the senior medical researcher, I’ll do whatever I think is best for my patient regardless of your piggish thoughts on the matter.”

“Fine, Dr. Penelope, but if they ask me where the last dose of cure is, I’m telling the truth.”

“Do whatever you have to, Damon. You always do.”

Penelope snagged the final dosage out of the climate controlled cabinet and silently dared Damon to stop her. He would learn the hard way she was not a frail little flower when it came to a fistfight. She knew a few moves to take his ass down if he tried to put a single inappropriate finger on her person.

Growing up on the outskirts of the Bravura Colony’s golden city,

Spectra, with its high walled perimeter taught her how to win a fight or how to damage the opponent and make him wish he hadn't started one. She didn't, however, have the nerve to challenge the only son of Bravura's most decorated hero.

Penelope exited observation and headed for the quarantine room. Alice was still curled in a ball on the bed.

"Leave me alone, Dr. Drake," she called without looking up.

"How did you know it was me?"

Alice twisted her head to stare. "I recognized the scent of your soap. Apparently, this cursed disease heightens my sense of smell for everyone, not just the men I need to fuck."

"It's understandable. The virus has an impact on olfactory processes as it relates to attraction of the opposite sex."

"Don't remind me." Alice sat up clutching her wrinkled, red robe to her breasts. "What do you want now? More blood? Permission to run another sexual experiment? Because the answer is no. I'm finished with tests."

"No. I'm here for another reason." Penelope kept her back to the window in case anyone might catch her and stop what she was about to do. She also angled a shoulder so the camera couldn't see her actions or that she had the cure. Approaching the bed, Penelope whispered, "I'd like to administer the available cure."

Alice squinted. "I thought the only cure you had couldn't be given unless I'd had the disease for less than three weeks. That's what Dr. Ledreder told me when I first arrived here yesterday."

"Nothing is absolute. I'm trying to formulate my own hypothesis, but I need for you to tell me everything you know. Everything you remember."

"Like what?"

Penelope pulled the only chair in the room closer to Alice's bed. She pocketed the cure momentarily and pulled out her digital note pad. "Have your symptoms changed since the initial encounter?"

"Yes. They've gotten worse over time. The pain comes faster

now. It always came faster for me than for Cora.”

Penelope read a few notes from Alice’s admittance form. “You’re from the Cordryte Mining Colony, correct?”

Alice nodded and crossed her arms.

“You and Cora lived close to each other in the outlands away from the city?”

Alice nodded again. “I could see her place from my front porch, but it was a ten minute walk to get over there.”

Penelope made some notes with her stylus on the back-lit flat panel of her digital pad. “Did you experience the same symptoms and pain as Cora?”

“Not exactly.”

“Explain. Exactly.”

Alice pushed out a long sigh and pulled her robe over her thin shoulders covering herself before she answered. “Cora’s symptoms were milder at first and got worse later on. She acted different and more forward with men, but I just thought she was lonely.”

“What symptoms were milder?”

“Cora was a flirt. Everyone knew it. Unlike me, she was very animated when in the presence of men. She was comfortable touching men casually on the arm or the back to get attention or to make a point as she talked, but once she contracted the virus, it was like she ramped up her efforts.”

“Were there lots of men living near by?”

“No. All the men lived in the small town. But we always went in to town every week to get supplies. We went together for company and also for protection. Two heads are better than one, you know.”

Penelope smiled and Alice continued. “Cora always flirted, but she rarely dated or chased after men.”

“When did you notice a change?”

“Thinking back, I guess I noticed she was slightly different after Collier visited. But I didn’t say anything. I wrote it off as her being upset.”

“Collier?”

She nodded. “Ross Collier. He was her ex-boyfriend. They hadn’t seen each other in years, but he showed up one day out of the blue and wanted to start up again. He was bad news and Cora didn’t want to get back together. They had a knock down drag out fight including lots of broken glass shattering against walls loud enough for me to hear from my porch. I went over to help her as she threw him out.”

Penelope made a note to contact Ross Collier. His name sounded familiar.

“Later that afternoon we drove my vehicle into town for supplies as usual. We were supposed to meet before dusk, but Cora sent one of the saloon girls to tell me she was staying overnight with a man. She’d never abandoned me before.

“I had to go back home alone. The next day Cora came back and told me she felt funny. She’d spent the night with a stranger after blatantly seducing him, but the virus didn’t become painful for her right away. She told me she’d been ‘compelled’ to have sex with that man. That was the word she used. She didn’t worry much afterward. She seemed to blow it off so I did too.”

Penelope flipped back and read a few notes from Cora’s admittance form but didn’t find anything relevant.

“So it was how long before you two went back to town again?”

“It was more than two weeks.”

“Could you have contracted the disease at the same time as Cora?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know when I contracted it.”

“Did you see any men in town the day Cora stayed over night?”

Alice thought for a moment. “I only saw one or maybe two, but maybe I wasn’t attracted to them.”

A tear slipped over her lower eyelid and she sniffed. “What if I did get it at the same time as her? The cure won’t work on me either. I was alone for a month before I came into contact with the first man I jumped into bed with. What if it’s been too long? Not knowing is

better. If you give me the cure and it doesn't work...I don't want to continue."

Penelope bowed her head and caught Alice's eye. "Don't talk like that. Please let me try it. Your symptoms were different than Cora's. What if the cure works for you?"

"What if it doesn't?" Another fat tear slid down her cheek. Alice pushed it from her face with the heel of one hand. "And most of all, I hate fucking crying at the drop of a hat. I never used to cry until I got this intolerable disease. Cora had the right idea. I don't want to live like this."

Penelope stood. "Don't say that, Alice. Even if this cure doesn't work I plan to develop a new one. A better one. I can have you put in isolation away from any and all men. You'll be safe from the virus being triggered and I vow to you that I won't sleep until I find a cure for you."

Alice stared at her for so long, Penelope got a little uncomfortable. All of a sudden, she slid to the edge of the bed, her breasts sagged against her body beneath the robe. She lowered her legs until her feet touched the floor and leaned forward. "Fine. You can try your cure." Alice pierced her with a heated stare. "But if it doesn't work," her lips trembled, "I want you to bring poison next time you walk through the door."

"I can't do it, Alice. I won't. I'll simply put you in quarantine."

"I can't live like this any longer, Dr. Drake." Her tired eyes leaked water in a steady stream down her hollowed cheeks. "I don't want to live the rest of my life tucked away in a small room boxed in. It's like living in a fucking coffin. I hate being indoors as it is all the time. It's torture for me. I miss the sun on my face and working in my garden. I didn't have much on that desolate planet, but I liked my life."

Penelope, hands in her jacket pocket as she fingered the vial of cure, squatted down next to the bed. "I won't rest until I find a cure, Alice. I promise. I'll only leave you tucked away in quarantine temporarily so no man will trigger your pain."

“I know you mean well, Dr. Drake, but this virus is worse than anything you can imagine. I ended up having sex with ten different men just to get transportation to this facility. Today’s little experimental fuck party was more painful than any I’ve gone through since this started. Promise me you’ll help me die, if your cure doesn’t work.”

While Penelope understood her desire to end her life, she wouldn’t help her do it. “I’ll think about it.”

“No. Either promise or I won’t let you test me.”

Penelope had no intention of killing her, but she leaned forward and stared in her eyes. “I promise I won’t let you suffer if my cure doesn’t work.”

“Swear it.”

Penelope pulled her hand from her pocked and lifted it as if in solemn reverence. With a silent promise to induce a temporary coma if the cure didn’t work, Penelope crossed her fingers behind her back and placed her other hand across her heart. “I swear it.”

Alice’s entire body slumped on the bed. “Okay.”

“I’ll give you the cure. It’s supposed to work in less than an hour. However, we’ll wait for four hours to make sure it’s taken effect and then I’ll bring back Karl to test you. Will that be okay?”

“Fine. But make sure you bring the poison along when you bring Karl. I’m not having sex with him again to stop the pain if your cure doesn’t work on me.”

Penelope nodded, said a silent prayer. She retrieved vial attached to the hypo jet shot filled with the last cure from her pocket. Surreptitiously, she blocked the camera and put the pressure device against Alice’s upper arm. She released the final dose to cure the dreaded and horrifying SOS Virus.

Seconds after the cure released in her system, Alice smiled. Penelope smiled in return.

Alice giggled. “Well, that didn’t hurt at all. I feel good.”

“That’s great. Why don’t you try to rest? I’ll be back later.”

“Okay, but don’t forget your promise.”

Penelope forced a smile onto her lips. “I won’t. Now get some sleep.”

“I mean it Dr. Drake.” Alice cackled with glee making Penelope wonder if there was a mood enhancing drug mixed with the SOS cure.

She turned to go but Alice grabbed her arm. With a huge smile plastered on her face, she added, “If you don’t bring poison when you come later, I’ll find another way to kill myself. Please make my death more humane.”

Penelope nodded and patted her arm. “Let’s hope for the best, okay? Perhaps when I bring Karl back you’ll be completely immune to him.”

Alice exhaled a deep breath. “I hope so.”

Little was known about this virus. It had been dubbed the Sex or Suffer virus by the barbarians who’d developed it more than three hundred years ago. Initially, they’d wanted to find a way to get an opposing force to pay attention. They decided if the women on a conflicting army writhed in agony and begged for sex, it would be a means to not only demean a populace in the worst possible way, but strongly distract the male forces of opposition during planet conquests.

When Dr. Ledreder had assigned her this case only two days ago, he brought her the only information available in the form of an old marketing slide show video of limited and dubious validity created to promote this horrible disease. He also assigned two patients, Cora and Alice, for her to study. He tasked her with finding another cure as the only one available wasn’t one hundred percent effective.

Penelope had accidentally discovered the two doses of SOS cure on her own last night after sneaking into the Bravura Science Lab’s pharmaceutical vault.

Once the virus had been in the victim’s system for longer than sixty days and acclimated to the body’s cellular structure, it became permanent. At least it’s what the barbarian’s archaic digital video

slide show reported as truth.

Penelope hadn't been able to confirm this information on her own. She barely understood the rudimentary process of how the virus worked. Once she got the information on Alice's results after the shot of cure, whatever they were, Penelope planned to bury herself in her lab and work non-stop until she found a cure. She made it a goal to keep Alice from suicide.

* * * *

Penelope didn't linger in Alice's room. Damon buzzed her I-link communicator from the observation room, so she went back to see what he wanted. She suspected she knew *exactly* what he wanted and put a stranglehold on her anger.

Picking a fight with Damon wasn't a good idea, his powerful family lived in the most prestigious circles on Bravura and associated with the richest of the rich. Besides, it might be a career ending move. She only sought positive progress for her livelihood.

Once she stepped her foot inside the room, he started asking questions.

"Did you give it to her?" he asked. "The last dose?"

Penelope wished she hadn't confided in him. "Yes. It's supposed to work in less than an hour. I'll give her at least four hours and then we'll test her with Karl again."

Damon zipped around the room like a wildcat doped up on speed and pinging off the walls. Suddenly very fatigued, Penelope sat down at the only table in the space. Seeing a small water spot on the desk, she wiped it away with the palm of her hand before putting her file down. Damon shook his head and an amused expression crossed his face. "I hope you know what you're doing, Dr. Penny."

"We'll know in a few hours."

He picked up an I-link box from the table. "This message came for you while you talked with Alice." He handed her the small silver

container. “It’s from the Interplanetary Alliance Coalition.” From the awestruck tone of his voice, the return address apparently impressed Damon.

He handed her the shoebox-sized container as if it were the sacred jewel encrusted scepter of the Chantilly, the ruling party on the planet, Bravura, where they resided. The return address listed her older brother, Philip’s name. He held a lofty position as a very junior assistant to the political manager of the Alliance Coalition’s top man, Governor Brawley. Philip’s position wasn’t the top spot, or even near it, but with respect to the lowly origins of her and her brother’s humble birth place, any nebulous link to Governor Brawley was considered an impressive accomplishment.

She grabbed one end of the box, but Damon held tight, not giving it up. In a tight low whisper, he caught her eye and said, “You may regret giving Alice the last dose, but just remember, I’m here to help out if you need me.” His eyes glittered and a smug grin formed.

Jerking the message box from his tight grasp, she didn’t respond, not believing for a second he gave a shit about helping her unless it was into bed. She’d rather slit her wrists than to lower herself by sleeping with Damon.

Penelope retreated to her private office for peace to get a few hours to work on a plan for either the success of the cure or the failure for Alice and any repercussions. The message from her brother was perfunctory like all his previous mail. She loved that Philip sent her a note each week, but he never really said much. His job was fine. His apartment was fine. His life was fine. He was fine. They both lived fine lives.

She placed the box on her desk and made a mental note to return it with the same message “she” always sent. She loved her job. She loved her apartment. She loved her life. It reassured her brother and kept him from worrying.

For the most part what she said was true. Oftentimes the only negative fact in her life was that she got lonely. The opportunity to

meet men hadn't materialized with her crushing workload. And that was okay too, because she did love her job. She watched for possible contenders in the very limited time she enjoyed away from her job. So far no one had inspired her to take a further look, but she was hopeful.

When enough hours had passed for the cure to have taken effect, Penelope gathered her things and headed back to Alice's room. Peeking into the observation room, she noted Alice slept. Penelope exhaled in realization of the first nebulous hope the cure had worked.

From her limited study of the original test victims on the digital video from the barbarians' own test studies, Alice's slumber was a good sign. Many SOS victims weren't able to sleep longer than a couple hours at a time. Others slept endlessly, the virus impacted diverse women in a variety of different ways.

Alice endured nightmares on both nights of her stay from all of the different men she'd had sex with before arriving at Bravura. Her painful symptoms had accelerated quickly, but her friend Cora had manifested slower and less obvious symptoms before the virus gave her pain. The virus was troubling in that it impacted different women at different paces and with varying degrees of pain. But in the end the emotional factor had a hand in each female's ultimate fate.

No woman wanted to be sexually dependent on a man for this most personal of acts. Not forever.

The timepiece on the wall made a sudden sound which signaled the hour. Glancing up, Penelope realized if she wanted something to eat, she'd have to hurry. The café, Nikki's Place, across the street to the science facility closed in less than an hour. Since Alice slept peacefully, she decided to grab something to quench her growing hunger before she brought Karl back for testing.

She didn't want to watch the impact of the virus again on an empty stomach if the cure hadn't worked. Penelope put a plan into her brain for that eventuality. If the virus cure she had *didn't* work, she'd put Alice into a medically assisted coma until she could figure out what to do about her condition.

Penelope left a note for Damon and hurried to the exit on the first floor of the science building where she'd worked for the past three years. Up to now she enjoyed her job, this case notwithstanding. Her studious upbringing had paid off and her family enjoyed the benefits of a child earning good pay as a scientist. Her brother also had done well for himself. She made a mental note to write a message in response to his communication when she got back with her dinner.

The street before the Science building was eerily quiet as she pushed through the glass doors to the sultry night air. The buzz of her communications device startled her as she released the door and stepped outside.

Penelope took a deep breath of evening air before answering her I-link. "Dr. Drake," she responded, hoping this call wouldn't keep her from a good meal tonight.

"It's Damon. Where are you? I thought you were coming back to check on the cure you gave Alice."

Penelope rolled her eyes and held her tone in check before answering. "Alice is sleeping. I didn't want to disturb her. I'm on my way to get a bite to eat before we do another test."

"Where are you going? I'll meet you. We can have dinner together or whatever else appeals to us." Damon's persistent requests to further their relationship made Penelope a little annoyed. She could only rebuff his advances and laugh them off, reiterating that his family would never approve of her as a spouse.

"Who says I'm looking for a mate," he'd always say and laugh uproariously, insisting in the next breath he was only kidding. His father, an Alliance Coalition High Committee member and former military hero, enjoyed respect and authority in his position.

While being a scientist was considered a generous step up for Penelope as a career path, she suspected it was a huge step down for Damon and his illustrious family.

Damon had mentioned a loathing of all things military even though it was one of the most prestigious professions on Bravura.

Either way, she wasn't remotely interested in him romantically.

"No. I won't be out long. Stay there and watch over Alice. I'll be back in thirty minutes."

"Fine. I still can't believe you used the last dose of cure on her. What if someone else comes in with the SOS virus? What if it's someone important?"

Penelope didn't want to rehash this argument. "Drop it, Damon. It's done. I can't change it, and I wouldn't even if I could."

"Okay, Dr. Penny don't get your panties in a wad. Call me and I'll meet you in the observation room when you get back from your lonely dinner."

Penelope closed her eyes and grimaced at his use of the nickname she hated. "Fine." She hung up without any pleasantries and strolled inside the nearly empty bar.

It was Penelope's favorite place partly because the owner was a woman. In fact, many women frequented the place which cut down on all the propositions she usually got from desperate men when she went into other drinking establishments.

An occasional date might be nice, but her work was the predominant force in her life and never more so than with this horrible virus. Lonely or not, she wasn't really looking for a mate or to settle down. She worked too hard to be distracted.

The only downside to being a scientist in her dream job was Damon. She had to be on guard to keep him from riling her emotions. She loved her job regardless of Damon and all his inappropriate behavior.

Given his connections, Penelope didn't dare make a formal complaint against him. If any disputes were realized, she would be the one fired in any test of wills between them. She was lucky to have this job. She was continually reminded of her ignoble birth nearly every day, but only by those crass enough to care about class and familial history.

Not everyone had a bigoted attitude. Her boss, Dr. Ledreder, for

instance was very tolerant. He'd been the one to search beyond the borders for anyone with the aptitude for science. She'd been one of fifteen candidates invited to the golden city for training. Likely her older brother had lent his assistance in the process. He told her he merely helped get the invitation. She'd won her place in the science field with her sharp mind and a willingness to work hard.

Top of her class, Penelope had graduated with honors including a position at this premier Science lab. She lived very frugally and with the credits she earned, she sent care packages to the family she'd left behind.

Penelope shook off the despair of missing her family and entered her home away from home. Nikki's Place was the first restaurant she'd eaten at on this side of the border. After three years, it was still the only place she ate when not in her tiny apartment.

Busy pouring a cup of coffee in front of the only other patron, Nikki glanced at her wrist watch and winked, "I didn't think you were going to make it tonight, Dr. Drake. Want to take a walk on the wild side and get something different for a change?" She put the slim coffee pot back on the laser warmer and approached.

Penelope laughed. Nikki always cheered her up. "I'll just stick with my usual sandwich." She'd had as much *wild side* as she could handle for one night and still had to face one more test with Alice. "Could you wrap it to go? I know you're about to close."

"Sure thing. Be right back."

"Thanks."

Nikki exited to the kitchen through a set of metal double doors and Penelope glanced at the other patron. A gorgeous guy in a flight suit hunkered over a steaming coffee cup. He was seated at the bar three seats down from where she waited.

Taking a deep cleansing breath, Penelope detected the faint scent of his engaging cologne mingled with the flavor of yummy man. She twisted her head to get a better look. Elbow on the chest-high counter, resting her chin on one hand, she watched as he took a sip of hot

steamy coffee. Penelope turned away before he caught her staring and pretended to study the selection of beverages behind the counter, but continued her perusal of the delectable man in the mirrored wall behind the hundreds of bottles.

The highlights in his dark blond hair, cut short enough to be military regulation, yet long enough to run her fingers through, danced even in the low light of Nikki's. Bent over his steamy beverage, likely nursing it with slow sips until it cooled, Penelope couldn't determine the color of his eyes, but watched intently in order to get a glance. He lifted his head and Penelope looked away to keep from being caught staring, but sneaked another glance as soon as his head lowered.

The high cheekbones and classically masculine angular shape of his handsome face appealed to her on an I-haven't-been-with-a-man-in-too-long feminine way. He turned at the sound of an emergency transport passing by and Penelope caught sight of his eyes before twisting to look outside as well. Green. His eyes were a light sea green.

Penelope took a deep breath to calm her riotous nerves and with it came another hint of his masculine scent along with the rich strong coffee he drank.

The end result of her silent evaluation determined he was very attractive, and she wished she weren't so embroiled at work or she might initiate a conversation. Beyond the fact she hadn't been with a man in a very long time, Penelope knew she'd been anxious and on edge since watching Alice and Karl through the observation room window. Her heightened feelings were likely a result of what had been on her mind all night from watching people have sex and not because she found the man three seats down so very delicious. Even though, he was completely desirable.

Nikki burst through the doors from the kitchen with a white takeout bag neatly folded at the top. Without looking, she knew Nikki had put everything she needed inside.

Penelope paid for her food using her thumb on Nikki's bio-print credit device. She lingered, studying the interior contents of the dinner bag. It wasn't that she didn't trust Nikki, she merely wanted to see if the man might say something to her. She'd love to instigate a conversation, but besides her current work load, it wasn't exactly in her nature to be so forward.

"Everything okay?" Nikki asked, jarring Penelope from her seductive thoughts about the man finishing his coffee.

"Yes. Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow night." Heat rose in Penelope's face at her audacious thoughts regarding a complete stranger. "Maybe tomorrow I'll take that walk on the wild side you offered earlier."

Nikki laughed. "I'll look forward to it. See you soon."

Penelope smiled in return, glanced at the sexy man once more and turned toward the door, taking slow steps to the exit.

Behind her, Nikki asked the seductive man, "Anything else I can get for you?"

"Nope. I'm good. Thanks for the coffee." He also paid using the bio-print.

Penelope lingered by the door, pretending to study an ad for Ugrian Crater foxes, a small rodent-like pet, listed for sale and posted in the window. Penelope didn't have time for a pet, but couldn't seem to get her feet moving.

The man took one last sip of his drink, slid off the barstool and as Penelope had planned, they exited the café on to the lonely street together.

"Thank you," she murmured as he held the door open for her.

"My pleasure," he responded. The sound of his sexy voice penetrated all the way to her core.

Nikki waved from behind the door and pushed a button so the steel security wall came down, shutting her place off from the public eye.

Penelope took a deep breath and with it came more of the man's

delectable and utterly male aroma. He glanced at her and then studied the quiet street around them. The dim glow of the lettering for the Science building cast meager light from across the street.

The noise of distant traffic from the beltway was the only sound surrounding them, and Penelope stared at him with sudden interest wondering if she should initiate a conversation. But then he did.

“Are you okay out here all alone?”

“Yes. I’m fine. I work close by.” She lifted her white bag. “I just came out for a late dinner.”

The gorgeous stranger smiled and nodded. “Do you need an escort back to wherever your workplace is? I’m on my way to the air dock for an off planet trip, but I have a few minutes if you want safe company.”

Penelope narrowed her eyes and unexpectedly knew she had to have this man. He was too perfect to pass up. His intoxicating scent overwhelmed her and trashed the last of her reserve. She took a step closer and put her free hand on his arm. “What’s your name?” She ran her hand to his shoulder squeezing his bicep along the way.

His sudden grin sent a pulse of desire low in her belly. “Nathan Tyndall. I’m the commander of the secondary supply ship, *Mirage*, for the Dalton Prime Corporation, and I’m also completely trustworthy.” He glanced at her hand but didn’t lose the smile or seem to mind her forwardness. She took another step closer and trailed her hand to his waist.

An abrupt red haze of lust covered her vision. A pulse of seductive desire shot into her pussy. She needed sex. Penelope slid her hand down to caress his hip and pressed against him seductively. “Know what I want, Nathan?”

By the bulge now evident and growing beneath the belt of his flight suit, Penelope was betting he did. Another beautiful grin shaped his luscious mouth. “A quiet place to eat your dinner?”

“No. A quiet place to eat you up, Nathan. I don’t think I can do anything else until we fuck.”

His eyes widened in obvious surprise. He glanced at the time piece strapped to his wrist and then back at her. “I sincerely wish I had the time to—”

Penelope wasn't about to take no for an answer. Her body burned with desire for this exceptionally sexy man. “Make time. I need you. Now!” She glanced over his shoulder and spied a dark narrow alley next to the bar. “Come on. Over here.”

She looped her arm through his and pulled him towards the shadowy space. He didn't fight her off, thankfully, because she was desperate. A blazing sensation began to register in her most private of places. Nathan slung an arm around her shoulders and they headed for privacy. She couldn't even think straight until she satisfied her hunger and food was not on her agenda.

The thirst she had for this man had tripled in three steps. An ache had begun burning her from the inside out. She had to have sex with him. A gush erupted from between her lower lips and her clit twitched with the need to be satisfied. Once they were three steps inside the mouth of the alley, Penelope pushed him against the brick outer wall and rubbed her body against his. His cock had swelled to an impressive erection.

“You're serious? You want to have sex with me? Right here and now in this ally?”

“Yes.” She dropped her purse and dinner bag next to her feet and started unzipping his flight suit jacket to have easier access to his pants zipper. “I must have you.”

His focused gaze never left her face. “You know, I hear about this sort of thing from other guys, but it's never happened to me before.”

“Well, now you'll have a tale to tell all your friends. Now please hurry. I'm beginning to ache.”

“I don't kiss and tell, sweetheart.” He cupped her head with one hand and pressed his lips to hers for a devouring kiss which only aroused her need further. His tongue licked a leisurely pace inside her mouth, sending her arousal level into the red zone. A seductive kiss,

like the lazy one Nathan gifted her with, would usually be appreciated, savored and eventually revered. Currently, it was not either valued or enjoyed. She needed sex. Now. She wasn't in the mood for any type of slow action.

Penelope broke away from the scorching kiss. "Kiss or tell or not. Whatever." She didn't want to kiss. She didn't want to take time from her primary goal, but when he connected to her mouth again, she didn't stop him. Instead, she used the distraction to prepare the scene for what she really wanted. Sex. She widened her legs and rubbed her clit against his cock. He moaned into her mouth clinched her tighter.

The motion and subsequent stimulation of her clitoris didn't result in the typical satisfying pleasure build up as she'd expected. It only increased the ache in her core. No meager satisfaction leading to climbing desire, but instead a pervasive itch flamed inside her pussy to an uncomfortable, and fast becoming unbearable, level. She needed him to fuck her. She literally burned with the desire to fornicate.

She pulled out of his embrace without stopping the kiss, promptly freed his cock from his loosened trousers and flipped her skirt up to pull her panties down to her thighs. Scissoring her knees against each other her panties were soon discarded on the ground between her feet. Penelope pressed Nathan harder against the brick wall and prepared to mount him.

He broke the kiss when her intentions became obvious. "Wait, don't you want—"

Penelope couldn't wait. She couldn't stop. She grabbed his cock and placed it between her aching pussy lips so she could find relief from the burning aching need to copulate. "Can't wait." His cock, directed by her eager fingers, slid inside her body an inch, and with the immediate promise of delicious relief, she sighed.

"Ohmigod, you're so big," she murmured.

Nathan grabbed her hips, keeping her from impaling herself further on his ready staff. She pulled at his hands, breaking his hold and sank down fully onto his cock with one swift thrust. Another

intense wave of relief came briefly once she felt him completely seated, but the urge to move became paramount in the next second.

She squeezed her vaginal walls against his delectable intrusion, and he groaned in response. “Jesus. You’re so tight. I don’t want to hurt—”

“Not hurt. Want. Need you. Please.” Penelope couldn’t even form complete sentences she wanted him so much. She retreated only to slam on to his cock again. The next thrust came from him. This time he gripped her hips and pushed inside her again deeply.

“That’s so good. Don’t stop. Oh God. Please don’t stop!” Penelope held fast to his shoulders as he pumped his cock in and out of her body.

This was the best sex Penelope had ever experienced. Wild. Ferocious. Phenomenal. The only sound she heard was their grunting and panting which only fueled her insatiable desire. The scent of his skin overwhelmed her with need. She buried her face against his chest and fastened her mouth to one flat nipple as he fucked her.

“I can’t hold it much longer,” Nathan panted. He slowed his pace and snaked one hand between them. “Let me—”

“No,” she wailed, “Don’t stop moving!” She was desperate for relief.

He slowed further and she felt his fingers slide between her legs and graze her clit. The sensation, while nice, wasn’t what she craved. The intense burning increased as he slowed his thrusts. The scorching painful sensation intensified within the wall of her pussy as he slowed to a virtual stop.

Penelope screeched in pain and lifted her hips to initiate his thrusting again. She slammed down on him and he made an inarticulate noise. She did it again, and he resumed his fevered thrusts. Five strokes later, Penelope found what she sought. Nathan growled and came inside her. The shower of his climax cooled the burning need in Penelope’s body instantly as if a frigid torrential rain filled her body with fresh, cooling relief.

The red haze of lust lifted immediately and Penelope woke up from the dream she'd been having where she had wild, wicked sex with a stranger while standing in an alleyway.

Only it wasn't a dream.

Completely out of breath, Penelope rested against the heaving chest of a complete stranger whom she'd lured into a sexual conquest in an alley next to her favorite restaurant. Good lord almighty what had she just done? Why had she done it?

Alice's agonized face filled her memory and she realized exactly what had happened.

She was infected with the SOS virus. Oh God. How could that be?

No time to analyze now because she currently had a stranger's cock shoved all the way inside her body and delicate explanations would have to be rendered.

"I'm so sorry you didn't come." He panted. His hand slid to her head, and he cupped it gently. He pulled her close as he massaged her scalp. "I can't believe it. I swear I never do that. I never release without—"

Penelope broke into his self regret quickly. "Don't worry. It was great. Just what I needed." She didn't have the courage to look in his face, but the first thing she did see at her eye level was the insignia for his ship, the Dalton Prime Corporation, fastened to his flight suit. She recognized the company name. She'd spoken to the logistics point of contact on one of the ships in the company once or twice for deliveries to and from the labs.

A sob rose inside her. Alice was right about this virus, and Penelope clearly understood her suicidal desire if this was the permanent life she faced.

Penelope separated herself from Nathan carefully. As his still semi-hard cock slipped from her body, she found she lacked the courage to look him directly in the eyes after what she'd done. Face pointed to the ground, she saw her purse and dinner bag hastily strewn to the side of where they'd copulated against the brick wall.

A new wave of horror over what she'd just done in the name of relief for her utter agony swept across her conscience. Instinct to flee overwhelmed her and propelled her to action. Penelope bent in half, grabbed only her purse and ran out of the alley without another word.

Nathan shouted after her, but she was too embarrassed to respond or return. Fearful she would run into another man fitting the attraction criteria, she took the long way. She ducked into the science building using a side access to avoid the main entrance. Even at this late hour there was the possibility of people, especially men, coming in and out. She couldn't chance running into anyone else. Especially men. Ohmigod. What was she going to do?

In the short term, she'd have to sequester herself in a containment suit and carry extra oxygen mix tanks to be safe. Pheromones and scent set the virus in motion. Nathan had been the one in four males Penelope was attracted enough to which signaled the virus to attack her system and seek relief.

The memory of Alice and the last dose of cure being gone assaulted her. Damon taunting her for using the last dose instead of saving it for someone more important punched her already heart-sick, aching insides. Not that she would have failed to try to cure Alice, but God help her if she couldn't find a way to cure herself.

Chapter 2

Penelope sprinted into the building where she worked and headed to her private office using the most obscure path. The horror of her new reality pounded in her conscious.

Oh God. She had the SOS virus. Oh God... The phrase repeated in her mind.

Entering her office, Penelope shot towards her gear closet to retrieve her containment suit. About to strip down to her bra and panties, she realized she wasn't wearing panties. She'd discarded them during the frenzied sexual encounter along with her dinner. A minor problem. Luckily, she had a couple extra pairs in her office locker for late nights. She had the suit zipped and was breathing oxygen from a tank through a filter mask inside of a minute.

Penelope had a short to-do list before she could get off the planet and accomplish her next goal—immediate transport to the Parsec Colony for the acquisition of more cure for the SOS virus.

First, she needed forged financial authorization for transport and lab fees on Parsec Colony, then...to manufacture and retrieve more cure and return to science building. She said a silent prayer they had some stock and the antidote wouldn't have to be produced from scratch.

Next, she'd need forged leave paperwork. The least of her problems since she was long over due for vacation, but time off was hard to get regardless of how much time she'd accumulated. The science community persisted in a very single-minded pursuit of scientific discovery.

The most difficult task she faced was getting off of the planet

without encountering any men, otherwise she'd rack up more sexual encounters than what she'd accumulated for the whole of her life.

And finally, she desperately needed the results of Alice's test without being present with poison as promised. Understanding Alice's desire to end her life didn't mean Penelope wanted to participate.

She considered her options and with a new plan in mind, Penelope called Damon's personal I-link, setting hers for voice only so he couldn't see her in the containment suit. She didn't want him to discover her secret.

Damon answered after several rings with a strident, "Where are you?"

"Doesn't matter. I need you to do a favor for me."

He paused for so long, Penelope wondered if he'd just disconnected. "I'm listening."

"I need you to go into Alice's room and see if the cure worked."

His voice turned soft and sleazy. "Should I call the volunteer or do you want me to help her out this time?"

Damn Damon the slime ball pervert, always on the make wanting to score with women. "Call the volunteer. We don't know if you meet the criteria for her attraction."

"Right." He paused again and several clicks and pops distorted the line as if he covered his mouth piece. *Was that someone's voice?*

"Are you alone, Damon?" Penelope went into heart attack panic mode. She needed to calm down.

"What? Yes. I'm alone. I was getting out of the elevator. I'll meet you in the lab."

"No. Wait. I won't be there, I'm not in the building," she lied, "but I want to connect via live feed sound only from my hand-held computer. Will you please set it up?" She didn't want Damon to know her whereabouts in the building. In fact, she'd like to avoid every male member of the species until she cured herself. Which was likely delusional. The better plan would be to have someone like a husband on hand for continual relief. Unfortunately, she was fresh out of male

companions. Flashing back to Nathan and the scene in the alley, Penelope cursed silently.

“Sure. I guess. I’ll call your handheld once I’ve got everything ready.”

Penelope disconnected before he could ask more questions. She had her own preparation to attend to, starting with transport off planet so she could find a cure for herself.

Picking up the directory for supply ships, she perused the short list. Heat seeped across her cheeks when she noted Dalton Prime Corporation. Listed beneath the company heading were the formal names of the corporate approved ships. Her face really warmed up when she got to the ship named *Mirage*.

Nathan Tyndall was listed as captain of the medium range craft. Would she ever say either name, even in the privacy of her own mind, without blushing? Likely not.

The electronic log showed the *Mirage* departing the planet in under twenty minutes for a trip halfway across the galaxy. At least Penelope wouldn’t have to worry about running into him before she left. A minor relief with all things considered, but she’d latch onto any good news for the moment. She owed Nathan an explanation, and if the occasion ever presented itself, she might give him one.

At the top of the page was the Dalton Prime Corporation flagship, the long-range star ship *Dalton* was listed before the *Mirage*. Beneath each star craft were the names of the officers in charge. The *Dalton*, commanded by Captain Gray Wyckoff, was the only ship authorized to leave Bravura in the next month and head to Parsec Colony.

The *Dalton* was scheduled to dock within the hour. She had to be on that ship and moving in at least a day or less. The next scheduled trip was in two weeks, but a bribe would help Captain Wyckoff leave sooner. Tomorrow at the latest, but tonight, under the cover of darkness would be best.

Nathan Tyndall was listed as the *Dalton*’s first officer, but she knew he’d be captaining the *Mirage*. She almost wished she had time

to message Nathan. He deserved an explanation for her actions. But then again, no one needed to know about her affliction. Penelope stifled her need to confess and focused on finding a way off this planet before anyone in her employ figured what was really happening.

Instead of collapsing in a sobbing heap like she wanted to do, she logged on to her lab's proprietary account. She had a budget and a healthy balance since it was early in the quarter. She sent a special request to Captain Wyckoff's personal account for transportation off planet tonight. Noting the cost of the round trip almost made her blanch, but then she remembered Nathan's face as she pushed him against the brick wall. She set up the transportation as two separate invoices. Payment included for the trip to the Parsec Colony. Payment for the return to be handed over on Parsec Colony.

Authorizing funds be sent to purchase more of the cure, she made up a bogus request form and used Dr. Ledreder's secret code to finalize the order. She'd accidentally seen him use it once and hated to abuse the knowledge, but desperation colored her actions.

With the outrageous cost to manufacture more of the SOS cure, she could barely afford a one-way ticket to Parsec Colony. Once there, she'd have to find a way to bring the cure back and replace what she'd used along with convincing the captain to wait for payment until they'd returned to Bravura.

Perhaps she'd mention her recent introduction and connection with Nathan and hope it was enough to get her back home. Ultimately, the *Dalton* would have to return to Bravura. She consoled herself with the knowledge that if she had become infected suddenly, others might be at risk.

How had she contracted the virus in the first place? And what if she couldn't get the cure in time? Answers to these questions were not readily available and promptly shuttled to the back of her mind in favor of a more productive action.

Half an hour later she was almost set. Three doses of cure from

Parsec Colony paid for and a one-way transportation request to collect it completely wiped out her lab funds account. If anyone checked her financial records before she returned, she'd likely be fired before a weak explanation could be rendered, but it couldn't be helped.

Penelope wrote a desperate message to her brother, Philip, begging for the funds to replace what she'd taken, along with additional funds for a return trip, but declined to explain why. The Sex or Suffer virus wasn't something she could comfortably explain to any family member. If he had the money, her brother would help her, but not necessarily with no questions asked. She'd deal with questions later. If Philip didn't have the funds, she was screwed anyway.

Literally and figuratively in this case.

* * * *

Gray Wyckoff swiveled in his captain's chair and directed his pilot to dock the ship. Fatigue colored his actions. His ship had been out an extraordinarily long time this trip. He'd hoped to stay awake until he reached his apartment in Spectra on Bravura, but decided sleeping in his captain's quarters for a few hours would help him make it home later.

Once in his quarters he relaxed with a shower then checked his messages. Several waited for him, including one from Nathan a couple hours before he left Bravura. It was too bad they hadn't had time to meet up. It had been a long time since he'd seen his best friend and Nathan always had great stories to share.

Following that message were several messages from family, and invitations from friends to get in touch while he was on Bravura. Lastly, one unexpected message waited on his business line. A transportation request from Dr. Drake at the Bravura Science labs. He read it, sorry he'd have to turn it down. He hated to give up a government funded trip, but the transportation location request was on

the far side of the galaxy and a lengthy three to four week round trip. His crew needed a break.

If he accepted, he'd have to use temporary crew to subsidize his regular staff, which he hated to do. He could use a break himself. He was just too fatigued to accept a lengthy journey with a rookie crew. He constructed a reply to gracefully refuse, then realized a default automatic response had been sent to Dr. Drake accepting the job and the payment.

Damn it. Now he'd have to call and fix things. With a heavy conscience, he contacted Dr. Drake to explain his predicament and kindly back out.

"Hello." The husky female voice reminded him that he hadn't had sex in a really long time.

"Dr. Drake, please," he queried.

"This is Dr. Drake." *Whoa.* Dr. Drake was a female? He didn't see that coming. His libido accelerated into action to the level where his cock wanted to join the party and offer services for consideration. Down boy, not now but soon.

"Yes. This is Captain Gray Wyckoff. I wanted to discuss the trip you've applied for with the Dalton—"

"Oh yes," she cut in, "I'm glad you called back so quickly. I'll need a few special conditions while on board. I have a delicate lung condition and I'll need a room to myself with a self-contained environmental system not shared with the rest of your ship. Do you have a room like that on board?"

"Yes, but—"

"Great. Also, I'll need to arrive on the Parsec Colony as soon as possible. I'm securing a treatment for my lung condition and the sooner I get it, the safer I'll be. What's the best time possible to get across the galaxy? Could it be accomplished in less than ten days? I'd like to depart as soon as possible."

"Miss Drake—"

"Dr. Drake, if you please. I hate to be difficult, but it's really hard

for a woman in the science field to—”

“I can’t take you to the Parsec Colony.” Gray finally got a few words in when he raised his voice.

“I beg your pardon?”

He repeated, “I can’t take you to the Parsec Colony.”

“Why not? I have the auto-response confirming my request. The funds have been sent. You must. There isn’t any other transport service listed as authorized to go to that sector within the next month.”

“My crew is exhausted. I’ve only just returned to Bravura in the last hour. My auto-responder shouldn’t have activated. I’m sorry, Dr. Drake, but I can’t put my ship safely in space for another week at the earliest.”

There was silence on the other end for a long moment and he thought she had disconnected before he heard crying.

God, he was such a shit. He shouldn’t have raised his voice. Her agonized sob sent a dagger straight to his soul.

“Please don’t cry. It can’t be good for your lungs. I’ll dispatch a refund to your account immediately and—”

“No! Ohmigod. Don’t send a refund!” Her shout startled his heart into almost skipping a beat.

“Why not?”

She sniffed a couple of times before whispering, “Please. You don’t understand I need to get my cure, Captain Wyckoff. I’m absolutely desperate. Please tell me how much money you need. What will it take for you to get me off this planet tonight?” Her impassioned request was very intriguing if only to get a look at the woman who went with the sexy voice.

Unfortunately, his mutinous curiosity wasn’t making the decision. It was his turn to sigh. “It isn’t about the money, Dr. Drake. Getting you off this planet within the next week would take a miracle.”

Again she was silent for so long he checked his device to see if they were still connected. Her quiet tone made him lean forward as if

hunkering over his desk would help him hear better.

“My brother, Philip, is the political manager to Governor Brawley. It would upset him greatly to discover you didn’t make every effort on my behalf, Captain Wyckoff.”

Shit. The PM to the governor of this entire sector had the kind of powerful and influential clout he couldn’t even hope to buy. The slim opportunity for a face-to-face contact made him giddy with untold success. He most assuredly didn’t want to piss off anyone connected to the Governor.

Thinking through all the amazing stunts he’d have to pull off to make this impromptu trip to the Parsec Colony work, he said calmly, “I’ll tell you what. If you’d be willing to get me an audience with your brother in the form of an official appointment for potential service runs to the governor’s planet, I’ll lift you off this planet before midnight.”

“Midnight is in just under four hours.”

“That is correct. Send me a carbon copy of the request to your brother and we’ll be on our way tonight.”

“Then we’re in accord. I’ll send the message to my brother before we leave and schedule a trade pitch meeting for you upon our return to Bravura in a month.”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll see you before midnight then. Thank you, Captain Wyckoff. I appreciate this.”

“You’re welcome. The *Dalton* is located at dock seventeen. And I’ll have your self-contained room ready upon your arrival.”

She disconnected without saying anything else, and Gray hoped he could pull this feat of madness off. He also desperately wished that the best first officer he’d ever had, Nathan, wasn’t already gone from the planet or he would have stolen him from the *Mirage* and enlisted his help for this journey.

* * * *

Penelope had to sit after her conversation with Captain Wyckoff. The close call had caused unprecedented tears. She never cried. And certainly never in front of anyone. Alice's mention that the SOS virus made her cry more flitted across Penelope's memory. The indignities of this disease were seemingly endless.

The silver box from her brother caught her eye again. Staring at it earlier had given her the idea of leverage to dangle over the captain's probable greed. Most thought twice about crossing the trade governor in a negative way, and everyone else wanted an audience to promote themselves or their business.

Captain Wyckoff was no different, obviously. His attitude had certainly changed when she'd mentioned the Governor. The only foreseeable problem was she didn't really have any leverage. Worse, she'd fibbed about the relationship her brother had with the governor's manager. Her brother wasn't actually the manager, just one of many who worked for the PM.

She hated the lie, but given her predicament the lie couldn't be helped. Fortunately, her brother's communication address listed him with the governor's office. She could send a coded message tagging the captain's address and at least fool him enough to get off the planet tonight.

She'd spend the rest of her life paying off what she owed to Captain Wyckoff if needed, but for tonight, she needed a ride to get her cure. She also hated that she'd cried. She so rarely wept, it had been a surprise when the hot, fat tears spilled across her cheeks in utter despair that he wouldn't help her with this monumental personal problem.

She gathered a change of clothes. She didn't dare try to make it to her apartment without coming across a man she'd want to have her wicked way with...like Nathan.

The look on Nathan's face when he finally understood what she wanted in that alley was pressed into her memory. But she ignored it

in favor of getting to dock seventeen and into the self-contained room before her oxygen packs ran out.

Checking her gauge, she grimaced. The tank held a lot, but it would be close. She composed a carefully worded message to her brother requesting what she knew he likely couldn't provide, and hedging her reasons for what she wanted and why she needed the appointment with the Governor so desperately.

Her second correspondence involved an emergency request for leave. She hinted it had something to do with a message from her brother. She hated using his lofty position so much, but her predicament left her little choice.

The final problem to resolve was payment for the return to Bravura. It would be due before their return. Captain Gray Wyckoff could strand her on the Parsec Colony, which would be game over for her career, but at least she'd be cured of this horrid disease.

If her brother had the money to deposit to her personal account, he would do so, if not, she was screwed. Perhaps she could arrange monthly payments to the captain once they'd arrived at the Parsec Colony. If she got back to the science lab with the cure in time to save her job, it would be a miracle, but at this juncture she didn't have any other choice.

Her communicator's buzz wrenched her from the despondent mood she'd sunk into. How would she ever pull this madness off?

"Yes." Penelope set her communication device to receive video signal, but left hers to voice only. Damon's face filled the small screen.

"It's Damon. Everything is set for the test." He switched the feed and connected her to the camera in the observation room.

Penelope zoomed the frame slightly. "Tell Karl to go in."

"He isn't here yet. Why can't I go in?" His whine angered her, but she didn't have time for that tonight.

"Fine, but take in a tranquilizer when you go. I don't want her forced into suffering another sexual encounter today."

Damon's deep sigh of disagreement rankled her nerves. "I'll be happy to quench her thirst for sex."

"No. Find a prostitute if you want sex so bad, Damon. Do not, I repeat, do not have sex with Alice."

Penelope flipped the camera to the observation room and watched as Damon pouted, but he grabbed a tranquillizer shot on his way to Alice's room.

She pushed the intercom button on her device. "Alice, can you hear me? I'm watching from my office."

Alice stirred when she heard her name. Her gaze shifted to the camera. "I hear you, Dr. Drake."

"We're going to run the test. Mr. Kaslan is coming in."

Alice's lip curled. Penelope added, "He's bringing a shot in with him in case the cure didn't work. But I'm hopeful, Alice. I really am." The door opened, and Damon came through.

A resigned expression came over Alice's face. Penelope hoped she could pull this off successfully. If Alice were still affected then the tranquilizer would put her out of her misery, but only until she woke up again. The riskier proposition was putting her into an induced coma for several weeks until Penelope could return.

Damon entered Alice's room and Penelope prayed for Alice to be cured. Securing the door, he advanced into the room. Alice stood and wrapped her robe around her tighter.

"How do you feel, Alice?" Penelope asked.

"Fine." She crossed her arms and a tentative smile tugged at her mouth. "Actually, it's great. I don't have the urge to fuck him at all."

"Good. That's good. Damon? Go ahead and call Karl. Have him wait in observation until Alice is ready." Penelope didn't have enough time left to get through another test, but she would have Damon sedate Alice and keep her that way until she could return from the Parsec Colony and research further options. She'd tell Damon to keep Karl away from Alice and then technically she wasn't breaking her word. Alice wouldn't be awake until Penelope got back.

Damon, lips pursed in obvious annoyance at Alice not being attracted to him, turned and opened the door.

Karl stood outside the entry poised to knock. “You called me?” He strode through the door. Penelope sucked in a breath and held it. Nothing happened for the space of five seconds until Alice’s inhuman screech of reaction echoed in the room.

“I’m not cured. Oh God. It burns. Where is my shot, Dr. Drake? You promised.”

“Damon! Give her the shot.”

Damon reached into his pocket and pulled out the syringe. He popped off the cover and pushed her down to the bed.

“This is poison, right?” Alice asked.

“No.” Damon’s brows furrowed. “It’s just a tranquilizer to keep you from getting fucked again.”

“I want poison. I want this to end.” Tears glistened on her face. “You promised, Dr. Drake. I want to die. You promised to kill me if the cure didn’t work.”

Damon paused before giving her the shot. “Dr. Penny promised to kill you?” He turned to the camera. “Did you?”

“Please, Alice. I need to take a trip. It’s why I’m not there. I’m headed to fetch more cure.” *And to save myself from the same fate.* “Once I get back, if it still doesn’t work, I won’t stop working until I find your cure. I know I’m asking a lot, but you’ll be safe in the room alone. I’ll direct no more testing and...”

While Penelope tried to convince Alice to live, Damon’s gilt-handled knife flashed beneath his medical coat. Alice had it unsheathed and headed for her heart before Penelope could scream the word no.

Damon smacked her hand and the knife clattered to the floor. He shot the tranquillizer into the meaty part of Alice’s upper arm. After several seconds, she stopped struggling and slumped onto the bed.

“Make sure to keep her unconscious and in isolation until I return—”

“Dr. Drake, your patient is tranquilized for now, but you still don’t have authorization to go anywhere off planet. I’m calling Dr. Lead-ass.”

“No, Damon. Please I’m on my way to get more cure to replace what was used. If it doesn’t work, I’ll research and study a way to cure Alice a different way.”

Hands on his waist, Damon turned with a doubtful look. “Where did you get the money for the trip to the Parsec Colony?”

Penelope took a deep breath and exhaled before answering, “I borrowed it.”

“From where?” He stepped closer to the camera, his disapproving face broadened in the screen of her handheld.

“I don’t answer to you. It’s the other way around, in case you forgot. Besides, it doesn’t matter. Just cover for me and keep Alice under sedation while I’m gone. You may have to induce a temporary coma. I put a leave request on Dr. Ledreder’s desk. I’m due for time off anyway.”

“You’re still going to be fired for using the remaining dose on Alice.”

“I don’t care. I had to try—”

“Where are you? Let me come and talk some sense into you. Meet me, we’ll talk about this and then I’ll go get more of the cure for you from the Parsec Colony.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I was the one who gave the last dose to Alice, and I’ll be the one to get more.”

A tracking call came through her communication device in an effort to locate her in the building. Her handheld buzzed with the waiting message. Crap. Time to go. “I’ll contact you later, Damon. Thanks for taking care of Alice.” She disconnected before he could respond and spent the next several minutes gathering what she needed for her unexpected trip.

The bag with essentials was slung over her shoulder. Glancing at the wall clock, Penelope released a soft curse and ran for the office door. She had plenty of time to get to the dock, but leaving without being seen would eat up much of it.

The I-link vibrated again. Penelope turned it off, a huge defiance in her line of work. Being unavailable, even during time off, was a punishable violation for this job.

One more defiance in a seemingly endless line of problems she shoved to the back burner of her tower of difficulties. Penelope didn't want anyone to know she had the disease, and she didn't want to end up having sex with anyone she worked with.

She ran like Hades himself nipped at her heels ready to pull her into the blazing heat of the underworld forever.

Zippering down the hall to the elevator, she noticed Damon coming out of the office of regents. What was he doing *there*?

His eyes narrowed as he scanned her from head to foot. "Dr. Penny!" He started moving in her direction. "Wait up."

Penelope pushed the button and the doors closed as he sprinted towards them. She knew for a fact she didn't want to have sex with Damon. Ever.

Chapter 3

Gray called in every favor ever owed in order to depart by midnight. During fierce negotiations to acquire crew, he managed to burn a couple of bridges to complete this ludicrous arrangement, but kept the Governor's face firmly in mind. Bribery accomplished the final components of his audacious plan and gave him the skeleton crew he needed to get back into space tonight.

Flipping a switch, he engaged the outer surveillance monitor. With less than an hour before his deadline, Gray checked for the arrival of his impulsive passenger. She'd probably end up being late after he scrambled in a frenzy of motion to meet the departure deadline.

Gray retracted his surly declaration when he saw someone in a bulky old-style containment suit approach his docking bay. It was impossible to tell what Dr. Drake looked like under the roomy volume of the old fashioned outfit, but he had to admit he was intrigued. She slid out of the range of the camera's view and toward the *Dalton's* entry.

The speaker in his office soon crackled with the voice of his current first officer, Lieutenant Angelica Brice. "Captain, our passenger is requesting to come on board." Angelica sounded very tired, but Gray was so grateful she'd agreed to come along, he'd offered her double pay as a reward for her reluctant acceptance.

"Good. Show her to the environmentally sealed quarters. Once she's secured, we'll get under way ASAP. You can take her out of dock."

"Aye, aye, Captain. Would you like me to take the first shift as

well?”

“No. I’ll be on the bridge to relieve you once we’re away. You need to get some sleep, Angelica. I appreciate you being here at all.”

Her mirthless laughter followed. “Just don’t forget about the enormous quantity of credits you bribed me to stay aboard, Captain.”

“Have I ever forgotten?”

“No sir, you never have.” She cleared her throat and changed the subject. “We’ll clear the dock in fifteen minutes or less. See you on deck soon. Brice, out.”

Gray sent an interstellar missive to Nathan informing him of the unexpected trip. Sub space transmissions took a few days to connect in the static ridden galaxy where they traveled. With Nathan speeding his way to the Echo Province for a negotiation deployment complement, he’d need to know of the *Dalton*’s change of plans and subsequently the rendezvous would be delayed. The *Mirage* shuttled Nathan and the negotiation team from Bravura to Echo Province.

The *Dalton* was scheduled to follow in two weeks, after R & R on Bravura. Vacation postponed, he’d have to swing by and pick Nathan and the others up on the return journey to Rycan from the Parsec Colony by way of Bravura.

Hopefully, the delegation would not be uptight with the delay. At the worst he’d have to return some of their credits, but he consoled the refund and his fatigue with thoughts of what he’d say to convince the governor the Dalton Prime Corporation was the supply operation and transportation answer to all his dreams during their coming appointment.

The taxing trip was a small price to pay to alter the level of his business. This contact would enable the success he’d always thought himself capable. A chance to meet the trade governor, with a recommended appointment was priceless. He’d join a precious few already in league with the big boys across this wide galaxy.

* * * *

Penelope was shown to her new temporary quarters by a tall exotic female who'd introduced herself as Lieutenant Brice the moment she'd stepped aboard the *Dalton*.

Completely opposite of Penelope's fair skin and blonde hair, Lieutenant Brice had dark almond-shaped eyes, thick, dark wavy hair and lovely caramel skin. Although half a head taller than Penelope, Lieutenant Brice's demeanor was not at all threatening. Instead, she exuded confidence and a no-nonsense air Penelope appreciated as a change of pace from the far too many pompous colleagues she endured in her own stuffy work environment.

"You'll be staying in here for the duration of your journey to the Parsec Colony. Captain Wyckoff authorized me to tell you the normal travel time is two weeks, but we'll try to speed it up and make the trip in ten days in deference to your lung condition."

"Thank you so much. Please tell your captain I appreciate his judicious urgency." Penelope moved inside the room as the alarm in her suit started chiming she only had twenty minutes of air left. She pushed a button at her waist to silence it. "Do you by any chance know if you have any replacement tanks for this suit," she pointed to the face mask of ancient suit she wore with a thickly gloved hand, "somewhere aboard your ship?"

Lieutenant Brice narrowed her dark eyebrows, studied Penelope's archaic garb hurriedly and shook her head. "I doubt it, but I'll check our onboard supply unit before I go off duty."

"I'd appreciate it." The alarm in her suit would start again at the five minute mark only it would keep ringing and grow louder as it got to the end of her air supply. Nothing like suffering with the constant alarm in your head reminding you of your impending demise right before you suffocated to death.

"If there aren't any replacement tanks, do you have any short term breathing apparatus I might use if I happen to open the door of my room for any reasons?" Actually, Penelope planned to be locked in

the room like a prisoner under guard for the duration of the flight, but the idea of not being able to exit for an emergency was beyond disturbing.

Another perfect eyebrow arched as if in strident speculation as to Penelope's reasons for being closed off from the world. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Brice."

"Sure thing." She turned and pointed to a device on the desk. "Here is the communication device for this secure room. It links directly to the command deck twenty-four hours a day. If you have an emergency just push the call button and you'll be connected to the officer on duty."

"Fine."

"The room has its own dedicated air supply which was created especially for quarantine purposes with the capabilities of controlling a level five viral breach with containment. The original specs for the ship detailed this room and the quarters next door were intended to be on a closed loop cycle, but as the Captain's business grew, the room next door became needed for quarters."

Penelope bent down and studied the control panel, confident she could figure it out. Newer than the computers she was used to working with at her lab, this more technologically advanced device made her feel better already. "Not that I don't believe you, but how can I be assured there hasn't been a breach in the air system for this room at any given time?"

Lieutenant Brice pressed a button on the rim of the computer screen and it lit up with the menu. She pushed the icon for environmental controls. "Right here." A picture filled the screen of the rectangular diagram of the room. Displayed beneath the picture was the time stamp for the door opening to admit them two minutes before.

The diagram showed entries into the room. One was an air vent sealed off from the room next door located on the wall directly above

the bed. The door, and then a thick oval window the size of a small painting, which would allow her to view the stars once they were in flight, remained the only other sealed ports. “Once I leave, push the green cleanse button on the panel and the room will self decontaminate from my presence.”

“How long does it take?” Penelope wouldn’t have to press the button for Lieutenant Brice, but instead for any other men she’d had been in contact with in the past few hours.

She shrugged. “About a minute or so, but once the door has been opened and re-closed, you must push the button to initiate the decontamination process. It isn’t automatic anymore since the rooms were separated and re-wired.”

“Got it.”

Lieutenant Brice strolled to a tall shelf on the right hand side of the entry with several square packages stacked up. “There are enough pre-packaged meals for two weeks since you can’t leave the room. Next to the shelf is the refrigerated beverage center with water and a few other hot and cold drinks that may be dispensed.” She lifted her arm and pointed at the door centered in the wall to the right of the desk. “Through that door are the facilities including a closet and a small unit to wash your clothes.” Tour seemingly at an end, she caught Penelope’s gaze. “Do you have any questions before I go?”

“No. You’ve been very helpful. Again, I thank you.”

She nodded once and pushed the button on the small panel for the pocket sliding door to open. “We’ll take off very shortly. Push this red button after I leave to lock your door.” Penelope, finally alone with her thoughts, closed her eyes, amazed she’d made it this far without mishap.

Penelope pushed the red button, and it promptly flashed twice. The digital display said the door was locked. The sound of an old-fashioned deadbolt lock shoving a bar of steel into place would make her feel more secure, but the level of protection afforded her on this ship was more than adequate. She was safely ensconced and brutally

smothered at the same time.

She walked to the computer, pushed the green button and a whooshing air noise sounded for several seconds. It stopped and a humming noise replaced it. As Lieutenant Brice had said, the purification process took only a minute.

Penelope unzipped her bulky suit and stepped out of it. She entered the facilities room which also housed a nice sized closet and put the suit inside along with her other things. The oxygen meter displayed eleven minutes remaining on the tank. It was unfortunately the only tank she'd had left in her office at the lab. With no time to go searching for any replacements, she remained at the mercy of Captain Wyckoff and his crew.

"Dr. Drake?" A voice called. Penelope darted out of the bathroom to the computer. She pushed the communication button and Lieutenant Brice's face filled the screen. "Yes?"

"I checked with supply. We don't have any more tanks that will fit your suit, but I did find a filtration air mask and a box of filters for it. They won't protect your skin if you need full coverage though."

"I have a lung condition," she lied. "I just need clean air."

"Fine then. I'll have them brought to your room. The box is small enough to fit in the decontamination mail slot to the left of your door. I'll leave them there for you once the ship is in flight."

"I'm very grateful, Lieutenant Brice. Thank you." Guilt made her heart stutter, but she slapped a big grin on her face to hide her discomfort from the falsehood. Lieutenant Brice smiled briefly before ending the transmission.

Penelope pushed out a long breath to quell another crying fit. She loathed that the virus toyed with her emotions. Besides wailing inconsolably would only alarm others aboard this spaceship.

The kindness of strangers always made her slightly emotional. If she weren't careful, she'd break down and weep because Lieutenant Brice had been so nice to her even after her requisite deceit. As a scientist obsessed with finding the truth of things, Penelope generally

found the art of deception to be counter-productive, until now. With the lies stacking up around her, Penelope was suddenly very tired.

Subtle movement beneath her feet likely signaled the ship readied to leave the dock. She drifted across the room to the large bed and planted herself cross-legged in the middle of it. Once this deplorable virus was gone, she wanted her life back. She sincerely hoped her far away optimistic scenario would once again be available to her.

Penelope wanted nothing more than to wake up and have this nightmare of a virus be nothing more than a dream. Nathan Tyndall's shocked yet lust-filled face, as she'd lured him into the alley to have sex, suddenly traipsed across the front of her mind and she sniffed back a tear.

Unless her memories were also vanquished, she decided with agonized reasoning this event would always be a part of her future regardless of the outcome from this trip.

* * * *

“Steady as she goes,” Gray murmured to himself after the *Dalton* had passed the six hour mark into its unanticipated journey. With a skeleton crew more than half filled with new recruits, he spent a long night trying to stay alert to watch for any rookie mistakes. As the hours passed and things seemed well in hand, all he could think about was crawling into his bed and sleeping for the next month. Alas, with still six hours to go on this shift and once Angelica relieved him, he'd only have twelve hours before his next duty obligation commenced. The thought made a throb of pain commence in his temples even as the future business prospects soothed that same ache.

In order to make the journey all the way to the Parsec Colony and also rendezvous with Nathan in two weeks, Gray would have to work twelve hours on and twelve hours off for the duration of the trip as there were only two others he trusted completely on this voyage. He refused to ask them to take on the same grueling shift he did to ensure

the best interests of his corporation.

Angelica in the position of his first officer could handle anything. And his third in command, Ensign Jeremy Cahill, was also a very capable man.

Cahill had been with the Dalton Prime Corporation for just two years now. Straight out of the military academy, he'd spent five years in combat before shifting to this civilian job. Cahill was intelligent, competent, knew the galaxy regulations like the inside of his eyelids and most importantly he knew when to keep his mouth shut when rules were bent or outright broken.

Pretty much everyone else was either a robotic drone or a temporary crew member with limited duties. The exceptions being, Doc, the Artificially Intelligent robotic being in medical and Lucas Kershner, his engineer. There were also a few second string personnel he rarely used because their skills were not up to his standards, but he'd grabbed anyone willing to fly right before departure.

The killer schedule on the bridge was one he only intended to apply to himself as Captain of the ship. He'd brokered the deal to gain something for his business. The sacrifice pumped him up and the reward from the arrangement between himself and Dr. Drake made it all worthwhile.

To say she intrigued him was the understatement of the millennium. He'd already resisted the urge to pump Angelica for any tidbits of information regarding their singular guest. The new plan he created alone on the command deck had to do with remaining aloof. He'd let his crew handle Dr. Drake and her needs during the trip across the galaxy.

Glancing at the time, he took a deep breath and tried not to think about the fact that Dr. Drake's room sat directly next to his for the duration of this long journey. She and her sultry voice would be merely an insulated wall away from him during his off hours, what few hours off he managed to snag anyway.

"Captain?" Angelica had entered the command deck before he

shook himself from his reverie of whether Dr. Drake's sultry voice matched her body.

Gray straightened in his seat, clutching the latest fuel consumption report on his handheld computer. "Is our passenger still all tucked in?" He pretended to read the fuel report as he listened for her answer.

"Yes, sir."

"She give you any trouble?"

"No, sir. Not at all." Angelica's startled tone made him abandon the dry report and turn to see her expression.

"In fact, she seemed very grateful. She asked me to tell you she appreciated your judicious urgency in this matter." Angelica's eyebrow went up likely in speculation of whether he knew what those scholarly words meant or not. He didn't reply.

She took a step closer. "Were you expecting her to be difficult?"

He shrugged and looked away to hide his surprise over Dr. Drake not being a prima donna. "Not exactly. She just came across as a little high-handed when initiating this trip."

"Hmm. Well, perhaps her lung condition was bothering her. For now, she's calmed down." Angelica walked closer and stood next to his chair.

"Good." After Angelica had gone off duty, Gray had expected Dr. Drake to contact him demanding any number of special requests once she was in the assigned cabin, but after six hours on duty, he hadn't heard a peep from her.

To that end, he wondered briefly what Angelica was doing here on the bridge. "Aren't you about six hours early for your next shift, Lieutenant Brice?" He only used her rank and last name to assert the slim to non-existent authority he held over Angelica.

"I'm instigating a rotating six hour shift schedule to be shared between you, me and Ensign Cahill for the first forty eight hours aboard during this journey."

"Because?"

She sent him a withering glare. "Because as you well know sir,

you've been awake now for at least twenty five hours.”

“I'm fine.”

“And you'll be even better with about ten hours of sleep. I know I feel refreshed with just five and a half. Ensign Cahill will relieve me in six hours. You may come back in twelve hours.”

Gray turned what was surely a blood-shot gaze in her direction. “God save me from your exuberant bossiness, Lieutenant Brice...and bless you. I'll be back in twelve, but tell Cahill to call *me* if anything unusual occurs during his next shift.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

He lifted himself out of the captain's chair and handed Angelica the fuel consumption report. “Some light reading for you.”

She rolled her eyes and climbed into the chair he'd vacated.

Gray made his way through the narrow halls of the ship to his cabin and passed the sealed door of his elusive passenger. Too tired to conjure any intrigue over Dr. Drake at the moment, Gray slipped into his quarters, set the alarm for six hours and fell face forward into his bunk fully clothed.

His last thought was a mental note and personal vow to contact his only passenger once he woke up for the next shift to ensure she had everything she needed. He was already dreaming about Dr. Drake's sultry voice before his head settled on his pillow.

* * * *

Angelica Brice read, approved and filed the fuel consumption report Captain Wyckoff had handed off in the first few minutes of her shift. Reveling in the fact she was in total command of the *Dalton* gave her a spike of pleasure that traveled all the way inside her bones. She was more grateful than she could ever express for the Captain's unwavering trust in her capabilities.

The reason she'd agreed to be on this unusual spontaneous flight was so she could get some quality time to be second in command.

Opportunities to sit in the captain's chair were few and far between and Angelica always took every chance for advancement.

Captain Wyckoff's primary first officer, Lieutenant Commander Nathan Tyndall, was yet another excellent officer and a good friend. When Nathan was on board he held this lofty position and Angelica was then relegated to third in command.

All things considered, Angelica considered herself extremely lucky to be in the regular third position here. But top dog was very nice on occasion. The third in command for this spontaneous trip was Ensign Jeremy Cahill, who'd be relieving her in a few minutes.

Angelica looked forward to twelve hours of personal time. Six of which she might inquire as to Cahill's interest in a little temporary onboard romance. It was a forbidden concept as there were loose fraternization rules in place, between those in a particular chain of command, but still she'd watched Cahill very carefully since he'd started on the *Dalton*. He was an excellent worker with a good attitude and he wielded an encyclopedic knowledge of galaxy regulation which she had to admit turned her on a little.

What turned her on a lot was Cahill's physique. He'd spent several of what she called his formative years in the military and his body still bore the evidence of the extra muscles needed for that career. She'd seen him working out in the on-board athletic room a few months ago and hadn't been able to get him out of her mind since. Cahill was one of the first to volunteer when the Captain called everyone in to offer the opportunity before disembarking at Bravura.

Behind her the doors to the command deck slid open with a nearly soundless whoosh of air. Angelica sensed him enter like a premonition of dark and determined discovery. Cahill earned a silent brownie point in her mind because he arrived promptly to relieve her.

"Lieutenant," he said.

"Ensign," she returned without looking around.

His footfalls marched across the expanse to where she sat in the Captain's chair. Once he stood next to her, he murmured, "Ready to

give up control for a few hours, Lieutenant?”

Angelica wished he meant it as a double entendre, but knew he didn't. It was a pity.

After a year and a half of no contact or significant conversation beyond work-related mission status between them, she changed her outlook of Ensign Cahill several months before.

She'd started with subtle hints the day after seeing him in the athletic room. She then dropped less subtle hints on each subsequent day she come across him on the ship until all these months later, she had almost given up. But not quite yet. Perhaps he needed an even more blatant nudge. Perhaps she'd think one up once he came off duty in six more hours.

Angelica held high hopes of a possible liaison. Perhaps when they were both off duty at the same time. With the limited crew of this special voyage, maybe he'd be more willing to consider an assignation with her. A secret, forbidden exchange of sexual pleasure remained her ultimate goal. Cahill had avoided her not so subtle inquiries likely because he worried about what would happen “after” their rendezvous was complete. Angelica could assure him she had no permanent intentions.

The sheer beauty of his muscled body was the starring feature in all her late night fantasies, but if anything ever happened between them, she wouldn't let it interfere with their work life. She had too much at stake and too much to lose to pine after anyone for a long term relationship.

Cahill's mere presence in the immediate area sent her pulse into the red zone. Angelica mentally shook herself. She wasn't quite ready to reveal her intentions just yet.

Clearing her throat, she finally responded, “I suppose you can be trusted with the ultimate power of his chair for a few hours. The captain said to call him if any trouble arises during your shift. He'll be relieving you in six hours.” She lifted from the captain's chair offered him the hand-held computer dedicated to the command deck.

“Right.”

The second he grabbed for the computer a shock zapped from the device and ran up her arm. An arc of blue snapped off the small computer and into the air between them. Once dissipated, a loud hollow thump rocked the command deck, and the power went off along with the lights. With the outer windows covered and hiding the stars, the thick shadow of pitch black draped over her completely. Eyes wide open, she knew she wouldn't be able to see her hand in front of her face if she put her fingers against her nose.

After a slow count of three, Cahill reached for her in the dark, settling his fingers on her upper arms. Even in the fear-inducing darkness of the blackout, Cahill's hands gripping her shoulder sent a pulsing delight straight to her moistening core. Her heart pounded in arousal at his mere touch. The inky black air around them ignited her imagination like no other aphrodisiac. She leaned towards him and his utterly male scent.

A millisecond later, the power came back up, and unfortunately his hands dropped from her shoulders, but the impression of arousal from his light contact remained behind.

Angelica ignored the consequences of finally having him touch her and called out, “Computer? Report. What was that?” to the on-board computer mainframe always standing by to deliver immediate status of the ship.

“*Power surge,*” the computer's flat voice came back with immediately.

“From where?”

“*Unknown origin.*”

“Any damage to the outer hull of the ship?”

“*Scanning.*” And then seconds later. “*No hull damage found on primary scan. Running detailed auxiliary search of all interior defenses. Results will be available in twenty three minutes and thirteen seconds.*”

“Send it to the command deck and Ensign Cahill,” Angelica

returned.

“What do you think *that* was?” Cahill chuckled nervously.

She shrugged, but it always bothered her when something out of the ordinary happened when she was on deck. “Don’t know. A glitch, maybe? The ship’s petulant protest at the unexpected trip instead of docking for R and R?”

Cahill grinned. “Petulant protest?”

She inhaled, deeply drawing his freshly showered scent into her lungs once more and exhaled very slowly to calm down. “Just stay alert and keep an eye out for unusual activity.”

“Such as power outages or more petulance?”

“Either.” Angelica half turned to exit the deck. “But if it happens again, call the captain.” She paused in her step and added, “And then call me as well.”

Nodding, Cahill slipped his beautifully shaped butt into the captain’s chair. Angelica thought authority looked very nice resting on his shoulders.

“Sleep well, Lieutenant Brice.”

“Thank you, Ensign Cahill.” *I’ll be dreaming about you and reliving your touch tonight.*

* * * *

Penelope opened her eyes and saw black. She mashed her eyes shut again, opened wide...and still saw black. Was she blind? Dreaming? Descended fully into the darkness of Hell for all the blatant lies she’d told in the last few hours?

The lights came back on in that instant, forcing a squint of protection from her wide eyes and likely even wider pupils. She sat up and dislodged the coverlet from her body. Had she just dreamed she was blind or had the lights been out? Blinking awake, she didn’t see anything different. How odd.

With so few clothes to her name for this sudden trip, Penelope

slept in a skimpy camisole undershirt and one of three pair of panties she'd scrounged from her locker at work. She didn't have to be a fashion plate to complete her plans. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she scrubbed her hands roughly across her cheeks to wake up.

During the first few hours of her journey, she'd rested fitfully. She'd eaten one of the pre-packaged meals and discovered it was tastier than upon first inspection. Maybe camping in here wouldn't be so bad after all. Likely the worst part would be the isolation. She only had eleven minutes of air left in her suit which didn't give her much socializing time for the duration of the trip. Talking to others aboard with a mask strapped to her face created another predicament she'd just as soon avoid if possible. Look at the crazy pathetic woman with the mask was an expression she'd rather not pursue for the sake of camaraderie aboard this vessel.

Penelope got to her feet and crossed to the facilities. Once inside she washed her face and studied her appearance. The image reflected in the mirror above the sink displayed her features, but she barely recognized herself. Stress regarding this bold plan already took its toll in the worry lines around her eyes. Vanity became another useless indulgence in this tense plan.

She took a quick shower for something to do and contemplated which of the seven varieties of pre-packaged meals she'd consume next as she dried her hair. She slipped back into her camisole and put a new pair of panties on.

When she returned to the main room she sniffed the air. Something smelled really good. It was as if the ebony darkness of the blackout had left behind a shadowy delicious scent for her to savor.

What *was* that? She inhaled deeply once again.

It smelled so magnificent she wanted to discover the source and bury her face in whatever it was. She sniffed the air here and there trying to find the trail to the elusive scent. The search led her to the bed she'd abandoned and then to the vent above. Standing on her tiptoes, after climbing up on the mattress and with hands pressed flat

against the wall for balance, Penelope took a deep breath of the breeze coming from the air duct vent.

Ah. Delicious.

There was something scrumptious in the next room and she wanted more. Much more. After quick consideration she determined the scent likely came from a delectable man.

Time to find him and get acquainted.

Penelope leapt off the bed, skipped across the room and hit the button to unlock the door. Once out in the hallway, she followed her nose to the room next door.

She pushed the button, seeking entrance, and door slid open to admit her instantly into a semi-darkened room as if she were expected. Grateful that the way inside to find the delicious man hadn't been locked, Penelope quickly crossed the threshold, closed and locked the door behind her and took another deep lungful of luscious manly aroma.

The overwhelming scent of soap, cologne and this man's lingering raw masculinity rushed into her lungs. The unique fragrance carried through to the very marrow of her bones, touching every nerve in her body along the way with a tingle thrumming her basest desire. Her pussy came alive, demanding unfathomable pleasure as the man on the bed stirred awake. A golden lock of his hair gleamed in the near darkness from a narrow shaft of light in the room.

Half lifting his wide shoulders from the bed, the man turned and shot a drowsy look over one shoulder. A voice gruff with sleep said, "Who are you and what are you doing in my quarters?"

Time to get his clothes off and introduce herself properly. She pulled her camisole over her head and flung it across the room. "I'm Penelope, and I've come to fuck you."

Chapter 4

Gray had experienced some wild dreams in his past, but the one currently playing out had to be the most outrageous.

“*I’m Penelope and I’ve come to fuck you,*” she’d said and flung off her skimpy shirt, which went sailing through the air in the direction of his dresser, revealing the most beautiful set of breasts he’d ever had the pleasure to see naked. Flawlessly molded round globes, sure to fit perfectly in his hands should the opportunity arise to touch them, currently bounced across the room towards him like a private fantasy come to life.

The dim light of his room didn’t afford him the detailed pleasure of her nipples, but since she’d started strolling to his bed, he imagined he was about to see them up close and personal in mere seconds.

“Is this a joke?” he muttered as his cock, already stiff with after-slumber arousal, pulsed, hopefully.

“No. And we need to hurry.” She hooked her thumbs into the barely-there scrap of panty fabric covering her mound, bent at the waist and shucked those off as well. Her body popped straight again and those perfect breasts bounced closer and closer, making his mouth suddenly water.

“Why do we have to hurry again?” Gray flipped his legs over the side of his bed as she took the final steps to meet him in all her nude glory. And she *was* glorious.

She lowered her beautiful face until it was even with his. “Because I burn for you. Please. I need to fuck you. Right now.” Her eyes stared straight through him, but the glassy sheen gave her aqua gaze a distant aura. As if she didn’t see the view directly before her

eyes.

Gray stood carefully as she straightened with him remaining very close. He grabbed her slim shoulders as she proceeded to press the full length of her delectable body against him. In the next instant, her fingers unerringly found the stiff length of his cock and squeezed her fist around him like some seductive test of endurance. Even through the fabric layer of his clothing, unabashed pleasure spiked from his shaft, and urgent desire rippled outwardly to every part of his body.

He grunted, "Wait." The prickle of desire she elicited in his cock almost overrode his level-headed danger signal of a strange woman being in his room ready to fuck his brains out.

"I can't wait." She gripped his cock tighter through the flight suit he hadn't bothered to take off before falling into bed. With her titan grip on his cock, he didn't notice her other hand had located the zipper. Not until he heard the sound of the opening zipping down his front and felt the air on his chest.

She released her hold on his cock only to slip her hand beneath the fabric of his now wide open flight suit to grab his shaft with the most unbelievably soft hand he'd ever had caressing his privates.

"God almighty!" A roar followed those two words, wrenched from his lips when she fell to her knees. Gray got a millisecond of warning before her hot, wet mouth closed over the end of his cock and blissful suction progressed. He lost feeling in his legs at the utterly delicious sensation of oral sex being performed to perfection.

Legs wobbling, he lost the connection of her mouth when he fell backwards onto his bed. Undaunted, she crawled up his body and straddled him. She grabbed his cock again and aimed it between her legs.

Gray was known in some circles as a man with very powerful sexual needs. Due to the recent extended mission, he hadn't been with a woman in an unusually long period of time. Even so, sex with a stranger who'd invaded his room in the middle of the night was not his style. He should at least find out her name, although he suspected

exactly who it had to be given this “special” trip and his limited crew.

With gargantuan restraint, Gray grabbed her hips and lifted her off his body. His cock had brushed the wet slit of her pussy and demanded to be put back. But he had standards and the most basic of information included the name of any woman he stuck his dick inside of. He rolled on top of her, held down her arms and legs and effectively trapping her to his bed. A few questions needed answering before any pleasure commenced.

“Please,” she cried. “We need to fuck. I’m burning for you. I’m going to die if you don’t put your cock in me.”

“Trust me. No one ever died from lack of sex,” he heard himself say and mentally shook his head at the most ridiculous statement he’d *never* imagined uttering in his life. She struggled beneath him and part of him wanted to let her up to escape, but he was fairly certain based on her earlier actions, she’d just leap on, slip his cock inside her hot body once again and go for it until she had what she wanted.

“Who are you?” he asked again as she lurched and wiggled against his hold. “At least tell me your name.”

“Penelope Drake.” A mournful cry wrenched from her lips.

“Dr. Drake?”

“Yes. Now please fuck me. I need you. I’m desperate. It hurts so much.” Tears blinked from her lower lids and the second she said, “*it hurts*,” he released his grip.

“What hurts?”

“My body needs you. Please.”

Dr. Penelope Drake rolled lithely from beneath him, crawled over on top of his body and straddled his hips once again.

“Tell me again why we need to do this.” He knew he sounded like an idiot repeating the statement again, but sexual conquests like this were not in his norm.

“Because I burn for you. Please. I need you. I need this.” She grabbed his cock and this time he didn’t stop her when she slipped his shaft between her hot, slick pussy lips. He did after all have her name

now. His hips did an involuntary and uncontrolled push upwards and a couple of inches of his shaft entered the nirvana of her sweet tight body.

She pushed down until he was fully seated in her tight core and whispered. "I need you to come. Please. I need it quickly." Legs pushing up, she rose half off his cock and promptly plunged down again. With her seeming need for a speedy fuck and his lengthy sojourn from the pleasures of the flesh, she was about to get her wish in his rapid performance.

Hands fastened to her hips, Gray allowed the extraordinary sex to continue. He suspected one of them was dreaming. He hoped it was her because this experience felt too astonishing not to be really happening.

After several strokes, she found a smooth fluid rhythm in her movements and because it felt so volcanically good, Gray soon matched it and thrust in tandem with her, creating a friction unequalled in the actions of his pleasurable past. His surprise, beyond the incredible sensation and how he'd gotten so lucky, concerned *her* relentless pursuit of *his* orgasm.

He appreciated her spirit, but Gray didn't want to fall over the edge of sexual oblivion alone. He wouldn't. Wanting to ensure her equal pleasure during this experience, he reached between them to finger her clit. He got two strokes in before she grabbed his hand, thrust it away and sped up her forceful drive to fuel his release.

"Oh God. You need to come. Please release. Please..." Perspiration dotted her forehead. She squeezed her eyes shut and a thin wail escaped through her lips. He thought she was in the midst of climaxing and that realization forced the power of his release to expand and burst.

The tickle of his orgasm scorched along the base of his spine before surging out of him with pressure like the strength of gale force winds.

Her reaction was immediate and visceral. Her whole body

wracked into a stiff arch, she uttered a short scream, shuddered and promptly melted forward until she slumped on to his chest as if her spine had been rendered boneless and she'd lost consciousness. Gray wrapped his arms around her and pressed a kiss to the side of her head. Cock still buried deeply inside her passage, he hugged her tight wondering what had just happened. Her subsequent reaction didn't take long.

Tensing in his arms, Dr. Drake's head popped up suddenly and her panicked gaze displayed the first reaction she'd had while in his room that he actually understood. It was as if she'd just woken out of a deep slumber and also wondered how she came to have his cock buried so deeply inside her pussy.

Had she been sleepwalking?

"Release me." Her high-handed tone had returned. The same one she'd used to negotiate this trip to the Parsec Colony. Gray certainly hadn't expected to enjoy such an intimate relationship the last time they'd spoken. Apparently, she hadn't either if the murderous expression now encompassing her face was any indication. Gray couldn't even conceive of a reason he was currently dick deep and totally satisfied in the warm folds of Dr. Penelope Drake.

Tightening his embrace to keep her close he murmured, "I will, but first, I'd like for you to tell me what just happened." *Did she have some sort of multiple personality disorder, perhaps?*

She struggled in his arms for a moment, but he didn't loosen his grasp. She pushed out an exasperated sigh. "You already know what transpired. We had sex. Now let me go."

"Are you seriously *not* going to explain this astounding event to me?"

Her forehead landed on his shoulder and her whole body relaxed. After almost a minute of her breathing in and out through her mouth as if she counted mentally to control her fury, she said in a tight whisper, "I'd really rather not."

Gray's motionless and fairly stiff cock was still buried quite a

ways inside her pussy, but she would “really rather not” explain why the phenomenon had occurred. Not to mention why she was out of the cocoon she’d insisted she needed for her delicate lung condition. Was “delicate lung condition” a new euphemism for sex?

A bark of uncontrolled laughter escaped before he could stop it. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook to keep from further vocal amusement.

Quiet for several seconds more, she eventually murmured, “It’s not funny.”

“You’re right, of course. And while I don’t *need* to know why we just had sex or why my very contented cock is still gracing the inside of your pussy,” he paused, kissed her temple and rubbed his lips along an invisible path into her silky fair hair above one ear before he continued with, “I’d still like to know.”

She was silent for so long he decided she wasn’t going to tell him, but her quietest whisper yet then danced across his collarbone with, “It’s complicated.”

“Sex with a stranger often is.”

Her head lifted, and she drilled a stare through the dimly lit gloom of his quarters and into his eyes. “I’m not a stranger.”

He nudged her with his hips and his cock shifted within her channel. “Right again. You aren’t a stranger. Not anymore.” Gray slid a flattened hand from her shoulder to the base of her spine, crossing her back tenderly and massaging the muscles along the way. “I’m Gray Wyckoff, by the way.”

“I know. I recognized your voice.”

“Tell me what’s going on, Dr. Drake.”

“Penelope,” she whispered with decided melancholy in her tone. “You can call me Penelope.”

Gray softened his sarcastic attitude with the distinct sadness he heard in her tone. He didn’t need to be a prick about this. There was obviously something at work here. He should find out what. “If it’s a matter of security, Penelope, I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“Not global security or anything. Just my security. Or rather my privacy over something...” She trailed off as if thinking over the careful wording of what she’d reveal. Again she sighed and then continued in a controlled soft voice, “Ever heard of the SOS virus?”

“No. What is it?”

“It’s a barbaric manufactured bio-weapon used to render the females of any warring humanoid opponent into the incapacity of unbearable pain until they have sex and a man ejaculates inside of them thereby delivering temporary relief of the symptoms.”

Holy fuck. Fifteen questions bombarded his skull at once vying for attention as to the previously unheard of virus. “How temporary is the relief of sex?”

“I’m not sure. It’s different for each individual female. The only two patients I treated had a recovery period of two to three hours between incidents.”

“My next obvious question is whether it’s contagious.”

“No. The female must be exposed to the virus in its liquid form.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. It’s like radiation poisoning. Once exposed, the female has it until she’s cured. I can’t spread it to other women...or men.”

“Where is the cure?”

“The Parsec Colony. That’s why I’m in such a hot, damn hurry to get there.” She shifted as if the mere mention of the trip agitated her. “Please let me up.”

“Do you promise not to run?”

She expelled a deep sigh. “Where would I go?”

“Good point.” He rolled her onto her back, extracted his firm shaft from her exquisitely tight body and lifted up off the bed to stand beside it.

He glanced at her beautiful nude body and then shifted his gaze away and asked, “So how does it work, this virus? What triggers it?”

She scrambled quickly off his bed, searched the floor a moment and retrieved her skimpy panties. “The virus works with my olfactory

system. The average female is at some level attracted to approximately one out of four men. The scent of attraction spurs the virus. However, I can't tell by just looking which men I need to avoid."

Gray didn't mention it out loud, but secretly reveled in the fact he was in the class of the one in four meeting the criteria for *her* attraction.

Instead he asked, "How were you exposed?"

Covering her lovely breasts with one arm she continued looking around his dark room likely for her shirt. He saw it draped on his dresser, retrieved it and handed the soft garment to her.

Slipping the thin garment over her head, she shrugged. "I don't know. I work in a science lab. It's possible I was contaminated by accident." Her gaze narrowed and went over his shoulder away from his stare as if contemplating all the ramifications involved in an accident of that magnitude.

"But you don't believe that, do you?" Her entire angry posture and accompanying frown suggested she'd been surprised by this turn of events with regard to the virus. She likely hadn't done anything to precipitate this travesty into her careful scientific world. He didn't blame her for her attitude and silently cursed his initial assessment of her "difficult" personality. Likely he wouldn't have been as kind given the same circumstances.

"No. It is a very rare substance. I didn't even know it existed two days ago. I did a little research after one of two victims showed up on Bravura from a remote mining colony with the disease. And then after I used the last of two doses of 'supposed' cure, suddenly I contract it? I think someone did this to me. But I didn't stick around long enough to discover who had done it, compile a list of possible contenders or determine why they would do something so horrific and deplorable to me personally. The truth is...I sort of lost the power of rational thought when I realized I'd been infected. My common sense fled with the panic of just wanting to get a cure."

“Very understandable. How did you discover you had the virus?”

Her sudden stark furious stare drilled a hole into the deep recesses of his steady gaze and even in the low light he saw her blush.

“How do you think?” She turned away and wrapped a hand beneath each elbow to rub as if a frigid wind had suddenly chilled the very marrow of her bones.

He pushed out a long sigh and said the first inadequate words that came to mind. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too. I accosted this poor man in an alley after picking up food for my dinner break. I can still see his face.” Her head dropped, gaze focused down as if she studied the carpet pattern on his floor. Loosening her arms from across her torso, she ran a hand down from her forehead to chin as if to wipe away the memory of her appalling discovery.

“I’m sorry.” He repeated what was in fact a useless unhelpful statement.

“I can’t even believe the lengths I’ve gone to escape without anyone finding out what happened to me. I’m probably out of a job once I get back to Bravura, if they haven’t already fired me for job abandonment. I dumped a surprise leave request on my supervisor’s desk without waiting for approval and ran out with a tank of air and the limited contents of my work locker.” Her chin dropped toward her chest and her arms wrapped around her torso again as if in utter defeat.

“If it helps or is any consolation, I swear I won’t tell anyone, Penelope. No one else on this ship needs to know. The important thing is to get to the Parsec Colony and secure the medication you need, right?”

She twisted to face him, her face a mask of skeptical doubt. “I appreciate that, but right now, I’d really like to know why the seal of my room failed and brought me to you in the first place.”

Good question. “I’ll find out.”

“Was it because of the blackout?”

“What blackout?”

“Everything went dark in my quarters a little while ago and then the power snapped back on. I thought I might have dreamed it. But somehow the seal of my room broke and allowed me to smell you in here.” Her gaze averted again. The blush remained.

“I’m afraid I slept through the blackout. My crew should have informed me, but I’ll look into it.”

“I guess it’s a good thing you were in here or I’d have wandered the ship until I found someone. That likely would have been much more embarrassing.” She turned towards the door, her body seemingly stiff with displeasure. “I’m going back to my room. I’ll lock my door and re-do the sterilization process again.”

Gray watched her stilted walk across the room and realized something had been bothering him greatly since the amazing interlude in his bunk. He’d never brought a woman to his ship for sexual frolicking and from this day forward he knew he’d never get into his bunk without remembering this exquisite experience.

They’d had what he considered spectacular sex, but now he wondered if she’d had an orgasm. The thought of leaving a woman stiff and unsatisfied put a queasy feeling in his belly. She might tell him to go to hell, but he dearly wanted to give her some gratification if she’d gone without. She certainly deserved it for what she currently endured.

“Wait. There’s something else I need to know.”

She paused and gave him a mournful look over one slim shoulder as if she expected him to ask about something worse. “What?”

He pointed his thumb to the rumpled bed. “That was likely the best sexual experience I’ve ever had. But I get the distinct sense it wasn’t the best for you. Not even close. And I’d like to remedy that, if you’ll let me.”

Her lovely brows drew close in puzzlement. “What are you going to do?”

“I want to make you come.”

She blinked slowly as if his words hadn't computed before she shook her head a little. "That isn't necessary." But she didn't turn away, and the blush had returned as if she contemplated the possibility of an orgasm. Her gaze wandered from his face down his body stopping briefly at his cock. A rush of red infused her cheeks, and she sent her gaze to the floor.

Gray took three easy steps towards her still-as-a-statue stance and slid a hand across her shoulders. "Maybe it will make you feel better. Let me relax you. Please." He squeezed one knotted shoulder muscle and then the other without any protest. He slid his free arm around her waist. She remained still and rigid, but didn't prevent him from hugging her.

Pressing his lips to her temple, he pulled her body into his. She still didn't stop him so he placed a soft kiss on one cheek. One hand slipped across her shoulder blade to cup and massage her neck, and the other fastened to the base of her spine and massaged there. Her chin tilted upwards and he took advantage of the movement to plant a delicate kiss on her lips. And then another. She didn't resist, so he kissed her again.

With the third whisper caress of his lips across her mouth she responded. Tentatively, her tongue licked the seam of his lips and a bolt of lust streamed through his veins at the prospect of further intimacy. This time he'd go slowly. This time he'd make her climax. He needed to please her. He parted his lips and allowed her hesitant entry.

Softly, she searched his mouth and touched his tongue. Carefully, so as not to scare her off, he curled his tongue around hers very gently as he pulled her into a tighter embrace. A moan escaped from her a few seconds later, and she sent her arms around his torso for a gripping hug.

The kiss escalated, and he cautiously slid his tongue into her mouth only to have her tangle aggressively with him. She tasted like heaven.

Gray twisted his mouth over hers and deepened an already volcanic kiss to an even higher level. She pushed her hips against his, and he danced them backwards slowly to his bed hoping she wouldn't stop him in his quest to satisfy her. Repeatedly, if she'd allow it.

His legs brushed the edge of his bunk and bent to pick her up in his arms without breaking the scorching kiss. She didn't resist or stop kissing him when he carefully deposited her on his bed and followed her down to cover her with his body.

One hand found its way to her breast where he kneaded the soft flesh and thumbed her nipple until it swelled and peaked. She moaned and pushed her breast into his hand so he flicked a nail across the tip. Breaking the succulent kiss, he trailed his lips to her protruding nipple and tugged it between his lips through the thin scrap of fabric covering it.

She hissed a breath between her lips and murmured, "So good."

Gray pushed his hand beneath her camisole and broke the seal of his lips to shove the skimpy fabric out of his way, reveal her breasts and taste her skin. In the low light, her dusky rose areolas greeted him with firm nipples begging to be sucked.

Clamping his mouth around her nipple, he slid a hand along her belly and dove between her legs to find her clit. Her underwear wasn't substantial enough to deter him. He niggled his way between the edge of her saturated panties and homed in on his target. This time she didn't thrust his hand away. She writhed and a little shriek of what he dearly hoped was pleasure escaped when he stroked her clit and nibbled the tip of her breast at the same time. The sound was music to his ears.

Wanting to delve deeper into the folds of her pussy, he pulled the scrap of her panties off. She lifted her hips to help him remove the sodden fabric.

Once he had easier access, he slid a finger between her pussy lips and inched it slowly into her body discovering she was very wet. Inserting another finger to join the first, Gray pushed his thumb

against her clit and circled it once. She moaned, and her hips began a subtle push against his hand in sync with the rhythm of his thrusting fingers.

In and out and circling her clit, Gray stroked her nub with his thumb and thrust his fingers into her hot, slick body. When she started moaning, he released her nipple and kissed a path straight to her mouth. Stabbing his tongue between her lips to collide in a seductive dance, he continued the carnal kiss until he felt her climax exert the first compression around his fingers in pre-release.

He broke the kiss and fastened his gaze on her face to watch her come. She caught his stare with an intense one of her own, but the climax squeezing his fingers apparently wouldn't be denied. Back arching, she sucked in a deep breath as if surprised the orgasm had caught up with his strokes. Eyes drifting shut, a beautiful smile of satisfaction curved her lips and several deep gasping sighs accompanied the final shudder of her body against his fingers. He stilled his fingers and watched until she finally opened her eyes.

“You're so beautiful when you come.”

“Am I?” She laughed and then another sigh escaped. “Well, I appreciate that. Thanks for...well, you know.”

Gray leaned in and kissed her lips in response.

“Captain Wyckoff?” The voice of his third in command, Ensign Cahill, followed quickly by the crackle and buzz of his aging communication device intruding into the sanctity of his room and broke the nicely established and very hard won sensual mood.

“What?” he barked instantly and regretted it when Penelope stilled, barely breathing next to him.

“We have a problem, sir.”

Chapter 5

Penelope didn't know what the problem was, but she stopped breathing in order that the party at the other end of the communication device wouldn't know she currently rested in the captain's bed with his fingers still lodged deliciously in her pussy.

"I'll be on the command deck in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir. Cahill out."

The incredibly mouth-watering Captain Gray Wyckoff had just wowed her with his clever fingers. The further honorable intention to ensure she got some satisfaction made Penelope's heart twist in gratitude. She should likely issue him a medal. It was amazing how an orgasm changed her perspective on things.

"What do you think the problem is?" Penelope wasn't really concerned with the captain's issues aboard the *Dalton*, as long as the problem didn't equate to her trip being altered.

"Don't know. Could be anything? Maybe they just noticed your cabin is unlocked. Or maybe I forgot to sign something." He smiled and studied her face with an intense sensual gaze.

If she hadn't been drawn here by his scent, his seductive stare might also have lured her to his bed. He was really very charming. How many other men would worry so much about whether or not she'd enjoyed sex? Her wickedly methodical brain provided a ready answer in the form of a Nathan Tyndall's satisfied face as he stood against the alley wall outside Nikki's restaurant. He'd also worried about her orgasm. Her mind screeched to a halt. She mentally shook off that image and went back to the conversation at hand.

"Why didn't you ask? Maybe space pirates are converging on

your ship ready to blast you with laser bombs into a million pieces.” It was a silly statement. But she missed being foolish just a little bit and her relaxed aura helped conjure her long lost frivolous attitude. A smile she hadn’t felt like forming in the past couple of weeks suddenly shaped her lips with the need to joke around. She wanted to lighten the mood. The power of an unexpected orgasm was simply amazing.

He laughed and slowly removed his fingers from her. “If it had been a life or death matter,” he paused and smiled, “Or space pirates with laser bombs, he would have told me instead of signing off.”

She grinned. “Oh. Well, that’s good to know.” It felt so great to smile again. She knew it wouldn’t last long as she had a long road to travel, but for now she relished it.

He lifted off of her and kissed her belly once before removing himself from the bed. “Want to take a quick shower with me?” She noticed he hadn’t even taken his clothes off. But now he unzipped the suit and shucked the jacket part off his shoulders. Mesmerized, she watched him slip the flight suit garment off of his hips. The fabric slid off his thighs and pooled at his feet. His burnished blond hair was cut in a haphazard fashion but it suited him. Wide shoulders, sexy chest leading to flat abdomen, narrow hips, Penelope slid her gaze down his perfect body and stopped at his cock.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t already seen his best parts during the haze of lust encompassing her, but she hadn’t exactly stopped to admire his fine apparatus. And it was very fine. She wished they’d had time to make love once more. If they ever got together again, it would be the crazed animal lust of her viral issues, but she’d love to spend some quality with him after she was cured.

Penelope pulled her shirt down to cover her breasts and slid from his bed. “Um. No. I’ll go back to my room and lock myself in.” She took a few steps intent on getting to the door, but he caught her and hauled her against his naked warmth. She twisted halfway back in his arms, resting her cheek against the center of his chest.

“I’ll check on some things and call your room in a little while, okay?”

She nodded and looked away suddenly embarrassed by the entire situation that had just transpired. He crushed her tight and kissed her cheek. “No need to be shy. I’m delighted to see your lovely smile.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

He squeezed her once. “We’ll talk some more later on after I take care of whatever this *problem* on deck is.” He dropped another kiss on her forehead and while it was charming, she hoped he didn’t misunderstand her continued intentions. She wasn’t exactly looking for a regular booty call. He started whistling, and the exuberance of his attitude suggested he might have a different opinion of their continuing relationship.

Eyes widening, she didn’t want him to assume he could come to her room whenever he wanted and get some. But then he grinned, “We’ll converse over the communications device, if that’s what has you blushing.”

“I’m not blushing,” she said as blistering heat crept up her cheeks to make a liar out of her.

He released her. “Whatever you say, Dr. Drake.”

Penelope, poised to race out of his room and into her own before anything more calamitous happened, forced herself to be calm. Being Captain Wyckoff’s lover wasn’t anywhere close to dire.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be ungrateful. I just don’t want to have to fuck you once before we can converse civilly. And that’s exactly what will happen the next time we are in the same room together. I’m not even sure how long exactly this temporary cure will last. It was two or three hours for the others, but it might be ten minutes for me.”

He nodded. “I understand. Go on to your room, Penelope. Lock it up. Re-deploy the decontamination program, and I’ll call you if I discover why the seal didn’t hold.”

“Okay.”

“And Penelope.”

She turned back. "I'd say I was sorry the seal didn't work. And I *am* sorry for your sake, but not for my own. If you ever need someone again, I'll make myself available to you during this trip."

"I hope I don't need anyone, but I appreciate your willingness to participate."

Embarrassed that this was the way she finally met a decent man, Penelope exited his room and quickly slipped back into her own. She locked the door and pushed the green button. The log showed that the room had breached exactly thirty four minutes before. Further study of the device showed the alarm was turned off. She pushed the button and set the device so that next time, she'd know. Perhaps with a warning bell, she'd have time to get into her suit or merely grab one of the provided filter masks.

The choice she wanted to contemplate was getting busy with Captain Wyckoff again if this illness accosted her once more. That was, in fact, fast becoming her first choice of cures.

* * * *

Gray took a speedy shower and headed to the command deck. Cahill was seated in the captain's chair but vacated it the moment he saw Gray march through the entry.

"Keep your seat." He motioned Cahill to sit back down. "I only came to address your 'problem'. So what is it?"

"A missive with the header of Bravura Space Command just transmitted a message and a search warrant looking for one Dr. Penelope Drake."

The air in Gray's lungs ceased movement for a second. He exhaled. "And?"

"Isn't that the name of our only passenger and the reason we're blazing a trail at max speed to the Parsec Colony?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Is it an audio message or a video?"

Cahill handed him the computer device. "Neither. It's a typed up

written message.”

“Typed-up written? Jesus. Is it from my grandmother?” The arcane method was rarely used and only by those very few not adept at technology. A message from Bravura Space Command would have been at the very least audio, and that, only if it were informational in nature.

Cahill cracked a rare smile. “No. The message is that Dr. Drake is wanted in connection with a death at the Bravura Science Lab. They’ve dispatched a courier ship aptly named the *Galaxy Retriever* to rendezvous with us so she can be shuttled back to Bravura. They’re several hours behind us, losing ground with each hour that passes and requesting that we slow down so that they can catch up.” An uncharacteristic grin from Cahill accompanied the statement.

“Are they?” Gray scanned the communication and noted the sender wasn’t the usual dispatch address for this type of message. It was a crappy, sloppy attempt to make a homemade private message look official. “You didn’t slow down, did you?”

Cahill sent him a dirty look. “Aside from the fact that I work for you and not for them, it’s a bogus message.”

“I see that. So who really wants to detain this Dr. Drake? And what makes them think she’s aboard this vessel?”

“It’s someone from the Science Labs. I did a little research on the message before you arrived. It came from the office desk of someone named Damon Kaslan. He’s a low level scientist geek from all that I can gather. And they would only know she was here if she told someone or you filed a flight plan listing her as a passenger. That’s public domain information, eventually. Although, for a passenger roster to be available on the public system within twenty four hours is miraculously fast service, if you ask me.”

“Do me a favor, send a return message to the speeding ship and tell them we don’t know what they’re talking about, and we aren’t slowing down. If the geek scientist sends another message and asks, you can even pretend to be me and tell him to fuck off. I didn’t file a

passenger manifesto since we only have one passenger. As far as any public information goes, we're headed to the rendezvous point early to pick up a delegation on Echo Province to transport them elsewhere."

Cahill cracked a bona fide grin. "Will do. And thanks for the boon. I love to tell people to fuck off." Gray knew he enjoyed playing mean military bastard leader on occasion. He was also very good at it.

Gray started to leave and then turned back as if he'd just remembered something trivial. "One other thing. Was there a blackout aboard ship in the last hour or so?"

"Yes, sir. I intended to brief you at our shift change."

"Tell me now. Start with what caused it?"

"Don't know what caused it, but there wasn't a breach to any part of the hull or damage any of the primary life support systems." He consulted the computer in his hand briefly and then reported, "The ship's computer ran an outer hull scan immediately and an internal scan shortly thereafter with no notable system being compromised. There were a few insignificant and redundant programs ship wide that defaulted to initial programming, but I haven't heard any complaints. Is there a problem?"

Gray didn't want to reveal the context of his concern being related to Penelope and her "big problem", so he shook his head. "It popped up on my quarters communication device when it re-booted. Just checking. Carry on."

"Aye, aye Captain."

Back in the hall outside of the command deck, Gray hurried back to his cabin. He knew that his quarters and Penelope's had originally been linked together as quarantine quarters. The blackout and subsequent system back-up defaulting to the original programming made sense, but he hoped Dr. Drake would understand and not hold the sexual interlude against him.

* * * *

Back safely in her quarters and sealed in after running the sanitation program, Penelope paced the small space in a restless square. Four steps forward and turn right, five steps, turn right again, four steps, and on and on until she'd found a comfortable rhythm to her movements. After several minutes of going nowhere, she realized that her antsy attitude was filled with unknown anticipation. She waited for something.

You want him, purred a satisfied little voice down deep inside. *You want him bad.*

Captain Wyckoff. Gray. Yes. She wanted him. Bad. She shouldn't have been so quick to dismiss any future contact with the delectable captain. She'd nearly accused him of being a Lothario ready to invade her sealed space for regular sexual activity, and now she wished she'd invited him to do just that.

She paced another square in the center of her room wondering if it would be out of line to call him. Why would he want to come back? What reason could she invent? Given that any physical contact between would have to begin with his cock buried in her pussy, she thought she should have a good reason to lure him here.

Penelope paced across the room in a diagonal and dictated a feigned message aloud that she'd never have the nerve to send. *"Captain Wyckoff? Could you come back to my room and hang around in bed with me until I need to fuck you again? Why? Because then I'll know how long the treatment of your virus mitigating semen will last. And additionally I can have sex with you again which is ultimately my true motivation for this call."*

The communications bell sounded once before a voice called out, "Dr. Drake?" Penelope jumped once at the bell and again at Angelica's voice. *Calm down.*

Hand on her chest, Penelope took a deep breath and responded, "Yes."

"This is Lieutenant Brice. I was just checking on you. Do you

need anything?”

Could you send your yummy captain to me pronto? I want to “do” him again. “Um. No. But thanks for calling to ask me.”

“No problem. I’m available if you should need anything. Brice out.”

The video screen blanked and went to a blue color. Penelope turned toward the wall next to her bed. If she possessed X-ray eyes, she’d be able to see into his room. Was he there? Was he thinking about her?

The communications bell sounded again. “Penelope?” Captain Wyckoff’s luscious voice came through the air and her heart promptly skipped a beat in surprise.

Composing her voice so as not to squeak she managed a quiet, “Yes.”

“It’s Gray. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” *Liar.* Her libido taunted her with images of a sleep rumpled Gray right before she’d thrown her clothes off and invaded his bunk. *I’d be better if you came to my room.* She approached the device. His handsome face filled the screen and she could tell he was back in his quarters. Directly. Next. Door.

His startling blue eyes fixed on hers and fairly mesmerized with their intensity. “I wanted to let you know about why your room seal failed. The blackout did cause the seal between these two rooms to default back to the original quarantine programming. I’m very sorry. I wish I could say it won’t happen again, unfortunately, we haven’t discovered what caused the blackout yet.”

“I see.” Penelope wanted to invite him to her room in the worst way.

“I’ve already retrieved the room separation program files and put your room back as it was when you arrived. I’ll look into reconfiguring the seal of the room so that even if there is a blackout, the system will default back to isolating your room by itself. I will, however, have to assign someone else to manage the project.”

“Someone else? Who?”

“I might be able to get Angelica to work on it. I’m using a very lean and mostly temporary skeleton crew on this journey instead of a full group compliment.”

Penelope knew her unreasonable demands were the true reason his ship was flying without a full crew. Still, she didn’t want anyone to discover the reason she needed to be trapped in here or worse discover what she’d done to Gray when it failed. “I wish you didn’t have to tell anyone.”

“Well, I’ll hold on then. The good news is that as long as you stay in your room, the seal will reactivate and as long as I’m not in my room...well, you should be okay.”

“I don’t mean to be difficult about the secrecy. It’s just embarrassing.” Penelope resisted the urge to hide her head beneath her arms.

“I understand. You aren’t being difficult. ”

Penelope pushed out a breath deciding that she was *too* being a big pain in the ass. She should say she was sorry, instead she said, “Thank you. I really appreciate your efforts on my behalf.”

He nodded and a smile played along his luscious lips before he asked, “Is there anything else you need?”

You. “Are you busy right now?”

“I...no. Why?”

Penelope didn’t know where she came up with the audacity, but she guessed that desperation changed the playing field. At least it did for her, so she straightened and asked for what she truly wanted. “I was wondering if you’d like to participate in an experiment?”

His gaze shifted from hers and he laughed in a rich deep way that touched her way deep inside. “That depends on the experiment.”

Clasping her hands together to keep them from shaking, Penelope took a deep breath before she responded, “Would you come to my room?”

His eyes narrowed for a moment as if suspicious as to why she’d

want him near, but soon softened. “Because you want to know how long your temporary cure lasts?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

His eyebrows quirked upwards. “So this would be purely for scientific reasons.”

Okay. If that’s what it takes to get you over here. “Yes. Purely scientific. Unless you want to talk. We can do that too.”

Another seductive smile slid into place across his beautiful lips. “How long has it been now?”

“About seventy-five minutes.” *But it seems like days since you touched me.*

“Give me fifteen minutes more and I’ll come over for experimentation and chatting.”

“Great. Thanks for understanding.”

“Sure.”

Penelope skittered off to the bathroom to see if she could improve her looks in the short term. It wasn’t like a date. Not exactly, but her heart rapped against the inside of her chest as if it was. Captain Gray Wyckoff was a man worth getting a little worked up over.

* * * *

Gray checked his external communication device, sent another video message to Nathan at the *Mirage* on planet Echo Province regarding his sudden flight to the Parsec Colony without mentioning Penelope or her disastrous problem and then carefully contemplated Penelope’s request. A smile formed as the memory of their previous liaison slid past his frontal lobe. Checking his timepiece, he noted another five hours before he’d have to report to the Command deck for duty. Plenty of time to experiment with Dr. Drake.

Surprised by his own anxious attitude of wanting to get involved with her, Gray realized he truly liked Penelope. If they both lived on Bravura full time and she didn’t have a dicey medical problem, he’d

bring her flowers or take her to dinner first. Likely it wasn't going to be possible to have any sort of regular budding relationship given her constraints, but the idea of quality time with Penelope wasn't a hardship.

This attitude was also a surprise as he didn't usually seek out women for relationships. Often his "feminine" relationships were quick and one-time affairs. He traveled a lot and most of the women he knew looking for a mate didn't like to be married to men they only saw infrequently throughout the year. Gray's life was in galactic space and he'd never found a woman he liked enough to either tame him to stay on solid ground or one who would agree to come along.

Dr. Drake made him reconsider his lonely bachelor status, and another smile formed. To solve her immediate problem, he merely needed to be available for sex at any given moment. An easy proposition. He closed his communication device and headed next door...for experimentation.

After a quick knock at her door, she opened the entry as if she'd been waiting for him and hovering by the door.

"I appreciate you volunteering for doing this. If you've changed your mind, I completely understand."

He stepped across the threshold of her door and kept his gaze on her face. "I haven't changed my mind. Anything for science I always say."

She grinned. "Really? Anything? How brave of you."

Gray approached Penelope, who stood very still in the center of the room. "Listen, I *am* very sorry about the seal breach. But I promise to do everything in my power to help you on this trip."

"I thank you."

Unsure of exactly what to expect, he glanced down her body quickly and asked, "How do you feel?"

Penelope shrugged. "So far so good."

"What happens so that you know you're about to have...an attack."

She crossed her arms and rubbed her upper arms as if she were suddenly cold. “It starts with your scent,” she finally whispered.

Nodding, he smiled. “I’m glad I showered then.”

The musical sound of her laughter which escaped her smiling lips all of a sudden warmed him deep down in his soul. He wanted to please her. He wanted to make this trip easy for her. With an internal sigh, he admitted to himself that he simply wanted her.

She caught his eye. “You don’t have to do this, you know. I probably shouldn’t have asked—”

“It’s not a really a hardship for me,” he broke in before she changed her mind. “Likely it’s harder for you.” He moved closer, step by step until their toes almost touched.

“The truth is that it wasn’t much of a hardship for me either. Not with you.”

He leaned closer with the intent to capture her mouth, but she moved faster and they connected mouth to mouth, lips to lips in a mutual embrace.

She was aggressive, but soon broke off the ardent kiss with a shake of her head.

“Wait. I know I started that, but I think it will lead someplace I’m not ready to go yet.”

He pushed out a long slow breath. “Okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

With the taste of her still on his lips he said, “I’m not.”

“You’re very understanding.”

He laughed. “No. I’m a man. I don’t often need much of a reason for...experimentation.”

“I’d like to wait and see how long it takes before I...um...need to...”

“I know. I get it.” He crossed his arms as if it would be enough of a barrier to keep them apart. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to wait for her virus to kick in, but there was something to be said for anticipation. He definitely wanted her. He wanted to make her scream

in delight. What would happen if he tried harder to wrench a climax from her as he pushed inside her body as fast as possible?

“Once your...attack begins, may I try my own experiment?”

Her brows furrowed. “Like what?”

“I’d like to try to make you come during your ‘episode.’”

Her eyes widened. “What are you going to do?”

Arms still crossed, he leaned forward. “I’m going to finger your clit while I relieve your anguish with my cock thrusting into your body.”

She swallowed hard. “But you’ll stop if it hurts?”

“Of course.”

Nodding, she allowed a little smile to surface. “Okay.”

“And if it does hurt too much during the treatment process...then I plan to make the necessary time afterwards to ensure you get some enjoyment from our coupling. As a matter of fact, I’ll insist on it.”

A slow smile crept over her lips. “That’s what makes you very different from the pricks I’m used to dealing with. The men I’ve been romantically involved with up to now couldn’t care less if I enjoy sex. Likely it wouldn’t even matter if I were suffering.”

“Then you’ve definitely been with the wrong men.”

She grinned. “Well, there haven’t been very many, but I’ve come to believe you’re correct. All two of them were wrong for me.”

Gray wanted to hug her tight again, but instead, he strolled across the small space and seated himself in the chair by her communication device. He stayed well out of the scope of the camera’s view. No need for anyone to see him in here. “Tell me about yourself. What do you do in the lab where you work?”

Moving to the bunk adjacent from his chair, Penelope sat, visibly relaxed and spoke in a quiet voice. “I spend a great deal of my work day studying historical mass illness breakouts.”

“Really? So after you read about all these histories, what do you do?”

“Then I try my best to find a better, cheaper or faster cure.”

“Was there a mass break out of the disease you carry?”

“No. Thankfully it was a very isolated case. My superior, Dr. Ledreder, asked me to handle the two cases quietly and assigned a staffer to help me.”

“Were you able to cure them?”

She shook her head solemnly. “They’d had the virus for too long. The cure we had didn’t work on either of them.”

“Why not?”

“The first woman killed herself shortly after entering our facility. I’d secretly given her the available treatment, but it didn’t work possibly because she’d had the virus in her system for too long. She killed herself before I could stop her. And I didn’t have time to study the illness before I caught it myself.”

“I’m sorry.”

Penelope shrugged, but he could tell she was devastated by her patient’s death. “The second victim wanted to end her life, but I refused and had her placed in a coma to allay her symptoms until I could figure out why the cure didn’t work. But then I caught this virus myself so...everything changed.”

The color in her cheeks rose as she spoke. Gray wondered if she’d be so embarrassed if she didn’t harbor the illness herself.

“Which is why you need to get to the Parsec Colony in less than two weeks.”

“Yes. I don’t know that I could endure this for a life time.”

“Understandable. We’ll make it there in time. I’ll see to it.”

“Thank you.”

They spoke for nearly two hours about her work and her life before this auspicious meeting between them. As the third hour passed with no attack, Gray wondered if perhaps he’d cured her for good. But shortly thereafter, it became apparent that was not true. She asked him a question about his past space travels and before he could utter a word he watched her transformation from intelligent passionate doctor of science to determined sexual hunter ready to pursue her prey

in a matter of minutes.

Her eyes glazed over in a subtle manner and at first he thought she was sleepy, but then she took a deep breath and a dreamy expression came over her features. She smiled in a lazy sultry way. The kind of smile meant to entice and engage.

Her voice lowered to a deep smoky tone. She leaned closer. "You smell delicious."

"Do I?" Gray watched her fix her gaze on his cock for quite a long time until it started to rise from the rapt attention. He pulled his shirt off over his head readying himself for the inevitable as he watched her conversion into sexy siren on the prowl and unable to take no for an answer.

Her movements changed. Whereas before she'd been a little bit shy and distant with regard to her personal space as they'd spoken, now she undulated towards him with precise movements meant to seduce. Before his eyes she changed. She was about to suffer from an attack of sexual desire because of the way he smelled. She needed sex right now this second because of him and their invisible chemical attraction. Extraordinary.

"Will you put your cock inside my pussy and fuck me?" The question purred from her lips as if another personality had taken over her body, mind and soul. Perhaps it had. Did she ever recall what she'd said during the "sexual episode" later on? He'd have to remember to ask. After not touching for two solid hours, she suddenly had her hands down his pants before he could agree to her demand.

"Yes," he said officially, although it didn't look like she would take no for an answer.

"Excellent." She put her face at his throat and licked a wet path from his jaw to his chin to his mouth. "I burn for you." She planted her mouth over his as if he needed more convincing.

Gray slid his pants down and kicked them away as she tore off her meager clothing.

"Do you remember my experiment?" he asked.

She launched herself at him without responding. The animal instinct to mate overrode absolutely all other reason—especially when it hurt not to copulate. One hand grasped his cock, and the other slipped around his neck to hold him tight for an aggressive, scorching kiss.

Gray sunk his hand between her legs and stroked her clit once, but she pulled her hips away as if he'd done something wrong. He grabbed her into his arms and placed her gently on her bed. Pulling her legs apart quickly, he mounted her seconds later, and his stiff cock thrust deeply into her several times. Concentrating on the tight fit and wet slick nirvana of her pussy, Gray watched the expressions on her face and the utter raw arousing idea of the act as he came as fast as he could.

It was actually an odd experience to climax so fast inside a woman during sex. Not exactly counting the strokes, but knowing he fell way short of twenty, Gray released with a guttural sound and sprayed her womb with his seed. He'd broken every speedy teenaged sexual record he'd ever remembered, but at least this time she didn't cry or writhe in pain by the time he'd finished.

Quickie sex to the rescue. He hated it. Sex should be languorous and completely unhurried in his opinion. The moment after his orgasm spilled into her pussy, and he recovered a bit, Gray kissed her mouth. He removed his dick and placed his hand between her legs again. She didn't resist as he lowered to capture a nipple into his mouth. She tasted like heaven. Rolling his tongue over the hardness of the peak, he heard a low sound from her throat. She moaned when he stuck two fingers deeply inside her pussy. Her near growl of approval at his actions in what sounded like pleasure warmed him. He continued fingering her clit until she soon arched her back and called out his name. That was nice. Something he could certainly get used to hearing.

"Gray." The shy sound of her voice saying his name in a whisper of gratitude touched somewhere deep inside his soul.

He kissed her mouth and buried his face at her neck.

“So I guess my limit is three and a half hours.” The heart wrenching tone of her voice would have put him on his knees if he’d been standing.

“And I can’t touch your clit or make any effort whatsoever to bring you any pleasure during the act until I come inside you.”

“Not surprising. I can’t imagine the barbarians who developed this would care if their victims were satisfied or pleased.”

“Do you remember the detailed events of the...act afterward?”

“Somewhat. It’s like a red haze fills my vision and fuels my compulsion until it’s all over. The second you climaxed, I woke up, so to speak.” She sniffed once and the sudden tremble of her body signaled she wept. He knew she hated the emotional impact of the disease. Pulling her close, Gray kissed her face and tried his best to comfort her.

“I’m so sorry. It’s not awful being with you, but this disease is so terrible I don’t think I can stand it much longer.” She sniffed and another sob broke forth followed by yet another on its heels, until she cried with deep shuddering spasms wracking her body.

“Shh. Yes, you can. I’ll help you. I’ll increase power to the ship’s engines and get us to your destination even faster.”

“Thank you.” She inhaled and then the fight seemed to leave her body and moments later she was sound asleep. “You know what I hate most of all?”

“Yes. You hate to cry.”

A watery smile of gratitude lit her features. “That’s exactly right. Thanks for understanding.”

She woke him a couple of hours later and he made love to her once more. Soft, sweet, leisurely and just exactly how he liked intimate encounters, Gray was fast becoming very infatuated with the lovely Dr. Drake.

Penelope slipped into another sleep shortly afterwards and he held her close until it came time for his shift to begin. He pulled away from

her slowly to keep from waking her. She only sighed in her sleep as he collected his clothing. He set the room cleanser program on a delay to run a minute after he left. He didn't want any residual scent of his to linger behind to make her suffer later on.

Gray knew he should take care not to get too deeply involved with Dr. Drake, but knew in his heart it was already too late for that now. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do to help her.

Chapter 6

Angelica waited only thirty minutes after Cahill's shift ended before approaching his room. On a personal mission for intimate knowledge of Cahill and his luscious body, a spring in her step made the journey very fast. Her first six hours off duty after he'd relieved her on the command deck were spent pacing in her room.

Should she make the first move? Or not.

She never chased men. They in fact chased after her most of the time. But not Cahill. He was Mr. Regulation. This transferal of pursuit wasn't comfortable. Not at all.

Standing before his quarters, Angelica paused and reconsidered her actions. The worst he could do was turn her down. The best scenario, and the one she hoped for, was that he would take her into his room and...well, take her. Repeatedly would be nice.

Before prudence could stop her, she pressed the signal to buzz inside.

The door slid open before she could change her mind or run in panic. Jeremy Cahill, fresh from a shower and wrapped in only a towel fastened at his hips, grinned and beckoned her inside with a tilt of his head.

Angelica took one long step and entered his private sanctuary. Once inside, the door whooshed shut and they were finally alone. He was close, so close she could smell the fragrant soap from his shower still clinging to his muscular body. Seeing him shirtless for the first time made her insides melty and her outsides vividly aroused. She took a step forward, and they were toe to toe. If he was surprised she currently stood in his room, he hid it well.

“What brings you here, Lieutenant Brice?” His voice never failed to instigate a spike in her pulse.

“I came to ask you a question.”

His gaze pierced to her core. “Ask.”

“What would it take to get you interested in me enough to take action?”

“Depends on the type of action you’re looking for.” His lips curved upward at the ends ever so slightly. “Besides, what makes you think I’m not already interested enough to,” his gaze slid down her body quickly, “take action.”

Tilting her head to one side she pierced him with her most interested gaze. “I guess the fact I’m inside your room for the first time since we met, we aren’t touching yet, and I’m still dressed.”

His bark of laughter took her off guard, but not as much as when he grabbed her tight, lifted her up and slung her around until she lay flat on her back on his bunk with his half naked body covering hers.

“Is this more in line with the kind of action you’re looking for?”

“Sort of. It’s a nice move and everything, but I’m still not undressed, and we’re only barely touching.”

“Patience, Angelica. I’m not a man who hurries this sort of thing.” He lowered his face until he almost kissed her, but didn’t.

“Kiss me.”

A grin surfaced across his lovely mouth slowly, and he shook his head. “Not quite yet.”

Cahill shifted on the bed, but his towel remained firmly attached to his body. He had a great chest. The alpha-numeric markings denoting his former rank and battles tattooed across his chest and upper arm were a major turn on she hadn’t anticipated. Slowly, and with methodical care, he peeled Angelica’s clothing off until she was completely naked. He then dropped his towel and climbed on top of her.

Warm and a little damp around the edges from his shower, Jeremy Cahill finally kissed her for the first time and with the first touch of

his lips to hers, Angelica knew she'd remember it forever. Gentle at first, exploratory next and powerfully arousing for the finale, Cahill certainly knew his way around a soul searching French kiss.

"Nice," he murmured and kissed her lightly once again.

Angelica wrapped her arms around his neck to hold him in place as if he might leap up and run from her. It was silly. Being beneath a large attractive man she'd spent so much time thinking about for so long made the reality a little bit unbelievable.

Pressed to his flesh from shoulders to toes and also completely naked was very sudden and very exciting. She'd dreamed of being naked and pressed to Cahill's masculine length for so long the quality of this moment seemed dreamlike in its intensity.

Was she in her room having yet another wicked dream? Would she wake from this dream with her fingers buried in her pussy or rubbing her clit? Would his name rest on her lips ready to burst forth once gratification satisfied her longing even during her restless sleep yet again?

Maybe she should pinch him to see if this were really happening.

"Am I dreaming?"

He sucked her lower lip between his teeth and bit down gently before releasing it. "God, I hope not."

"Tell me something. If I hadn't initiated this by showing up in your room, would you have ever come to me?"

"I'd like to say yes, and I certainly had the desire, but not the will to ruin my career by revealing my feelings if you weren't interested. Why do you ask?"

Angelica smiled. "I just wanted to make sure this wasn't a pity fuck." She pushed at him playfully as if to dislodge him from her body, but he didn't budge.

"I'm about to ravenously enjoy someone in a very carnal fashion who at worst outranks me part time and at best is still a fellow peer. Either way I should likely keep my hands to myself. But I can promise you no pity will be involved in what is about to happen

between us.”

“I see. Maybe we should stop and talk about the possibilities and problems.”

Cahill pushed a kiss onto her cheek and murmured, “Do you really want me to stop?”

“No. I just didn’t want to be with someone who wasn’t interested in me in return.”

“Oh. I’m interested. But I didn’t feel like it was up to me to make the first move.”

“But you wanted to?”

“Since the second I laid eyes on you, honey. Believe it.”

A warm rush washed down Angelica’s insides. She *did* believe it. And time was wasting. “We only have six hours, and I’ve talked enough. Do you have any questions?”

“Tell me, Lieutenant, what is your end plan?”

“End plan? Explain.”

“Is this going to be one time, many times or as many times as it takes until you’re tired of me?”

“No promises after this one, but I’m open to further...engagements, if all goes well tonight.”

“Then I’ll make sure it all goes well.”

This time he lowered his head and fastened his lips to hers. Mouth parting gently, he licked between her lips with tender persuasion until their tongues touched. Hot, wet, and likely the most seductive and arousing kiss she’d ever experienced, Angelica slanted her mouth over his and opened all the way. He wrapped his tongue around hers in a lazy satisfying fashion, not too demanding, but aggressive enough to make her heart pound just a little faster.

For a second kiss, it rated in the top five she’d ever received in her life. The top of the list was the first one he’d given her only moments before. He sucked her tongue into his mouth and growled a little as if he also didn’t expect it to be so wonderful and shuttled *this* kiss up the list to number one.

So busy with the hot, sizzling touch of his lips, she didn't realize his hand had snaked down her body until his thumbnail skimmed over one taut nipple. The electric zing of pleasure from the small touch sent a racing pulse of vibrant sensation all the way to her clit.

Angelica wrapped her arms around Cahill's back and scratched her fingernails from his shoulder blades to the small of his back. She paused a moment, and then sent her fingertips exploring the firm muscles of his sculpted ass.

His cock was lodged between her legs, but not close enough to where she wanted it. Inside. Deep. She wiggled her hips hoping to convey her interest in joining their bodies soon.

Cahill broke from the kiss long enough to whisper, "What's your hurry?"

"I've waited quite a while for this opportunity. You can even say I've dreamed about this moment...repeatedly. I'm simply anxious." She pulled one of her legs from beneath his and wrapped her calf across the back of his thighs to force his body closer.

"Give me a few more minutes to play, Lieutenant. I had something else in mind." He kissed her chin, slid his body down a little and kissed the base of her throat at the collarbone. He licked his way to one nipple and pulled the sensitive bud in between his lips. Tugging it into his warm mouth, he sucked until she arched her back. A wash of moisture coated her pussy.

Her nipples were very sensitive and he'd unlocked that secret in mere minutes of getting her naked. Cahill made a noise as if he found her tasty and trailed kissed across to the other breast to tease, lick and suck her other nipple. Angelica pressed her hips upward into his hard hot body.

Cahill rose onto hand and knees. He kissed her mouth, her chin, the space between her breasts. He licked a path from the lower curve of one breast to her belly button. If he kept his tongue headed south with the intention of licking her clit, Angelica thought she might climax before he got there at the very idea.

He lifted to his knees, put his hands on her inner thighs and swooped down to do exactly what she hoped he would. Fastening his mouth over her pussy lips, he delivered one long slow lick from the base of her wet opening to her throbbing clit, lapping up her substantial juices along the way.

“Oh God, Cahill.”

No response from below with the exception of his concentrated efforts to bring her off by sucking her clit between his lips, ratcheting up her ardor to the point she got a little faint.

Without warning, two of his fingers slid directly into her pussy curling inside, filling her and expanding the pleasure until the ripe hot sensation pushed her over the edge of a long awaited much anticipated orgasm.

Angelica’s back arched into the climax as waves of her release rode roughly through her body. She fairly shuddered with the climax.

“That was amazing.”

“And only the beginning, right, Lieutenant?” Cahill kissed the spot below her belly button and then proceeded to kiss his way to one breast. Nibbling on one nipple as he stared at her, he smiled around her peak.

Shifting to place his cock at the apex of her thighs, Angelica opened her legs, allowing an even more intimate connection. The tip of his shaft grazed her sensitive clit and she sucked in a sharp breath. He grinned and leaned in to kiss her mouth.

Angelica tasted herself on his lips and the very idea of what he’d just done sent a pulse of arousal down her body. She wanted his cock buried deeply.

“Name the position.”

His eyebrows creased in puzzlement. “What?”

“Name the position you’d like to start with tonight. I have a feeling I’ll remember it for a long time.”

“I don’t care as long as I can see your face when you come this time.”

“Stay on top. No need to be gentle. I won’t break.”

He reached down, grabbed her leg and slipped it over his shoulder. Legs now opened very wide, Angelica couldn’t wait for him to slip his cock deeply inside.

A firm hand on one cheek of her ass, Cahill centered his hips and pushed his cock balls deep into her wet pussy with one deep thrust. Her slick walls stretched wide and barely accommodated his thick shaft. He didn’t wait for her to get used to his girth, he pulled out and pushed in again before a second had passed. Even deeper this second time. His ardent chocolate gaze fixed to hers without blinking and thrust inside a third time with exquisite pressure, bouncing the head of his dick over the entrance to her womb.

“I have a request,” he murmured without breaking the rhythm of his strokes.

“Anything.”

“Stick your hand between us and finger your clit while I fuck you, Angelica. I want to see you come this time and I’d love to watch you touch yourself.”

A ripple of sharp arousal came with his request, and Angelica complied without taking her gaze from him.

The moment her finger glanced over her clit an unexpected moan escaped her lips. Cahill kept up a ferociously deep steady pace, and his wide cock made the experience uniquely satisfying. She could probably come with a few flicks of her finger.

Cahill’s watchful gaze slid to their joined bodies. While his attention was diverted, she reached up with her other hand and pinched a nipple between thumb and forefinger. Exquisite pleasure rifled from all of her pleasure centers and converged into an erotic dance of sensation about to erupt in her core.

His growl of approval when he glanced at her fingers pleasuring her breast sent his hips pushing into her body even faster. Cahill’s dark eyed gaze trapped her attention once again.

Heart pounding wildly, she fell into oblivion as a vivid orgasm

rushed through her all of a sudden. She cried out, experiencing the most acute pleasure she'd ever known.

“Angelica,” Cahill whispered, belying the pounding of his cock into her pussy. “I’m just about there, honey. Look at me. I want to see your eyes when I come.” The urgent sound of his voice kicked her arousal to a new height. As waves of rapture slid through her body and out across her skin, Angelica focused her rapt attention on his eyes. A second later his lids slid shut half way, and he barked out a low satisfied sound, thrusting one last time deeper than ever. The warmth of his climax sprayed against her womb with gusto.

Angelica’s leg slid down his sweat-slicked bicep when she leaned forward to hug him close. His face buried at her throat, and he whispered, “That was amazing, Lieutenant. I should have sought you out earlier.” He slumped forward and trapped her to the bed with his warm body.

She laughed and nuzzled his neck. “Cahill?”

“What?”

“Promise me that won’t be the last time we do this.”

He kissed her throat and murmured, “I goddamn guarantee it, honey.”

Angelica slipped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him tight. She glanced at her time piece resting on the side table. They only had less than five hours to get their fill of each other...this time.

* * * *

“Any problems, sir?”

Gray glanced over his shoulder as Angelica glided silently through the command deck door on a fast trajectory to the captain’s chair where he was seated. “Nope. It’s been quiet and steady as she goes, Lieutenant Brice.”

Gray relinquished the command computer to Angelica. He stood from his captain’s chair, lifted his arms above his head and stretched

slightly. It was precisely six hours since his shift had started. Angelica was nothing if not prompt. After spending his last break with Penelope, he needed to get back to his quarters and take care of some correspondence and paperwork.

He regarded Angelica with careful attention. She looked different somehow, but he couldn't identify the reason. "After Ensign Cahill relieves you later, let's go back to twelve hour shifts."

This order apparently shocked her. Eyes wide she asked, "Are you sure you don't want to continue the six hour shifts just a little longer?"

"Why? Do you?"

She shrugged. "I don't mind them. Seems like time goes by faster, but whatever you want, sir. Tell me and I'll make it happen."

"We can keep the six hour shifts if you want to, but I'd like to add a couple more people to the rotation."

"I'll take care of it." Angelica slid into the captain's chair. With communications device in hand, she sat as if poised to take notes. "Who do you want added, sir?"

Gray took the opportunity to peruse Angelica once again. There was definitely something about her that looked a little different, but he couldn't put his finger on what seemed altered. Her hair? Her weight? Was she more relaxed? Likely he was simply over tired, and he shifted his focus back to answering her question. "Get Kerchner from engineering and his first assistant. They can help add some relief until we pick up Nathan from the Echo Province on the way back from the Parsec Colony. They'll whine that they shouldn't ever leave engineering, but tell them I insist."

"Got it. I'll contact the engineering department and add them to the rotation schedule. Any whining I'll deal with accordingly."

Gray turned and headed to the exit, but snapped his finger and turned back. "One more thing."

"Sir?" Angelica swiveled around with a satisfied smile. He suspected that she really enjoyed sitting in the captain's chair. Maybe

that's what was different about her...a power rush over sitting in his chair.

"I increased the speed. We're at one hundred and five percent of regular capacity. Keep us there unless any serious engine strain starts showing."

"Yes sir. Does Kerchner know about our current speed load capacity?"

Gray resisted the urge to crack a smile. Kerchner babied the engines, but he wasn't captain and he didn't have a passenger with an abominable medical condition needing a cure. "He knows, and he's not happy about it. So don't let him slow us down. Call me if he gets unruly. And if he balks, put a lock on the accelerator while he's in the captain's chair."

"I can handle him, sir." Angelica relaxed back in the captain's chair with a smug expression. Gray thought she looked great in his command seat. One day he'd do his best to see she got her own command with the Dalton Prime Corporation, but for now he depended on her too much to let her go.

Angelica looked more relaxed than usual. The determination remained, but she seemed softer somehow. Less crisp than her usual uptight aura. She was likely overworked. Perhaps she was tired. Perhaps he was just as fatigued and seeing things that weren't there. He should get some extra sleep while he was off duty.

He caught Angelica's eye. "I have no doubt about your ability to handle anything, Lieutenant Brice. Carry on."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Gray exited the command deck and headed to his room. As he passed Penelope's quarters, his heartbeat sped up. She intrigued him. He'd love to talk to her, but didn't know if she was even awake.

Brushing his hand across the smooth surface of Penelope's door, Gray resisted the urge to stop and knock. It wasn't like they could have a simple chat. If he entered her room, he'd have to fuck her once before a coherent conversation could take place. Better to just call her

from his quarters rather than initiate something she might not want. A wave of regret rode through him at any monster able to conceive of such a virus. Penelope's condition was deplorable.

Sex or suffer was no way to live.

He shook his head and entered his quarters. After he responded to all of his messages, he stripped and fell face forward into his bunk. The sheets still carried Penelope's scent. He inhaled deeply and drifted off with her on his mind.

Alarm set for four hours later, Gray woke with a start when the buzzer sounded and sat up in bed. He snapped the alarm off just in time to hear a nasty hollow grinding noise from somewhere towards the engine room. Then the lights went out. Again.

Shit.

He slipped out of bed and felt his way to the communication device on his desk in the pitch blackness of his room. After five seconds, which seemed like much longer, the lights flickered back on, and his communication screen flashed back to life in the form of the comforting cerulean blue backlight.

Gray slammed his palm on the "send" button and called the command deck. "Another blackout! Why does this keep happening?"

Angelica responded. "Unknown, sir." To her credit, her voice never wavered or sounded uncertain when he was in a bad mood. Even as angry as he was now, Angelica never cowered from him. But it didn't stop his rage or the tone in his command.

"Find out!"

"Yes, sir. I'll check with Kerchner again."

"Fine, but don't let him slow us down. Make sure the ship speed goes back to where I had it once the engines reengage."

"Yes, sir."

A thud sounded from the wall connecting his room to Penelope's. His gaze rose to the vent above his desk connecting the rooms. These blackouts were going to become a really ugly problem very fast for Penelope if they continued.

Gray pushed out a deep breath and signaled Angelica again. "I'll be off line for the next half hour, I'll call you for a status report on the blackout then."

"Yes, sir. Brice out."

Damn. He could fairly see his aroma floating to the air shaft and into Penelope's room. This had to be excruciating for her. Unsure of how much time would elapse before she sought him out, he pondered his next move. Should he go to her room or wait for her to come to him?

He heard another indistinct scraping noise from her room. Better go to her.

Decision made, Gray slipped on a pair of pants and pulled a shirt over his head on his way out. Three steps down the hall and Penelope's door slid wide open. She launched out into the corridor on a trajectory for his room. The lust-crazed shine in her eyes was back. Gray grabbed her up into his arms, carried her back into her room and shut the door behind him. Without speaking, she pulled off his shirt as he pushed his pants off his hips.

"Penelope?" He searched her eyes for some sort of recognition, but she stared right through him.

"You know what I want!" The low growl of her voice sounded pained as well as insistent. Her gaze pierced him to the marrow of his bones, but he got the distinct impression that she didn't see him beyond a solution to her immediate problem. Poor Penelope. Unfortunately, he knew exactly what she wanted. The cure for this disease. Instead, for now she could only get fucked.

She'd apparently discarded her panties before he arrived. He didn't even take time to carry her to bed. Instead, he turned and pushed her against the wall without a single protest from her lips. Already panting wildly, she widened her legs without his asking. Cock in hand, Gray pointed it between her legs and pushed his hips forward, feeling his way into her already slick pussy.

"Fuck me, damn it. Hurry up! I can't wait." She put her hand on

his hip and pulled, which sent the head of his dick inside her pussy.

Gray thrust inside her body until his balls bounced against her. His cock was cocooned between her hot, slick walls. He pulled out and stroked in again deeply. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the physical aspects. She was so wet and hot it was a wonder he didn't lose it faster, but the very nature of this fast fuck went against everything he'd explored in his adult life with regard to sex. He wanted her cured because no one should have to endure this sort of existence.

Penelope slung an arm around his neck and rocked her hips against his as if trying to speed the act up. Soon after she started whimpering, and he knew she must be in pain. He was taking too long. Gray closed his mind and let the physicality of the act come to its logical conclusion. The fast orgasm tightened his balls, gripped his dick, and he exploded inside her with a rush.

She released a deep sigh the second he released, and her movements slowed to a stop. Pinned to the wall by his body, Penelope soon slumped against him, her face rested against his chest. Two seconds later she started crying.

He couldn't blame her. Not one bit.

Gray kissed her temple and removed his cock from between her legs. She started to slide to the floor still weeping, but he picked her up and carried her to the shower.

"I hate that this keeps happening," she stuttered out between sobs. "I can't even say, 'Hello. How are you?' before I rip your clothes off and force you to have sex with me." Another bout of weeping came next.

"Shh. Please don't cry. It breaks my heart. I'm so sorry you have to endure this agony." Gray turned the water on and once it warmed up he led her, without any resistance, into the shower stall.

She didn't once protest or stop him as he carefully and methodically washed her from head to feet. He soaped up and scrubbed himself quickly as she watched without seeming to really

see him. A little worried about her, Gray decided not to press any further sexual attention.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked folding his arms together and leaning against the wall of the shower.

Penelope looked up as if suddenly surprised to see him in there with her. “I’m not sure. I have to tell you that this...condition is really wearing on me.”

“I understand completely.” He turned and shut the water off. “Let me tuck you into bed, and I’ll get out of here.”

Her hand shot out and grabbed his forearm. “Please don’t leave me. Not yet.”

The look in her eyes said she was desperate. “Please. Just for a few minutes.”

He nodded. “I can stay for an hour or so. Then I’ll have to go on duty.”

She visibly relaxed and uttered a quiet, “Thank you.”

Gray dried her off and carried her to bed. She didn’t stop him, but hugged his neck and wouldn’t let him get too far away once he settled them beneath the sheets.

He kissed her forehead tenderly. “You need to rest, Penelope.”

In a tone bordering on watery, she whispered, “I just woke up from a ten hour sleep. The lights went out five minutes after I sat up in bed.”

“I’m sorry the ship had another blackout. I’ll find out why. Plus, I’ll have Angelica work on fixing the room so it doesn’t go back.” Her eyes went wide, but he quickly assured her. “I won’t tell her the real reason. I promise. I’ll just tell her that your lung condition bothers you after each blackout when my room is connected to yours. It’s the truth anyway.”

“Right.” Nodding, she slid deeper beneath the sheets. “Thanks for rushing to me this time. At least I didn’t have to run through the ship’s halls searching for you.”

“That actually brings up a point I’d like to discuss with you. I

don't want my current crew to know anything about your...*condition*. Most of them are temporary and I don't trust their permanent discretion like with my regular crew."

Penelope hugged up closer to him beneath the sheets and slung a leg over his hips. "Okay. I understand. Thanks for letting me know."

Gray slid his hand to her leg and did his best to relax in her arms. He had one thousand other things he should be doing with his ship, but knew she needed some comfort, and he was the only one aboard able to deliver it.

He brushed a strand of hair off her face and said, "How much do you remember about what happened after you are...temporarily treated."

"All of it, but it comes through my recollection like I watched instead of participating." She placed her face against his shoulder and snuggled closer still.

"Is there anything else you can do to prevent the attack?"

Shaking her head, a resigned sigh escaped. "I guess I could wear a filtration mask every hour of every day, but there is a limited supply of them on your ship. We still have eight days to go until we reach the Parsec Colony, right?"

"Yes. Best time is about a week." Secretly, he hoped his ship would hold together if he pushed the limits of his engine much longer. He tilted his head. "What about a temporary medical treatment?"

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's too bad you can't disable your sense of smell. Maybe catch a cold or something. Then you wouldn't be able to smell me." Chuckling, he was surprised when she lifted her head as if pondering his suggestion to get sick.

"That's not a bad idea." Penelope stared at him for a long second. Her gaze shifted to an invisible spot over his shoulder before she finally whispered, "I wish I had access to my lab."

"Why? Do you often catch colds in your lab?" he asked in an effort to cheer her.

“No,” the dreamy tone of her response combined with the sudden narrowing of her brows likely signaled her mind in serious think mode. Penelope was beautiful, but most especially as she contemplated a problem. Eventually, she directed her gaze back to his eyes. “I could simply study the virus if I had access to my lab. Work on a cure, perhaps. You know, a focused task to concentrate on and possibly give my self esteem just a ray of hope and sunshine for an eventual end to this abominable torture.”

Gray nodded but looked away first. He didn’t want her to see the pity in his eyes and didn’t think he could hide it. He silently agonized over her situation. Penelope, unfortunately, attached a different meaning to his response.

“I’m so sorry, Gray. I don’t mean to say that being with you is torture. You’ve been so sweet to me. I’m sorry to be so mean.”

He swept her into his arms, clenching her tight to his chest. The pervasive scent of her freshly showered skin stabbed into his lungs causing lust to coat his insides. “You aren’t mean and trust me when I tell you that you never have to apologize to me, Penelope. Not ever. This virus you have is appalling.” Next time he wouldn’t care if she saw pity in his unguarded expression.

“I want you to know how much I appreciate what you’ve done for me.” She pressed her soft sweet lips to his throat.

“I know you appreciate me. Besides, it’s not exactly a hardship, Penelope. I promise.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll tell you what, if you’d like, I’ll take you down to the med lab on board the *Dalton*. The medical technician is a robotic unit with limited medically related artificial intelligence capabilities, so you should be okay while working there. Just use a mask to and from the lab. There is a small conference room off of the main med lab with a computer station. The room seals off from the rest of the med lab. You can experiment to your heart’s content.”

Penelope sat up, clutching the sheets to her chin. He found it

endearing given all they'd done together. "You'd let me play around in your medical lab?"

"Of course. Whatever you need."

The smile she graced him with was more beautiful than the most colorful sunset on Bravura. She cupped his face with her soft palm. "Thank you, Gray. I'd be so grateful for an opportunity to accomplish something instead of waiting around to succumb to this virus like a powerless victim."

"Good. I'll set it up once I get back to my room." Gray kissed her lips and wondered if she wanted anything else. He'd be delighted to make love to her, but didn't want to make suggestions or bring up the sensitive subject of sex.

"I hate to ask for anything else..." She sent her gaze to a point across the room.

"Ask. You know I'd do anything if it's within my power."

"Okay. The memory of the incident we just shared against the door was very arousing upon reconsideration."

"Really?"

"Oh yes."

"And I wondered if you'd like to recreate it or perhaps even expand upon it."

"I'd love to. I even have an opening ice breaker that I'd like to try, if you'll let me."

"I'm yours any way you want me."

"Good, and for the record, I want you anyway I can get you."

Gray slid down her body, dropping kisses along the way. He stopped briefly at her breasts to suckle first one nipple and then the other, before continuing on his way to his ultimate goal. He wanted to try something just a little different and proceeded to lick his way lower and lower down her body.

Circling her belly button, Gray traced the tip of his tongue straight south across her mound and over the thin hooded flesh protecting her clitoris. He pulled his mouth away and pushed her legs apart. Gray

lowered his mouth and licked her from between her musky wet lower lips to the tip of her clit in one long tongue stroke. She was delicious.

“Oh my.” Penelope tightened her legs around his head, but unclenched when he pressed her legs open with his hands again.

He gave her one more long lick before fastening his lips around her clit to suck. She writhed and moaned with each pull of his mouth. Gray slid two fingers inside her body which quickly coated with her musky juices. The tensile strength of his cock was equal to that of reinforced steel as she arched her back and screamed.

While her pussy still squeezed a rhythm on his fingers, Gray shifted to his knees. He lifted her hips and pushed his cock deeply inside her body on the heels of her orgasm. Pumping inside deeply, Gray felt her vaginal walls constrict and release a few more times.

She rested on her shoulder blades watching him fuck her. He gripped her hips with stable fingers and thrust inside surely as deep as he'd ever been before. He wanted to come after about three strokes, but held back. He didn't want to get in the perpetual habit of shooting his load like a teenager with his first girl.

He wanted it to last and last. He wanted to make her squeal with climax just once more.

“Touch yourself,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Put your finger on your clit and rub.”

“I...what?”

He stopped pumping long enough to grab her hand gently and place it on her mound. “Go on. Finger your clit. I like to watch, and I'd love for you to come once more and squeeze my cock. Your orgasm registers an incredible feeling on my dick when you come, didn't you know that?”

She shook her head and the glazed-over stare never left his eyes. Tentatively, she stroked her finger over her clitoris as if the experience was brand new. Gray resumed his thrusts, slow and deep as she rubbed her middle finger over her sensitive hot spot. Panting in

less than a minute, he timed his strokes to match her massaging finger, all the while watching her face.

She was a sight to behold. Golden strands of hair were strewn wildly over her pillow and a dazed lust shown in her eyes. She had the feral look of a woman being pleased to the limit of her capacity.

Gray lowered his lids, trying to keep from releasing. She was so damn sexy he decided he'd be able to watch her all night long. He wished his time weren't measured in between his arduous shifts to keep the ship on course and in time to save the very woman his sweat slicked body was attached to.

Penelope sucked in a sudden breath as if shocked by something. In the next beat of time, her orgasm clamped his dick in rhythmic pressure signaling her release. It felt like nirvana wrapped in hot wet heat. Shuddering, and in a spasm of exquisite release, Gray shot his semen deeply into her body as the bone melting orgasm sent waves of pleasure up his spine.

Not only was she amazing in the sack, with or without the virus driving her, the connection with her brother and the Governor would make his life exponentially better.

The satisfaction of the sexual encounter was almost second to the idea of what meeting her brother's boss would do for him in the business world. Not that he did poorly, he didn't.

However, a singular private meeting with the trade governor and the accompanying accolades from Dr. Drake and her brother were like credits he could already count.

Gray almost felt guilty about how much he enjoyed the surprise sex with Penelope. That information alone might have made the trip worthwhile, had he known before securing this trip, but as an added benefit, he knew in his heart he would never regret it.

Part of him had begun to think of Penelope as a permanent fixture in his life. She was fast becoming someone he didn't want to end his acquaintance with.

* * * *

Penelope adjusted the temporary filter mask on her face for the tenth time since entering the *Dalton's* medical lab. Knowing that this small very annoying attachment was the only thing keeping her from having sex with whatever male wandered nearby or into the medical lab didn't make her like the clinging device any more. In fact, it made her inherently nervous.

"What if..." scenarios rifled her mind with each breath, making her work more and more difficult. What if the filter ran out before she noticed? What if she got so wrapped up in her science experiments, she forgot to change the filters at all? What if the mask stopped working for some reason? What if Gray couldn't make it to her and she burned to death from inside out, writhing in agonized pain?

What if space pirates with laser bombs attacked?

Get a grip. The memory of the pain from her disease was as fresh and raw as if she'd just experienced it. Like having a blowtorch inserted in her body, but if she spent her precious time dwelling on it, she'd never get anything done. This unexpected time in the *Dalton's* medical lab was a boon and definitely a treasure to keep her from a slide into insanity over this virus running rampant through her body.

"Dr. Drake?" asked a metallic voice from the doorway, making her heart skip a beat.

"What?"

Hooking her foot into the chair legs, she swiveled around on the provided stool. Penelope grabbed the mask as she twirled to face the robot attendant. She'd probably just used up the last fifty percent of her oxygen in utter surprise from being interrupted. Get a grip. At an even six feet tall, the robot towered over her seated position on the stool.

The humanoid face staring pleasantly at her responded, "The captain is on duty on the command deck. He wanted me to let you know he would be there for the next six hours." The robot's lean

hydraulic frame was partially shielded by light blue plates forming arms and legs. The med lab robot's soft soothing voice was as aesthetically pleasing as his shape.

Penelope hadn't ever worked with such a sophisticated robot before. The *Dalton's* med lab robot was one of the more advanced models she'd ever seen. On Bravura she'd inherited Damon when she needed help. He was not in any way pleasing, just a perverted prick.

Sensing no aggression from the robot, Penelope exhaled and tried to calm down. "Thank you." Her response earned her a nod.

"There are several routine appointments scheduled for the crew over the next three hours. Is there anything you require from me before the end of that time frame?"

"No. Just seal the door to this room when you leave."

"Of course. Good luck with your queries and experimentation. If you need analytical assistance later on, I would be happy to help you."

Almost like a real human, Penelope thought. Certainly a refreshing change from dodging Damon's thinly veiled attempts to get her into bed at every second of the time she spent in his company.

In fact, the *Dalton's* med lab Artificially Intelligent robot was advanced beyond any she'd ever seen let alone worked with. When Gray and brought her down here to work, she'd initially worried that the robot would discover her vile secrets.

There was a prejudice from many in the medical community regarding the use of robots for human care. Penelope wasn't prejudiced, but she knew the sentient beings tended toward literal translations and didn't want the machine to rat her out regarding her virus to anyone besides she or the Captain.

Gray assured her that the med lab robot, while quite competent and possessing advanced human traits in its program core, was also not a busybody. Her secret would be safe in this room.

The door to her room slid shut as the med robot went about its duties in the *Dalton's* medical facility. Penelope turned back to her

experiment, relishing the opportunity to get back into a lab environment once again.

The mask with the temporary filters she wore had exactly one hour of air available for each filter. She had two additional filters to replace the one in the mask. The communication device on the table had an alarm feature which she set for two minutes less than the single hour to give herself plenty of time to change it out. The mask used cylindrical filter which once removed, allowed enough residual air in the mask for several breaths of clean air while the new filter was snapped in place.

The extensive precautions out of the way, Penelope was finally able to concentrate on the query computer before her. She enabled the voice program so she could speak instead of type.

“Show the human female olfactory process on screen.”

A picture instantly appeared with a layering feature so that she could look at individual components.

“Show detail of the olfactory process where scent registers for social and mating functions in the central nervous system.”

Again a more detailed picture was revealed.

“Query: What components of the process stop scent processes to the brain function?”

“Answer: Three parts will need to be stifled to reflect a complete cessation of scent to the processing plant of the brain. Olfactory bulb, receptor cells and the amygdale.”

“List best possible scenario to disable scent temporarily, but with sterile environment as baseline for allowable plus or minus deviation.”

“External filter required for sterile environment deviation.”

“Question: List scenario to disable scent internally and temporarily to the level of sterile environment.”

“Answer: None. Scent may be permanently disabled by removal of amygdale, olfactory bulb receptor cells and olfactory bulb. However, components are irreplaceable. Extensive tissue damage will

result in any of three components being breached or removed.”

As she suspected, Penelope was screwed in the possibility of a temporary fix. Even if she caught a common cold, the swelling of the olfactory process and lowered scent capacity wouldn't be one hundred percent.

The only one hundred percent cure was what she was already doing unless she went with the permanent damage option. And that was unacceptable for now, although for patients facing a life with the disease never being able to smell again might be a viable option. If she weren't on the run from Bravura and anyone trying to stop her, she'd send the information on so Alice could be given the choice.

Penelope worked through another filter, replacing the first when it got close. The room seal allowed her to simply let the one filter run out and then pulling out and replacing it with the second she'd brought. After she put in the third, she'd need to make haste to her room.

Gray wouldn't be back in his room for several hours and they hadn't made a date for any future intimacies. It was sort of difficult to plan a nice polite date when a fuck fest had to take place before any meaningful conversation ensued. At least it was hard for her. The captain didn't seem to be as bothered by her symptoms as much as she was embarrassed by them. Either way she couldn't help it or control the infrequent blackouts aboard the ship. Her only other option was to stay in the filter mask all the time, but an inventory aboard ship showed limited supplies. Besides, she didn't want to wear a mask all the time.

The seal breach issue wasn't something that could ever be planned on and while the captain had asked Angelica to work on it, she was also busy on this trip, a trip Penelope had engineered to suit her needs. The circular thinking got her nowhere.

Planning to check for messages from her brother once she returned to her room, Penelope wondered if Philip would be surprised by her request for money. It was followed quickly by the reality of her

situation.

Guilt assailed her over the fact that she had no money to return to Bravura after purchasing the cure she needed. If her brother couldn't help her financially, she didn't want to have to face Gray with the news that she'd lied about the meeting he expected to have with the trade governor.

Penelope had not one clue what would suffice as reimbursement instead of what she'd promised. Acid roiled in her stomach at the idea of Gray finding out about her deception before she could figure something out to appease him. The alarm to replace her third and final mask filter sounded, breaking her from her dismal lie-ridden reverie.

Twisting on her stool to reach the air filter, Penelope noticed one of the med robot's appointments was seated on the central medical table being examined. Shirt off, she also couldn't help notice that he was a fine specimen of a man. With the body of a military man and the permanent markings to boot, she suspected he'd been a long member of the regiment before coming here to work.

Penelope reached for the filter without looking and missed it. She abandoned her appreciative gaze for the military man, turned to grab the now rolling replacement filter, missing it rolling off the counter just as the lights went out.

Pitch blackness consumed her. The alarm stopped with the power outage, and the replacement filter slipped away from the barest tips of her fingers and crashed to the floor. Disoriented in the inky darkness closing in on her, Penelope fell forward off of her stool and felt the wayward filter crush beneath the toe of her shoe.

The lights blinked back on as if trying to decide whether to return full strength or not. Once the steady illumination stopped flickering, a triad of truths became patently obvious. In decreasing order of importance, the third thing Penelope noticed was that the door to her room enclosure was opening wide. The second thing, directly on the heels of the open door, was the startled well built man leaping off of the table next to the robot with a look that said he was concerned for

her well-being and the motion of his body was headed in her “no longer sealed” direction.

The first, and most disquieting, was the sound of her mask running out of filtered air and shutting off as the broken replacement filter rolled out from under her shoe in five separate pieces.

The hunky former military crewmember, now three long strides from the doorway to her violated sanctuary, was about to get a big surprise.

Penelope took the final breath of filtered air and removed the mask from her face. Afraid to take her next breath of contaminated air, she closed her eyes and waited for the nasty initial punch of lust to take over.

Chapter 7

Gray cursed a vivid blue tinged storm of obscenities when the telltale grinding noise echoing distantly from the engines immediately preceded the lights snapping off on the command deck for the third time in as many days. His vocabulary became incredibly colorful when he realized that Penelope wasn't safe in her room, but instead she worked in the med lab.

Exposed and vulnerable.

"Computer, report!" he shouted into the obsidian air. "What the hell just happened?"

"Power failure and recovery. Scanning hull for breaches." A humming noise began indicating the on-board computer checked for catastrophic breaches to the hull or other life threatening problems across the ship. Even with no power on the ship, the computer still operated on a self-contained power supply separate from the craft's control.

"Determine origin and cause of continuing power outages aboard the ship."

"Cause unknown. Origin unknown. Complete diagnostic required for further data."

"Like I have that kind of fucking time," Gray muttered to himself and released a long sigh. A complete diagnostic was minimum three days at a regulation docking bay and not going to happen on this trip.

Unable to see a damned thing two inches in front of his face, he didn't want to lurch through the decks without at least a portable light, which he didn't have anywhere close. The nearest one was out the door near the entrance to the command deck. He stood from his chair

in the tar splashed blackness of the room trying get a meager sense of direction.

“Hull secure. No breaches in primary living quarters or areas where catastrophic loss of life will result. ”

Ten seconds later when the lights flickered back, Gray checked the flight navigation and automatic pilot to ensure it reengaged and resumed the set course to Parsec Colony. He hated to leave the command deck unmanned, but his concern for Penelope over rode it. He headed for the medical lab where he'd left her working. He didn't know what her status was and hoped enough time remained in her replacement filters to get her back to her room unscathed.

Gray stalked into the medical lab and turned towards the enclosed conference room. The clear conference room wall showed Penelope, her filter mask already off of her face, take a deep breath and start screaming at a shirtless Cahill who stood sealed inside the small room with her.

Damn it.

Penelope shook her head and backed away from an obviously confused Cahill. He tried to comfort her and moved forward for every step she took to get away from him. Fingers pressed over her nose and mouth, Penelope pulled them away from her face as if she'd been holding her breath. She took a deep lungful of air and backed into the far wall.

Hands up in the air waving to get her attention, Gray strode over to the door to enter, but the seal wouldn't disengage. Penelope shifted her gaze and looked at him for the first time. A worse expression filled her eyes.

All of a sudden she stopped screaming and turned to Cahill with a shocked expression. Gray wanted to close his eyes and not witness her turn into a sex crazed predator about to violate his third in command.

Cahill remained motionless probably wondering what in the hell was going on. He was about to get a big surprise. Gray didn't want to

watch the Ensign have sex with her. Truthfully, he wasn't sure Cahill would do it. Not even if she begged, but either way, Cahill was about to discover Penelope's big secret.

Backed up against the far wall in the conference room as if trying to meld with the surface, Penelope shook her head and started talking. Gray couldn't hear her obviously, but he watched as she mouthed the words, "Stay away from me. I'm warning you, get back."

Gray couldn't see what response Cahill gave her, but he stopped moving forward. He lifted his hands into the air in a conciliatory manner likely meant to calm her down.

Seconds ticked by as Gray waited for her eyes to glaze over in lust. But she didn't change. Instead, she squinted and tilted her head to one side with a very confused expression. She moved forward a step and sniffed the air, keeping her stare fixed on Cahill. She promptly inhaled with exaggerated gusto, and this time Cahill backed up a step. A grin appeared on her luscious mouth. She laughed, raced forward three steps and hugged a very confused Cahill around the waist and then backed off. She turned to Gray, pointed to Cahill and shook her head no.

Apparently she wasn't attracted to Cahill. Thank the heavens above.

Gray took a relieved breath for the first time since leaving the command deck. She grinned again, and Gray thought she'd never looked so beautiful.

Cahill took another step backwards and lifted an arm to hit the sensor, which opened the door seal to the small room. The clear panel slid open exposing Gray, and more importantly, his scent, to the conference room. While Cahill didn't send Penelope into a frenzy of lust, Gray knew that once his scent entered the room things would change drastically. Penelope's joy ended.

Cahill turned his back on Penelope and exited the room, approaching Gray with a very perplexed expression on his features. "Captain? What are you doing here? Aren't you on the command

deck this shift?"

"Yes," Gray answered as he watched Penelope's expression change. She inhaled deeply and a new predatory gleam shined in her face. "I left to check on our passenger."

Cahill's brows furrowed. He glanced over his shoulder once. "I ran in there right when the lights came back on. She stepped on her filter and crushed it into several pieces, but when I went in there she said I didn't carry any allergens or something."

"Unfortunately, I do." Gray swept past him and grabbed Penelope, who'd migrated out into the main medical lab. She'd paused in the door frame to inhale deeply once again. She looked...hungry, for lack of a better word. Gray knew what was coming, and he suspected Penelope wouldn't want Cahill to witness it.

It was time to go.

She launched forward, threw her arms around his neck and buried her face at his throat. "You smell good enough to eat, Gray," she purred in a low sultry voice.

"Do I? Let's get back to your room and discuss it."

"But my room is so far away. Let's just stay here, shall we?" Penelope pulled his face to hers and plastered a juicy kiss across his mouth. Gray backed up another step. He felt a breeze across his chest, and noticed she'd unzipped his uniform jacket.

Cahill's eyes fairly popped out of his head. Gray gave him a look which hopefully conveyed his panic over the impending situation. "Whatever you hear or see in the next few seconds, Ensign, do not ever disclose it to anyone for fear of your job. Am I understood?" Gray hugged Penelope to his chest and began a slow trek backward headed out of the medical lab, holding her close. She was fastened to him like bright on a star. Cahill didn't speak. He gave a half nod and simply watched unblinking. Penelope undulated her body against Gray's seductively and tried to undress him.

"I need you," she fairly moaned in that smoky, fuck-me-now, voice of her illness.

He put his mouth to her ear and whispered, "Let's go back to your room, Penelope."

Penelope spied the medical table as they moved towards the door and pushed him in that direction. "No. The table. I need you now. This will work."

"Don't need an audience." Gray's eyes fastened on Cahill's wide-eyed stunned expression. He'd have to take care of her and promptly schedule a conference with Cahill to explain. "Do me a favor, Cahill?"

"Sir?"

"I left command deck unmanned. Could you relieve me for a while? I'll return within the hour to relieve you, and I'd rather not be disturbed."

He nodded but his glances shifted to Penelope and her undulating body every other second. "Yes, sir. I'll take care of it."

Penelope's hand slid below his belt and gripped his rising cock before he could stop her. Cahill's bewildered expression turned to one of shock as Gray man-handled Penelope out of the med lab on a fast track towards her room. Her hand was securely attached to the front of his uniform with his fully erect dick clutched in her fist.

Gray raced to her quarters slowed down only by her desperate gyrations to get his clothes off along the way. The other more disturbing element of her illness was that her pain seemed to be escalating. "Now!" she screamed, "I need you to fuck me right now!" Penelope pushed him against a wall around the corner from their quarters and unzipped his uniform jacket from chest to groin.

The lust in her eyes was visceral, but he wasn't about to consummate in a public corridor on his ship. He kissed her mouth hard in an effort to distract her, lifted her into his arms and carried her the rest of the way at a fast trot.

His room was the closest and from the pain-filled sounds now emanating from her throat she was past her limit of endurance. Gray fairly launched them into his room locking the door on the way in.

Little screams of pain came out with each breath as Penelope tore at her clothes. The excruciating pain registering on her face broke his heart. No one should have to endure this. He opened his uniform enough to get his stiffening cock out and pushed her to his bunk. Thrusting his dick deeply inside, her first sound of pleasure released a welcoming sound. He pumped inside of her hard and fast in an effort to come quickly and end her pain.

The tight slick grip of her pussy made the task easier, and five strokes later he climaxed with a growl. The instant his semen shot inside of her body, she released a long deep sigh as if the pain of a fiery internal inferno had been doused at long last.

“Ohmigod,” she whispered in a tearful sob and hugged him tight.

“It’s okay,” he managed still panting from the exertion and trying to ignore the sublime pleasure of the orgasm he’d just had.

“No, it’s not okay. That crew member in the medical lab saw me...he saw what I did to you...” She trailed off into babbling sobs as she clutched him tight.

Gray held her close as she wept murmuring reassurances until she quieted a few minutes later.

Still five days away from their destination, Gray’s wishful attitude waned and the first seed of doubt over this journey’s success grew decisively in his mind.

* * * *

Angelica, tucked behind a structural reinforcement column in the hallway outside the medical lab, wasn’t seen by Captain Wyckoff...or the distressed Dr. Drake, who clung to him with her hand gripped to the captain’s cock through the front of his trousers. She’d been so shocked at the display, she wouldn’t have been able to speak even if she *had* been able to think of something to say.

Whatever was going on with their elusive and singular passenger, Dr. Drake, it didn’t have anything to do with a delicate lung

condition. Less than a minute later, Cahill exited the medical lab tucking his uniform shirt into his slacks as if he'd just gotten dressed.

Angelica's lovelorn feelings rode along the arm crease of her uniform jacket for all the world to see. She stepped from behind the column and called out, "Cahill!" before prudence could prevent her outburst.

He turned with a wide-eyed surprise and replied, "Angelica."

"What the fuck were you just doing, Ensign?"

His head turned first in the direction the captain had just gone before returning his puzzled gaze back to her. Eyebrows raised he said, "I was getting my quarterly physical, Lieutenant."

"Really? It looked like something else entirely."

"Did it?" Cahill put his hands on his waist and a sudden grin split his gorgeous face. "Are you jealous, Lieutenant Brice?"

"I..." *Shit. Yes, I'm insane with jealousy.* "I just saw..." She didn't finish her sentence and pointed down the hall where Dr. Drake and the captain had disappeared. "Never mind. I was obviously mistaken. And no, I'm *not* jealous." *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* "Would you like to go to the training room and spar a few rounds? I need to burn off some energy." Angelica had been on her way to find Cahill for some sexual calisthenics when the lights went out. She knew Dr. Drake was in the medical lab working on something and had redirected her path to check on their only passenger.

"Sorry, Lieutenant, as appealing as a spar session with you to burn off *energy* would be, I've been ordered to the command deck to take over for the captain's shift temporarily." He backed up a couple of steps in the direction of the bridge.

"May I accompany you?"

He flashed his nova bright grin again and shrugged. "Sure." He motioned her forward.

Together they marched all the way to the command deck without saying another word. Cahill slid into the captain's chair, checked the course headings and then turned his attention to her. Angelica relished

the chance to be alone with Cahill.

“What were you doing down in the medical lab hallway, Angelica? Following me?”

His tone sounded light, but Angelica hesitated to admit she’d been looking for him prior to her detour to find Dr. Drake. She’d been fairly skipping around all morning waiting for Cahill to get off duty so she could lure him back to her room for a repeat performance of the last time they were together. After waiting around for an hour, she’d gone looking for him, but didn’t relish admitting it.

Fearful that her strong and growing attachment for Cahill didn’t mirror his own feelings, she took a more dismissive tone. “No. I wasn’t following you. When the lights went out I went to see if Dr. Drake was okay.”

“Why? What’s wrong with her?”

“When she arrived here she was placed in the old quarantine cabin next to the captain’s quarters. I was told she needed to be separated from the ship’s main life support because she has a delicate lung condition.”

Cahill snorted once but apparently thought better of his expressive reaction to Angelica’s information about Dr. Drake and didn’t comment further.

Angelica approached him. “What do you know?”

“Nothing.” Cahill shifted in the captain’s seat and refused to look her in the eyes.

“Well, what happened in the medical lab earlier?”

“Nothing,” he repeated. This time the word came with a stern look as if he was through answering questions. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Like what?”

Cahill put one elbow on the armrest and leaned forward until his face, and more importantly his mouth, was inches from hers. “I’d like to see you again, Lieutenant. Am I stepping out of line?”

Angelica swallowed hard and inched closer. “No. Not out of line.”

The very scent of him being this close aroused her to the point of idiocy. With no one around, she was hard-pressed not to take advantage of his lips. Now that they'd consummated their relationship, she spent too much time thinking about not only what they'd already done, but what might possibly happen next.

He smiled, but leaned back and settled into the captain's chair. "Once the captain comes back to relieve me, I'll come and find you. We can chat."

Did "chat" have anything to do with sex? "Chat about what?"

"For starters, the complications a shipboard romance has on crew members whenever they are within a few feet of each other during duty hours."

"Shipboard romance?" Angelica sucked in a deep breath and backed up a step. "Don't flatter yourself, Ensign Lothario. I don't need you—"

Cahill snagged her forearm in one hand and pulled her two short steps back to where she'd been. "Relax, Lieutenant Brice. It wasn't intended as an insult." He loosened his grip and cleared his throat. His expression softened.

Angelica blinked once, but otherwise didn't move a muscle. Cahill's hand gripped her arm and she was afraid to move for fear he'd release her. "Okay. Fine. Tell me now whatever you want to say."

"When I saw you downstairs outside the med lab, I wanted to slam you against the nearest wall and plunge my cock inside you so deeply you'd climax screaming my name with a single thrust."

"Is that so?" Angelica whispered. "I had no idea."

His lips formed a sardonic smile and he nodded. "It took months, but I'd finally learned to fight the blood sinking out of my brain and throbbing erections when in your immediate presence." His voice then lowered to a whisper, "However, now that I've tasted you, it's excruciating to be this close to you knowing that I can't touch you."

Her gaze rested on his hand still gripping her arm. "You are

touching me.”

“Not in the way that I want to be touching you, Angelica.” He was so close that if she stuck her tongue out, she’d come in contact with his mouth. Cahill was right. Being this close was dangerous to both of their careers.

Pulling gently out of his grasp, Angelica smiled and replied, “Good to know because I lied. I *do* need you, Cahill. I’ll be in my quarters. Don’t make me wait too long.” His sudden laughter followed her to the door of the command deck.

The door to the command deck slid open and admitted two crewmembers before she’d made it to the sensor. Angelica’s heart skipped a beat. If they’d come in a couple of minutes sooner, she and Cahill would have been possibly compromised. They needed to be more cautious. Correction, “she” needed to be more circumspect.

Before she made it to the exit, the on-board computer alert alarm sounded and stated, “*Incoming priority video message from the underground command center on Echo Province.*”

Cahill responded immediately, “Who is it from?”

“Lieutenant Commander Tyndall of the *Mirage.*”

“Put it on the forward screen.”

Angelica turned back as the Lieutenant Commander’s face filled the large screen facing the captain’s chair.

“Ensign Cahill,” Nathan drawled with a hint of surprise. “What are you doing in the captain’s chair, soldier boy? Crew assignments sure have gotten interesting since I’ve been gone.”

“We’re on an ‘interesting’ new trip?”

Nathan grinned. “Well, now ‘interesting trips’ always spice up the flavor of flying. Where’s Wyckoff?”

“He’s off duty. I’m filling in.” Cahill straightened in his chair

“Where’s Lieutenant Brice?”

Angelica stepped forward into the view of the forward screen. “I’m right here, sir.”

Nathan’s signature drawl was in full swing. “So tell me, what’s

going on? Why is the *Dalton* currently speeding its way to the Parsec Colony? I thought you all were scheduled for two weeks of recreation time on Bravura.”

“The captain accepted passage from a doctor needing to retrieve a cure. How did you know where we were going?”

“I just received a message from Gray a few moments ago that he apparently sent days ago. Shit gets lost in space more than it gets through, but ultimately I’m grateful for you being headed this way. I’ve got some trouble here on Echo Province. I hate to send you off course and out of the way, but the Rycan delegates I escorted here are all in an uproar. I’m going to need an immediate evacuation off the planet. Put me through to Gray, and I’ll give him the particulars, would you please?”

“Yes, sir. Let me put you on hold and locate him on the ship.”

“Roger that, standing by.” The screen went to solid blue.

Cahill ran a hand down his face and quickly twisted to face Angelica. “Your opinion, please. Dare I disturb the captain in his quarters, or wherever he is, when he specifically asked not to be bothered for an hour?”

Angelica glanced at the blue screen and then shrugged. “It’s a priority message. I don’t think you have a choice.”

“Tell me, Lieutenant Brice. If you were sitting here in this chair running the show, would you make the call?”

She straightened her posture realizing he asked as a peer. He wanted the value of her opinion meaning he respected it. If she didn’t love him before, he’d just pushed her into a never before feeling of camaraderie. “I would make the call.”

Slanting a gaze to one side he inhaled, exhaled and then pushed the button for the captain’s quarters. In a softer than normal tone he said, “Captain Wyckoff?”

* * * *

Penelope shook so hard her teeth rattled in her mouth. “What do you think he’ll do?”

“Nothing.” Gray hugged her tight trying to reassure her fears, but she was in a blind panic. Ensign Cahill had seen her in action. Not only acting crazy and backing away from him in fear when he only tried to help her after the lights went out in the med lab, but also once the door opened and Gray came inside.

Then Cahill had seen what she did to Gray, heard what she said to him.

If Gray had allowed her to do what she wanted, she would have stripped bare and fucked him on the med lab table while everyone, including the Artificial Intelligent medical robot, stood by and watched. The mere thought of a public display of her nasty virus cure sent a fresh wave of chills across her body. Another sob escaped.

She remembered the force of Gray’s scent striking her lungs like a solid object had entered her body. The virus had come on so fast she hadn’t even had time to reason any idea but one single thought. Get Gray out of his clothing as fast as possible and fuck him.

“But what if he—”

Squeezing her harder, Gray whispered urgently in her ear. “Penelope, he won’t do anything. I promise. I’ll order Ensign Cahill to forget what he saw...and he will.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I’m the captain of this vessel, Penelope. My word is the law. Trust me.”

“But what if he sees me on the ship?”

“What if he does? He still won’t comment. Besides it’s unlikely you’ll see him again. I don’t imagine you’ll spend the rest of your time aboard running loose through the corridors of the ship, will you?”

She huffed. “I’m never leaving your quarters ever again.”

“As appealing as that is, I think it might be difficult to explain.”

Penelope snuggled closer to his body. “I don’t care.” Like the first time they’d been together, Gray hadn’t even gotten his uniform

completely off before he'd taken action to relieve her suffering.

"Captain Wyckoff?" Cahill's voice echoed through the small cabin, and Penelope slid the sheet over her head in utter fearful panic.

Gray detached himself from her, exited the bed and crossed to the communication device. His response was a very abrupt, "What do you want?"

"There's a priority message from the *Mirage*, and its captain. Says it's urgent and he's standing by waiting to speak to you. Want me to patch him through?"

"No, tell him to keep standing by. I'll return to the command deck in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir. Cahill out."

Penelope sat up in bed. "You have to leave." It was a statement not a question. She folded her arms across her body as if a chill had suddenly swept through the room, but a blush registered on her cheeks.

Gray ran one hand over the top of his head through his short golden locks and then started straightening his uniform. "I'm supposed to be on duty. Cahill is covering for me."

"I know. I wish he hadn't seen me in my give-me-sex-right-now condition. He likely thinks I'm insane."

"He doesn't. I'll order him to forget what he saw. Get dressed and I'll take you to your room."

"I can get there by myself." The dejected tone in her voice was almost more than he could bear.

"I don't mean to desert you right now, but I need to tend to my other responsibilities as captain of this ship."

Her head came up. She fixed a warm gaze on him. "I know. Go on. I'll be fine. I promise."

"Don't forget to run the cleansing program once you're locked in your cabin."

"I won't."

Gray finished fastening his uniform and turned to leave. "I'll

contact you later on once I'm alone."

Penelope slid her legs over the side of the bunk in time to see him do an about face and return. He squatted next to the bed, took her face in his hands gently and put a tender kiss on her lips. "I may not be back for quite a while. So don't fret, okay?"

She kissed him in return. "I promise not to fret."

"There's something I need to tell you." He took one hand and kissed her palm. "I care about you, Penelope. Once you obtain your permanent cure, I'm still going to want to see you again."

"You don't have to—"

Gray cut her off with one more passionate kiss before adding, "Oh. I know I don't *have* to do anything. But the truth is I'm getting extremely attached to you, Dr. Drake. Will you promise to consider that once you're cured?" He grinned and Penelope was struck by a realization. Gray was quite possibly the most attractive man she'd ever seen in her life. He was certainly the most caring and devoted man she'd ever been with and technically they'd never dated. She'd be foolish to throw him over for any reason.

Cupping his cheek with one hand, she kissed the corner of his mouth. "I promise."

He exited the cabin and a fresh rush of guilt washed through Penelope. Promising Gray a meeting with the trade governor was a betrayal he'd likely never forgive her for once he discovered it. She didn't deserve his forgiveness anyway for putting him through so many hoops for a reward he wouldn't receive.

* * * *

Gray raced to the command deck to relieve Ensign Cahill and pondered what explanations would have to be rendered to satisfy his curiosity. Likely Gray could merely say, "I order you to forget about what you saw or heard with regard to our passenger, Dr. Drake."

Cahill was a former member of the regiment planetary militia.

Military types rarely demanded an explanation for anything, but the *Dalton* wasn't a martial vessel and Gray's leadership style wasn't "Do as I say and shut up," as a rule.

He stepped on to the command deck where he found both Angelica and Cahill with heads bent as if a confidential conversation took place. Great.

Cahill jumped up from the captain's chair and didn't look him directly in the eye. Angelica, on the other hand, fixed an oddly rebellious stare on his face and didn't look away.

"Lieutenant Commander Tyndall is waiting on the line, sir," Cahill announced before Gray even took his second step inside the room.

"Put it on the forward screen."

Pushing a button on his communication device, Cahill brought Nathan's visibly irate face onto the large wall of the command deck.

"Nathan," Gray called out, "What's the big priority?"

"Hello to you too, Gray. Yes, of course, I've missed you. No, no don't beg me to come back sooner, I've got my own ship."

He allowed a grin to surface. "Sorry to be so abrupt. It's been a grueling trip. I don't miss you though, and trust me when I tell you that I'll never beg you for anything."

"Funny." Nathan cracked his legendary half grin, and added, "I need you to come and fetch me. Soon. Now."

"That will be problematic. You're supposed to be there for another two weeks. Why do I need to fetch you so early?"

"The negotiation party we are supposed to be escorting on to the Rycan System in two weeks is also the primary team they use on their home planet for peace negotiations. They just got word of some trouble on Rycan. They want to leave early. As a matter of fact they've been quite vocal about wanting to depart as soon as possible."

"So what? Tell them no. We have a signed agreement. Reassure the delegates we'll be delighted to escort them per the contract. We'll be there in two weeks."

Nathan shook his head. “Unfortunately, their home planet issued a distress call a few hours ago. There has been some sort of incident on their planet. An attacking party is plundering their planet or threatening to plunder the planet. I’m not sure. The details are fuzzy. They think they need to be there to talk the offenders out of it. And they demand to go home. Now.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I currently have a medical emergency. I’m on my way to the Parsec Colony and I don’t have time to stop. Besides why can’t you take them on the *Mirage* if it’s such a big, hot emergency?”

“Because the *Dalton* is the only ship cleared to go to the Rykan System or enter the Rykan atmosphere. A paperwork shuffle for the *Mirage* would take time.”

“My medical emergency takes priority over their planetary squabble.” Gray broke out in a cold sweat because he knew what was coming next. Something dreadful. Nathan was about to verbalize terrible news and he didn’t want to hear it.

“They called the Galactic Federation of Planets and made an official request. The *Mirage* doesn’t have sufficient tactical safeguards in place to enter Rykan space or the planet’s atmosphere without being considered hostile. Since the *Dalton* is the only authorized ship able to enter Rykan space, you have to come and fetch us and take us there. Oh and, if you could hurry up get here yesterday, that would be great. Seriously, you need to come and get me before I kill someone.”

Damn it. An official request made his decision for him. Gray had to comply or face a punitive council with the federated planets on why he didn’t respond to a peace delegation while he was in the vicinity and the only authorized vessel to transport them.

Damn it all to hell.

“Try not to kill anyone before I get there.”

“I’ll do my best. No promises. I’m sorry my planet emergency trumps your medical emergency. If there were another way, I’d be

willing to discuss it.”

“It can’t be helped. Now get along with the others and play nice or else.”

“It’s not me. On day one they had a test of the emergency quarantine system, we were locked inside deep in the tunnels behind several sets of blast doors for fifteen hours because they couldn’t figure out how to turn it off. Have you ever been trapped with Serillial Warriors? They stink like death on a cracker and I discovered that fact before the quarantine started. When will you get here again?”

Cahill caught his eye and responded, “If we shift course immediately, we’ll be there in two days and back on the way to the Parsec Colony with only four total days lost in detour time. But will the delegation agree to go to the Parsec Colony first before we drop them off elsewhere?”

Gray’s entire body stiffened at the thought of telling Penelope that there was a delay. “They’ll have to, I don’t have time to go to the Rycan system before it’s too late for Dr. Drake.”

Cahill nodded. Angelica’s visceral hostility continued, but thankfully she remained silent.

“Nathan, we’ll be there in two days. Hang in there.”

“Roger that. Sorry to change your plans. Tyndall out.”

“Cahill, put in the course change and kick it into high gear.”

“Yes, sir. Are you taking the command deck back?”

Gray had intended to take back his shift, but paused to consider Penelope. He decided quickly that he didn’t want to break this latest tidbit of bad news to her on the heels of what had happened in the medical lab. Glancing at Angelica and then at Cahill, he pondered the merits of confiding Penelope’s secret.

“Yes. But I’d like you both to work on something for me.”

Cahill handed him the command communication device and slid out of the captain’s chair. “What do you need?”

Angelica remained silent.

“I need to know what is causing these blackouts and how to stop them.”

“Is that *really* the biggest concern we have at the moment?” Angelica’s attitude bordered on dissident and Gray wondered if Cahill had shared something about what happened in the medical lab with Penelope. Then again, why was she here alone with Cahill in the first place and not on her time off doing whatever she did on her time off?

Gray’s next epiphany took a second or two and the imperceptible changes in Angelica plus her presence on the command deck with Cahill finally snapped into place. Maybe what she was “doing” on her time off *was* Ensign Cahill.

“It’s *my* biggest concern.” Gray paused a moment to gather his bearings, then asked, “Tell me, Lieutenant Brice, why are you currently on the bridge?” Using her rank and surname formally usually got her rapt attention.

“What?” Angelica’s mouth opened in shock. She glanced at Cahill and then back at Gray.

Gray raised his eyebrows, waiting for an answer. Her lips slammed shut and formed a thin line as her eyes narrowed as if in accusation.

Cahill responded slowly without taking his eyes off of Angelica, “I met her in the corridor outside of the med lab after you’d gone. I asked her to come with me to the command deck.”

Narrowing his eyes on Angelica’s fidgeting stance, he murmured, “Is that so?”

“Yes, sir.” Cahill didn’t elaborate further, but added, “I’ll look into the blackout problem with the engineer.”

“Good. Thank you. Dismissed.” Gray wasn’t usually so curt with his crew, but he was moved by Penelope’s plight. Unfortunately, he didn’t want to explain her private problem. Not yet.

“Sir, before we go, I’d like to discuss something else.” Angelica hadn’t moved, but her restlessness had abated.

Gray seated himself in the captain’s chair before he turned to his

two first officers. “What’s on your mind, Lieutenant?”

“I think we need to talk about what happened in the med lab earlier.”

He sent an angry gaze to Cahill’s stony expression. “What do you know about that, Lieutenant Brice?”

“Cahill didn’t tell me anything, sir. I saw you dragging Dr. Drake to her room. She was...altered, troubled.” Angelica pushed out a breath, leaned closer and whispered, “As a matter of fact, I saw her licking the side of your face with her hand attached below your belt, sir. What is really wrong with her?”

Fuck. Gray didn’t want to have this conversation. “Did anyone else see me exit the medical lab with Dr. Drake?”

“Not to my knowledge, sir.”

Gray pierced his first in command with a stern look. He didn’t want to explain if he didn’t have to. Given Angelica’s attitude, he likely needed to. “Dr. Drake suffers from an illness. One I decline to express the details in this current venue. Besides, I don’t know that it’s any of your business, Lieutenant Brice.”

“It’s our business if her *illness* makes her contagious to all of the rest of us.”

“It doesn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“She told me.”

“And you believe her.”

“Yes. I believe her. I don’t have any reason not to.” Gray crossed his arms. “Do you have some knowledge that I’m unaware of, Lieutenant? Something you’d like to share? Or are you just trying to get me to reveal detailed private information of our only passenger?”

Angelica’s eyes widened a bit, she glanced at Cahill and then at the floor. “None of the above, sir. My sole concern is for this ship and its crew, as always.”

Damn it. Gray knew he was being defensive where he shouldn’t be. Of course her concern would be for the ship and crew. She

practically bled *Dalton* fuel she was so loyal. Time to back down and regroup his misdirected feelings.

“I’m sorry, Angelica. I didn’t mean to imply you were out of line. You’re right to be cautious about this phenomenon. However, it is a delicate matter and one I don’t wish to discuss here on the bridge of the ship.” He sent his gaze to Cahill, whose stance was more rigid than if he’d been at attention.

Gray realized in that second that he needed to confide in someone else. If he couldn’t trust his executive staff, they wouldn’t be working for him. Penelope wouldn’t suffer any more or less if Angelica and Cahill had the pertinent information about her condition.

“Call the senior engineer to the bridge to take a six hour shift and meet me in the private conference room on deck three in an hour. I’ll explain everything then.”

“Yes, sir,” they both said in unison.

* * * *

Once ensconced in a private room, Gray seated himself and prepared to explain about Dr. Drake’s condition. Hoping to elicit two more advocates for her cause, Gray hadn’t called Penelope. She had enough on her plate currently and Gray planned to ask his two top crew officers not to divulge any information regarding this matter.

“Dr. Drake contracted the *Dalton* for a quick as possible journey to the Parsec Colony so she can obtain a cure for an illness she harbors. It’s a horrible virus, however it’s not contagious. Penelope explained to me—”

“Penelope?” Angelica interrupted to ask. “You two are on a first name basis now?”

“Yes. Much like you and Ensign Cahill, I’d imagine. Let me explain and all will be made clear to you.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“The virus she has is like getting radiation poisoning, but she is

the only one who's been exposed. She can't give it to anyone else."

"What kind of virus makes her do what she was doing to you?" Cahill asked.

"It's called the Sex or Suffer virus. It's a little known, manufactured bio-weapon which attacks only humanoid females. It causes great burning pain internally until the woman afflicted basically...well...she has to have sex with a man. Quickly."

Angelica's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"I'm not repeating it."

She shook her head and squinted as if she either didn't believe it or didn't want to. "She has a virus that makes her have pain until she has sex."

Gray nodded. A whole host of expressions ranging from anger to disbelief to fury crossed Angelica's face. "That is absolutely barbaric," she spat out.

"Yes, it is. The virus is triggered by scent and attraction. Statistically, according to Dr. Drake, any given female is attracted to one in four men she meets. Once Penelope comes within range enough to smell a male that she's attracted to, or say her sealed quarters link with the cabin next door and begin sharing air, the virus is triggered and the pain escalates until her symptoms are temporarily alleviated."

"What if she isn't temporarily alleviated?"

"I don't know. I don't want to find out. However, I believe her pain increases to unbearable levels."

Cahill placed his hand down on the table. "I get it now. She told me to stay away from her in the med lab after the last blackout. Her mask was beeping, the last filter was smashed on the floor, and she backed away from me and held her breath."

"You were in there with her while she had an attack?" Angelica snapped her head and glared at Cahill. "Is that why you were getting dressed on your way out?"

"No. I was getting my quarterly physical. Like I told you."

Angelica stopped talking as if she just realized where she was and who sat in the room with her. Gray didn't stop to analyze the sparks volleying between them. Given their body language, he suspected they had something going on.

"Dr. Drake is not attracted to Ensign Cahill." Gray fixed his gaze on Angelica. "She is, however, attracted to me. Every time the power drops and we have a blackout, the quarantine quarters for both her room and mine revert back to the original programming, begin sharing air and she...seeks me out to relieve her pain. It's a pain which escalates until she's temporarily treated...by sex."

"That must be absolutely agonizing for her," Angelica whispered.

"Being forced to have sex with me or just having the virus?" Gray grimaced as he realized what he'd said. The stress of this trip wore on him and made his personality angrier.

Angelica blushed to her roots. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"No," Gray broke in. "That was uncalled for and I apologize. It's been a difficult journey and I'm worried about Penelope. Since she's been here, her virus is getting worse."

"How in the blue blazes could it be any worse?"

"Her pain is increasing with each incident. And I can't stand to see her suffer so unbearably."

"What do you need from us?" Cahill asked.

"I need to find out what is causing the blackouts. Barring that, I need to find new quarters so she won't be impacted if the power continues to cut out. I desperately need to get her to the Parsec Colony so she can get cured."

Angelica's eyes widened with new understanding over the problematic side trip they were about to take. "And now we have to stop off at Echo Province to pick up Nathan and the annoying delegates."

"Yes. Otherwise they can pull my transport license for failure to respond to an emergency."

Cahill cleared his throat. "What did Dr. Drake say about the

delay?”

“I haven’t told her. I just don’t have the heart to yet. The trip from Bravura to the Parsec Colony is traditionally fourteen days, but I told Dr. Drake we’d try to make it in ten. I’ve been running the engines at over capacity, but with the delay on Echo Province it will revert back to the two week journey at the minimum.”

Cahill nodded. “Plus when the power drops, we lose acceleration and it takes time to get back to full run speed.”

Angelica brightened. “Once we pick Commander Tyndall up, he’ll know why the blackouts are happening. I’ll help him fix it once he’s on board.”

“That’s if we don’t end up being forced to take the Rycan delegation back to their home planet immediately upon landing. The *Dalton* is the only registered craft able to enter Rycan space currently. And while the *Mirage* is able to make the trip to the Parsec Colony, it doesn’t have the same heavy duty engine capacity as the *Dalton*. I’d burn out the engines before we made it in time to get Dr. Drake’s cure in a timely manner.”

“The Rycan delegation members are self-righteous assholes. They don’t think anyone in the galaxy is as important as they are. They’re completely worthless in military situations. Stupid bastards.” Cahill smacked a hand on the table to punctuate his point. “You know they’ll be waiting with bags packed, ready to board the second the Echo Province planet finishes with the ship wide security sweep.”

Gray nodded. “Plus, they’ll treat us like we’re the crew of a pleasure vessel and demand we meet their every whim all the way back to Rycan.”

Angelica lifted her head and a smile suddenly played over her face. “Unless they think we make our vessel an undesirable option.”

“How?”

“What if the waste tanks accidentally leak into the ventilation system?”

Cahill narrowed his eyes. “That’s nasty.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, we don’t really have to do it. We can just pipe a bad smell out of the airlock as we disembark. We can even wear full containment suits and tell them that if they demand this ride, they’ll have to supply their own suits for the duration of the trip to Rycan.”

Gray laughed. “I’d be willing to bet a large sum of credits that if we all show up wearing full containment suits, surrounded by the vile funk of sewer smell as we exit, they won’t press for a ride on the *Dalton*.”

Angelica sat up straighter in her seat. “Meanwhile, we’ll give them an alternative. The paperwork for the *Mirage* is already in the works, but it’s likely held up on some bureaucrat’s desk at the Bravura council building with five hundred other requests.”

Cahill grinned at Angelica, “I’ll bet it would be sped through the process in a nanosecond given pressure from the delegation and depending on how badly they ‘really’ need to get to Rycan.”

“And how much they don’t want to use the *Dalton* to get there.”

“Good point. I guess we can try it.” Gray decided it was a great idea to have confided in his crew. He’d forgotten how smart they were when challenged. “One other thing, I don’t want anyone on Bravura to know we have Dr. Drake on board. Once she discovered she carried the virus, she left rather abruptly.”

“Is that why the co-worker sent the message trying to get her back?” Cahill asked.

Gray was embarrassed to realize he’d completely forgotten about that bogus message in lieu of spending time with Penelope. “I’m not sure why that message was sent. I neglected to mention it to Dr. Drake as unimportant.”

“I guess you’ve had your hands full...no pun intended, sir.”

Gray smiled. “I can ask Penelope about it, but I hate to upset her. I don’t know who Damon Kaslan is, but I recognize his last name as being the same one shared by one of the Bravura government’s highest officials. It’s possible he thought he could swing his weight

around. But if he acted alone for some reason, I'm not impressed."

"Or it was the Bravura science lab trying to get her back quietly using one of their other employees with a well known name to force compliance."

Gray shrugged. "Could be her employer or a fellow worker being a prick. Either way, we deny knowing anything about Dr. Drake to the delegation demanding a ride to Rycan or anyone asking."

Both Cahill and Angelica nodded.

"I'll go let Penelope know about the detour and delay. Once we get to Echo Province, I'll meet up with Nathan and explain our dilemma and foster his cooperation to coerce the Rycan delegation to have a change of plans and allow the *Mirage* to escort them. She'll have to disembark the ship for the security sweep anyway so I'll just bring her with me."

"I almost can't wait until we all disembark wearing full containment suits." Angelica smiled as if the very idea of thwarting the Rycan delegation brought her personal pleasure.

"I'll put you in charge of disembarking the crew and the fragrant plan of action."

"I'll take care of it." Angelica stood. "Tell Dr. Drake that neither Cahill or I will ever discuss her 'condition' with anyone. Not even her." Cahill didn't hesitate or disagree with Angelica putting words in his mouth, but nodded immediately.

"And if you need me, I'll volunteer to be her eunuch in waiting so she can dispense with the physical aspect of her disease cure," Cahill paused and gave Gray a pointed stare then continued, "If she's interested."

Gray nodded. "I appreciate it. I'll ask her, but hopefully it won't be a problem."

The three made a few more plans for landing on Echo Province and then Gray dismissed them and headed back to the command deck. He'd send a message to Penelope from the bridge. Glancing at his time piece he noted that he'd left her over four hours ago. He

wouldn't be able to see her in person without a filter mask in place.

He dreaded telling her about the delay of two days in getting to the Parsec Colony. He also recognized that he should have moved out of his quarters sooner. His growing feelings for her aside, she deserved the quiet peace of not worrying about sudden blackouts, excruciating pain and having to find him to cure her atrocious virus.

Dr. Drake had wormed her way into his heart. He didn't know if Penelope would ever be interested in a permanent life with him.

Once cured, she'd introduce him to her brother and he'd set up a meeting with the trade governor and then their initial agreement and subsequent affiliation would be complete.

Would she want a further relationship even though he traveled a lot?

Gray vowed to spend his free time practicing what he'd say to the trade governor versus all the things he wanted to say to Penelope regarding a future together.

Chapter 8

Penelope hid in her quarters for the next two days too embarrassed to take a chance on seeing Ensign Cahill after he'd seen the SOS virus in action down at the med lab. While she trusted Gray not to discuss it over much with his crew, she also didn't want to face him. The pending discovery of her lack of funds and connections to the Trade Governor also weighed on her soul.

Gray communicated with her several times a day, but he'd moved out of his quarters and into a cabin next to Cahill's on the other side of the ship so that if another blackout occurred, she wouldn't be forced into pain. His actions were honorable and steeped in concern for her feelings and welfare, but Penelope missed him.

After having such a volatile sex life from the very beginning, Penelope found Gray even more stimulating when they conversed. And that was all they'd done for the past two days. Talk. He worried about her. She could tell from the inflection of his voice each time he called.

She hadn't seen him since the incident in the medical lab. He'd cured her and left to assume the neglected responsibilities of his job as captain instead of serving as her stud for pain every hour of the day.

"Penelope?" Gray called from the communication device on her desk.

"Hi, Gray." She raced over to sit in the desk chair like a school girl with a crush on the popular boy at school who'd just called to make all of her dreams come true.

Gray was the sexiest man she'd ever known. If her virus wasn't in

the way, she suspected they would have started a relationship. She missed having normal sex with him versus the crazed lust required by the virus and the sound of his voice sent her libido into the stratosphere. When she wasn't crazed with desire and trying to fuck him because of her disease, any contact between them sped her heartbeat. She fell a little bit more in love with him after each late night chat they shared.

The first words out of her mouth after her greeting was always, "I miss you."

This time like all of the others, his face transformed and the smile that shifted into place made her heart flip over in her chest. "I miss you too, Penelope. I..." He started to say something else, but stopped and cleared his throat. By the sudden stern expression on his face, whatever he was about to say wasn't going to be good news.

"I need to tell you something. I've put it off too long."

"Bad news."

"Yes. Unavoidable bad news."

Penelope's back straightened as if bracing for "Okay. What is it?"

"There's been a distress call from a planet near the route we're taking to the Parsec Colony."

Penelope knew in an instant what the bad news was. He'd been saddled with a distress call. Anyone with a pulse knew what that meant. Gray had to drop everything and answer the call or be ruined.

The galaxies had been a dangerous place for decades prior to the new government currently running the show. Space travel had been put into a lockdown mode after the intergalactic war almost one hundred years before. The resulting piracy afterwards became barbaric during and after the war. A war that made a great many people homeless and desperate.

The Galactic Federation of Planets changed everything, generally for the better. However, space was guarded closely. Miles of paperwork were needed to get a ship into the cosmos, not including all the stringent rules the spacecraft had to follow once approved.

Additional paperwork was required by the Interplanetary Alliance Coalition, the governing body on their home planet of Bravura.

“I understand. You have to respond or lose your transport license.”

Gray’s expression actually relaxed. Now an explanation wouldn’t be needed. “Yes. Exactly that.”

Crossing her arms in front of her as if she discussed a science question on Bravura with a colleague, she asked, “How long is the diversion from our journey?”

“Two days each way for a total of four days.”

Penelope exhaled a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “That isn’t so bad. It’s the original quote you gave me.”

“Right. However, nothing is ever easy.”

“Meaning?”

“We’re headed for Echo Province. Heard of it?”

Echo Province. Penelope searched her memory and the only phrase which popped up was insane panic-stricken security measures. “That’s not the planet that requires every ship to disembark the entirety of his passengers every time they land, is it?”

“The very same.” From somewhere behind him on the command deck, loud klaxon signaled a warning, and Gray shifted his gaze away his screen a second before piercing a solid look back to her. “Listen, Penelope, that sound means we’ve reached the outer perimeter marker of Echo Province space. We’ll be docking in a few hours.”

“We’ve already reached Echo Province?”

“Yes. You’ll have about four hours to get ready to disembark. Don’t worry. It shouldn’t take too long once we land. Perhaps eight hours at most. I’ll meet with the delegation seeking emergency transportation and explain that we have a leak in our sewer waste system onboard, which is pouring into our ventilation system.”

“When did this happen?” Penelope’s body tensed from neck to hips. She glanced at the vent in her room.

Gray grinned. “It didn’t, but that’s what we’re going to tell them

so they won't want to go."

Penelope laughed. "Well, that would certainly put me off. Won't they be angry?"

"No. We're going to try and persuade them to take another vessel already docked at Echo Province awaiting the laborious paperwork already in motion, but so far without clearance to the Rycan system."

Penelope relaxed. "So you're going to fake them out so they'll find other transport?"

"Exactly. I have to meet with the leaders of the delegation and the two negotiating parties, but I'm certain it won't take long. Then we'll be on our way to the Parsec Colony and I will have fulfilled my response obligation."

"Okay. That is very smart. Good idea. But can I stay with you when you go to the planet surface?"

"Sure. All of us will be wearing full containment suits when we disembark for the security sweep. Angelica, Cahill and I believe it will make a suitable statement to make the proposed argument go our way. And it has the added bonus of us not having to explain your condition."

"Thank you, Gray. I know you're jumping through hoops for me."

"Well, that's okay. Once I meet with the trade governor and sell him on the merits of the Dalton Prime Corporation, it all will have been worth it." He grinned again, but she felt a sharp pain in her chest. Before the chill completely surrounded the smile glued in place on her frozen face, she nodded. Another warning bell sounded on the bridge, distracting his attention again.

Eyes focused on her soul again, Gray said quickly, "I've got to go, Penelope. Don't worry. Everything will work out fine, and we'll be on our way in no time."

She nodded unable to say anything else without blurting out the confession that there wouldn't be a meeting with the trade governor. The screen went to blue on his lovely smile, and Penelope resisted her body's effort to force a collapse into a violent crying jag. She'd wept

enough.

Gray had sacrificed so much for her and this horrible virus she carried, and she wasn't going to be able to even secure passage back to Bravura without signing over an IOU. An IOU she wouldn't be able to pay off if she lost her job at the science lab. The vivid possibility of her job being lost after working so hard to earn Dr. Ledreder's regard for the past several years brought on another fit of tears.

Born into a poverty stricken family of five on the outskirts of Bravura's largest and most beautiful city along with hoards of refugees from the war, Penelope and her older brother were the only two in their small village to have escaped. Her brains and aptitude for science got her a full scholarship ticket to a higher learning center sponsored by the Bravura Science Labs. She then secured a job after killing herself for years.

Similarly, her brother Phillip, had earned his place in the government job he held with an innate ability to decipher complicated mathematical problems. He also had the gift of a photographic memory. He was invaluable to the Trade Governor, but his status was that of a low level communications officer and not manager to the Governor.

Given another twenty years, Phillip might make it into the manager's office as a junior representative, but only if his only sister didn't ruin his career with her massive and increasing virus related problems. Scandal of his nature was the kiss of death for those coming across the borders to work.

The nobility of Bravura didn't publicly begrudge those of a lower birth a "decent" living within their ranks, but plenty of resentment went on in the actual working environment. Entitlement, like the kind Damon insisted he only joked about, was alive and well in all facets of the Bravura government and many of those with the status of a high born family didn't usually let those considered lesser ever forget it.

Inevitably, her mind raced back to the day she'd discovered she had the SOS virus and all the desperate things she'd done to secure passage to Parsec Colony for a cure. There was the matter of the funds she'd "appropriated" from her department and even if everything went her way, there was no getting around an embezzlement charge. Invariably her train of thoughts always led to the unexpected sexual encounters she'd had because of her disease. She was lucky it had only been two men and not ten like poor Alice, her patient back on Bravura.

Alice was another possible casualty of Penelope's journey. She hadn't dared to communicate with the Bravura Science Lab to check on her, and unfortunately she didn't trust Damon with her care. She could only hope that he didn't wake her or worse, ignore her.

Along with procurement of the remedy, Penelope hoped to discuss the virus with another scientist on the Parsec Colony. She wanted enough time to confer with other doctors who'd dealt with the disease eager to learn any additional information she could which would help Alice.

Two hours later, Penelope exited her cabin, holding on to Gray like touching him was her only link for survival. She released him once they made their way to the lower floor and exited out of the cargo bay area into Echo Province's quiet dock. There was one other ship docked on the other side of the large space, but Penelope couldn't see the ship's name.

It was likely the one sitting idle without paperwork and the vessel Gray was about to persuade the Rycan delegation to choose instead of the *Dalton*. Penelope sent up a small prayer that by the end of day, she'd be back on Gray's ship headed at top speed for the Parsec Colony and not writhing in agony with the prospect of harboring the SOS virus for the rest of her life because of fate and this emergency stop on Echo Province.

* * * *

The docking bay on Echo Province was just as cold and miserable as Gray remembered. Nothing had changed, including the severe scenery of this harsh foreboding planet.

Echo Province, known for their unforgiving craggy landscape, also had an insensitive attitude regarding trade negotiations with other planets. And none worse than with the Seriillial warriors, inhabitants from the other side of their own planet.

The Rycan delegation came to negotiate an agreement between Echo Province members and the Seriillial warriors, regarding a mutual trade of goods. Each of the representatives needed the other, but both refused to budge on their desires to be total rulers of the planet they mutually shared.

Gray knew from Nathan and the initial request for transport off of Bravura on the *Mirage* over a week ago that the Rycan delegation had given up hope for a peaceful negotiation on planet Echo Province and regarded being here a waste of time.

There probably wasn't a true emergency on Rycan, but a spoiled need by the delegation to get away from the endless arguments of two races that might never get along. Echo Province and the Seriillial warriors shared the planet, but agreed on absolutely nothing else.

Penelope released her grip on Gray's forearm before they descended the ramp to the dock. He patted her arm in an effort to comfort her before he took the lead as his crew exited the ship.

After being separated from her for the past couple of days, he was surprised by the stuttering of his heart the moment she'd stepped from her cabin. Even with the filter mask covering her face, she looked sexy enough to kiss. The best they could accomplish was to touch face masks together.

Behind him Cahill and Angelica, also wearing filter masks, descended the ramp on to the floor of the docking bay. They were the last to disembark the *Dalton* and as soon as they stepped to the floor, a contingent of Echo Province soldiers dressed in full explosive

resistant suits entered his ship to sniff out any potential mischief aboard.

To his right, Gray saw the *Mirage* locked into the alternate bay, looking lonely and abandoned. Echo Province demanded that the crew stay off the ship while they waited for the delegation to complete the negotiations.

They hadn't gone three more steps when Gray spotted a group of five Rycans approaching swiftly from a blast door cut into the jagged rock that made up the walls and ceiling of the docking station area.

A stodgy, short bald man with a ring of hair around his head attached to a full brown beard, led the pack of four other Rycan negotiators in his party. Dressed formally in the recognized uniform denoting he was an "official" Rycan negotiator, the pompous expression on his florid face summed up his personality in seconds for Gray.

"I'm Frade, leader of the Rycan delegation to Echo Province, and you are?" He leaned forward but didn't extend a hand in greeting.

"I'm Captain Gray Wyckoff, of the *Dalton*."

Next to the lead Rycan delegate, trying to keep up with the fast moving party of negotiators, was a tall thin man wearing a bright green jumpsuit.

Frade pointed to him and said, "This is Hendle. As you can see, he's from this planet."

Given that Hendle's clothing choice was so completely opposite of the dreary surroundings, this man had to be a high official of Echo Province low dwellers. They were known for compensating in extremes to offset their lackluster environment. His squinting suspicious eyes, pursed lips and permanent frown lines bracketing his sour expression, made Gray triply assured of his identity as a high official from Echo Province. Perceptually unhappy was another mark of an Echo Province low dweller.

"And where is the leader of the Seriillial Warriors?" Gray asked, wondering if poor Nathan was trapped somewhere with a group of

them.

Frade glanced over his shoulder briefly in disgust and said, “Somewhere back in the tunnels. Good riddance. They’ve ruined this negotiation with their unwillingness to compromise anything.”

The Serillial Warriors, wherever they were, usually dressed in bland brown, black and gray clothing to camouflage them in their topside surroundings. They also exuded a very pungent body odor if anyone got too close, the stench of which was guaranteed to keep strangers away to avoid continual retching. He couldn’t imagine being locked up with them for fifteen hours as Nathan had been upon his arrival here.

Frade continued in an arrogant tone without looking up. “It doesn’t matter where those foul creatures are. Negotiations are officially off. And another thing, Captain Wyckoff, it’s about time you arrived. We’ve been deadlocked in our hopeless discussions and now our own planet needs us immediately. We’ve been waiting eternally for you to show up and escort us...” His angry speech trailed off as he looked up and finally noticed Gray’s filter mask.

“Why in the world are you wearing that mask? There is no contamination here.”

“Unfortunately, we’ve had a minor accident aboard the *Dalton*. The liquid and solid waste sewer assembly leaked into the ventilation system. It’s slightly fragrant inside. You ‘do’ have full decontamination suits complete with masks, hoods and gloves equipped with enough filter units to last for five days journey to Rycan, don’t you?”

“Yes, but surely you don’t expect us to travel for five days suited up like quarantine victims, do you?”

Gray shrugged. “I’d recommend it. It doesn’t smell very pretty on board the *Dalton* right now. A filter mask will protect you from the foul scent, but a full decontamination body suit would keep your clothes from being permanently saturated for the trip.”

“This is outrageous.” Frade turned to his companions as if for

confirmation of his belief. “What if we don’t wear suits?”

“That’s up to you. But if you decide to go without a D-suit and get sick then you’ll have to clean up your own mess. I’ve got a limited crew this trip and no time for nursemaids.” He turned to the green suited man, Hendle. “My crew has completely disembarked the *Dalton*. How long before we can get back on board to power up and take the delegation to Rycan?”

“Less than an hour, captain,” Hendle answered with an almost joy to his tone that Gray had never heard from one of his race. His abnormal exuberance was likely due to the fact he was about to get rid of Frade and the other delegates.

“Can’t your scans radiate a super potent deodorizer or something at the same time to alleviate the problems on board your ship?”

“I’m not letting them radiate anything onto the *Dalton*.” Gray frowned. “We have the problem under control. It’s just a bad smell not a rampant flesh eating bacterial threat.”

Frade ignored him and sent a piercing stare to Hendle gesturing for his answer.

Hendle shook his head. “Our equipment is used to detect explosives and other dangerous unstable substances with bomb capabilities. We don’t deal with any fragrance problem. Our environment is so harsh it’s rarely a problem we worry about.”

Frade gestured to the lonely *Mirage* bay. “Why can’t we take *that* ship over there on to Rycan? It’s one of yours, isn’t it?”

“Oh sorry,” Gray lamented, “It *is* mine, but *that* ship doesn’t have the approved paperwork to enter your atmosphere. We hoped it would be approved by the time you were ready to leave next week, however with this priority emergency call, the *Dalton* is your only choice of ship.”

At that opportune time, Gray scratched the side of his helmet and signaled Angelica.

The outer hull vents near the open cargo door opened and released the vilest smelling odor ever concocted into the air. At least Gray

assumed the scent was bad, since he was wearing a protective mask.

There was complete silence for several seconds after the blast and then the odor reached Frade and the other delegates.

Frade's face contorted, he gagged a couple of times and covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve. "I will not get on your ship, captain, unless you can assure me and my fellow delegates that there is no chance of that stench being on board." The four delegates behind him nodded their heads in agreement.

"Well, sir until I get back to the Bravura docks so I can run a full decontamination and deodorization program, I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

"You can't force me to get on your ship, captain."

"The priority emergency message you sent to bring me out of my way to pick you up says I can. I've been called from another transportation assignment and there are expenses involved with my coming to pick you up. Do you have an emergency or not?"

Frade shifted his stare from Gray's mask to the *Dalton* as a sincere look of distaste crossed his features. His gaze drifted from the *Dalton* to the *Mirage* and after a few seconds more, his eyes narrowed.

"Has the authorization paperwork begun on your other ship by any chance?"

"Yes. But it hasn't been approved and no date has been given for its completion. I'm here now with the *Dalton*, ready to take you to Rycan."

"If we withdraw our priority, and demand to be put on your other ship, you won't be able to stop us."

Gray pushed out what he hoped sounded like a sigh of disgust. He then tried not to laugh out loud at the predictability of pompous asses with regard to being told what they could and couldn't do. "A transaction complete with payment has been established for an emergency retrieval or otherwise, believe me, I wouldn't be here. If you withdraw, you'll still have to pay half of my fee."

“Fine.” He turned to Hendle with an authoritative air. “See that our things are sent over to the *Mirage* and get me a priority message link to Bravura Space Command. I’ll see that the *Mirage* has its paperwork approved in no time.”

Hendle skittered off to secure the link for Frade’s business, leaving them unattended.

“Captain Wyckoff, I want you to go down to the negotiation room and explain everything to the Captain of the *Mirage* and then you may go.”

Gray whispered a vulgar curse for show and shook his head. Doing a private dance of joy after fooling this pompous ass would give everything away, but he couldn’t wait for privacy to tell Nathan what he’d done.

“As you wish. First take the priority hold off of my ship so we can leave after the totally unnecessary Echo Province security scan is complete and I’ll accompany you.”

Frade cleared his throat, but didn’t look at all sorry for causing trouble. Glancing behind him, he snapped his fingers at one of the other delegates. The other man handed him a digital hand-held computer. Frade signed his name, showed Gray the screen with the completed cancellation and transfer of the transportation request to the *Mirage*. He flipped to another screen and wired half the funds they would have earned if they’d had to take the delegation, to Gray’s business account. Finally, he sent a message to the Bravura Space Command Group requesting an immediate upgrade to the application for the *Mirage* to fly into Rycan air space unhindered.

“Satisfied?” he asked in a tone that made Gray want to put a smack down on him and push his sanctimonious face into the dirt.

Instead, he pushed out another long sigh and responded, “I guess so.”

Gray turned to Angelica and Cahill and lowered his voice. “Once you get on board, prep the ship to return to our previous course as soon as possible. You know what to do.”

“Yes, sir,” they responded in unison.

“We’ll be right back and we’ll resume our journey.”

Angelica put her right gloved hand on her left wrist. It was an established signal for the crew of the *Dalton* with various meanings attached. Basically it meant, “congratulations on a job well done” or “good job we’ve won” and could convey triumph over those uninformed. A silent victory signal to boost morale.

Cahill saw Angelica’s signal and allowed the barest of smiles to form at the corner of his mouth. He and Angelica promptly saluted, which Gray returned. They executed a perfectly choreographed right face turn and headed towards the *Dalton*’s open bay door to wait for admittance back on the ship.

Gray turned and walked over to Penelope still waiting near the ramp and pointed to the door that the delegation had just come through before joining them. They’d promptly danced with perfection to his “I don’t want to fly you anywhere” tune without knowing it. He allowed a self satisfied smile to shape his mouth. “I need to talk to someone then we’re out of here, okay?”

“May I go with you?”

“Sure. It’s in the caves. Are you okay with that?”

Penelope nodded and together they walked towards the underground entrance. Gray had been here a couple of times before, and he suspected nothing had changed. Hendle scrambled over and stopped them. “I’m sorry, Captain Wyckoff, but you’ll have to be escorted.”

“I know where the negotiation rooms are.”

“Yes, sir, but you still have to have a guide.”

“Fine. Will you please accompany us? I’m in a hurry to get on my way.”

Hendle glanced over his shoulder at the delegation. They chattered amongst themselves about how long it would take to get aboard the *Mirage* and when they started complaining about their time spent on Echo Province, Hendle nodded. “Yes. I can accompany

you as far as the second blast door in the tunnel.”

“Great. Have the passageway guard call for the captain of the *Mirage* to meet us there.”

Once he trotted on ahead to the guard to make the request for Nathan to meet them, Gray leaned in toward Penelope. “Hang in there for another hour. We’re almost free.”

She nodded again and stepped closer to him as they strolled to the underground entryway trailing behind the effervescent green glow of Hendle’s clothing. The tunnel was circular with the exception of the flat pathway where they walked. Echo Province had spent decades creating the underground space where they dwelled.

At the first blast door, Gray helped Penelope step over the six inch wide trench which was where the blast door hidden above dropped into during emergencies. The tunnel was very well lit and while Gray wasn’t claustrophobic he appreciated the large bright path to follow.

“How much farther?” Gray asked.

“Not too much longer. We’re about to come to a bend in the tunnel which will drift to the right until we reach the second blast door.”

Penelope stopped and tugged on Gray’s sleeve. “I need to change the filter in my mask.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about the smell here in the caves,” Hendle said.

“I have very bad allergies and I don’t like to test my resolve in new places,” Penelope recited quickly before Gray could even form a response. “Besides, I’ll just have to put it back on before we board the ship.”

Hendle looked dubious but soon nodded. They stopped while she slipped her spare cartridge in and popped out the old one. Pocketing it, they continued along until they heard voices.

They rounded a sharp curve in the tunnel and Gray saw Nathan walking with another brightly clothed man dressed in a shade of orange just this side of the brightness of a sun gone super nova.

Nathan spied him and smiled. Gray crossed the trench for the second blast door. Penelope trailed behind him having stopped before traversing the dip. He marched ahead two steps and held out his hand to shake Nathan's already outstretched palm.

"Nathan. Good to see you."

"You are a sight for sore eyes, Captain. If I didn't think you'd enjoy it so much, I'd kiss you on the mouth."

"Very funny. I've missed you too."

"What's with the filter mask? I promise, I'm not really going to kiss you."

Gray glanced at the two brightly dressed Echo Province leaders several paces away and deeper into the cave and murmured, "I told the delegation there was sewage leak into the ventilation system on the *Dalton*. With a single blast of noxious fumes from a sewer tank, I've convinced them to push through the paperwork for the *Mirage*. Therefore, you get to take them to Rycan as soon as the license clears you for authority."

Nathan grinned. "Good job, Gray. The delegation headed to Rycan are all pompous assholes, but that will certainly take a load off of the *Dalton's* steady consignment of trips in the future. Great news for the company."

Gray turned and noticed that Penelope was still several paces away past the dip in the floor of the blast door. "I'd like you to meet someone, Nathan. This is Dr. Penelope Drake. She's a scientist at the Bravura Science Lab." He pointed to Penelope before realizing she looked a little bit distressed behind her mask for some reason. She shook her head a little, but Gray didn't understand why.

Nathan stepped forward and headed toward Penelope with his hand extended. "Pleased to meet you ma'am. I hope Captain Wyckoff has been treating you well."

Once Nathan got a good look at Penelope, he stopped in his tracks and uttered a shocked sounding, "You!" He glanced at Gray and then fixed his gaze back on Penelope. "At the café on Bravura. In the ally."

“Yes. It’s me. I’m so sorry. Please let me explain,” she said in a nervous tone. “You see, I have a virus that makes me do things I wouldn’t normally do.”

Nathan crossed over the blast door trench just as a percussive explosion rocked the tunnel and knocked all of them off their feet.

Seconds later the second blast door dropped neatly into its prepared trench sealing Gray on one side of the clear barrier with the two men from Echo Province.

Meanwhile, Nathan was now on the other side of the six inch thick barrier with Penelope.

Chapter 9

Trapped behind a clear wall, Gray watched as Nathan gained his footing in the aftermath of the explosion. He reached out to help Penelope to her feet on the other side of the transparent blast door. She'd gone face down on to the floor of the cave. Damn it. They were trapped apart. Gray stood up wondering how long before the barrier could be raised.

From behind him, Gray heard the other men run away from the blast door. They disappeared around the tunnel corner, leaving him alone. His attention went back to the other side of the barrier.

Penelope staggered to her feet with Nathan's help and turned toward the blast door. Her mask was damaged. The heart-pumping realization that she was about to be without protection forced his spine to snap to attention. He could see part of her lovely jaw line as she reached to straighten the off kilter mask.

Her fingertips touched her skin. Comprehending that it was broken and she was exposed, Penelope screamed. He couldn't hear her, but he saw the terror on her face. Gray pressed his body against the clear barrier and beat uselessly on the blast door. There was only a one in four chance that Nathan was a candidate she was attracted to enough to trigger the virus. But given what she'd said to Nathan right before the blast, he suspected they were already acquainted.

Penelope ripped the now worthless mask from her face. Gray did the same to his, pulling it over his head and bouncing it off the ground.

Pressing her fingertips against her face as tears trailed down her cheeks, Penelope turned and caught Gray's gaze. She shook her head

as if in denial of who stood with her, and Gray figured out for certain who she'd had sex with just after the initial discovery of her disease. Nathan's favorite café was near the Bravura Science Lab, and he always made time to get a cup of coffee before every trip like a superstition. It wasn't a stretch to figure out what alley she'd been in once the virus triggered for the first time.

Scrambling away from Nathan, Penelope ran toward the blast door where Gray was pressed, wishing he could melt the panel and take her into his arms. She put her hand up against the barrier at face level. Gray placed his hand to hers through the clear impenetrable wall.

He couldn't hear her, but she mouthed the words, "I'm so sorry."

A smudge of dirt marked her forehead and jaw from the blast that had knocked her off her feet. She was breathing hard likely from fear, and like clockwork, the lusty glazed over expression of her virus washed down her face, changing her personality just as he'd witnessed before. She pressed her hands against the wall as if she had the strength to push through it. Frustration soon shaped her look as she realized she wasn't going to be able to get to him.

Nathan walked forward and closer to Penelope with a vibrant "what the fuck" look on his face. Penelope turned, tilted her head to one side briefly, and without warning launched at him. He caught her into his arms and held her against his chest, but when she tried to kiss him, he turned his head away to avoid it. Penelope, undaunted by his seeming lack of desire for participation, pulled away and started trying to take his clothes off. Nathan stilled her hands on his jacket zipper so she lowered her hands to his crotch and rubbed his dick. Dodging her familiarity with his privates, Nathan sent a puzzled look over her shoulder.

Now that he had Nathan's attention, Gray fisted his hand and pounded on the barrier and screamed, "Don't let her suffer!"

Nathan's expression bordered on shock first and then sad resolve next. Penelope talked at what looked like a mile a minute as she

resumed pulling his jacket off. He stopped fighting her, removed the garment himself and discarded it on the ground.

She doubled over for a minute and Nathan had to help her straighten. She threw her arms around his neck, and her hips gyrated against Nathan's crotch. For his part, Nathan seemed very reluctant to do what she asked, but Gray could tell he wouldn't let her linger in pain. He rested his forehead against Penelope's and started nodding.

The decontamination deployment tubes on the walls near the blast door started filling the space behind the blast door with a misty fog that smelled like sour dirt. It swirled around Gray's legs as he watched Penelope hurriedly slip out of her slacks. A hand went over her mouth as if she stifled a scream accompanied by her hunching over at the waist.

Nathan bent down to her and rubbed her back, obviously trying to help. Unable to tear his eyes away from what was about to happen, Gray found he was more upset about Penelope's escalating pain. The anguish now resting on her lovely face was more agonizing to endure than the idea of watching her have sex with his best friend. He almost screamed, "Hurry up! Damn it. Can't you see that she's in pain?" They couldn't hear him.

Penelope turned her back on Gray and pulled at Nathan's shoulders until he dropped to his knees. She wrapped her arms around his neck and put her hand on the front of Nathan's open trousers. She rubbed and grabbed at his stiffening cock until he pushed her to the ground. Penelope was talking again. "Please hurry. Oh God it hurts. Please..."

Her eyes closed, and her back arced as if wracked with the burning pain of her virus. Watching her discomfort made Gray antsy. He wanted Nathan to speed up and stop her from suffering.

Nathan nodded and pulled his pants off to his hips. Stiff cock emerging, Nathan put a hand on his member and directed it toward Penelope's open legs.

Thrusting into her for the first time, Nathan closed his eyes and

paused for a moment. Penelope was crying now in earnest. Several runnels of tear tracks stained her cheeks. Writhing back and forth on the ground beneath Nathan, she arched her back once again as pure anguish registered on her face. Gray melted into the barrier wanting her agony to end. *Please hurry.*

Nathan picked up the pace of his thrusts and stroked inside her at a faster pace.

Penelope grabbed at his shoulders. She pulled on his ass as if to make him go faster. After what seemed like an eternity, Nathan thrust inside Penelope deeply and stiffened as his head fell forward. The instant he came inside of her body, the utter joy from lack of pain on Penelope's face almost made Gray weep with relief.

The decontamination fog thickened and roiled all around. For the barest instance, he locked his gazes with Penelope as she became aware of herself and what had just happened. Her eyes narrowed in sorrow before the mist took his view. With his forehead pressed against the chilly glass now fully engulfed in opaque mist, the true and vile nature of the sex or suffer virus hit him square in the chest.

Nathan didn't know what Penelope meant to him, but Gray couldn't think of anyone he trusted more to "help her out" while he was ensconced in this hellish incarceration.

Unfortunately, his containment would add an undetermined amount of waiting on to the time to get her the five day minimum journey to the Parsec Colony. Gray knew she couldn't wait. Hell, she shouldn't have to linger here. He stepped away from the wall on a mission to find a communication device. He'd send word for the *Dalton* to depart Echo Province as soon as Penelope and Nathan were on board.

* * * *

Penelope was shattered beyond her capacity for rational thought. The man she had fallen in love with had just watched her have sex

with Nathan. She wanted to die. Poised over her on his knees and still intimately attached, Nathan came to his senses quickly and separated from her. He yanked her to her feet, handed her the clothing she'd removed and started hauling her down the tunnels. Trotting along in errant fashion, he kept her from slamming into rock walls. She didn't care. She came out of her lust and saw a glimpse of Gray's face before the mist consumed him.

Gray had seen her.

With Nathan.

Because she had this fucking virus.

Nathan pushed her further away from the blast door and the mist consumed space behind the clear wall. The solid fog now swirling about behind the barrier where she couldn't see Gray anymore. When she realized Nathan wasn't slowing down, Penelope stopped in her tracks and refused to move. "Wait. We need to get Gray. We can't just leave him behind."

"Sorry, sweetheart. He's locked in for at least the next three days and probably longer. We have got to go right this second, or we'll suffer the same fate."

"Oh God. But I need him." She stopped again, but he grabbed her by the shoulders and got her moving again.

"Come on. We need to get off the planet surface before they won't allow us to leave. I'll take you back to the *Dalton*, I'll do whatever I can to help you and we'll wait it out in orbit."

"But we were on our way to the Parsec Colony. I need to get there. My time is running out." Penelope did her best not to stumble as he prodded her forward down the wide tunnel.

"What's on the Parsec Colony?" For a man she'd given few details to and two sexual encounters that really needed some clarification, Nathan was a decent guy not to demand an explanation.

"They have the cure for the virus that I contracted. It makes me need sex or else I hurt."

Nathan turned his head without slowing down and his soft gaze

searched her face for she knew not what. “Hurt? There is no need to sugarcoat it for me sweetheart, that virus doesn’t make you ‘hurt’, it makes you scream in pain.”

“Only until I have sex.”

Arm fastened around her to help keep the breakneck pace, he squeezed her tighter as if he could protect her from all the bad things she’d already had to endure. When he spoke, his voice was almost a murmur. “That is the worst thing I have ever heard of in my life, and I’ve heard of some monstrous things.”

Over one shoulder she sent a glance to Gray. She couldn’t see him anymore and the absence already made her heart ache. The memory of what Gray had mouthed to Nathan when he pounded on the glass surfaced in her mind. “Don’t let her suffer!” Tears welled up with pure unrelenting anger at this unjust situation.

Nathan pulled her, stumbling further and further away from Gray. They traveled faster and faster towards the first blast door they’d crossed in the direction of the *Dalton*. The blast door was still up, but five seconds after they passed the dip, a heart pounding alarm pealed relentlessly. The clear wall crashed down into the grooved space they’d just crossed.

They didn’t stop.

“Not much further.” Nathan wrapped an arm around her shoulders and sped his steps, trying to get her to keep pace with his urgency.

Penelope didn’t want to argue, but she wasn’t a great runner by any stretch of the imagination. She was already out of breath as they made their way back to the dock. “Do we still need to run?”

“Yes. I don’t want them to seal the tunnels with us inside. They take drills very seriously here. I imagine that they also take sudden unexplained explosions to an entirely new plane of security.”

“Good point.” Ignoring the stitch in her side and with the threat of possible burial if she didn’t move her butt, she pumped her legs faster and in close rhythm with Nathan’s. If he hadn’t been propelling her along as they ran, she never would have made it. They ran through the

door to the hangar seconds before a guard snapped the entrance shut.

“Halt. You have to be tested for explosive residue. And I recommend putting filter masks on.”

Penelope was grateful to halt. Nathan raised his arms over his head and widened his stance. Penelope mimicked his movements, still trying to catch her breath. The guard handed them two cheap, disposable filter masks and waved a square black handheld device over each of them slowly. He nodded once and walked away. Apparently they were free to go.

“I’m not sure if the stench is still lingering. We should likely wear these.” Penelope slipped her mask into place.

Nathan put his mask on quickly. He then slung an arm around her again, pulled her close, and led her to the lively activity at the *Dalton*’s lower bay ramp.

Angelica, still wearing her mask, turned and fixed a surprised stare as she and Nathan approached the ship. “Lieutenant Commander Tyndall?” Her gaze widened as she searched Penelope’s face with the new filter mask. “Where is the captain?”

“He’s locked in the tunnels behind the second blast door.”

Again Lieutenant Brice’s gaze found Penelope. “For how long?”

Nathan pushed out a sigh and answered, “Minimum three days, but I’m betting it will be more since something exploded down there.”

Cahill galloped down the interior ramp from the cargo bay of the *Dalton*. “The captain just called and left a message.”

“What’s the message?” Nathan asked.

“He said to depart Echo Province immediately once we’re released and continue on...without him.” Cahill sent his gaze to her.

“Without him? No. We can’t leave without Gray.” Penelope headed toward the tunnel door.

Nathan grabbed her into a tender hug, pulled her back. She fought him. Silent tears erupted, but he held her close and whispered over and over that it would be okay. He walked her up the ramp and into the *Dalton*. Over her head he asked Angelica, “When can we depart.”

Cahill and Angelica exchanged a look, but the Ensign answered, “At once, when we get clearance from the Echo Province docking command center.”

Angelica took a step closer. “Do you want me to take Dr. Drake to her quarters?”

Nathan squeezed her tighter as she sniffed. “No. I’ll do it. I’ll return to the command deck once I get Penelope settled in her room. Is she in the quarantine cabin?”

“Yes, sir.”

Penelope did her best to keep the tears locked inside as the ramp ascended closing off the ship to the Echo Province dock.

And Gray.

* * * *

Nathan escorted a distraught Penelope toward her room on the *Dalton*. Her progress slowed as if she walked through a trough of mud. He gave up and carried her the final leg since their movement was so prolonged. Once inside her room he put her on the edge of the bed and squatted next to her. “What can I do?” He put a hand on her knee more to make himself feel better and resisted the urge to pat her like a domestic pet.

Her utter sadness was pervasive. “No...nothing.”

“There’s got to be something. Maybe a shower would make you feel better. Do you want me to turn the water on for you?” He’d never considered himself an expert at giving comfort. Humor was a much easier to deliver, but was inappropriate in this instance.

She shook her head back and forth in response to his shower query. Nathan didn’t know what to do. He lifted himself from the floor and sat next to her on the bunk.

Elbows resting on his knees, Nathan hung his head. “You’re killing me, sweetheart.”

Her back straightened and she sent a gaze in his direction. It was

the first time she'd actually looked at him since they boarded the *Dalton*. "What...what do you mean?"

Nathan hadn't gone a single day without thinking about her. He knew her name was Dr. Drake from the café where he'd met her the first time right before leaving Bravura. From the quick introduction in the cave from Gray, he now knew her first name was Penelope. Handy given what had commenced after the explosion and the subsequent blast door's fall.

"You've been on my mind since..." Without finishing his thought, he sent a sideways glance to gauge her expression.

"The alley," she supplied and hunkered down to his level. "I owe you a long explanation."

"Well, I have been very worried about you. And there are several levels of guilt that have been eating at me since we were together on Bravura."

"Don't feel guilty. You saved me from a horrendous pain you can't imagine."

"I'm glad I relieved your pain, but the guilt is for something else."

"What else?"

"You left a couple of things behind in the alley."

Her lovely brow furrowed. "I grabbed my bag. The only thing I left behind was my dinner sack."

"And your panties."

"Oh." Color rose in her cheeks like the sun in the morning. "I forgot about those."

"I still have them, but they're currently hidden in my quarters on the *Mirage*."

She cleared her throat and looked at her feet. "You don't have to feel guilty about that either."

"And I ate your dinner, too." Her eyes narrowed in confusion. "The one you left behind outside Nikki's café? I couldn't find you and I hated to see it go to waste." Nathan had taken away her dinner and her panties from that alley once he'd gotten his clothes

straightened. He'd looked around for her briefly, but ultimately had to leave for the *Mirage* to depart the planet. He ran to the dock platform and his ship without realizing what he carried until a dock worker gave him an odd look.

A laugh erupted next to him breaking his reverie. "After all that's happened, you're worried about eating my dinner?"

Nathan turned and smiled. "Yeah. *That* and one 'other' thing."

"What other thing?"

He took her hand and kissed her palm. "I will always remember being in the alley with you for the rest of my life. " He paused and gazed into her eyes. "And I'll never forget that you didn't get any pleasure out of it."

"Honestly, relieving the pain was pleasure enough. I'm sorry I didn't have time to send you a note. "

"Don't worry about that, but now with the Echo Province cave incident fresh in my mind, that makes two in a row."

"I don't understand."

"The second to the last time I had sex took place with you in an alley against a wall. The last time I had sex was also with you, but instead it happened on the floor of a cave in a tunnel on another planet.

"I'm two for two in the 'don't bother to give your partner any pleasure' competition, not to mention the luxurious setting we shared during each unexpected affair. I believe as a result I've been named a finalist in the Mr. Galactic Tender Romance contender of the year. So I have that to look forward to."

Another laugh escaped. She reached out, hugged him around the neck and kissed his cheek. "You're funny."

"I try. Especially in difficult situations." Nathan put an arm around her shoulders. "Please let me make up for it. Let me give you some pleasure."

Penelope turned toward him and he tightened his embrace. "You don't need to do that." Her breath brushed the skin at his collar and

sent a pulse of desire down his spine.

“Let me do it anyway. I feel like such a bastard prick.”

“But you aren’t.” She pulled away and her gaze pierced his soul. She caressed his face with one soft hand. A tender gesture he wanted to explore. Nathan glanced at her mouth briefly before he lowered his face and kissed her.

His recent dreams held many scenarios where he’d kissed Dr. Drake, instead of what had really happened in that alley. Nathan had wanted a “do over” since the first scorching kiss they’d shared right before the exciting dangerous sex that came after. But in his dreams she released with a grateful sigh instead of climbing off his cock to run.

Nathan cupped the back of her head and pulled her tighter. He pressed his lips lightly to hers. She didn’t move. Instead, she tensed up. A stray thought hit him like a renegade meteor and he broke away. Penelope hadn’t wanted to leave Gray behind in the tunnel and the reason why was stamped in her reluctance.

“You and Gray are involved.” It was both a question and a statement.

She cast her gaze from his and whispered, “Yes.”

“Much more than just a cure for this illness, right?”

“Yes,” she said again in the same quiet tone. She put a hand across her eyes and rubbed either side of her face as if massaging away the stress of today Nathan held her and rocked her gently. He considered Gray being left behind and the fact that the woman he was involved with had to have sex with his best friend right before his eyes. More guilt heaped on Nathan’s already abraded soul.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“Don’t be. It’s not like I’m not attracted to you or nothing would have happened between us in the first place. But I feel like I’ve betrayed him in the worst possible scenario.”

“Don’t. Gray and I have been best friends since before we could talk. Nothing will ever change that.”

“But he watched us—”

“He also pounded on the wall and ordered me not to let you suffer. I promise you infidelity isn’t involved in this equation. Not between Gray and me.” Nathan mentally backed up a step. He wanted to right what he considered a wrong regarding their sexual experiences together, but he wasn’t really looking for a permanent relationship. Gray must have very deep feelings for her based on the tortured expression he displayed while trapped behind the blast door.

Nathan wouldn’t ever do anything to ruin that.

“Thank you for understanding.”

“No problem. Mind if I ask how you and Gray got together?” Her brows narrowed so he added, “If it helps, he likely would have told me himself, eventually.”

“Shortly after the *Dalton* took off from Bravura, the power went out. When it came back on, my room and Gray’s reverted back to the original programming and began sharing air. So...I went to his room.” The blush which rose quickly on her cheeks was a beautiful deep crimson color. “As a matter of fact they haven’t been able to figure out why it keeps happening.”

“I know why. Gray didn’t allow a full diagnostic to run on the *Dalton’s* engines before taking off again. There are several systems which are very persnickety about regeneration time.”

“Which is also my fault because I’m in such a hurry to get to the Parsec Colony and end this agony.”

Nathan pondered the strain on the *Dalton’s* engines if he ramped the capacity to over one hundred percent and tasked his memory regarding the landing procedures for the place they were headed. “Tell me what happens when we get to the Parsec Colony.”

Penelope stared at him with puzzlement in her eyes for a few moments. “What do you mean?”

“Once we land, are you going to have the cure brought to the *Dalton* while we’re docked?”

“No. I’ll have to go get it. I have an invoice from the Bravura

Science Labs with their insignia and—” She stopped in mid sentence and stricken look she gave him made his heart skip a beat in concern.

“What?”

“I can’t wear a filter mask into the Parsec Colony Science Lab without raising suspicion as to why. Once I get this cure, I’ll have to inject it and wait an hour for it to take effect.” She glanced at him. “And I’ll have to test it.”

“Test it. You mean like hang out with me in a room until—” She nodded so he didn’t complete the sentence. Nathan squeezed her hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll go with you. And you won’t even need me because you’ll be cured. We’ll do a quick dance of joy and then I’ll take you back to Gray so you can truly celebrate.”

“You’re so nice. But that’s not all.” A long sigh escaped, but she shook her head, inhaled deeply and promptly focused her gaze directly into his eyes. “The temporary fix only works for about three and a half hours.”

Nathan squinted, trying to figure out what about the problem was. Then it dawned on him. “You’ll need another temporary ‘fix’ before we exit the ship and pick up the cure.”

She nodded once. “It’s awkward. But I don’t know what else to do. My boss knows people on the Parsec Colony. I don’t want any speculation over what disease I have. Especially not this one.”

Nathan pondered the problem for a minute, trying to think of a way to make the awkward sexual act less embarrassing. “I have an idea for that when the time comes. But first, how much time do I have left from when we were in the cave? I don’t want to over stay my welcome right now.”

Penelope glanced across the room at the time piece on the wall. “At least two hours maybe more. What’s your idea?”

“I’d rather surprise you. Then you won’t be thinking about it for the next five days. I’ll call you an hour before we depart the ship and outline my plan.”

Penelope nodded and her trembling mouth was too hard to resist.

Hands cupping her face, he kissed her lips with tender attention several times before he stood from the bed.

“We don’t know each other very well, but from now on and forever, I’m always your friend, Penelope. Always. No matter what happens.”

“Thank you.”

Nathan exited her room and reminded her to sterilize it once he was out of the room. He headed to the command deck with a sense of purpose. He’d pull every ounce of power out of the engines to get to the Parsec Colony as fast as possible.

Out of nowhere the notion that he’d have sex with her again pinged his mind.

Knowing what he knew now about her illness and her relationship with Gray, the idea of having sex with Penelope once again was an idea that both compelled and dismayed him.

* * * *

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

Angelica’s heart skipped a beat. Ensign Cahill had entered the command deck without a whisper of sound. He was exceptionally good at sneakiness because of all his military training. Plus, she’d been lost in thought pondering Dr. Drake’s illness and what she might do in the same situation. Likely there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do to cure herself and sincerely hoped she’d never be put to the test.

“Yes. I guess I have.”

“I miss you, Angelica.”

She released a deep sigh. “I miss you too, Ensign.”

“Do I get to know why we aren’t seeing each other anymore or are you just done with me on general principle?”

“It’s because of Nathan. Now that he’s taken over as captain...” She paused and cleared her throat. “I just don’t want him to know. It would be uncomfortable if he found out about us.”

“Why, because you two used to have a hot sexual thing going?”

Angelica twisted in the captain’s chair so fast she almost fell out of it. “No! Where did you get that from?”

Cahill shrugged, but the expression on his face said he was relieved she hadn’t slept with Nathan. “Why can’t he know about us? The captain didn’t seem to care.”

“Captain Wyckoff is my boss, but we’ve worked together long enough that he trusts me. While he would worry about our working relationship, as long as we didn’t go for it on the command deck or any other public places aboard, he wouldn’t care.

“Nathan, on the other hand, is like a big brother to me. I don’t believe he’d be happy with anyone I chose. He definitely wouldn’t approve of us because he’s opposed to shipboard affairs. With him as acting captain, I don’t want to cause problems on this journey.”

He moved closer and his male scent greeted her first. “I *really* miss you, Angelica. There are things I’d like to do to you. Tonight. After your shift.”

The spicy muskiness of him caressed her lungs and teased her libido. She could almost taste him in the air from every breath she took. An ache formed in her core the likes of which she’d never felt before. “What do you want to do to me?” The desperate sound in her voice couldn’t be hidden.

“Make you scream in delight.”

Angelica almost moaned out loud. She took a deep breath and with it came his delectable scent again. She’d denied herself the pleasure of his touch for four days and each one had been utter torture. She attempted bravado. “And you think I miss that?”

“I know you do. I think you *need* it. Or maybe you need *me*, Angelica. Admit it.”

“Never. I don’t need anyone.”

“You’re absolutely right. You don’t need me, but tell me you’ll come to my room tonight anyway because you want me.”

“No.” But her resolve weakened with every breath she took.

“Please?” The whispered request with a hint of desperation was unexpected. She’d thought he wouldn’t even miss her, but deep down truly wanted him to track her down. He cared about her, if just a little bit. Or maybe he just missed the sex.

She stiffened her resolve. “I’ll think about it. No promises.”

“I’ll leave my door unlocked. You won’t be sorry.”

Angelica had avoided his gaze since he’d been next to her, but she looked deeply into his eyes. Mistake. She wanted him. She needed him. “I’m already sorry.” *Because I love you, Cahill. And that’s the true problem. I don’t know how you feel.*

Even though he was already too near for her comfort level, he slid even closer. Now she could reach out and touch him if she wanted. And she *really* wanted.

“I’ll never be sorry.” He sent her one last smoldering look before leaving her alone to ponder the fantasy of permanence with a co-worker aboard the *Dalton* and the inherent difficulty of such an arrangement.

Three hours later, Nathan arrived to relieve her on the command deck. Angelica planned to exit the bridge and race to Cahill’s room before he changed his mind and locked her out.

She slipped from the captain’s chair and handed Nathan the communication device.

Leveling an uncomfortable look at Nathan, she asked, “How is Dr. Drake doing?”

Nathan took the device and glanced at it before responding, “I would have to say that she’s been better. However, she’s resting. I assured her we’ve been making good time.”

Angelica brightened. “We’re running the engines at fifteen percent above capacity today. So far they seem to be bearing up to the strain.”

Nathan nodded distractedly. “Noted. I’ll keep an eye on them. Anything else I need to know?”

“Kerchner from engineering will relieve you in six hours. The

rotating shift is logged in the communication device and I guess that's it unless you have any questions."

"Nope. Carry on, Lieutenant Brice."

She got as far as the door when he added, "Tell Cahill he better not hurt you or he will deal with me."

"Sir?" She took a deep breath, cleared her face of emotion and twisted around with the best quizzical expression she could master.

Nathan laughed. "You heard me."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean." Angelica crossed her arms and lifted one eyebrow, daring him to explain.

"You know exactly what I mean. I can see it in your eyes, Angelica. You like him. He likes you. The truth is Cahill's carried a quiet torch for you since he boarded this vessel. You must have made the first move because he never would have."

"What makes you say that?"

Nathan's gaze twinkled as if he had secret information. "Three things. His past career in the military didn't lend itself to permanent relationships. He is cautious regarding the life he has now aboard the *Dalton* because he wants to keep it. And most importantly, I threatened him within an inch of his life if he ever did anything to upset you the first time I noticed his adoration."

"What?" Angelica blinked and refocused on Nathan's sardonic expression.

"You heard me. What I said still goes as far as I'm concerned."

"My relationship, whatever it is, with Ensign Cahill isn't in your purview, sir." She didn't want to be thwarted in her sensual mission tonight.

Nathan tilted his head to one side. "Perhaps you're right, Lieutenant, but I've decided to amend my thoughts on the matter."

"Oh? To include what?"

"Screw him if you must, but don't drag it out. He doesn't deserve to be hurt when you're done."

"You think that anything I did could possibly hurt him?"

Nathan fixed a surly glare on her. "I know it would. Tread lightly. I mean it."

"I will neither confirm or deny your allegations. But I will say, mind your own business, sir." She did a crisp about-face and exited the bridge without another word.

Interesting conversation. Angelica marched toward Cahill's room and thought so hard about what Nathan had just inferred that she almost walked past his room.

She opened the door without knocking and stepped inside Cahill's dim quarters, quickly closing it behind her. Across the room, he sat up abruptly in bed. "Whoa. You surprised me." He ran a hand down his face as if he'd dozed off waiting and quickly scooted across his bunk.

"I thought you invited me here."

Cahill threw his legs over the edge of his bed and stood. "Given your absence of late, I didn't know if you'd show up, now did I?"

Angelica watched him emerge from his bed to see if he'd been naked beneath the sheets. He wore shorts so she sighed and said, "Nathan knows about us."

Cahill's eyes narrowed. "Well, I didn't tell him anything."

"Neither did I. He guessed. Apparently, I look at you differently now that we're sleeping together." She threw up a hand in the air in disgust of apparently being so easy to read.

A lazy grin formed on Cahill's lips sending a pulse of desire streaking down her body. With a decidedly predatory gleam in his eyes, Cahill sauntered closer. The black silky shorts he wore hid nothing and she noticed his cock stiffening beneath the fly. "Is that so?"

Angelica didn't respond. She was busy watching him approach. The muscles in his very well formed legs bunched and released with each step he took closer and closer still. Her heart pounded so hard in her chest she expected to see it exit her body at any moment.

He cupped his hands on either side of her face, stepped directly into her personal space, overwhelming all of her senses, and plastered

his lips over her mouth. Angelica leaned into his warmth unable to stop her urge to touch, taste and smell him all at once.

Cahill released her lips long enough to say, “I love you, Angelica,” before resuming the seductive kiss. Her heart skittered on the edge of shock at his quiet earnest declaration.

Pushing back enough to break the connection, she gazed into his eyes with blissful sincerity and whispered, “I love you too, Cahill.”

He scooped her into his beefy arms, twisted her around, walked two long steps and had her on her back and in his bed before she drew her next breath.

“Let me love you.” His rigid cock pressed against her thigh, sending a riotous shiver of pleasure to her pussy and releasing a gush of moisture in readiness for him. “I’ll remind you of what we’ve been missing out on.”

She pushed upward with her hips in silent invitation and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth for encouragement. Cahill lifted off of her only long enough to strip her clothes off as if trying to beat the world speed record for such an event. The final piece of clothing to hit the deck was his black shorts and then he fairly pounced on her like a feline with a tasty treat in its possession.

His mouth clamped on to one peaked nipple. He sucked the bud into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue, distracting her as his hand slid between her legs as if to assess her wetness level.

Angelica moaned and bucked when his large fingers shot inside her pussy unexpectedly. She groaned as his thumb grazed her clit. She screamed when he circled her clit with firm attention and sent her over the edge of a climax she didn’t realize she was at the brink of until he touched her.

Releasing her nipple, he turned his gaze to hers and murmured, “You really *did* miss me, didn’t you? I didn’t expect you to release the second I touched you.”

Panting and gasping for breath, she managed, “Me either. Hard to be sorry about it though.”

His sudden laughter lit her libido like no other sensation. “Oh, I’m not sorry, but I almost sprayed my sheets with cum when you screamed and your pussy clamped on my fingers.”

“What are you waiting for then? Get up here and put that cock where it is supposed to be.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Cahill’s solid warm body shifted and slid upward until his cock fell between her legs. She opened her thighs and his cock dropped neatly between her pussy lips. Half a breath later he pierced her to the hilt with one stroke and internal pleasure radiated from her womb outward.

“We belong together, Angelica.” He pulled out half way, pumped his cock inside her body even deeper than the first stroke and paused in his movement to whisper, “We fit together perfectly, just like this.” He pushed his cock against her womb.

“Yes.” Angelica slipped her arms around his neck. He kissed her hard on the lips, his tongue invading her mouth as deeply his cock embedded into her pussy. He resumed his heavy, hard thrusts mimicking the brutally arousing kiss. Her body was on fire. The scent of his skin, the feel of his lips against hers, the utter possession of her body made her giddy. Cahill overwhelmed her senses. She lifted her hips to meet his powerful strokes and the friction worked to ignite another swell of pleasure. She rushed to yet another commanding pinnacle of bliss.

The orgasm crashed through her with vibrant sensation. She groaned into his mouth as he plowed forward, thrusting his cock hot and hard into her slick pussy. Seconds later Cahill stiffened, broke the kiss, buried his face at her throat and growled in release.

Angelica clutched him hard against her body, scraped her fingernail along his shoulders, neck and through the short hair style he wore. She never wanted to let him go.

“Good God, Angelica.” He panted and his hot breaths brushed across her collarbone. “It’s like I can’t get enough. If I spent two lifetimes making love to you, it still wouldn’t be enough.”

“I’ve never felt this close to anyone, Cahill. Never in my life.” She kissed his forehead tenderly. “I want to tuck myself inside of you and stay forever.”

He lifted his torso and held himself above her balanced on one elbow. “Forever may not be long enough.”

She grinned. “You sap. Forever is all you get from me.” She brushed his face with her hand, and he leaned down to kiss her palm.

Fixing his gaze on her he smiled. “On the day after forever, I’ll convince you to stay with me longer.”

Angelica kissed his lips with a tenderness born of utter love and sighed. “Deal.”

Chapter 10

Penelope paced back and forth across the small space of her cabin. The past five days since leaving Echo Province, and Gray, came and went with agonizing lethargy. Angelica had called an hour ago to tell her the *Dalton* was about to dock on the Parsec Colony, at long last.

She crossed the small room and back again two more times. Her restlessness had to do with the anticipation of Nathan's imminent arrival and the blindingly needful sex that would take place soon after he entered the room.

The bell chimed signaling a communication from someone on the ship. Nathan. She took a deep breath and answered, "Yes."

"It's Nathan. The ship is about to dock. I'm on my way to your cabin. Are you ready for me?"

"I guess so."

"And you understand where I want you to be when I get there, right?"

"Yes. But you'd better hurry once you come into the room."

"I know. Leave the door unlocked for me and I'll be there in five minutes."

Penelope slipped her clothing off, unlocked the door, readied herself per his slightly unusual specifications and hoped that his "idea" would work to make her less embarrassed about what needed to take place before leaving the ship.

She entered the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and turned on the shower. Once the water was steamy, she stepped inside the warm spray and waited. Luckily, she didn't have to linger for very long all alone. The bathroom door opened and closed with swift

clarity. Penelope closed her eyes knowing what would happen as Nathan's scent reached her inside the shower stall. She inhaled deeply and exhaled through the mist of the shower. Her next thought? *Time for sex.*

The throb of lust hit her in the same moment he entered the shower and hugged up to the back of her body. She looked down to see his arms wrapped around her torso and felt a warm kiss on the back of her neck in a very tender spot. She might have demanded more kisses on that lovely sensitive place below one ear, but her body craved something else, and she no longer had any control of her inhibitions. Before she voiced her impatient desire, he squeezed her tight.

"Face the wall," he whispered.

"I need you." Penelope started to turn around, but he halted her progress.

"I know. Now stay right here against the shower tile and I'll take care of you," came his urgent whisper. He pressed into her from behind until the front of her body firmly touched the smooth tile of the shower stall. Her breasts adjusted to the cool feel of the shower surface as his firm warm chest pinned and held her in place. Because of the amorous state she was in, she might have argued and tried harder to turn around, but in the next second his hand slid between her legs and distracted her. Unseen fingers dipped into her body as if assessing her readiness to fuck. She was more than ready.

Penelope pushed back and groaned. "I need—"

Before she could finish her sentence and demand what she wanted, he thrust his cock deeply inside her body from where he stood behind her. She sucked in a breath of surprise and pushed her butt backwards for a deeper connection. He pulled out of her pussy half way, grasped her hips firmly in his hands and pushed inside again deeper and harder.

Rapid thrusts pierced her and in no time, he growled and came in a rush, smothering the burning deep inside of her body with a spray of

semen. She released a long breath and pressed one heated cheek to the cool smooth tile grateful for the swift relief of her pain.

Nathan's hand slid from the top of one hip and dipped between her legs again. Cock still hard and fully embedded in her pussy, a firm finger located her clit and started a slow circular rub. A moan in her ear soon followed as if he found touching her particularly arousing, and he carefully fastened his mouth to the back of her neck again.

Tingles of arousal melted into her from his lips caressing her and his tongue licking the sensitive spot. His cock began a slow move in and out as the insatiable rotation of his finger brought her ever closer to an orgasm she wasn't sure she wanted.

Hesitation in the form of her stiffening spine and rigid body slowed the rubs to her clit as if he understood her unease over allowing any pleasure to commence from him.

"Consider this," came his whispered voice brushing against the tender part of her ear, "You haven't *really* seen who's doing this to you." He gently kissed the back of her neck sending a riot of pleasure cascading down her back before continuing.

"A particular voice is difficult to discern when all you hear is a whisper." He thrust his cock inside her gently as his finger continued stroking her clit, sending more acute bliss racing up and down her body.

"Relax and enjoy. Pretend you're dreaming and let your phantom lover take care of you just this once. I can be anyone you want me to be, Penelope. Anyone at all."

His finger stroked her clit with increasingly firm attention as his cock sped up the thrusts. Alternately he nibbled, kissed and licked the wickedly sensitive space behind her ear.

Penelope smiled and allowed herself to relax and enjoy the sensations he evoked. His perfect idea of a phantom lover was exactly what she needed. He could be Nathan or he could be Gray in her misty, warm fantasy. Either way, she was lucky to have met both of them.

Her phantom lover slammed his cock inside her with considerable force, inspiring delicious sensations with each stroke. Rubbing her clit fervently, he timed the movement perfectly with each stroke of his finger inciting a delectable itch. Arousal sizzled through the network of her veins and pushed her to the ripe pinnacle of climax in mere minutes.

The luscious swell of a spectacular orgasm consumed her and kept her silent for a beat until she could catch a breath. Inhaling deeply, she shrieked as a thrumming climax rode through her body and thought of her love, Gray, in the aftermath of sublime release.

Her lover, still quiet, pumped one last time and came deeply inside her as her pussy gripped his cock in aftershocks of climax. He exhaled, kissed beneath her ear one last time and pulled out of her body. Still resting her face against the tile wall, she didn't realize he'd left the shower until she heard the door to the bathroom close.

Pleasure still traversed her limbs in little ripples, but she was left alone to her fantasies and eternally grateful Nathan understood her dilemma enough to find a perfect solution for her guilt.

Penelope released a long sigh, soaped up and got ready to face her next challenge. The Parsec Colony Science Lab and her long-awaited very costly cure.

* * * *

Penelope readied herself after the blissful shower and exited her quarters sans any mask protection secure in the knowledge she was protected for approximately the next three hours. Thanks to Nathan and his inventive ideas, she could almost believe "anyone" had just taken a shower with her, cured her illness and as a bonus, brought her exquisite release. Orgasm made everything a little bit more wonderful. Bad things were much easier to tolerate after a shot of satisfying release flooded into her system.

Angelica supplied them with a map to where she needed to go.

Cahill wished them luck and a speedy return. She and Nathan exited the *Dalton*, walked a ways across the busy port station to the elevator lift and then on a trajectory to the pharmacy level where she'd secure her pre-paid package.

Nathan didn't touch her, but stayed less than an arm's length away during the trip through the Parsec Colony city. He'd dressed in his formal captain's uniform complete with a firearm strapped to his side beneath his jacket. While guns usually made her slightly nervous, Nathan being armed made her feel better for the purposes of this mission.

Located near where they docked was the Parsec Colony Medical and Science Lab. Inside the lobby, they followed signs leading them through the facility. They rounded the corner of the final turn and the auspicious sight of the man standing between her and the final pick-up of her cure stopped her heart for several beats.

Penelope's steps slowed and she reached for his arm and some support. Nathan turned and whispered, "What's up, Doc?"

Penelope felt the blood drain from her face as she faced Nathan. "That man is Director Blevins." The man in question saw her and smiled. He started approaching them as Penelope's heart threatened to explode.

Nathan leaned close and asked, "So?"

"He's an old acquaintance of my boss, Dr. Ledreder."

"Relax, Penelope. If you act like this is no big deal, then so will he." Nathan was right. Penelope took a deep breath and calmed herself quickly. If he hadn't contacted Bravura, she was in good shape. But then another thought occurred.

"What if he contacts my boss?"

"Then I'll shoot him in the hand and he'll never make that mistake again." Nathan grinned and a bark of laughter escaped her unheeded.

Nathan tilted his head signaling that they were about to be joined so she pasted a smile on her face and turned to meet the Director.

"Dr. Drake. So good to finally meet you." Director Blevins came

into the lobby area with them and approached with his hand outstretched.

“Director Blevins. Thank you for meeting us personally. You didn’t have to do that. I know you must be incredibly busy.” Penelope regarded his high-handedness in personally meeting them as a power play to throw her off guard rather than a gesture of goodwill between planetary science labs.

Besides which, although, Blevins was good friends with Dr. Ledreder in the highest of scientific circles, she didn’t completely trust him. She worried over whether or not he would tell her boss about her trip, and she worried about him contacting Dr. Ledreder now that she had finally arrived.

“It’s not a problem at all. Now what can we do for you?”

Oh God, he was going to make her explain. And her precious time ticked away. “I came to pick up a cure for a patient. I placed an order before I left Bravura. Hopefully it’s ready and I can be on my way.”

“Well, our labs are excellent. I’m sure it’s ready. However, since you’re here, I’d love to show you the amazing technology of our labs before you go. I’ll give you the personal tour.” He glanced at Nathan as if his presence was unexpected and he would no longer be needed as an escort.

Nathan spoke up and saved her from having to make up yet another story. “I’m sorry. But I’m the captain of the trans-galactic ship the *Dalton* and currently on my way someplace else for an emergency. I agreed to bring Dr. Drake here to collect her order, but unfortunately, we’ve got to get going as soon as possible. Perhaps next time we can take your ‘amazing’ science lab technology tour.”

Blevins pursed his lips. She wasn’t sure if it was because he thought she might be romantically involved with a starship captain or because they couldn’t waste time taking a tour of his “amazing” lab. Possibly both were transgressions. “How unfortunate. Well, I’ll show you to the pharmacy.”

“Thank you, Director Blevins. However,” Penelope paused for

more drama. “I simply hate to take you away from your important work here. If you could just point us in the right direction, we’ll be on our way.”

“Decent of you. Tell Dr. Ledreder that I’d love to hear from him. It’s been a long time since we spoke.”

“I certainly will, Director. Thank you so much.”

He gave short instructions matching what they already had so they said quick farewells and moved on.

Penelope took one step forward and almost landed on her ass. The near escape from Director Blevins had more of an impact on her nerves than she expected. Nathan attached himself to her side and grabbed her arm to steady her as she staggered another step forward because her legs shook so badly.

“It’s okay, Penelope. We’re almost through this.”

“Right.” She nodded, got a grip on herself. They hurried on to the pharmacy and her final stop to end this virus.

* * * *

“Does that ship over there look familiar to you?” Cahill asked Angelica, two hours after Nathan and Penelope had departed from the *Dalton’s* docking platform.

Following the direction of his gaze, Angelica noted it was currently transfixed on a small beat-up and barely space-worthy vessel of dubious capabilities called the *Galaxy Retriever*. It sounded like a large canine lived inside and given its sorry state perhaps a dog actually did command it.

“I don’t recognize the name, but based on the tail identification number its registration shows it came from Bravura. Designation is a private federated corporation vessel.”

Cahill snapped his fingers as if he’d just remembered something important. “I need to check the command deck logs. Right now!” They’d exited the *Dalton* to wait in the very cavernous Parsec Colony

docking station for their crew member and passenger to return.

Angelica asked, “Why? What’s wrong?” He didn’t respond but instead hurtled up the ramp and disappeared into the cargo hold of ship.

Given the choice, Angelica decided she’d rather spend the time with Cahill, so she followed him back inside, and affixed her gaze on his spectacular ass moving swiftly through the cargo deck toward the bridge.

* * * *

Guided by Nathan’s sure hand, Penelope walked with a purpose down a long well lit hallway toward the pharmacy and her cure.

“We go straight down this corridor and the place you want should be at the end on the right,” he whispered.

“Okay.” Trembling slightly in anticipation of her journey’s end, Penelope drifted to the right and the counter jutting out marking her final destination.

Above the counter perched a large glass window. Behind it stood a technician dressed in white. He was tall and thin with straight black hair. The name stitched on the upper right side of his coat said, “Marshall.”

Penelope glided to a stop in front of the window facing Marshall and smiled. She was eternally grateful that no one else was around in the immediate vicinity.

“Can I help you?” Marshall asked.

“I’m here to pick up a medical package for the Bravura Science Lab.” She slid her paperwork through the narrow slit waist high in the glass to show she’d pre-paid.

Marshall snagged the paper, nodded distractedly as he read the top and moved away, with a murmured, “Be right back.”

“It’s almost over, Penelope. Hang in there.” Nathan’s whispered assurance calmed her down a notch. She inhaled and exhaled slowly,

trying to keep her heartbeat under two hundred beats a minute.

After only a few moments, Marshall returned with a small brown paper wrapped package. “Are you Dr. Drake?” he asked with a slight frown.

“Yes.” Breathe in. Breathe out. “I ordered the medication myself.”

“I need to see your identification, please.”

Penelope reached into her pocket and pulled out her badge from the Bravura Lab and flattened it against the window for his perusal. Marshall looked it over and hesitated before handing over the precious package.

“So you *do* know what’s in here, right?”

What an odd question to ask. “I hope it’s what I ordered.” Penelope didn’t really want to say it out loud.

Marshall stared at her as if he tried to get information across that he also didn’t want to say aloud. “This is a very rare medication. I took the order and packaged it myself.”

“And?”

Looking over his shoulder, Marshall turned back and peeked out over her head as if ascertaining they were completely alone. He saw Nathan and drew back snapping his mouth shut.

“No problem. Never mind.”

Penelope caught his eye and said, “He’s with me. Is there something you wish to say?”

“Just that...” Again he paused and looked around his immediate area. His paranoia started to rub off on her. “...um...you know what this medication is supposed to cure, right?”

The technician’s unease was likely because “he” knew what the cure was for and about it being very rare. She mentally relaxed and accepted the package through the slit in the window.

“Don’t worry,” Penelope lied, “I’m just doing some experiments. Are there three doses inside as requested?”

“Yes. But I don’t understand—” The door to the pharmacy behind him opened and a rotund little man in a similar white lab coat entered

carrying a lunch sack.

“You were saying?”

“Um...nothing.” Marshall pushed out a deep breath through rounded lips. “Okay, good. You have your package. Best of luck.” He pushed back from the counter and disappeared into the shelving holding thousands of different types of medication.

“That was odd.”

“Is it what you need?” Nathan studied the package. Penelope opened the paper bag at one end and pulled out a clear rectangular box. Through the top of the lid she could see three identical jet injector hypodermic guns filled with clear blue liquid ready to disperse her cure. The number etched along the fluid container already loaded in the disposable injector was identical to the one she’d used on Alice back on Bravura. Penelope thought these injectors were the most beautiful sight imaginable.

A shot in the arm or leg and an hour’s wait was all she needed to see the conclusion of this miserable disease.

“There’s a public restroom behind you,” Nathan murmured. “I’ll wait out here while you go inoculate yourself. Then we’ll head to the ship and break out a decanter of Gray’s expensive booze to celebrate your new virus-free existence.”

Checking her time, she noted they had over an hour before her most recent temporary cure ran out. She could easily wait and get back to the *Dalton*, but the enticement of the treatment was too great.

“Thanks, Nathan. I’ll be right back.” Penelope gave him a smile and carried the box inside. She gave herself a hypo shot in the leg because it was easier and less painful. In order to put an end to the sex or suffer virus, the stinging pain of the cure entering her thigh was very minimal. She was in and out of the restroom in less than two minutes.

With a whole new outlook on life, she grabbed Nathan’s extended arm and ambled down the long hallway leading out of the Science lab.

“Did the shot hurt?” he asked as they walked along.

“It wasn’t too bad.” Penelope grinned. “Mostly I’m relieved. Why?”

“I hate hypo shots. Just saying, better you than me, sweetheart. You’d have had to strap me down on the med lab table to inject me with one of those.”

Penelope laughed out loud at the visual, but her good humor soon faded. They hadn’t moved very many more steps when she realized something was terribly wrong. The sensation in the pit of her stomach made her wonder if she were about to become violently ill. The feeling passed, but something replaced it. She stopped moving, turned to Nathan and leaned closer.

“What’s wrong? Is the shot making you sick?”

“No. It’s just that...” Penelope paused and gazed into his worried eyes. She motioned him closer. He leaned forward. She said, “I need to fuck you right now. And I can’t wait, you big stud.” She giggled when his eyes widened in surprise.

“I thought we had an hour left,” he murmured quietly.

Penelope’s immediate response was to extend her tongue and lick his chin once. His eyes got even wider.

“Not any more.” Penelope laughed out loud as Nathan looked both ways and over his shoulder as if searching for a quiet room or perhaps to see who watched them canoodle and get ready for sex, sex and more sex.

She hoped so anyway. In order to get the party started, Penelope slid her hand beneath his belt to stroke his cock to life so she could ride him as soon as possible.

The euphoria she experienced now was an added bonus to this lovely virus, she thought and gripped Nathan’s cock in her anxious fingers.

Chapter 11

Nathan almost swallowed his tongue when Penelope's hand snaked down his pants and she gripped her bare hand around his semi-stiff cock. The cure hadn't worked. Obviously. Or, the cure she'd taken just gave her some ridiculous high so she wouldn't come across as such a driven nymphomaniac so much as a goofy drunken girl wanting to "go for it" right away. An interesting change, but he was sure it wasn't the one Penelope envisioned during this long journey across the galaxy.

He spotted a hallway up ahead with a placard stating there were temporary sleeping quarters to purchase and an arrow pointing to the right. Likely they were used for friends and family of sick patients, but it would at least be concealed. Nathan gently peeled her hand off of his dick and directed her toward the hallway with rooms for some privacy. He dearly hoped a vacant one was close by with insulated walls.

"Don't you want to fuck me, Nathan? Don't you want to fuck me hard and fast until you come?" The trill of maniacal laughter that followed her crude statements made him wonder if sex would even relieve her symptoms her this time. She reached for his cock again as he rounded the corner, hoping not to run into anyone else as she felt him up.

A richly dressed man exiting the hallway gave them a shocked look first as his gaze went down to what she attempted to do, followed by a slightly annoyed look directly afterwards. They passed him very quickly, and Nathan ignored the stranger in favor of finding a room with the digital sign on the door listing it as "unoccupied" so

he could get Penelope inside and under control.

Halfway down the hall, a door on the left stood blessedly opened and Nathan pushed her inside as her laughter reached an epic high in sound as they crossed the threshold of the room.

Once inside, Penelope threw her hands in the air, swayed her hips and danced to a tune only she could hear. He locked the door which immediately flipped the switch showing that this room was occupied. The box by the door asked for his credit rations to secure the room. Nathan swiped a travel card with enough credits to give them an hour then peeled his jacket off. He removed his gun still in its holster, placed the weapon carefully on top of his jacket resting on the table at the end of the simple bed and approached a still dancing Penelope as she started removing her clothes and draped them around the room haphazardly.

She twirled several circles around the room, dropped the clear box containing the remaining two hypo shots of cure near the door and resumed her impromptu dance. All the while she sang her own song about stripping while dancing around a pole, having sex in the shower standing up and lap dancing. Dropping her bra to the floor, and also the last article of clothing she wore, Penelope staggered a few steps, but he couldn't tell if she was dizzy from all the spinning or hurting from her illness.

“Penelope? Are you in pain?”

Arms shot straight out as if for balance, she carefully twisted around to face him. Eyes focused directly on his cock, she launched forward and grabbed him around the waist burying her face in his middle.

She ignored his question to ask one of her own. “Why aren't your clothes off yet?”

He brushed his hand down the silky softness of her hair and murmured, “I was busy watching you get undressed, sweetheart.”

“Well hurry. We need to fuck.” She let go of him and turned toward the bed. “Nathan! Here's a bed. We can have sex right here.”

“Very convenient.” He pulled his shirt over his head and unfastened his pants. She meanwhile crossed the room, giggling all the way, and climbed on top of the mattress. From what little he knew about Penelope, this change in character was one she wouldn’t be happy about, and he hoped she might be spared the memory of it.

“Are you coming?” Now on her knees, she bounced up and down with exuberance, and he tried not to watch her breasts, reminding himself that she was Gray’s girl. He saw the round bruise on her thigh that the hypo jet left from the cure she’d given herself. He dreaded her reaction when she woke and realized it hadn’t worked.

“Sweetheart. I wish you were going to have this exact enthusiastic attitude after we have sex.” Nathan approached the bed, and she grabbed him by his fully engorged dick. “But I suspect that instead you’ll be tormented. I’ll say I’m sorry in advance.” She stopped bouncing and slipped an arm around his waist as she stroked his happy cock to a granite hardness.

“You are so nice to look at. You don’t have to be sorry.” Her awe-filled voice made his guilt even deeper.

“Thanks, Penelope. I hope you don’t hate me ten minutes from now.”

“Nathan. My pussy really hurts. Could we have sex now?” Her wavering tone suggested the pain was sinking in.

“Of course.” He pressed her to the center of the bed, directed his cock inside her slick pussy and pushed forward until he was fully seated. Moving in and out was not a chore, but Nathan focused on trying to climax quickly. He fastened his mouth around one nipple, knowing the taste of her would enable his orgasm to materialize faster. And it did.

Stroking his tongue across the hard bud at the center of her breast in rhythm to the thrusts of his rigid cock deeply into her tight pussy sent him to the wicked edge of pleasure. He palmed her other soft breast, kneading her exquisite flesh as he continued to suck on her nipple. Seconds later his release barreled out of him at the speed of

sound. The nipple popped out from between his lips, and he pressed his forehead between her soft breasts to rest.

Nathan panted for a second or two trying to catch his breath and raised his head to see Penelope's expression. He hoped she wouldn't be distraught by this set back.

She rose to her elbows, blinking as if coming out of a deep sleep. Nathan's legs were still weak from the orgasm or he might have leapt up and pretended they didn't just have sex.

"Nathan?" The slur in her voice said she wasn't quite back to normal.

"Uh huh."

She squinted slightly and her glazed over vision zeroed in on the connection between them. "I guess...cure didn't work."

"No. I'm sorry. It didn't."

Her head went back, and she flattened to the bed. He expected tears, but she laughed. "I feel like I'm still a little high, but it's wearing off."

"Do you remember anything since giving yourself the shot?"

Grinning a little, she caught his gaze and whispered, "I remember everything. I'm just a little goofy from the drugs right now."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. At least I don't hurt."

Before he could comfort her further, the door to their meager privacy burst open, the useless lock dangling from near the handle. The richly dressed man Nathan had seen in exiting the hallway earlier entered through the door and leveled a gun at the bed where he was still entwined with Penelope.

Nathan spied his own weapon at the end of the bed on top of his jacket and reached for it, but not in enough time to get it before the man pulled the trigger and a near silent shot hit him in the back.

Burning searing pain registered between his spine and one shoulder blade before large black splotches hid his view even though he was still deeply connected to Penelope and a nanosecond from

abandoning her to unwelcome unconsciousness.

* * * *

Penelope screeched a warning when she recognized Damon enter the room. Earlier she'd noticed him as Nathan led her to this room, but her brain hadn't been connected in any rational way from the useless drugs she'd counted on to cure her. She hadn't warned Nathan of the impending doom her rational brain acknowledged with Damon's presence. She was powerless to stop her drug-saturated irrational mind from anything but its sexual goal.

Nathan slumped over her from the shot to his back. The large hole looked horrible. Blood oozed from the wound steadily and dripped in a stream down his back onto the sheets.

"Why did you shoot him?"

Damon stepped into the room and closed the door. "He went for his gun."

"Only because you burst in here waving your gun, you idiot. He was defending himself and me." A sob came with the end of her sentence, but Penelope bore up to face the man she'd long suspected of infecting her.

"Don't call me an idiot. I shot him with a tranquillizer dart not a real bullet. He'll be fine."

Damon grabbed her arm and pulled her from the bed. She slid from Nathan's warm still form and hated that her worst tormentor now leered at her nudity. She pulled her arm from his grasp with a defiant jerk, reached down to check Nathan's pulse and found it beating strongly. "Well the *harmless* dart is embedded beneath his skin so deeply, you must have set the range incorrectly, oh great brainy one."

He twisted a knob on the gun. "I'm going to fuck that smirk off your face, Dr. Penny. I can't wait until you beg me to bang you deep and hard so the pain will stop. In case you're wondering I just set this

to shoot real bullets. Don't piss me off or I'll use it to finish him off. Am I clear?"

She pressed her lips tight to keep from smarting off and nodded. Damon reached down to the floor and grabbed some of her clothing. He threw her the shirt and pants she'd discarded and directed her to get dressed. The bra and panties remained behind along with poor Nathan.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To a perfect place where we won't be disturbed for at least four hours."

"How are you going to manage that?"

"With a time lock, of course. And if you scream or try to run away then I come back and kill him." Damon opened the door and pushed her into the hallway. There was not a single soul around to help her. He motioned her further down the hallway. It ended in a T shape and he sent them left. The larger than normal gunmetal gray door situated immediately to her left had a face level window at the center. Damon opened the door and shoved her inside.

She saw the bed first because it was pretty much the only thing in the room besides a spindly chair. The door slammed shut behind him, and he pressed a large red button on the wall.

A buzzer sounded, and the digital time piece on the wall started a countdown from four hours. The best she could hope for was that she wasn't attracted to the prick. Somehow it seemed a hollow dream at best.

"You gave me this deplorable disease, didn't you?"

Damon's focus narrowed. "What makes you say that?"

"No one from the science lab knew I was infected with the exception of the prick who gave it to me. Since you're the only one here ready to fuck the smirk off my face. I believe that limits my choice to you."

"Not true. I knew you had it when I saw you in the containment suit before you disappeared off of Bravura in the middle of the night.

Doesn't mean I gave it to you."

"But you're the only one I work with who's had access to the virus and is also so fanatical in the pursuit to get in my pants that he'd even go to these outrageous lengths for some pussy."

He smiled a wicked little smile. "That's so vulgar, Dr. Penny. You turned out to be quite a nasty girl, didn't you? How many men did you have to fuck to get this far?"

Declining to answer his question on principle, instead she muttered, "You disgust me."

Damon merely laughed harder.

"What's your big plan now? Huh, Damon?" Penelope had reached the limit of her endurance. "After you fuck me, then what?"

"I was sent to take you back to Bravura. You're in a world of trouble with Dr. Lead-ass." Damon let loose a sound resembling a giggle. "He sent me after you because he wanted you brought back quietly. The captain on the *Dalton* wouldn't confirm your presence on his ship, but I knew you were coming here. I knew you needed to replace the two doses of cure you wasted on the patients from that mining planet. I told you that you'd regret using the last of it."

"The cure doesn't work."

He laughed again. "I know. I found that interesting piece of information out by accident, but I forgot to mention it to you."

"What are you going to do, rape me?"

"Oh no. Contrary to your views on me, I'm not a rapist. But come three hours or so, you're going to beg me to fuck you. You're going to put your hands down my pants and slither all over me as well, but I'm mostly looking forward to the begging." He grinned. "I can't wait."

Penelope was suddenly so tired, she staggered against the bed. "Well, in the mean time I'm tired. It's been a long day and I'm taking a nap." She yawned and as soon as she finished, Damon let a yawn out as well. "You, on the other hand, better stay awake, Damon. If I get that gun from you, I won't hesitate to use it."

“Temper, temper, Dr. Penny. I can wait ten or fifteen minutes before the time lock releases, while you beg me for sex. But sincerely, I can’t wait to fuck you back to your senses. Then we can discuss how you’re going to give up your position at the Bravura Science Lab and name me your successor.”

“At which point you better have control of that gun.”

“You don’t scare me, Dr. Penny.” He grinned again because he likely knew those stupid pet names aggravated her. “You aren’t as hot shit as you think you are.”

“Why? Because I wasn’t born on the rich spoiled side of the Spectra City wall in Bravura?”

“That’s right! You and your kind come over the wall like vermin out of a flooded building and take jobs meant for your betters. I can’t believe you’re treated with more respect than I am. Me! The son of the greatest leader the planet has ever seen.”

“If ‘your kind’ were really better, I wouldn’t be able to ‘take’ your job. Respect is earned. What have you ever done to earn any?”

“My father is—”

“Your father is someone who worked hard and earned a name for himself because he had every opportunity in life. I have the utmost respect for *him*. You, on the other hand, expect that because you sprang from his seed and got placed under his roof that you deserve everything handed to you regardless of any effort on your part.”

“Breeding is important—”

“Breeding is as worthless as shit when selecting those qualified for certain jobs. You couldn’t do the job that I do. Spoiled brats like you make me ill. You whine that life isn’t fair when those you consider unworthy come along and have the gall to work harder than you’re willing to. You make me sick, Dr. Demon...oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to call you a doctor. What I meant to say was you make me sick, ‘not smart enough to pass your medical boards’ Demon.”

The dark anger in the form of blood rushing to Damon’s face made Penelope take a step back. It wasn’t like her to make fun of

people for failing the medical boards. It was particularly stupid to provoke someone holding a gun. But she knew he wouldn't shoot her. The prick wanted to fuck her too badly. She didn't know if that was lucky or not.

He leveled the gun on her with an expression that said she better shut up, but Penelope wasn't worried. He had an agenda.

Penelope turned her back on him and yawned again. The day had been too much. She fell face first onto the bed and tried to stay awake to consider all of her options. Whatever she did, she had to do it in three and a half hours. She never expected to fall asleep, but the stress of the past couple of weeks had taken its toll and her body simply shut down once she gave into the idea that whatever happened, she couldn't control it anyway.

She dreamed of Gray, and later she dreamed of Nathan bleeding on the bed. When she stirred awake later she thought she heard the distinct sound of the time lock releasing to allow the door to open. It was a nice dream so she didn't open her eyes, but tried to slip into unconsciousness once again and hold on to it.

Two seconds after that she heard the distinct sound of a gun hammer cocking back and ready to fire. Lifting her head from the pillow, Penelope figured she was about to glaze over in lust and beg Damon for sex.

The good news? She wouldn't be coherent until after it was over. The bad news? Once he finished with her, she'd remember everything. Perhaps he'd fall asleep and then she could wrestle the gun out of his hand and kill him, so the one time sex would be just that...one time.

Glancing over her shoulder expecting to see Damon pointing a gun her way, she was completely shocked to see the time lock door "was" wide open and Ensign Cahill stood in the doorway with a revolver held to Damon's head even though he was sound asleep in the chair.

Cahill glanced her way. "You okay, Dr. Drake?"

“How did you get in here?” Penelope leapt up from the bed, embarrassed to have been caught sleeping during such a stressful horrible event. A pervert locked her in so at worst, he could essentially rape her or at best take advantage of her deplorable virus for his own gratification.

A half smile curved one side of Cahill’s mouth. “The time lock released. I just came in.”

Damon snorted in his sleep but didn’t wake.

“I can’t believe I fell asleep for so long.”

“The facility director pumped something into the room’s vents to knock you both out. Then you wouldn’t have to do anything sexual with Damon.”

“But I still don’t want him.”

“Apparently, like me, you aren’t attracted to *this* shithead either.” Cahill handed her a new filter mask. “Here. Put this on. There is someone who wants to see you.”

“Is Nathan okay?”

Cahill nodded. “He bled quite a bit, but they got the dart out of him. He’ll live. He roused enough to tell us where shithead here took you. Apparently, he wasn’t completely unconscious before you left the room.” Glancing down at Damon, he added, “This prick shouldn’t be allowed to live though. He shot Lieutenant Commander Tyndall in the back. The good news is the other room has a video feed of him doing it.”

Penelope fastened her mask in place. “The bad news is that it also has Nathan and I...together.”

Cahill shrugged. “I imagine that the shithead’s illustrious family will never allow it to be made public. A deal will be made undoubtedly. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“You’re right. I have plenty else to worry about.” Penelope sighed and couldn’t keep the dejection out of her voice. “The cure didn’t work.”

Cahill nodded and winked. “Put the mask on. Trust me, I think

your day is looking up, Dr. Drake.”

Once her mask was secured, Cahill made a call and Parsec Colony security came in and hauled a still half asleep Damon out of the time lock room.

Penelope exited the room in time to see Nathan loaded onto a stretcher. She grabbed Cahill’s arm and got his attention. “Are you sure Nathan is going to be okay?”

“Yes. He just needs some rest. He’s headed to the *Dalton* med lab for care.”

“I don’t know why you thought my day was looking up, Ensign Cahill.” He ushered her out into the hallway and directly into the arms of the last person she ever expected to see on Parsec Colony.

Gray.

* * * *

“Maybe because he thought you’d be happy to see me.” Gray hugged her as best as he could given that she had a filter mask strapped to the lower half of her face.

“Gray!” She threw her arms around him despite the mask. “What are you doing here?” Cahill stepped outside as Gray pushed her gently inside the room again. He shut the door and pushed the time lock seal. Gray had set it for an hour and posted Cahill as a guard.

“You just locked us in here.”

“Yep. I missed you. I wanted some uninterrupted time to talk.”

“I missed you too.” The low whisper drew him closer until her gaze shifted to pierce him with a new look he hadn’t catalogued. Regret, perhaps? She averted her eyes. “I’m so sorry about what happened with Nathan.”

Gray took her in his arms and squeezed her. He placed a kiss awkwardly on the top of her head. “Don’t worry, he’ll live. The dart didn’t pierce anything important.”

“No.” She stiffened in his arms and moved a step backwards. “I

mean about what happened in the tunnel at Echo Province.”

Since that particular image of her with Nathan was the last memory he'd carried for these past several days, it would be a lie to say he hadn't pondered all the implications associated with the event. Including the instant discovery that Nathan was the first man she'd been with when she discovered this disease. Did she care for Nathan? Undoubtedly. Had they formed a bond in their short time together? Would she rather be with Nathan?

Gray wondered if she was about to express her newly rediscovered love for Nathan. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear her say the words out loud, but shrugged in reference to her comment. She didn't have to be sorry about what happened.

He did his best to guard his heart and shrugged. “I didn't want you to suffer. Besides, Nathan is my best friend. I trusted him to take care of you. He did. It wasn't your fault, Penelope. I don't blame you for not wanting to suffer in agonizing pain.”

“Nathan is a very good man.”

“He is. The very best.” Gray squeezed the regret out of his soul.

“I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I had to tell him that we were involved.” She inhaled deeply and her stunning aqua gaze returned to taunt him with seductive grace. “I didn't tell him that I loved you though.”

Gray's heart skipped a beat in impulsive elation, and a grin erupted before he could temper it. “Why not?”

“Because.” She blinked, and she smiled in return. “I wanted to tell you first.”

The desire to kiss her reared so suddenly and desperately that he pulled her mask off knowing what it would do.

She didn't stop him.

He cupped her face sans the mask. “I love you, Penelope. Don't ever doubt it.” And then they kissed and kissed and kissed all the while clothing stripped quickly from their bodies.

Before she could demand that he do so, Gray pressed her against

the wall out of view of the room's camera, released his cock and pierced her deeply. Never ceasing the kiss, he pounded into her and because of the seemingly endless separation which really only amounted to five days, it didn't take him long to cure what ailed her.

The orgasm rushed out of the end of his cock in seconds, but the best part of the experience came a few minutes later when she did.

The grip of her pussy signaling her release moments later after he slid his hand between them to ensure her climax, made him come even harder a second time. She wrapped her legs around his waist during the subsequent interlude, connecting them at a level he never wanted to sever.

Gray didn't know what their future held, but didn't ever want to be away from her again.

"I'm sorry the cure you came here for didn't work," he whispered against her head. "Tell me what I can do to help you beyond the physical and I'll do it."

"I just want to go back home, Gray." She pulled away to look deeply into his eyes. Her mournful expression made his soul ache. She repeated, "Please just take me home."

Chapter 12

Ten days later, still aboard the *Dalton* and mere hours away from making good on his vow to take Penelope back home, Gray experienced an epiphany.

He woke with a start in the middle of the night snuggled up to Penelope after a lengthy lovemaking session earlier in the evening. After she'd fallen asleep, Gray had watched her for a long while unable to sleep and trying to figure out what troubled him.

Something elusive and on the edge of his conscious had nagged at him for the duration of this trip. He glanced at the time piece on the wall, noting he had another three hours before his shift started. The undetected aspect dawned on him as suddenly as the illumination of an exploding star. Time.

It had been well over five hours since they'd had sex in the shower and fallen into his bunk. His calculations told him that she should have woken him at least a couple of hours ago for another round, but she hadn't.

They'd spent almost every waking and sleeping hour together on the return trip to Bravura due to the new filter masks Penelope wore. Smaller and less bulky, they allowed for more intimacy rather than the big bulky face masks from the first trip. Angelica had secured the smaller mask from a place near the dock and rounded up enough of a supply from the Parsec Colony to allow coverage for Penelope's entire trip home.

Each night, after his shift on the command deck, Gray came to either her room or called her to his. The intimacy afforded them with this change had strengthened their relationship, at least in his way of

thinking. Penelope was distant at times, but Gray dismissed it as worry over her future.

They spent inordinate amounts of time talking about what might happen with Nathan, Damon and her job once they returned to Bravura. She worried about the status of her job most of all, but Gray told her he'd find a place for her on his ship if need be.

Visibly dubious of his repeated offers, Penelope generally found a way to change the subject of conversation soon after, and he let her in an effort to keep the peace. He knew she had enough on her mind with her uncured virus to consider, which was the catalyst for his epiphany.

The subtle changes in their lovemaking, across the ten days ticking by quickly, had been so slight that he knew she hadn't noticed. At least not yet. Afraid to wake her, point out the obvious and be mistaken, Gray simply kissed her mouth gently while she slept and kept his own counsel.

Given the restrictions of their relationship, he hadn't spent nearly as much time with his mouth between her legs as he'd wanted. Perhaps now was a good time. Watching her sleep and wishing to have her wake with his tongue jammed in her pussy became equal parts of agony and ecstasy.

The urge to taste her was too irresistible so he gave into temptation. Ever so carefully, and so as not to wake her, Gray slid his body down the bed until his face rested next to her hip. He turned on his side and kissed her leg. She didn't move. He twisted to hover over her and lowered his face until his tongue licked the perfect bud of her clit. She inhaled deeply, but didn't move. Gray smiled and dove in for more. He pushed his mouth over her and sucked her clit between his lips. Wet, even in her sleep, Gray noted that she was as delicious as he remembered.

A trickle of moisture gathered on his chin, so he released her clitoris and licked the juice covering her pussy lips all along her seam. She cried out and moved, but pushed herself closer to his mouth. He

grabbed her legs with eager hands and resumed licking her clit. Once he'd established a solid rhythm, he pushed two fingers inside her body and massaged as he licked her clit until the miraculous sound of her screaming orgasm nearly made him come. The glorious pulses against his fingers gave him hope that a normal life might be possible.

Perhaps the cure had worked after all, but had a delayed reaction. He knew for a fact that the time between incidents had increased.

He kissed his way to her mouth as a particularly delightful feeling encompassed him.

"What did you do to me?"

"Something magnificent."

"I'll say." She drifted off to sleep again and that made Gray even happier. He'd never been a clock watcher, but watching the time tick further and longer between her brazen episodes had been subconsciously sending a red flag.

Glancing at the time piece on the wall again, Gray decided to relieve Ensign Cahill early. He'd been working long shifts on this journey back to Bravura.

Angelica volunteered to take the *Mirage* to Rycan along with the delegates. It gave her an opportunity to captain her own vessel and the glow she exuded was worth seeing. Cahill pretended not to miss her, but Gray was glad to see he didn't begrudge her the opportunity to captain a vessel. Although, Gray suspected they'd both be happier once she returned to Bravura as scheduled a week after the *Dalton*.

Once they'd been within range, messages had been back and forth between his ship and Bravura Space Command with regard to Damon being detained on criminal charges.

Nathan remained in the med lab. Director Blevins had insisted they take Damon back to Bravura to face charges, but wanted it handled quietly in deference to Damon's illustrious father, Oscar Kaslan. Damon was currently locked up in the brig, where he complained daily about his poor treatment and threatened dire consequences once his father found out about his confinement.

Damon never once took any responsibility for what he did to Penelope or Nathan. Penelope refused to press charges because she feared her word against Damon's wouldn't survive. Nathan pressed charges immediately, and Gray backed him up.

Once the *Dalton* was docked, they all had a private meeting scheduled in the tribunal room at the Bravura Science Lab conference table to take place immediately after disembarking the ship.

Gray knew Penelope was still worried about her job and being gone for so long, but she'd given him a tight-lipped frown and refused to discuss any charges the few times he'd brought it up.

In the name of getting along, he abandoned any pressure on the matter of her pressing charges, but asked that she be there during the hearing. Her reluctance was understandable, but Gray was glad she agreed to attend.

Once the hearing was behind them, Gray planned to discuss their future. He knew Penelope was his one true love.

A pledge ceremony was what he had in mind. He wanted her to know that he loved her and he'd stand by her regardless of her illness.

* * * *

"I protest this barbaric trial," Damon snarled as he was brought into the Bravura Science Lab conference room in restraints. Penelope swallowed hard and resisted the virulent urge to launch across the large oval table at Damon to throttle him with her bare hands.

"Silence," his father hissed just as fervently. Oscar Kaslan followed his son into the room along with a gray suited law representative likely well versed in personal damage accusations.

Damon's father was a well decorated military hero from the intergalactic wars and now held a powerful government position in Spectra. The three took seats opposite of where Penelope sat between Gray and Nathan.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, wishing to be anywhere

else but right here, right now. Stifling the impulse to scream about the barbaric treatment she'd suffered because Damon the bastard had given her an incurable virus, Penelope concentrated on breathing in and out as she kept an eye on the time.

Beside her, Gray glanced at her restlessness and smiled briefly as if in reassurance. He'd done everything possible to ensure her comfort for this meeting, and she tried to relax for his sake, but worried endlessly about what this meeting would reveal. She didn't want anyone here at work to know about the virus she harbored.

Still sporting a sizeable bandage on his back beneath his uniform, Nathan sat straight up, unable to lean back in his chair due to his injury.

The tribunal had been called to ascertain the punishment Damon would face for trying to harm Nathan. Penelope hadn't brought any charges against her coworker and hoped that during today's inquiry, none would be brought against her.

She had come directly from the *Dalton* with Nathan and Gray. They hadn't even been docked for an hour yet. Penelope figured she had three hours left without a mask before she'd have to excuse herself and go hide.

From across the table, Damon smirked at her, and she hoped he'd stay quiet about her problem. In this forum, she was merely a witness to what happened to Nathan.

Dr. Ledreder entered the room, followed by two other high ranking scientists at the lab. His gaze slid over her quickly, and Penelope saw his concern. At least he didn't seem angry with her.

Once seated at the end of the table he began, "This is an informal hearing—"

"Then why am I still bound?" Damon interrupted. He lifted his connected wrists and crashed them to the table.

"Because you shot my first officer in the back after breaking into his private room while you worked for the Bravura Science Lab," Gray stated evenly. "And I don't trust you."

“Allegedly.” Damon dragged his folded hands off the table and back into his lap. But the self satisfied grin remained and stayed focused on Penelope. “No one has proven I did anything, yet.”

Gray’s gaze remained on the table in front of Penelope when he added, “You were sent there under company orders from the Bravura Science Lab which makes it their jurisdiction. If it were up to me you’d already be on your way to the nearest penal colony.”

“May I ask why my son was sent to the Parsec Colony?” Oscar Kaslan, asked slowly and carefully as if unwilling to jump to his son’s defense without further explanation.

Dr. Ledreder harrumphed. “I sent him to intercept Dr. Drake. She went to get medication for one of her patients, but was unaware that we already carried that drug in our vault.”

“And you couldn’t send a sub space message to her?” Oscar frowned.

“With sub space static what it is, communications are very poor along the channel between Bravura and the Parsec Colony. We couldn’t contact her using that means. At least not reliably. Quite frankly, I didn’t expect Damon to follow her all the way there.”

“You said, ‘Bring her back!’” Damon pulled his stare from her and sent an angry glare to Dr. Ledreder.

“What will it take to get the charges dropped?” Oscar asked.

Gray leaned forward. “Are you asking for a monetary figure or something else?”

Eyes wrinkled with amusement, Oscar Kaslan responded, “What else is there?”

“Lots of things. How about the assurance that Damon won’t accost others in this manner for starters?”

Oscar shrugged with a slightly puzzled expression coloring his features. “My understanding was that he was merely jealous over the...” he paused and his gaze shifted to Penelope before continuing, “...indiscretion of Dr. Drake privately engaged with another man.”

“What?” Penelope didn’t mean to voice her shock out loud.

“Mr. Kaslan is her assistant. Why would there be any jealousy?” Gray asked. “Or is romance encouraged between employees here at the Bravura Science Lab?”

“Of course not,” Dr. Ledreder spoke up.

“Whether or not it’s encouraged is a meaningless supposition. These things happen.” Oscar sent Penelope a slightly distasteful glance as if the thought of his son consorting with such an insignificant person was offensive.

Penelope countered, “I can tell you, sir, with complete honesty that there is absolutely nothing romantic between your son and I. Nor has there *ever* been.” She thought Damon’s father looked relieved by her announcement.

“Doesn’t matter.” Nathan spoke for the first time. “There is no good reason for what he did to me.”

Oscar released a deep sigh. “I agree.”

“Whatever.” Damon snorted and shook his head.

Gray directed his gaze to Dr. Ledreder and said, “Regardless of the eventual outcome of this tribunal meeting, I’d like to ask that Mr. Damon Kaslan not ever be allowed to work with Dr. Drake again.”

Dr. Ledreder nodded. “That can certainly be arranged.”

Damon half stood from his chair. “I won’t take a demotion. Not for the likes of her.”

“My first officer could press criminal charges with the galactic federation of planets,” Gray added in a calm tone. “I wonder what the minimum sentence is involving personal assault.” He turned to Nathan. “Ten years minimum? Is that correct?”

Nathan nodded, but remained silent.

“That won’t be necessary.” Oscar sent his son a positively demonic glare.

Damon huffed. “What about Dr. Penny? What about her crimes?”

Penelope froze in her chair. She’d been about to check the time piece on the wall, but instead she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Her crime started with Damon’s horrific beginning act of poisoning

her with the virus. But she didn't want that fact brought to light. Not here. So she chewed the inside of her mouth.

Damon continued, and Penelope wondered what he hoped to accomplish. "She embezzled company funds."

"How do you know?" Nathan shot back.

"Dr. Drake did not embezzle company funds," Dr. Ledreder said with a long sigh. "She has discretionary authority over the funds in her department and can spend the monies as she sees fit."

Gray spoke up. "I'm curious about something, Mr. Kaslan. In my place, what would you do?"

Oscar's brows furrowed. "I beg your pardon?"

"If my first officer had broken into your son's private room and shot him in the back, what would you be asking for as punishment? Because I suspect we wouldn't even be entertaining the idea of his release. I believe the Penal System would be in authority."

The elder Mr. Kaslan ground his teeth together and closed his eyes. "I see your point." His eyes opened again. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "If you don't want monetary compensation, Captain Wyckoff, how about I introduce you to the Trade Governor? You're a business man. And I have the power to set up a meeting where the two of you can discuss possible business between your corporation and the Galactic Federation of Planets. Would that be of interest to you?"

Gray smiled and said, "That would be an acceptable start, however, I already have a meeting with the Trade Governor courtesy of Dr. Drake's brother. I don't need two of them." Penelope felt the blood drain out of her face in embarrassment. She wanted to die. She didn't know how to speak up and tell Gray to take the meeting. Her betrayal would cost him the very thing she promised.

She turned her head to Gray but her shame wouldn't allow her gaze to reach his eye level.

Damon laughed out loud. "Dr. Drake's brother is the lowest of the low in the governor's organization. You couldn't possibly have a

meeting courtesy of him.”

Penelope shook her head as if she could stop Damon from revealing her lie and prevent Gray from discovering the deceit of her initial proposal. But it was far too late.

“You’re mistaken.” Gray glanced at her and added, “Tell them.” The puzzled uncertainty in his expression stopped her heart.

“I’m so sorry, Gray,” she whispered. *Take the meeting!*

She couldn’t think of a worse scenario for the information to surface. She turned to Gray with an apologetic expression, but in less than a moment, his face shifted from puzzled to flat and emotionless as if carved from granite. He look away from her. Surely he was furious and with good reason.

Unless he didn’t believe Damon, which would ultimately be worse when he found out later after turning this opportunity down. She didn’t know what to do. Trapped like a rodent backed into a corner, she opened her mouth, but no further sound came. She closed her lips and wished for a miracle.

Nathan spoke up a second later. “I’d like a meeting with the Trade Governor. And since I’m the one who got shot in the back, I believe it’s ultimately my call, would you agree with that, sir?”

Penelope glanced sideways at Nathan with gratitude pouring from her like waves on the shore.

“Certainly.” Oscar nodded and shrugged. “Is there anything else you want?”

“Five hundred thousand credits deposited into Nathan’s personal account and matching funds also sent to the Dalton Prime Corporation,” Gray said evenly.

“One million credits! You’re insane.” Damon screamed. “That’s outrageous. Don’t pay it, Father. They’re lucky I don’t tell—”

“Oh Damon.” Gray broke in with a chuckle. “I’d be very careful here. There’s no need for you to ‘tell’ anything, am I right? What I’d like to know is how much a ten year penal sentence is worth to you, personally?”

Damon's lips pressed together flat and his face turned blood red in seconds. "There is information being withheld here."

"What information?" Oscar asked slowly as if he weren't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"You're right, Damon. There is important information being held back. For instance, I have the only copy of the DMR surveillance from the private room where you visited and attacked Nathan. It's in my possession."

"That's not what I mean and you know it." Damon pointed to Penelope. "The information is about her. She has—"

"Are you telling me that you have my son on a Digital Motion Recording committing this crime?" Oscar stood and the quiet seething tone he used to ask his question made Penelope's blood run cold.

"Yes, sir, I do. Your next question is why wouldn't we release it? The answer is to protect Dr. Drake. She and Nathan were 'privately' engaged right before Damon broke into the room. And while my first officer would like to spare her the embarrassment of that film being shown, I have no such compunction. He works for me. I have no problem releasing it to see justice done."

Damon started to say something and Oscar stopped him. "Do not speak a word." The fury in his voice stilled the room and the demonic glare from earlier was back ten times worse than before and focused on his son. Damon finally shut his mouth and had the courtesy to look a little frightened.

Oscar turned to Nathan. "I'll set up the meeting with the Trade Governor for early next week, if that is suitable, Mr. Tyndall."

"Yes, sir," Nathan replied. "That would be perfectly acceptable."

Damon's father then turned to Gray. "The sums you requested for both Mr. Tyndall and the Dalton Prime Corporation will be deposited to your specified accounts by the end of today."

"Good." Gray's flat emotionless expression hadn't changed a flicker.

"And, Dr. Drake, I assure you that my son will no longer be your

concern at this facility in any way.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly, but couldn’t make herself look at him. Her focus remained straight ahead at the table. She didn’t dare look at Gray. Lacking the courage to face the betrayal he must feel and which she caused made her queasy inside. She couldn’t look at Nathan either. Another betrayal of a sort since Gray was his best friend.

“I’ll ask that the DMR be destroyed. I’ll assume your word is good on this matter, and it will never be brought to my attention again.”

“I guarantee it,” Gray stated.

The time piece on the wall chimed and startled her. Noting the hour with regard to her disease, she knew she needed to keep aware of time remaining her most recent “cure” from Gray before they’d left the *Dalton*. She assumed that Gray wouldn’t ever want to see her again. Given her relationship with both men, she wasn’t sure either of them would.

Oscar Kaslan, spoke a few words quietly to his law representative and exited the room with a brooding Damon. Penelope hoped she’d never see him again.

“Captain Wyckoff. Lieutenant Commander Tyndall.” The representative motioned them over to the opposite side of the table to officiate the agreement and put bio prints to documents. Both Gray and Nathan rose and rounded the table to the other side.

“Dr. Drake, may I see you in my office?” Dr. Ledreder motioned at her from the end of the table to join him. She stood, avoiding both Gray and Nathan’s gaze, and made a fast path to her boss.

The man who’d been like a surrogate father to her smiled sadly and led her from the room, down the hallway and toward his office. Grateful not to have to speak to Gray or Nathan and see the anger and resentment in their faces, she didn’t look back before exiting the room.

Gray finding out that she’d lied cruelly and then betrayed him

further by remaining silent in the meeting was an unforgivable act in her mind. Her heart ached at the probability of never seeing Gray again, and she fought tears escaping in a foolish love lost moment.

Stupid virus.

He was better off without her to deal with any longer. She was grateful he at least got financially compensated for his trouble.

With an eye on the time remaining, she seated herself in Dr. Ledreder's office.

"Can you tell me why you ran, Dr. Drake?"

"I'd rather not. Can you tell me why you sent Damon after me?"

"I was only trying to help you."

"By sending him to hunt me down? Do you know what he did to me?"

"You mean breaking in on you and your friend at the Parsec Colony?" Dr. Ledreder's eyebrows wrinkled in concern.

"No. Not that."

"What else did he do to you?"

Penelope shook her head. If Dr. Ledreder didn't know she carried the SOS virus, it was less embarrassing. Maybe she should just quit. The tears welled up again. Stupid. She hated the emotional influence of this virus.

Dr. Ledreder sighed. "The truth is Damon left Bravura without permission. He used my name to secure the ship and told everyone I sent him. In deference to his father—"

Penelope was about to quit her job and Damon had engineered the whole stunt because he knew his father would bail him out? She snapped, "Damon used your code to retrieve an ampoule of the virus from the vault and he exposed me to it." Penelope was sick of hiding her embarrassment over something she didn't deserve.

"What?"

"I have the SOS virus, Dr. Ledreder." She leaned forward and focused on his stunned gaze. "That's why I ran. That's why I've done things I never imagined I would do all in the name of a virus I wish

I'd never heard of. The very virus you entrusted me to cure. Instead, I couldn't think of anything beyond curing myself.

"Perhaps I'm not worthy of this position after all. People like Damon will always win in the end because of his status, his father's money, and the power of prestige. He should be in jail for all the things he did. But instead, everyone breaks their back in 'deference' to his father." Time ticked down to where she'd have to find a mask, a fact never too far out of her mind.

"Dr. Drake." The shock on his face was palpable. He shook his head. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. I didn't realize—"

"Why is it your fault? Damon is the pervert in this scenario, but I didn't press charges because I didn't want to lose my job. I love working here, but with this disease, I'll have to change absolutely everything to accommodate it. If you'll even allow me to stay. The cure from the Parsec Colony is useless and only gives the victim a euphoric sensation and not a true treatment."

"I know the cure from the Parsec Colony doesn't work, but the SOS virus does have a cure, Dr. Drake."

Chapter 13

Penelope shook her head in utter disbelief. “Say that one more time.”

“The SOS virus has an established cure.” Dr. Ledreder stood and motioned for her to follow him. He led her from his office through a door she’d always thought was a closet. “Come with me. Quickly.”

“If it has a cure why did you ask me to find one?”

“I’ll explain everything once you’re quarantined.” He motioned her down the narrow hallway leading to she didn’t know where.

“Quarantined?” She stopped following, pausing in the center of the aisle like a petulant child unwilling to go to the doctor. “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life tucked away in quarantine.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Dr. Ledreder turned right at the first doorway and proceeded down the hallway to the private facility housing the elite rooms for those important enough to warrant them.

He led Penelope to the nicest area in quarantine. A spacious fifteen feet square room with one entire wall a clear window to the inner facility. It held a narrow bed, a table with two chairs for dining and a recliner in the corner facing a screen for entertainment viewing. Along the clear wall sat a desk and chair with a computer and a communication device.

Walking across the threshold was the hardest thing she’d ever had to do. She paused at the door, unable to take the final step.

“Please, Dr. Drake, trust me. I promise you won’t suffer with this virus forever.”

Penelope stepped through the door and walked straight to the desk in the corner. Pushing the button to talk, she said, “Explain.”

Dr. Ledreder seated himself opposite of her outside, pushed his button and began. “The virus is weak and unable to sustain itself after several weeks in a humanoid body. It burns itself out so to speak.”

“So the cure is just waiting in quarantine?” *Unbelievable*. “How long does it take?”

“It varies with each woman infected, but the longest recorded victim from the original testing was fifteen weeks. The average was eight to ten weeks across fifty or so victims.”

“So you knew if I had time to study the virus and a couple of patients infected with it, I’d draw the logical conclusion and be able to tell you something that you already knew. Why?”

Dr. Ledreder’s entire body sagged. “I want you to be my successor when I retire, Dr. Drake. You are the most qualified, the hardest worker, and the smartest. However, I knew that unless you did something very dramatic, those in charge wouldn’t ever let you take over my position at this facility.”

“So you resurrected a dangerous virus and infected innocent people?”

He let out a sigh laced with regret. “Yes. I sent an unsavory man named Ross Collier to the mining colony with instructions to break an ampoule near a house of prostitution. I told him what to expect, and to bring the infected women back for treatment here. He didn’t follow my instructions. Instead he visited an old girlfriend to exact some revenge.”

“Alice?”

“No. Her name was Cora. She was Alice’s neighbor on the mining colony and our first victim. She’s the one who killed herself. I’ll never forgive myself for her death.”

“How did Alice get the virus?”

“Alice helped Cora chase off the man I’d hired. He became belligerent when the virus didn’t take effect as quickly as he wanted in order to fulfill his retribution plan, and he left. However, the virus must have still been alive when Alice came to help her friend. Neither

Alice or Cora knew they harbored the disease until much later when they went to town together for supplies.”

“So where did the virus come from?”

Dr. Ledreder dropped his gaze. “It was invented about three hundred years ago here on Bravura. Not our most productive invention.”

“But worthy enough to be saved.”

“Only for study and safekeeping. But it got lost in the massive vault, and I found it by accident years ago.”

Penelope relaxed her stiff back and leaned forward. “How long will I have to stay here?”

“I recommend ten weeks.”

“Beyond the obvious, how will I know that I don’t have it any more? Is there a blood test or something?”

“No. Unfortunately not. If you don’t want to take any chances, you may stay as long as twelve or fifteen weeks.” He ducked his head. “Or if you’d like to have Nathan Tyndall brought back here—”

“No!” Penelope didn’t want to test herself on Nathan.

“I’m truly sorry Dr. Drake. I never imagined anything like this would happen. I was confident you would discover the secret to the virus given a week or two with the victims, but you left the planet unexpectedly. It never occurred to me that you had contracted it.”

“Am I out of a job?”

“No. Of course not.”

“I’ll just stay here for twelve to fifteen weeks then. I can do my work in here. I’d like to know what happened to Alice.”

“She’s fine. I have her in quarantine in a different section of the facility. She should be as good as new in about two more weeks.”

“Good.”

Dr. Ledreder wiped his eyes. “I should have put both Alice and Cora in quarantine the moment they arrived. The very second after I discovered my initial plan had failed. If I’d explained the established cure, they’d both still be alive. I wish you’d gotten the opportunity,

Dr. Drake.”

“I appreciate your confidence in me, but it still wouldn’t have been right to infect anyone with this deplorable disease.”

“You’re right, of course. I’ll resign from this post after you’re released from quarantine.”

Penelope had mixed feelings about her boss and what Dr. Ledreder had done. She knew he meant to further her career, but couldn’t condone his actions. In fact, he was no better than Damon using the virus and the suffering of innocent women for his own gain. She sealed her lips shut to keep from blurting out anything inappropriate.

“Is there anyone I can call for you? Your brother perhaps?”

Penelope considered asking him to contact Philip, but decided not to just yet. Her last communication to her brother had been in the form of a request for lots of money with no explanation for why she needed it. Philip would contact her soon enough to check up on her.

“No. Perhaps later. For now, I just want some solitude. I figure I have about twelve more weeks to ensure I’m completely over this. And I don’t want to talk to anyone in the near future.”

Penelope pushed a button on the desk and the clear wall changed to opaque white privacy mode. She sat on the edge of the bed then reclined on it.

Twelve weeks was plenty of time to forget about how much she already missed Gray. It was also plenty of time to figure out how she’d ever live without him. Her foolish unattainable promise had cost her something very dear. A life with a man she loved.

* * * *

“Do you forgive her or do I have to threaten you with something dire?”

Turning a weary gaze to Nathan, Gray frowned. “Of course I forgive her. She did what she had to do. I would have done the same,

and so would you.”

Penelope left the conference room with Dr. Ledreder. More importantly, she left without looking back. His heart squeezed a little in pain at the snub. But he understood her actions. She lied to him from the beginning regarding her connections, but Gray knew she wasn't deceitful by nature. Her actions had to do with survival, and deep down he knew he'd likely have done exactly the same thing.

He and Nathan concluded their lucrative business agreement with the representative, and suddenly he had a bountiful credit balance.

The meeting hadn't worked out anywhere close to what he'd imagined, but he'd gotten five times the money he'd initially been willing to accept. Stunned by the revelation that Penelope couldn't deliver the meeting with the trade governor, Gray had sat frozen, and reviewed any and all possible ways of asking what he wanted. However, he wasn't willing to kick Penelope to the curb and embarrass her in a public forum to achieve that lofty goal.

Luckily, Nathan had saved the day with his request for the appointment. Startled for a minute, Gray also thought fast on his feet and the credit amount increased five fold. Oscar Kaslan hadn't even batted an eye.

He still thought Damon got off easy. The representative had intimated that the senior Mr. Kaslan was sending his son off planet someplace remote and that the funds being transferred were coming out of Damon's trust fund. It was almost enough to know Damon would be furious over the monetary loss.

Nathan poked him in the side to get his attention. “And because you are desperately in love. The thought of living without her makes your balls shrivel with dread, right?”

Gray laughed. “Something like that, yes. Do you relinquish her to me or will we have to fight for her affection?”

“No fight needed.” Nathan gave him a somber look. “She doesn't love me. It's always been you from the very first. Besides, I'm not ready to settle down yet. Hearts would break on every planet all the

way to Rycan if I settled down.” Nathan grinned.

“And you won’t find it awkward to be around the two of us in the future?”

“Nah. But I do like her very much, and if you don’t make her happy I *will* kick your ass.”

Gray laughed again. “You and what army?”

“Is that a challenge?”

“No. I wouldn’t want to beat up on the infirmed.”

Nathan snorted. “Even with the hole in my back, I could still take you. But I’ll let you off this time. I don’t want you to be all broken and sad when you go fetch Penelope.”

“Oh, thanks.” Gray turned to his best friend. “Listen, I appreciate what you did for Penelope. I know it was uncomfortable, but there isn’t anyone else I would have trusted to help her.”

“I know. Don’t go all sappy on me. Dr. Drake is a unique woman with a very tender soul. She’ll be good for you. Congratulations. I mean it.”

Gray sent Nathan back to the ship to get the recent docking squared away and headed for Dr. Ledreder’s office to wait for his love. When she didn’t come out after an hour, he knocked on the door.

“Yes.”

Gray entered and seated himself in front of Dr. Ledreder’s desk before he could protest or stop him. “I want to see Dr. Drake.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry that won’t be possible.”

“Why not?”

“Dr. Drake is ill.”

“I know all about her illness. That’s how we met.” They played a staring game for a few long seconds, but Gray won, and Dr. Ledreder looked away.

“Yes. But I thought she was involved with your first officer.”

Gray didn’t want to reveal anything that Penelope wanted kept secret, but he wasn’t about to lose her. “She and I were involved on

the first part of the trip to the Parsec Colony. I got trapped on Echo Province, and my first officer had to take her the rest of the way. When the cure didn't work, he kept her from suffering. But make no mistake. Penelope is mine."

Dr. Ledreder paled as Gray explained, but it couldn't be helped. "I'm sorry. However, Dr. Drake has asked for solitude. She's in quarantine."

"So is that your cure? Keep her in quarantine for the rest of her life?"

"No. The virus will burn out of her system in ten to twelve weeks. She asked to remain in solitude "

"Not going to happen. Take me to her."

"No, Captain Wyckoff. I will do no such thing. She's been through enough. Let her alone."

Gray stood, put fists on the desk and threatened. "Let me talk to her. I took her across the galaxy and back." What Gray didn't say out loud had to do with a possible misunderstanding. They needed to have a private conversation.

Dr. Ledreder's eyes widened for a moment, and Gray thought he was going to call security, but instead he relaxed. "I'll show you to the quarantine room, but if she doesn't wish to speak to you then I don't want any trouble."

"Fine."

Gray followed Dr. Ledreder down several halls to one with several clear walled rooms on either side. One had the opaque privacy white color turned on. Penelope.

Dr. Ledreder pushed the communication button. "Dr. Drake."

The wall flashed to clear and there she was. Gray flattened a hand on the wall and cast his gaze up and down her as if he hadn't seen her in days.

"What are you doing here?" Her eyes watered up and threatened to spill over.

"I came to make sure you weren't suffering."

“Well, I am. But not forever.” Her gaze shifted to her boss. “It turns out the virus isn’t permanent. I’ll be fine in a few months.”

“Let me in.”

Dr. Ledreder huffed. “I’m not going to allow you to breach quarantine.”

“Penelope, we need to discuss a few things.” He glanced at his time piece. “I know you have at least another hour.”

“Let him in for an hour.” She nodded at Dr. Ledreder and turned the wall opaque again.

Gray went to the side where the door to her room was and before he entered it, he turned to Dr. Ledreder. “I’ll let myself out. You don’t need to hover.”

“This is highly irregular,” Dr. Ledreder muttered. “I hope you know what you’re doing?”

“I hope so too.”

Gray entered and closed the door behind him. He watched her carefully and waited to see if anything had changed with regard to her illness. She didn’t attack him so he walked forward with the intention of grabbing her so he could hold her tight.

Before he made it halfway across the room she said, “I’m so sorry.” Her face crumbled and tears spilled over her lower lids to streak her cheeks.

Gray took her into his arms. “Tell me. Why are you sorry?”

“I lied to you from the very first moment about getting you an appointment with the Trade Governor. My brother works there, but he has no pull, and I knew that when I negotiated passage on the *Dalton*.” She tilted her head back until her gaze caught his. She would have pulled away, but he refused to release her.

“You wanted a cure for yourself. I get that. I just don’t get why you didn’t tell me later on. You could have explained it to me on the return trip to Bravura.”

“I didn’t want you to know what I’d done. I was ashamed.”

“I would have understood.”

“Maybe. But I’d already asked you for too much. I fell in love with you and then had to endure you watching me have sex with another man.” She buried her face in against his chest and sobbed once. “I then left you on that planet and continued the sexual relationship for several more days.”

“You’re rehashing what I already know. I love you, Penelope. All I want is to hear you say that you love me again.”

Her head snapped up. “How can you still love me after every thing that’s happened?”

Gray shrugged. “I think it’s a chemical thing, something about your scent. You’re beautiful, brilliant and perfect. How could I not love you? I’m miserable without you. I don’t want to contemplate a future without you in it.”

“What about Nathan? What will happen when the three of us are together?”

“Nothing. Nothing will happen. Unless you want it to happen. Are you telling me you want a relationship with him?”

“No.” She shook her head. Placing her hand on his chest, she said, “I will always love him, but not in the same way I love you. Does that even make sense?”

Gray smiled and kissed her cheek. “Yes.”

“Will Nathan be upset?”

“No. He’s sort of a free spirit when it comes to women. He isn’t ready to settle down to only one. He’s not looking for permanence.”

“Are you?”

“Yes.” Gray kissed her mouth. “Let me prove it to you.”

“How?”

“How do you think? I’m going to strip you down and make love to you while I can. There aren’t any cameras in here, are there?”

“I hope not.” She laughed and glanced at the time piece on the wall. “But if you’re going to strip me down, you’d better hurry. A few more minutes and I’ll be the one taking charge.”

“I’m also okay with that, in case you wondered.”

“I love you, Gray.”

“And I love you, Dr. Drake. I think we should make our relationship permanent. What do you think about a pledge ceremony in a few months?”

“I think I’m the luckiest woman on this planet. And also that I’m very anxious for you to take my clothes off.”

“Good. But while I still have the opportunity, I’d like to go very slow.”

“Fast or slow, doesn’t matter. I just want to be with you.”
Penelope threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

There would never be any suffering over sex in their future.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lara Santiago is the bestselling author of over twelve books. She's an Ecataromance award winner, a 2007 Passionate Plume finalist for *The Lawman's Wife*, and has garnered a coveted four and half stars from Romantic Times Book Reviews for her novel, *The Blonde Bomb Tech*.

From her futuristic novels to her contemporary romantic suspense, she's known for her independent heroines and those compelling alpha males we all adore.

After turning in her twelfth manuscript, she came to the realization that this writing gig might just work out after all. She continues to dream up stories, keeping no less than ten story ideas circulating at any given time.



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