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Veiled Heat  
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# Veiled Heat

*Leigh Wyndfield*

## Dedication

To my husband Chip—thank you for your constant support of my writing.

To my friends in my magical gaming realm—thank you for fighting dragons with me and showing me what true teamwork can do.

To my critique partners, Jasmine Haynes and TL Schaefer—as always you are there for me when I need you most.

## Chapter One

*Somewhere on the outer rim of nowhere*

Callie Justice might be an ex-captain of a patrol starship, an ex-up-and-comer in the Inter-world Troopers, and an ex-winner at the game of life, but she knew how to connect the X-bolt cables to their console. Obviously her superior, Lieutenant Mildred Hornburn, didn't think so since she was painstakingly explaining the process as if Callie was as big a moron as Mildred herself.

The problem with having a bad boss was that you were stuck with them, possibly forever. Callie pictured herself reduced to a skeleton as Mildred instructed her on how to insert the cable into the socket that had been built for it. How Mildred had made it to command rank wasn't a mystery. Hornburns filled the upper echelon of the military. Her name alone would have gotten her the basic promotions. How Mildred ended up here wasn't a mystery either. This ship, sent to patrol the outer rim of nowhere, had been filled with those the military wanted to hide. Dimwits, like Hornburn, and the ex-elite demoted for conduct unbecoming in an officer—like Callie.

If she were the captain of this ship, rather than the slab of muscled hunk named Captain Rafe Vantry, she'd fire Mildred and send her back to Borrus in disgrace, highly placed family or not. Instead, Callie nodded docilely and reminded herself that flying was better than the rubber room.

Reassignment Center 001, called the rubber room by anyone who'd ever spent time there, was an old worn-out building on the outskirts of Capital City where they sent those in command who'd made an "egregious" error in judgment. The dregs of the Troopers sat waiting for new assignments which never came, sometimes for years. After months of coming in every day and sitting for ten straight hours waiting for orders to go to a new assignment, people had literally gone crazy, which had earned the building its nickname.

The rules stated that anyone who failed to report for duty was AWOL and therefore could be dishonorably discharged. That meant a loss of benefits and the end of being a Trooper. For Callie, it meant losing the only home she'd ever known.

So when she'd been offered an assignment in the middle-of-nowhere space, on a piece of junk years out of date, she'd done the only thing she could to escape the hell of waiting endlessly. She'd taken this position as third in line to Mildred's position as lieutenant.

She'd thought anything would be better than the rubber room. Now she wasn't so sure.

"Here, you try," Mildred said, her voice the same tone used with very small children. She pulled apart the cable from the socket and handed over the pieces.

Taking the parts automatically, Callie looked at them, her mind stuck in a circle of disbelief. Was she really supposed to put them back together? Did the lieutenant think she couldn't insert one end into the other?

A strangled laugh worked its way up her throat. She'd been here a week and already she'd begun to question her sanity.

"Lieutenant, I need you to check the cargo we took on this morning," a low, sexy male voice growled from behind Callie's shoulder.

As always, a slow curl of lust spiraled inside her, making her skin tingle and her breath catch. She rolled her eyes at herself.

Really, this lusting had to stop. It had been a long, long time since she'd been with a man. Too long. Drastic steps had been taken, though. Soon she'd have an outlet for all this pent-up need, if she could hold on long enough.

"Yes, sir," Mildred trilled, happily marching away, leaving Callie standing there facing Captain Yummy.

"Do you know how to fix the Comm?" His voice was a perpetual growl, his bad mood constant for the seven days she'd known him. He didn't walk, he prowled. His body always appeared on the edge of action, a circle of intensity surrounding him like a cloud.

She found the fact that she lusted after *him* more interesting than the lust itself. It had been two years since she'd had sex. She cringed admitting that to herself. So lusting was healthy. For the year she'd captained her own ship, she'd been celibate by necessity. Captains couldn't have sex with crew members, even in the Command-sanctioned Relaxation Program. But after she'd returned to Borrus to face charges, she'd been too pissed off to have sex, too angry with everyone, herself included.

But the fact her body had chosen *him* of all people baffled her. On the outside, his brown eyes and brown hair should have made him completely uninteresting, but she couldn't take her eyes off him. He drew her notice the way one might be unable to take their gaze off an asteroid shower. The danger combined with a strange sort of beauty dazzled the senses. It was what drove her yesterday to put her name in for the Relaxation Program for the first time since she'd become a Senior Officer.

"Major," he snapped, taking a step closer.

She blinked away her thoughts and rewound the last sentence he'd said to her. "Of course I can fix it, Captain." The words came out as a purr. Gods above! She'd only exchanged a handful of sentences with him, but already control slipped from her grasp. She had to take care of the lust. Tonight by herself if she wasn't matched when she went off duty.

Her tone pulled him up short, and he looked at her as if she'd grown a third eyeball. Then his intensity whipped around him like a cloak, making him appear to lean further into her airspace. "For the last three hours, we've had no functioning internal or external communication equipment." His voice dropped to a deadly whisper. "While we've had to put up with the intra-ship Comm being down for the last few months, we can't fly without contact to life outside this ship. Do you understand my concerns, Major?"

Her mind pictured him saying other words in just that tone and a shiver of desire passed through her. "Yes, sir." She gave him a snappy salute, hoping he'd go away so she could get herself back under control.

He stared at her for a long, agonizing moment, his eyes narrowing to slits. Finally, he turned on his heel and marched off. Most likely he thought she was a few ions short of a full charge the way she'd acted.

She turned to her work, trying to blot him out by assuring herself that her body would get some relief as soon as possible. That would raise her intelligence level back to normal.

Forcing herself to remember where she was (the biggest hunk of junk still flying in the Troopers), she let a slow burn of anger wash in her veins while she waited until he'd walked far away before kneeling. There was something just plain wrong about dropping down at his feet. Bad visions hit her brain of her unbuckling his weapons belt. The thoughts didn't make sense at all. She'd never been submissive to any lover. It was a matter of principle.

Besides, he was more like Captain Grumpy than Captain Yummy. There was nothing sexy about a bad-tempered man.

*It's not bad temper. It's caged animal.*

"Shut up," she whispered to herself.

Blocking the captain out wasn't difficult after she slid under her workstation. Wires sprouted this way and that, hidden by the overhang of the console. "Whoa," she whispered, in awe of what she'd found. Talk about a patch job. With a shaking finger, she touched an actual piece of string holding together what looked like the internal communication links.

She swallowed back a hysterical bout of laughter. "Mother of the gods." If it had been her ship, she'd gut anyone who'd done this. But it was not her ship. In fact, she was about three steps above the guy who cleaned the toilets.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to make sense of it all. Seconds ticked into minutes. She followed the dark green internal Comm link, trying to understand why it was on the wrong side of the console. Her finger traced along like a child following a shooting star, past the blue piece of string, down along where it wrapped around some other more



secure lines, down, down, down into the external communication power source. “Holy shit.”

She sat in shock, knocking her head. “Double damn,” she moaned, rubbing the spot, breathing deeply through the pain and the dizziness. What the hell was going on here?

Lying back, she searched for her Zen, knowing it was nowhere to be found, but trying to fake it. She’d been a rock once, more professional than the current yummy captain if for no other reason than she hadn’t been in a perpetual bad mood. Clinging to that, she traced the line the other way, back past the blue string, all the way to the internal Comm side of the console, where it hooked back around a support beam and hung a 120 degree zig back in the other direction.

She finally found where it went.

Someone had hooked the internal communication lines to the external control, using it for the external communication. But why? Following the other lines, she found out quickly that none of them went anywhere.

With a shiver of sudden insight, she knew what had happened. Whoever had done this job before her had used the external power source to alternate between the inside and outside communication, switching the cable as they needed it. The sheer craziness of it overwhelmed her as much as the genius. *This* was her life now. Thinking outside normal protocols. Making a lot of little.

“A challenge,” she mumbled.

She could do this. Maybe she wasn’t captain material. Most likely she would never be at the helm again, not unless she joined the resistance, but she wasn’t ready to betray the Council. She wasn’t a lowly maggot, eating on the underbelly of the human universes. Even if she might secretly wish she was, just so she could be in command again.

Okay. So now she had to figure out where in the jerry-rigged hell all this went wrong.

Not a problem for someone with her intelligence level and drive. She may have lost her rank, but she hadn’t lost the core of herself.

Although her current lusting after the brooding captain might signal the impending end of her sanity.

Captain Rafe Vantry steepled his fingers and studied the very nice ass of his new major, wondering what in the universes she'd done to piss off the top brass. Because she had to have done something bad to land this assignment.

She was too competent to end up here for being an idiot, like most of his crew. He could tell that within the first two sentences out of her mouth, and watching her face as she interacted with the crew. It was on the tip of her tongue to start correcting people, but each time she'd fought it down.

Again he ran through the list of possible violations which would tank her career. Having sex with a married fellow officer wouldn't land her here, even though Command had been cracking down on that infraction lately. He could handle her having had a past, elicit affair, as long as she was good at her job. To bust her down to major, she had to have been at least one grade above. Possibly even a lieutenant. He shut his eyes briefly, sending a prayer to the higher beings. To have a decent lieutenant, even one with a small issue with following rules, would change everything on this ship.

He almost snarled aloud at how low he'd fallen. Four months ago, he would have never done anything outside protocol. Now he found himself bending rules almost continuously to keep the Ventura flying for another day.

She had to have done something worse than simply sleeping with the wrong person. Steal supplies and sell them on the black market? There had been a lot of that going on. Maybe. Insubordination? She was a woman, after all. There were still those at the top who hated that females were allowed on ships and would do all kinds of chicken-livered things to keep them from the higher ranks. So far, there were no women at all in the highest echelon of the Troopers. That spoke volumes to him.

He doubted he could be so lucky as to have a wrongly accused superstar on his ship.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes and massaged his temples, trying to relieve the headache that had taken up residency there.

He was Captain of this barely flying heap because he'd been dumb enough to make a bet that he could whip any crew, no matter how terrible they were, into shape. Picturing the moment at the Senior Staff Celebration Gala where he made the bet, he could not believe how arrogant he'd been. He'd practically *begged* for this assignment. He really had believed he was *that* good of a captain that his presence alone could solve any issues, no matter how great.

He'd been wrong.

Utterly, horribly wrong.

If he could have just one higher-ranked crew member who wasn't a slacker or an idiot, he could do it. But even he couldn't be everywhere at once.

On second thought, he'd settle for a semi-idiot.

The whole thing had eaten him alive over the last four painful months. Especially since the losing end of the bet was staying in this command forever. He'd had the best assignment in the whole fleet, with the best crew and the best equipment. No wonder he'd been a superstar. He still wasn't ready to give up his belief that he had the ability to fix the Ventura. Only now he'd modified his thinking to include a few other key individuals who could help him get the job done. Even the gods called upon others for assistance sometimes.

Like now. He was stuck on this ship, without any working communication. *Floating forever out here with this merry band of idiots and incompetents...*

He felt the constant growl vibrating under the surface of his chest climb up his throat. It was all he could do not to unleash a blast of anger at his hapless crew. He didn't use to be this much of an asshole, but he couldn't help the fury which raged within him.

"Captain," a breathy voice said beside him, excitement dancing below the surface.

He turned his head slowly, inch by inch, wanting to chew up and spit out the joy from whoever dared to think there was anything to be happy about here. Why wasn't he surprised that it was his new Communications Specialist, Callie Justice, doer of unknown violations?

"Major." The word crawled out of his mouth, the tone so dangerous, even he winced.

“I’ve got the communications up and running.” A grin flashed across her face and he realized she was younger than he’d originally thought. Prettier too, with regulation bob-length brown hair and deep green eyes framed by thick lashes. Her short, slight build made her appear almost waif-like.

He raised an eyebrow, glad that with the return of the external communications a floating death wasn’t in his future. Things were looking up. “Patch me through to the Relay Station.”

“Yes, sir.” She dashed off without saluting, leaving him wondering if her crime had been insubordination after all. Maybe her last captain had a stick up his butt about regulations? If he could only be so lucky. He’d requested her records twice, but had received only vague answers. He’d take someone competent who didn’t know how to salute any day, but something about the whole situation had him on edge. His gut told him Callie Justice was going to be a double-edged sword, and his gut was rarely wrong.

After a quick check-in with the Relay Station to let them know the Ventura was online, he sat back, enjoying the first time something went right since he’d boarded the ship.

His first day he’d found out that over half of the crew had reached the end of their tours and had been replaced. So not only did he inherit a ship which was falling apart, fifty percent of his staff was brand new, and most of them had never seen the inside of a patrolship before. Things had only gone downhill from there.

Glancing down at the computer inside the armrest of his chair, he noticed a blinking light, signaling he had high-priority mail. Tapping through quickly, he paused when he saw who had sent him the missive. The ship’s computer, known as M.A.R.L.I.S. (Machine ReLay Intelligent System), had only sent him mail once before, about an issue with the portside engines. Unlike most ships, this one had no sentient computer to help him understand the complex functioning of the ship. With everything else broken, it didn’t surprise him that M.A.R.L.I.S. needed to be fixed as well.

He should have known things would take a turn back to the worst once again.

Tapping twice, he opened the mail and read the standard form letter, expecting the news to be grim:

*Congratulations...Rafe Vantry...*

*You have been matched with the perfect Relaxation Partner based on your personality analysis. Please report for your first encounter at 0200. Regulation states—*

He stopped there and backed up. Reread.

The Relaxation Program had malfunctioned, just as he'd known it would.

During his first week on the ship, he'd done a total systems check. That was, of course, before he'd even guessed how bad things were here. As if he cared if the Relaxation Program wasn't operating as it was intended. He had so much more to worry about.

He should never have been matched. Captains were excluded from sleeping with subordinates, even in a program which kept identities a complete secret. Blind, anonymous sex with a monogamous partner was supposed to keep Troopers content while they spent sometimes up to a full year in space without their families.

Closing the mail without finishing the notice, he felt a hum of regret. Gods, to have straight, simple, no-holds-barred sex would do wonders for his morale. But if there was one thing he stood for, it was regulation, even if he'd lately bent a few rules here and there.

That didn't mean he'd outright break them.

Even if he desperately wanted to relieve some of his pent-up anger with a good fuck.

An alarm sounded, ripping him from his thoughts.

"Incoming, sir," Willis yelled from across the bridge.

They rarely ever encountered another ship here, let alone someone with their weapons running hot enough for the old sensors to pick them up.

"Alert the crew," he heard himself say, the words coming from his mouth without conscious thought before he remembered they still had no functioning internal Comm.

“All crew report for duty. We have incoming. This is not a test. Repeat. This is not a test.” The female voice came over the loudspeaker, calm and cool.

He stared in disbelief at his new major. She nodded, her expression smug at having fixed both the external and internal systems at the same time.

If he lived through the next few hours, he’d pin a medal on her for a job well done. But since most of the guns on the ship had stopped functioning over the last few months, he doubted that was a probability.

## Chapter Two

Callie blew out a breath of pure relief that her voice had come out strong and sure on the intercom. If she hadn't been so rattled, the look on Captain Grumpy's face when he heard the intercom working would have brought her much amusement. But all she could think about was the last time she'd encountered a hostile ship.

She'd been ordered to blow it away, even though the top brass knew it was filled with mixed breeds, mostly women and children trying to escape from Inter-world planets before they were rounded up and destroyed.

When she was a child, her mother's maid, Atla, had been a breed, half-human, half some other humanoid race. They were strictly forbidden from living on Inter-world Council planets, but that rule had largely been ignored as long as the mixed breed could pass on the outside at least. That changed when it was discovered that some breeds had genetically enhanced powers, making them dangerous to the Council.

It was a picture of Atla's gentle face which had her frozen at the console, unable to give the order to send hundreds of women and children to their graves. Her mind couldn't stop circling on the fact that the breeds were leaving, so why not let them escape? Later, she'd been told that since these breeds looked so much like humans, they were much more dangerous. The Council feared they would return and cause all kinds of havoc, killing humans in an attempt to exact revenge, joining forces with the Rebel Alliance. But at the time, she couldn't think that far ahead. She could only think about the fact they were asking her to kill women and children.

Someone yelled from across the room, "Incoming XL7. Cannons hot and armed, ready to fire."

Callie tightened her fist, biting her nails into her palms in an attempt to banish the déjà vu which swamped her. She couldn't think about those old memories now. The XL7

wasn't a ship full of innocents, anyway. Most likely it was a simple transport with only enough room for a crew of six.

"We're doomed," Jackson whined, jerking her from her memories, allowing her to slam shut a mental door on them. Focusing on the Radar Specialist, she thought for the tenth time that even though his blond hair was regulation length, it still managed to appear too long and stringy.

There seemed to be two types of people on the crew of the Ventura—simpletons and slackers. She'd already figured out that Jackson was as lazy as they came.

Actually there were three kinds—simpletons, slackers and Captain Grumpy. There was nothing unintelligent or lazy about him.

"I doubt we're doomed." She didn't think Vantry would let them become floating debris any time soon.

Already he was on his feet, pacing across the room. "Justice, send out a message to the Relay Station and let them know we've encountered another ship and are approaching to investigate."

"Yes, sir." She leaned down to carefully unplug the wires from the intercom and connect them to the external communication box. Not her best work, but she needed parts before she could do better. Once the emergency passed, she'd have to take the whole console apart and see if she could figure out what exactly was going on with the internal power source.

Vantry shouted orders while she patched through to the Relay Station. "Ventura to Station 18. Ventura to Station 18."

No one replied.

That was odd. But it looked like the equipment hadn't malfunctioned. The indicator showed it running at over half power, enough to make contact.

A weird feeling crawled up her neck. The system had been working only minutes ago. It couldn't have broken *this* quickly.

Following her hunch, she slid from her seat to stand behind Jackson.



“What are you doing away from your post, Major?” the captain growled from close behind her left shoulder. Too close.

She ignored him, concentrating on the screen. There it was. A stray buzz of energy radiating from the incoming ship.

“They’re jamming our communications, sir.” She tapped the screen, showing him the stray energy signal. “Old school jammer, nothing high tech,” she murmured, unsure if he’d be familiar with what the signal looked like. She’d only encountered it once before, at the beginning of her time in the Troopers.

“I see it.” He spun on his heel. “I need to know who we’re dealing with here. Willis, I want an answer now.”

“Their ship has a freighter call sign.” Willis studied his screen, which had zoomed in on the approaching ship. He was one of three people on the bridge who would man their artillery.

Callie returned to her radio, locating the transport communication band most small companies used. It was worth a shot. “This is the patrolship Ventura. Please identify yourselves and stand your weapons down or we will be forced to fire. Repeat, stand down.”

“Ventura, this is...” Static erupted on the radio. “Request help.” More static. “...help.”

In the viewport, the ship propelled itself closer. Old memories of her last encounter crawled to the forefront of her mind, but she pushed them back.

“Should we fire, Captain?” Jackson asked, his voice a quivering mass of nerves.

“They’re a freighter class, sir,” Willis said again, implying that their weapons would be minimal. Willis was the only person she’d met on the Ventura who had a chance at being good at his job. He only needed some training to come up to speed.

The whole room paused in silence, waiting for Vantry’s answer. She realized the crew respected the captain as much as they feared him. That said a lot for how well Vantry had established himself with this hodgepodge group of unwanted.

“Hold your fire until my word.” Vantry’s order came strong and sure, no hesitation or indecision anywhere to be found.

No one questioned him, but tension ratcheted up another notch. If he was wrong and this was a trick, they’d be floating space wreckage.

Without waiting to be told, she reopened communication. “XL7, this is the Ventura. Please cool your weapons and prepare to be boarded.”

“...can’t...weapons, no one...left...”

She glanced at Vantry, raising an eyebrow asking him what to do. She no longer trusted her instincts when it came to making this kind of call.

On their port side, the XL7 closed the gap between them, forcing the Ventura to turn at the last minute to avoid a head-on collision. The ship filled the viewport—damage all over the hull, huge gashes torn through the metal in several places, as if giant claws had ripped the cargo ship.

“Release the grappling hooks.” Vantry’s voice was calm and in control.

Sexy, she thought, glad to be distracted from the memories nipping at her mind.

Desire washed through her. There was something very hot about a man who didn’t panic in the face of a crisis situation.

The hooks deployed, spiraling out through space, clamping onto the hull, pulling the ship into their grasp.

“Majors Justice and Willis, suit up. You’re accompanying me on board the other ship,” Vantry snapped, as he strode away from the consoles.

Callie barely stopped the protest which jumped automatically to her lips. As captain, protocol said he should stay on the Ventura.

But her protests would have been for nothing, anyway. Vantry was already gone.

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It was against regulation for him to board the XL7, but Rafe could care less. Regulations hadn’t been made for this situation, hadn’t been made to apply to a crew who could mess up on the most basic of orders. At this moment, he just didn’t give a shit. And

if he died, well, did it really matter? It was a toss-up if that would be worse than staying on the Ventura for the rest of his career.

They were in bio-suits, he and the two most competent people on his crew, waiting for the welders to cut through the XL7's airlock. It wasn't smart, since he might be killing them too, but he felt reckless today, on the edge of a meltdown.

The metal of the XL7's hull squealed in the tight confines of the room as it was peeled back.

"You're in, Captain," the welder said, stepping from his path.

Without another thought, he entered the XL7's airlock, waited for his two crew members to join him, then opened the portal.

They walked down a silent hall, an eerie feeling making the air heavy with anticipation. This ship should have a crew of at least six. No one greeted them. Nothing moved. He gripped his blast rifle, feeling the hair on the back of his neck rise at the unnatural stillness.

The thick silence was punctuated only by the sound of his own breathing in his bio-suit. The harsh cadence of his inhales were followed by the cool slide of his exhales. Since his peripheral vision was obstructed by the suit, he had to constantly turn his head to scan back and forth.

Tension rode his shoulders, building as he felt the utter motionlessness of an empty ship.

The two majors followed in his wake, each a step behind.

"Empty," Willis said, the sudden sound almost causing Rafe to raise his weapon.

"Something's wrong here." The husky tone of the woman's voice tickled down his body, leaving chill bumps of another kind on his skin.

He blocked it out easily. There was nothing sexy about this situation.

"There's still gravity. The XL7 hadn't lost pressure." That was something. If they'd had a malfunction in their life support, his feet wouldn't be touching the deck right now.

Rounding the corner, they found the first body, face down.

“Keep your eyes up and down the corridor,” he growled to his majors, then crouched to roll the dead man onto his back.

Rafe bent for a closer look, feeling how large a target he made as the seconds ticked by slowly. Having Callie Justice behind him gave him some measure of calm, since she at least would do what she was told. “No wounds of any kind.”

“Keep your eyes down the corridor, Willis.” Callie’s commanding tone, mixed with just the right amount of bite, had the feel of long practice.

She’d had a command, at least a small one. Rafe filed that away to think more on later. “It’s as if he fell over dead for no reason. There is nothing here to indicate he died by violence of any kind.”

“Maybe the life support only temporarily failed, then came back up?” Callie didn’t turn toward him, holding position with the kind of discipline that brought tears to his eyes.

“He’d have grabbed his neck or mussed his clothes trying to catch his breath.” Rafe stared into the dead man’s face. Young, maybe only a few years above the legal age to work on starships. Long hair partially covered his eyes, which were clouded a milky white. His face was relaxed in death, as if he’d gone to his grave with peace in his heart. “Nothing on him is out of place.” Using a handheld, he checked for any signs of life, knowing there would be nothing, but going through the steps anyway.

He stood and walked on, his pace increasing, a bad feeling making him want to get the rest over with as soon as possible.

The command room had five more bodies. He held out his hand for Callie to stop when she made to circle around him.

“One of them should be alive,” she protested.

“Maybe, but we take this slow. Willis, you cover behind us. Justice, you cover the right door.”

She moved at his order without question, her own desires instantly forgotten in the face of his command. It had been so long since he’d had a crew member who didn’t look

at him for a moment in confusion after every word he said, that Rafe had to shake his head at the feeling of gratitude welling up inside him.

They made a careful, agonizing sweep of the room, checking for signs of life while watching for attackers. *Something* had killed these people.

No one lived, including the woman in the captain's chair, her hand lying next to the external Comm from which she'd hailed them, her body still warm.

It took another hour to fully comb the ship. Nothing. No more bodies, no one left alive, no readily apparent reason for their deaths.

"Space sickness?" His new major's tone held horror. She understood too well what could happen if some rogue virus made it on board a tightly packed patrolship.

He nodded, worried about that himself. "Let's take some readings from the bodies, then return to the Ventura." He moved quickly now, wanting to be gone as fast as possible. He'd never been one to spook easily, but the dead on the ship stared straight through him, their faces in such a happy repose, he couldn't stay another second longer than he had to. "We have to fully decontaminate when we get into the airlock. If this is some sort of deep-space virus, we need to make sure it's eradicated completely. I don't want to infect the rest of the ship."

"Yes, sir," the majors said in unison, not even complaining about the invasive, unpleasant task ahead of them. They didn't want whatever happened here to get into the ship.

He didn't take a deep breath until the airlock slid shut on the XL7. Punching in the commands, he started a full decontamination.

"Starting Decon level five," a female ship's voice said pleasantly, startling him.

Since the ship's voice program had broken long ago, it had to be only a small recording attached to the decontamination procedure, not the miraculous return of his ship's computer.

"Please hold your arms straight out from your sides," the computer said in a pleasant singsong.

They stood still as minutes clicked by, the air so misted he couldn't see his hand in front of his face.

"It is now safe to take off your bio-suits. Please place them in the receptacle on the far wall, along with any clothes on your body. New clothes will be provided for you."

Callie sighed, obviously not looking forward to stripping in front of them. Willis's eyebrows climbed up his forehead.

"Keep your eyes on the ground, soldier," Rafe snapped, not intending to follow that command himself. What that said about how low his character had fallen, he didn't want to examine too closely.

Callie stripped, her movements jerky, red creeping up the back of her neck.

They all stepped into place in the center of the room.

"Commencing stage-two decontamination." The ship's voice had an odd rhythm to it, as if it was amused by their discomfort.

He forced himself to wait until the room began to fog before glancing Callie's way. She stared directly at him. He watched as her eyes narrowed in anger.

Slowly, without any remorse, he let his gaze drift down along her beautiful shoulders, over her firm, small, proud breasts, enjoying the spike of desire that sliced through him. Without feeling the sting of recrimination, he realized for the second time in as many hours regulations could be damned.

He wanted this woman, even though she was his subordinate, even though his already floundering career would definitely be over if he had her. For the first time, he understood all those soldiers before him who'd thrown away everything to have a woman.

It had come to this then. A choice between the lesser of two evils. An affair or the Relaxation Program. Because he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it had to be one or the other.

The small part of him which was still honorable wouldn't bring another down with him. No matter what she'd done to get demoted, he wouldn't be responsible for landing her in more trouble by engaging in an affair—assuming she even wanted one.

That left only one option.

With a sigh, he accepted the inevitable.

## Chapter Three

Callie couldn't believe her commanding officer was blatantly staring at her body. Anger and something that could be need swirled inside her. Dropping her own gaze, she swept down his chest as the decontamination solution hazed the air.

She had only a few moments to take in the view.

He was perfect. Lean muscles corded his arms and shoulders. Flat abs with a dusting of hair had her swallowing with awe. Before the room filled completely and she had to shut her eyes, she caught beautifully muscled thighs and a...

She closed her lids against the sight of his cock.

Her commanding officer had an erection. A very large one, standing tall and proud from a nest of light brown hair.

Gods.

A burn filled her blood, whispering through her to pool between her legs.

The hum of need rose within her body so strong and sharp, she had to force herself to stand still for the rest of the decontamination.

When the ship announced they were clean, she spun on her heel and grabbed one of the clean uniforms from the now-open drawer.

She had to escape, had to make it back to her quarters.

"Major Justice," the object of her pure lust yelled after her, but she was gone, leaping through the narrow opening as the doors slid open.

Dashing through the corridors, she barely made it to her cabin in time. With a sob, she palmed the close button for her door, before jogging to her perfectly made bunk. Had she really been in such control this morning when she'd fixed the bedding just so? Now look at her.



She didn't even care. She *had* to take care of the desire before her whole body split in two.

Jerking off her uniform, she threw herself onto her bunk. Spreading her legs, she found her clitoris with the fingers of her right hand. It would take only a few turns of her hand to bring her to orgasm, but now that she was so close to completion, she tried to slow down.

It felt like heaven, the tight bud of her clit aching with every swirl.

Her body shook with the effort, her mind conjuring a man's—*his*—tongue where her own fingers touched.

It was suddenly no longer enough.

Rolling to her stomach, she reached her left hand down and snuggled two fingers inside her tight channel, imagining the stiff, huge cock she'd seen only a few minutes earlier entering her.

Need the likes of nothing she'd ever felt before exploded over her, wrenching a moan from between her lips as a mind-blowing climax washed through her, shaking her body with the force of the orgasm.

Tremors faded along her nerve endings as she lay gasping for breath, her uniform pants still around one ankle. Her body and top sheet were soaked with sweat.

Flipping to her back, she stared up at the blank, white ceiling, groaning with embarrassment. Could he tell that she'd wanted him so badly?

Then another thought hit her.

"What if *Willis* could tell I was lusting?" She closed her eyes, gritting her teeth in shame. "Oh my gods." She'd finally snapped. The stress of the investigation and losing her command must have led to some sort of breakdown.

For awhile she could only lay there, playing the last few minutes over and over again in her mind. Her staring at his body while he stared at her, the need, running away like a fool.

"Get it together," she said, forcing herself out of her self-pity.

Sitting up, she stared at her pants hanging from one leg and shook her head. “Don’t think about it. Just erase it from your mind. It didn’t happen.”

But it did happen. And she knew she would think about it for a long time. His body had been so perfect, so big and muscled and...

Stop!

Adding to her frustration, she was still turned on, the need still lurking under the surface, waiting to boil over again at a moment’s notice.

She couldn’t continue like this. Lusting after her *commanding officer*. He wasn’t even a nice guy. He wasn’t even likeable.

It was time to do something—anything—to stop the madness.

Then she saw the computer screen across the room blinking to signal that she had inter-ship mail.

Standing, she shook off her uniform from around her ankle and strolled naked to click the screen. Relief poured over her. She’d been matched by the ship’s Relaxation Program. This would be the last time she’d have to deal with the need on her own. Hot, anonymous sex would make all of this go away.

Glancing at her wristcomm, she found she only had to wait two hours and all her sexual worries would be over. With a slow smile, she opened a small box on her nightstand, carefully lifting the precious bottle of perfume from where it nestled safe within a padded box. The liquid was worth its weight in the most precious of gems, but the purchase had been one of her few extravagances. She could only afford the smallest of dabs, which would be washed clean when she showered after her encounter, but the action of putting on the perfume made her feel feminine and all woman. As strange as it sounded, when she wore this scent, she felt confident and sexy.

The ritual complete and the bottle safely stowed, she returned it to the box, closing it with a snap. Now she was ready for anything.

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Whoever came up with the Relaxation Program had to have been insane and brilliant at the same time. Rafe had often envisioned a bunch of senior brass sitting around a conference table, trying to figure out how to keep the men and women on a ship from, as his friend Jigs used to say, “Fucking like bunnies.”

Fifty years ago, someone had proposed letting the Troopers have sex, but keeping their partners a mystery.

While it went against all the rules of the service and the top brass were a conservative, older lot, they had to face facts. The gods had built the human form to need sex and to lie, cheat and disobey orders to get it. The longer the tour, the more fornicating in dark corners occurred.

When a computer program was developed which not only matched monogamous partners for the whole tour but also kept those soldiers from knowing the identity of one another, the brass had finally found a way to make sex palatable. Rafe had to admit, it appealed to him on some level as well. He was, at his heart, a guy who wanted to come home every night to one woman. He’d always thought if he found the woman he loved, he’d leave ship duty and take a desk job at HQ. Raise a family. All that stuff people talked about as fairy tales.

Of course, that was no longer an option for him. His days of being able to transfer on his own whim were over. Since he’d arrived on the Ventura, he’d asked for personnel transfers, supplies and even ship repairs, only to be denied at every turn. His status in the Troopers had gone down to nothing. He hadn’t realized how much people had bent over backwards for him when he’d been commanding the Mothership.

It had been years since he’d entered the Relaxation Program. Once he’d made it to second in command of a ship, he’d given it up as one of the costs of being a leader. But he’d been happy with it before. The ship had always chosen an adequate sexual partner. Nothing spectacular, but certainly someone good enough to keep him balanced.

After seeing his new major without her clothes, he felt like one of the bunnies Jigs referred to. He was more than ready to meet the woman his crippled, duct-taped ship had picked for him.

The ship had scheduled his first meeting at the best possible time for him to go undetected. Both shifts had an hour overlap on duty, giving him forty-five minutes inside the box with his new lover. No one would be anywhere near the area of the cargo hold which had been set up for the program.

Stepping into the male side of the preparation chamber, he took a deep breath, suddenly having second thoughts. There were reasons the brass decreed that captains couldn't sleep with crew, even in the Relaxation Program. There was no chance of being matched with an equal, no doubt at all he would be engaging in sex with someone who reported to him.

What was worse was that he was committing a cardinal sin for selfish reasons. Earlier, he'd explored the rogue ship because he'd been the only person he trusted to not screw up. But this would be for his own pleasure.

But what did it matter now? He was stuck on this heap of junk for the rest of his career, never to be seen again. His whole life as he'd envisioned it was over. Done. Gone.

He'd been brought down by his own hubris.

Anger directed wholly at himself flashed through him, goading him into pulling the tab holding his uniform shirt in place. He'd give himself this one time, then he'd never come back again. Just this once. Afterwards he'd return to trying to be perfect.

In seconds, he was naked, staring at himself in the mirror.

Not bad, he knew. He kept himself in top shape, even here in the middle of nowhere. Sure, he'd been banged up a bit in the Alien Wars when he'd first joined the Troopers, but the laser scars were almost faded now. Not that his partner would ever see them.

With that thought, he stepped into the entrance hall. Automatically the door slid shut behind him, enveloping him in darkness.

The hum began, a low buzz which would rise to a screaming pitch if he or his partner tried to speak. He'd heard rumors of people communicating through sign language or drawing letters on each other's skin, but there was no way he would let his partner know who he was. Ever. Besides, with only forty-five minutes between them, she wouldn't want to know.

A dull green light glowed on the wall to his right, signaling the lock had popped on the door he knew stood before him. He ran his hand down the cool metal until he found the handle.

His cock throbbed in time with his heartbeat. He needed this so badly. Just the physical release would fix something that had broken inside him when he realized he had no chance of whipping the Ventura into shape.

Sliding the door open, he entered the small room which was the size of a large bed, the floor one giant mattress. Most patrolships had four or even six compartments. His ship had only one, jammed into a section of the cargo hold.

The air smelled vaguely of cleanser and purified recycled air. As he moved forward, it felt as if he swam through water, the air thick with the deadening sound-prevention waves.

Slowly he inched forward, drifting his hand along the soft cloth of the bedding below him. *If she's here, she's short or not lying with her legs straight.*

*Or the damn ship hasn't matched me with anyone. It's probably a malfunction and I'm in here by myself. That would be my luck.*

The chuckle rising in his throat faded as his fingers brushed a woman's toes.

He stopped, curling his hand around her foot, keeping the touch harmless and light, enjoying the comforting heat of another human's skin against his own.

The standard form he'd filled out had asked about every one of his secret desires and for some reason, he'd actually clicked the box which said he liked to touch/kiss/handle women's feet. He'd never admitted that before, since it always seemed a bit weird and fetish-like to him. Most women hated to have their toes touched, recoiling in laughter, screaming that it tickled. But she must have said she didn't mind or she wouldn't be here.

He'd filled out his form with complete honesty because he'd assumed when he'd done it that he'd never be matched with anyone. He'd just been stepping through the process to make sure each stage worked and that the system was functioning at a certain level. When he submitted the final form, instead of being rejected due to his rank as

captain, he'd received an inter-ship mail saying he'd be matched when an appropriate partner became available.

He'd planned to have the program fixed the next time they were in port, but by the time they'd arrived, there were hundreds of other critical issues which had surfaced, and he'd had to prioritize.

Still kneeling, he slowly massaged her feet, one in each hand, enjoying the feel of them. How long had it been since he'd been with a woman? It felt like a lifetime, even though he'd had a final night of fun before he'd left to join the Ventura four months ago. Still, he didn't think any woman had ever felt this good before. All warm and alive and his for the span of forty-five minutes.

He brought her right foot up and kissed her instep. Inhaling deep, he searched for her scent, looking for some marker to drown out the annoying vision of his new major bending over to fix the communications equipment. This wasn't the major, it couldn't be. And he wasn't going to be a complete ass and spend his time with his partner thinking about another woman. That just wasn't fair to either of them.

At the end of his deep breath, he caught the faint whiff of flowers, real ones, expensive and sweet. Another indication it wasn't his new major. She wasn't the flower kind.

He lightly scraped his teeth along her instep, enjoying her jump of surprise, emboldened by the knowledge that she must like this, too, or she wouldn't be here. He held her still as he captured a toe in his mouth, tasting clean woman and that same vague hint of floral.

Sucking lightly, he massaged her with his tongue, liking the way she relaxed her foot more firmly into his hands. With patience he rarely displayed and lately didn't know he even possessed, he moved from toe to toe, licking and nibbling along at a leisurely pace.

All at once, she sat, her action snapping him from a pleasant trance. Her hands tugged at his legs, as if she wanted him to move.

He concentrated, letting himself become as pliant as possible, so she could do what she wished. When she didn't take her own legs from his hands, he realized she was trying to stretch his body out alongside hers, so his head was at her feet and her head was at his.

A shiver raced down his skin as she stroked along the muscle in his calf. They were going to touch each other at the same time. Instead of lying still while he did all the work, she would explore him too. Gods.

He took a steadying breath, knowing he'd need every ounce of his legendary control to keep from imploding within minutes.

## Chapter Four

She had him stretched out on his side, facing head to feet. Later, she planned to touch the backside of him, couldn't wait in fact since she'd always been a huge fan of the place where a man's waist and butt met, but for now, she wanted to explore him while he kissed her feet.

She'd lucked out with this partner. In seconds of him touching her, she'd felt he would be a perfect lover. Something about the way his hands skimmed her skin. It hadn't been tentative. Whoever this was, he had confidence and control. She'd worried that on this ship full of ragtag losers, she would be matched with someone with no self-esteem. For the first time in her life, she desired a lover who would take charge, push her higher, take her to places she'd never been before. Shocking herself, she'd clicked all the boxes on her survey, asking for a new sex experience. She no longer needed to be in control and make every decision. For once, she wanted to be the submissive one in bed.

Adding to her unexpected delight, she was a sucker for a foot massage. He'd turned it erotic by nibbling on her instep, which gave her hope that perhaps he had a darker side to him, a side she'd been longing to explore in herself.

Gods she hoped so. If she wasn't going to have a career, she could at least explore a new sexual side of herself, dammit.

Running her fingers down his legs, she studied the contours of his body, tracing the muscle in his calf. He was in shape for sure. She took a deep breath in appreciation, inhaling the scent of spicy aroused male.

*Maybe he's just young, a hard-bodied junior officer.*

Maybe. She was only a major now. That would qualify her to have sexual partners younger than herself. But did that matter?

No, it didn't matter one bit.



Her fingers brushed the edge of a scar and she returned to the side of his calf to touch the indentation again. Working her way along the imperfection, she followed what she knew was a burn as it angled in an almost perfect line slightly downward along the outside of his calf.

She knew what it was, even though she herself didn't have any similar markings. Laser blasts left a definite pattern. She longed to ask him how he ended up in combat when it had been so long since any serious fighting had occurred. The Alien Wars had been over since shortly after she joined the Troopers. It annoyed her that she'd never know how her soon-to-be lover had ended up with this badge of honor.

With no outlet for the questions burning inside her, she moved on, skimming her fingertips along his instep, shadowing his moves on her own feet.

His toes curled at her touch. She backed up and repeated the motion. This time, he spread his toes a bit, pushing forward into her hand.

There were thousands of nerve endings in the feet. Ancient medicine often called for pressure there to ease pain in other parts of the body. So it made sense that people would like their feet caressed and played with, even though she'd never spent any time touching one of her other lovers there. It felt so good she almost didn't note how odd it was to start their session by playing with each other's feet.

It made her suspect he was older. Young lovers started with breasts as a rule.

What intrigued her most was his use of his teeth. In her most secret fantasies when she'd pleased herself, she'd imagined someone biting her lightly, hurting her just a little. What if he actually fulfilled that fantasy for her? She didn't want true pain. What she wanted was the *edge* of pain.

They were mimicking each other, kissing and touching in response to the other's actions. What would happen if she pushed him farther? He'd already scraped his teeth against her, so technically she wasn't going there first.

Before she could overthink it, she pushed herself to take a risk she'd never had the nerve to try before. This was the time to take a chance, here in the deep darkness with a man she'd never have to face in the light.

She kissed the tip of each of his toes, licked along his ankle, and with a quick burst of nerve, finally bit his heel, too nervous to enjoy the action. Her body quivered with pent-up worry. Normal people didn't like love-play that was out on the edge. They liked missionary, face-to-face, under-the-covers loving. Maybe she should have waited until the second time she was with him? Maybe she shouldn't have pushed?

He didn't react at all, didn't even pause, continuing to kiss up her calf, running his tongue along the smooth skin behind her knee.

Did that mean he wasn't shocked by her actions? Surely it meant that he didn't *mind* the bite, right? Or he would have pulled away.

Rising up on an elbow, she kissed all the way up to his thigh, deciding to leave behind the biting for awhile. Exploring with her hand, she felt the sprinkling of hair and the rock-hard muscle. In her mind, she tried to picture what he'd look like in the light. A picture of her captain flashed in her mind, but she stomped it out quickly. She would insult this man if she put Rafe's face on his body. Rafe. She almost laughed at herself. Captain Vantry. That's all he was. Her captain. Period.

The man beside her nipped her calf, perhaps feeling that she'd wandered off mentally.

Desire flooded back, the brief feel of his teeth filling her with a strange need, turning her on that much more. Gathering her courage, she pushed the envelope again. In slow motion, she leaned down to bite him on his thigh. This time she didn't rush it, but enjoyed the feel of her teeth locking onto his skin, reveling in the rush of doing something forbidden, hoping he'd understand she wanted this done to her in return. Losing track of the moment when she tasted the spicy maleness of his skin, she closed her teeth on him harder than she'd intended.

She jerked away, embarrassed that she'd hurt him.

His hands spasmed on her legs. Then he released her as if she burned, the action signaling his disgust at what she'd done.

If she could see his face or ask him what he felt, she wouldn't have been this distressed, but sitting in the agonizingly still darkness, she realized she'd made a horrible mistake and couldn't give him an apology.

He'd leave now and she'd spend the rest of her tour masturbating to her own fantasies instead of living them.

She'd bitten him hard on the leg, then pulled away. Need swirled hot and heady around him as he debated what to do. Did she want him to back off? Had the bite been a warning?

Or did she want him to be rougher with her?

The thought she might want him to amp up their play made him slightly mad with desire. Maybe she wanted a partner who wasn't afraid to push the boundaries?

There was only one way to find out.

Spinning, he stretched out beside her so he could drag her on top of him. He framed her head with both hands while he gave her a searing, open-mouthed kiss. The positioning would allow her to jerk free if she didn't want him to be so demanding. But if this was his only time with her, he wasn't going to waste it through misunderstandings and going slow.

Her soft lips met his, at first making no movement at all. Then she melted into his kiss, opening her mouth under his. Relief and pleasure shot through him, giving him the strength to keep pushing for more.

Slipping inside her mouth, he brushed his tongue against hers, hoping she'd respond.

She touched him tentatively, as if she was still off balance by his sudden shift of positions, but the gentle prodding turned him on more than something rough would have done.

It was pitch dark in the room, the only sound the hum of the noise blocker filling his head. The lack of two of his main senses—sight and hearing—made each touch that much more explosive. With her lying so tight against him, he could smell the vague impression of flowers. He wished he knew what the scent was, but he just wasn't the type

of guy who had that kind of knowledge. Until a moment ago, he hadn't even thought he'd wanted to.

As the kiss lengthened, his mind shifted to the feel of her body on top of his. She was short, made up of lean muscle, but heavy enough so she didn't feel fragile. He didn't want a woman who would easily break in his hands.

Her breasts were flattened against his chest, and he suddenly had to explore them. Finishing their kiss, he pushed her into a sitting position straddling his upper thighs.

With a feeling of greed, he cupped her breasts, weighing them, kneading them, measuring them. She wasn't overly large, but her breasts felt perfect in his hands, her nipples peaking in his palms.

Stroking, he felt every inch of her firm globes before pinching her nipples, increasing the pressure of his thumbs and forefingers until her legs gripped his torso. He released, only to tighten his grip again. Her hands spasmed on his chest where she held herself propped in a sitting position. He debated with himself before he twisted her nipples, to see if she liked it.

Her weight shifted as she arched back, bowing into his hands, turning him on so much his hands shook with need.

A dark thought passed through him. He could twist a little harder and hurt her just enough so she'd feel him for hours after their encounter, leaving his mark on her. His body actually trembled at the thought. The desire to do it was so strong and held so much appeal that he released her nipples at once, afraid his hands would move of their own volition.

Gods above, he'd lost his mind.

Her fingers traced his shoulders, the touch tentative as if she wasn't sure why he'd stopped. To reassure her, he rose to capture her nipple in his mouth. Her palm cradled his head, the action telling him she liked his new direction.

The nipple was pouty and plump in his mouth, the tight bud the perfect size for his tongue to circle and lave. His ministrations drew it tighter, the taste of her fresh and clean and all woman. Her nails scraped at his scalp in a languid motion.

She moved away and he let her nipple slide free with reluctance. Shifting, she brushed her other nipple against his lips. Obliging her, he suckled that one as well, this time drawing harder on her, knowing his action was a bit rough, but wanting to feel her reaction to it. Her hand shook in his hair but she didn't retreat.

Something inside him broke free of its cage and roared through him. This woman was his match and when he drove himself inside her, he would release all the pent-up frustrations that had been growing for months. He would own her and she would be his salvation.

A gong sounded in the room, making them both jump. Half their session was gone already. Time had vanished so quickly and he was only on her nipples. He hadn't even touched her in other interesting places.

If this was to be his only encounter with her, he had to act fast to fulfill them both. Spilling her off his chest, he followed her over, his hands sliding down to her sex. He knew he was rushing, but a feeling of panic burned over him, making his control break free from his grasp.

His fingers slipped on her wetness there, and he would have howled with relief if he hadn't been worried he'd set off the sound-prevention device. He had time to fuck her twice if he was fast.

Working two fingers inside her tight channel, he carefully opened her, gently rocking inside and out to loosen her up for his cock. He wanted her to come and she wouldn't be able to if he hurt her.

A tremor slid through his body, his need almost overwhelming him. He would bring them both relief. He had to. His mind couldn't handle another failure.

Callie wanted to scream, but she knew she'd set off the alarms if she did. Her hands spasmed on the mattress as she tried to keep herself from coming. She'd never had anyone work her with their fingers before like this. He was deliberately and slowly thrusting into her. His fingers were big, but not *this* big, so he must be using two.

Whatever he was doing, he filled her up completely, stabbing into her, hitting a spot with the tips of his fingers she didn't even know existed.

He shifted and the amazing feeling stopped.

Without thinking, she grabbed his wrist, trying to reposition him back to whatever he'd been doing before. For a moment, he stopped moving all together. She tugged at his wrist, or tried to, but he wasn't budging. Gritting her teeth with frustration, she tried again.

He moved, thank the gods, and her hand on his wrist trembled with pleasure. *There*, she wanted to scream. *Put your fingers there, damn you!* But she didn't need to say it after all, because he'd found her sweet spot once more.

His fingers moved in and out, but also she could feel him widening them, stretching her even more to the limit. She was so turned on it felt amazing when she knew it would normally be uncomfortable.

Suddenly his mouth was on her, his tongue sweeping across her clitoris. The combination was too much for her to manage, her body so awash with pleasure she couldn't control the madness, couldn't control anything at all. Her body was no longer her own. This faceless, nameless man owned her and he demanded with his mouth and fingers that she come.

Her orgasm peaked without her consent, blasting through her body, the pleasure almost too much to handle.

Her mind didn't understand at first what was happening when he turned her onto her stomach and pulled her to her knees.

His erection touched her inner thighs and she knew what he wanted. Reaching under herself between her legs, she guided him to her sex, helping him work his way inside her. She marveled at how pliant her body was, how quickly her channel accepted his massive size with no issues at all. In almost a dream-state, she relaxed into him. Was this what it was like to give yourself over to another person? To feel all the worries of her life slide away as she became immersed in a fantasy world where the only thing that existed were two bodies coming together?

He thrust deep, hitting the very top of her. Her lethargy broke, need flooding into her so fast it was as if she hadn't already come.

The pace he set was hard and furious, his body so demanding, she could barely think as he dragged them both toward release.

She'd never had a man ride her like this. She felt again the odd sense of being owned, of being ruled by another and it turned her on even more.

His body rocked deeper still and every muscle tightened. He came violently, one of his hands grabbing her hip so hard the nip of pain had her desire shooting even higher.

Then he collapsed onto her, forcing her flat against the mattress below. It was only after they lay still that her own orgasm washed over her, the soft flutter of it racing out from her sex, bringing her satisfaction and the immediate need for more.

For a moment she couldn't think. Couldn't move. She just floated in the oddly dense air of the box.

He lay on top of her, keeping her trapped partially below him. When she started to turn over, he backed off, letting a wash of cool air fill the space between them, making her shiver.

They had time for one more round if they hurried. They'd somehow used up half their time so quickly, she'd been startled by the bell.

She snuggled closer to him, carefully feeling for any signs that he didn't want her company. Some men didn't want intimacy after sex, but she hoped he wasn't one of them. Her perfect partner had to be perfect in every way.

He caught her face in his palm, stilling her above him while his other hand explored her face, running the pads of his fingers over her cheeks and temple. Tension she hadn't known she'd been holding released with his touch, dropping from her like a veil. He slid a finger over her lips once, then twice, then again.

Each time the pressure increased until she opened her mouth for him. He slid the digit inside, the action reminding her of other things sliding inside her. She suckled before taking him deeper as the hand behind her head encouraged more penetration.

He pulled his finger free and ran it around her areola. It caught her off guard, making her jump. He placed a hand on her arm, bringing her closer, holding her still. She both liked and rebelled against his domination.

Feeling the need to balance the power between them, Callie ran her hand up his thigh all the way to the top of his legs, catching his cock in her fist. It stiffened in her embrace, coming more fully to attention. Gods, she just wanted him to be inside her again, even if she wasn't fully ready. Or maybe she was ready. Her nipples were rock hard, her sex wet and begging.

*He's hard enough to penetrate you. Just climb on top of him. Ride him and make him come.*

*He might not want me yet. He might be angry that I'm in charge.*

She could tell he was an alpha personality just by how he touched her. Even if she forced him into pleasure, something told her he wouldn't like it.

The rebel inside her demanded she push.

The allure was too much for her. She needed to have him inside her. Right now, not later. On her terms.

She straddled him quickly, releasing her grasp so she could work him inside her. The high of doing something so forbidden as taking a partner before she knew he was ready made her even wetter, allowing her to slip further down his cock.

Suddenly she was rolling to her back, and for a moment she didn't understand until it hit her that he turned them both over, so that he was on top. He took the power from her as easily as snapping his fingers, using his greater strength to wrest it from her. In a fit of pique, she bit him on the shoulder. Hard. Loving the feeling of her teeth bruising him. He'd spend the next week looking at her mark on him.

He froze as she bit him, but didn't pull away. As punishment, he grabbed the backs of her thighs, pulling her legs above his shoulders, taking away her ability to influence their pleasure.

Thrusting the rest of the way inside her, he made her arch at the pleasure/pain of it. But she couldn't do more than tighten her internal muscles around his cock. He'd pinned



her in retaliation. It made her so hot, she moaned out loud without being able to control it, causing the hum to rise to a screeching pitch.

He pulled back almost out of her only to delve deep again. Increasing the tempo, he kept the pace fast and furious and on the edge of violence. Pleasure built inside her, pleasure he controlled completely. Just like when he rubbed her face earlier and released tension, what he did now released something inside her she hadn't even known she'd been carrying. By dominating her, she was able to give up her own so closely guarded control, allowing the stress of the past year to escape with it.

When they climaxed, it was together, the act bordering on savage.

She had never known such pleasure could be possible.

## Chapter Five

Rafe stumbled from the shower, his body boneless and used up, emptied of all his sins. He felt redeemed and powerful, as if he could rule the world, as if he'd never taken that bet, never ruined his career through the sin of pride.

He knew the temporary high would fade. It had to. He wouldn't be absolved of his sins until he was off this ship, and he wouldn't be able to leave until the Ventura passed inspection for the first time in years. Not just passed, but marked excellent in all categories. He laughed as he pulled on his uniform. The last five years it had been marked failing on all but six of the fifteen categories, where they'd gotten a pass mark. He was convinced they'd only been given that rating so the ship would remain flying.

As he secured his shirt tabs, he realized that while he was annoyed by the thought of failing another inspection, all the bitterness was gone. It would come back, he was sure. But for this moment, it didn't eat him alive that the sheer force of his will wouldn't fix all the Ventura's problems.

The short time he'd had in the Relaxation Chamber had made him a new man.

The woman he'd been matched with had been amazing. He'd never had sex so powerful and right. He should have been honest when he'd filled out the intake form years ago.

While he knew about how tall she was and what she must weigh, he would never figure out the identity of his Relaxation Partner because if he did, he wouldn't be able to face himself in the mirror for taking advantage of a crew member. But whoever the woman was, she'd touched him in the right spots and her sweet pussy had gripped his cock as if they were two pieces of a puzzle, made to fit together. The thought of it had him flying inside with renewed desire.

As he turned, he caught the edge of something on his neck above his collar. Pushing the fabric back, he revealed a bite mark on his shoulder, the outline of her teeth turning from red to a bruise even as he watched. Reverently he traced the mark. She'd been perfect in every way and now he had something to remind himself of their time together. Too bad he'd promised himself only once in the Relaxation Chamber or he'd give her a reminder of her own to wear. The thought brought a grin to his lips as he envisioned her tracing the outline of his teeth in her flesh, thinking of him, her body flashing back to his cock ramming deep.

"Captain," his new communication specialist's voice said from the Comm around his wrist.

He pressed a button and replied, "Major?" a smile still on his face.

A pause came then, and he realized his amused, light-hearted tone had pulled her up short. "Um, well." Another pause. "We've got the tests back from the XL7." Her momentary discomfort was replaced by that steely tone he'd heard her use with Willis when they'd been on the other ship.

His gut again told him she'd been in command some time in her career, but that didn't seem possible. Where the hell were her records anyway? She'd showed up with only written orders, her file to follow, but it never arrived and his repeated inquiries were met with stonewalling. Frustration roared back, pushing away his good mood. There had been a time when he'd make a request for anything, and he'd have it with only a snap of his fingers. Now he couldn't even get the most basic information. "I'll be there in two minutes," he growled.

"Aye-aye, sir." The relief in the words came through loud and clear, as if she were glad his good mood had ended.

He gave his wrist Comm a narrowed gaze that should have had it shaking in its proverbial boots, even if it was an inanimate object.

He stalked to the bridge, feeling his peacefulness recede further. So she didn't like him happy, was that it? The thought made him annoyed on many levels. If he wanted to be jolly, he'd damn well be jolly and his crew should damn well like it. He'd been a

normal human before he'd walked onto this heap of trash and normal people had normal emotions.

"Tests," he barked as he walked onto the bridge. A nearby crew member shrank away from him. "Something wrong, Ensign?" When she jumped in fear at the sound of his voice, he grew even more annoyed.

"Captain." Callie Justice's voice was so pleasant, he knew she was feeling anything but.

He turned, ready to redirect his irritation, needing an outlet. Already he could use another session in the Relaxation Chamber. Once wasn't enough. He'd been a fool to think it would be.

"I have the results here." She pointed to the main console beside his chair. Almost like a challenge, she raised an eyebrow at him, daring him to behave badly.

The action took him by surprise. The major wasn't scared of him, unlike the rest of his crew. The pause allowed him to gain control of himself once more. What the hell was wrong with him, anyway? He never lost his cool. Sure he was pissed off nearly all the time, but that was a lot different than having what amounted to a small temper tantrum. He covered his confusion by throwing himself into his chair. One round of hot sex and his emotions were all over the map. Maybe he should return to being celibate—or maybe he needed a lot more time in the Relaxation Chamber with his partner.

The major appeared at his shoulder, tapping his screen to display the results. He slowly turned to meet her gaze, reminding himself that he was calm, cool, always in control. "I think I'm able to display the results, Major." The growl in his voice wasn't so bad with his new resolve to find his inner peace.

"I'm sure you can, Captain." She smiled disarmingly, the look on her face almost patronizing. "I wanted to point this out first." She quickly tapped his screen three times, her hand disappearing before he could grab it.

And he tried. No one touched his monitor. It was like having a crew member handle his underwear. Some things just weren't done.

He opened his mouth to chew her ass out, but the results on the screen caught his eye.

Normal. All the tests they'd hastily performed on the bodies were normal. He paged down, reading the right-hand results column. Normal. Normal. Normal. Air quality. All levels in the bodies. Everything.

"If it's a virus, then it's a new one," the major murmured.

He shook his head, tapping deeper into the results. "Too bad we don't have a ship's doctor any longer to take a closer look at the body enzyme levels and all the rest of this. Something has to be off or they wouldn't be dead." If he'd been at his old command, he would have the best staff doc in the Troopers to look at all the data and know what tests to run to figure all this out. Instead, he had a fifth-rate medic who could barely dispense the right meds.

Callie shifted her weight, her attention moving to the XL7, which was visible out the viewport. "We can't haul the ship into the station if it's got some new superbug on it."

"And we can't stay connected to it forever."

"And we can't leave it floating for someone else to find."

He nodded, part of his brain turning over the problem and the other part marveling at the fact they were having this discussion as if they'd been on a staff together for years instead of a week. It felt like it had been a lifetime since he'd had someone he trusted enough to discuss the ship's operation.

"I'm going to have to call this in." Maybe he should have done so already, but he didn't want to report to the brass what he'd found until he had some answers.

"They're going to either tell you to destroy the ship or let it go," the major said so softly he could barely hear her.

"Yes." He wanted answers but what else could he do? He didn't have the tools to diagnose whatever had happened to those people. But someone somewhere would be able to figure out what killed the XL7's crew and that seemed important if for no other reason than the dead deserved answers.

"Request a scientist to investigate instead. Go through IWCF&I."

The Inter-world Council Forensics and Investigative Team would jump at the chance to get involved. He'd forgotten all about them since it was against standard protocol to call on their help. Not that he'd be disciplined if he contacted them, but he wouldn't gain promotions turning for help outside the Troopers, either.

"I have a contact there." She kept her tone casual, but he wasn't fooled. Contacts in the F&I were beyond rare. They were a group of scientific elitists who thought they were well above the average Trooper in both brains and refinement. The two groups didn't mix as a rule.

"You do, do you?"

She nodded.

Contacts in F&I, obvious leadership experience, missing records. He wasn't going to sit around waiting for an explanation to come to him any longer. He stood, wanting to have this confrontation away from the avidly listening Troopers on the bridge. "Follow me, Major."

"Sir?" she asked, but he was already striding through the rear doors, moving toward the nonworking War Room.

He needed answers about her history and he wanted them *now*.

Callie was at a loss, standing flat-footed on the bridge, wondering what had set the captain off. Her instincts told her she was in hot water, but what had she done wrong? Offering her contact in F&I went beyond her duty. He should be giving her a heartfelt thank you, not striding away with obvious ass-chewing intent. Irritation replaced the huge amount of dreamy pleasure she'd been basking in since she'd met her Relaxation Partner. She couldn't have had a better encounter than that. For once in a long, long time she'd been lucky.

And now Captain Grumpy was about to steal that pleasure away from her.

"You'd better follow him," Willis whispered from where he'd suddenly appeared at her elbow.

She stared around the bridge at the faces of her fellow crew members. They were filled with emotions ranging from terror to wary fascination. The whole crew was scared of him.

Well, Captain Rafe Vantry didn't scare her. She marched off the bridge without fear, her shoulders thrown back, ready to give him back as good as she got. What was he going to do about it anyway? Fire her?

Besides, who did he think he was stomping around in a bad mood all the time? Captain Grumpypants. She could fly circles around him and keep a smile on her face. She paused, wincing at the memory of her inability to blow the mixed breeds from the sky. Vantry wouldn't have disregarded the order. During their encounter with the XL7, he'd proved himself a good captain, she'd give him that. But she had him hands down in the personality department for sure. Her crew had followed her because they loved her, not out of fear.

He waited at the end of the hall outside a door marked "War Room", his whole body seething with impatience. "Pick up the pace, Major."

Irritation rolled through her. She tamped it down, keeping a straight face when she answered, "Aye-aye, sir."

He narrowed his eyes as he opened the door and waved her inside, the action almost a bow.

She had to force herself not to skitter past him. Putting her back to an angry caged animal wasn't advisable, but she'd done dumber things. Still the skin on her back quivered as she walked by.

"Sit."

She sat automatically, years of training kicking in.

He took the chair across the table from her.

Stealing a quick look around the room, she found the walls covered with blank computer screens, a sheen of dust blanketing them. "Don't tell me they don't work either?" she asked.

"Of course they don't. Nothing works on this pile of trash."

She blinked at him in surprise. His tone had been that of a complaining friend, not a stoic captain.

“I might be able to fix some of it,” she offered before she thought it through. If things were jerry-rigged here like they were on her console, it would only be a matter of figuring out how the last communications specialist had taped it all together and then fixing whatever had broken in his terrible patch job. Maybe it was only a matter of a piece of string coming untied.

Vantry’s eyebrows shot up and for a moment the storm cloud gathering on his face receded. “I want to know how the hell you ended up on this ship.”

That brought her up short. It had never occurred to her that he hadn’t been told in full detail why she’d been demoted and tossed out here in disgrace. “You don’t know?”

“Your records are mysteriously missing.”

“Missing?” Nothing went missing in the Troopers except on purpose. Staring at Vantry’s face, she knew he was well aware of that fact. “I don’t know why they’re missing.” She took a deep breath to tell him what happened, surprised at how hard it was for her to do. “I was relieved of command after an egregious error in judgment.”

“Command?”

She didn’t appreciate the pure disbelief in his tone. “Yes, command.”

“Of what?”

“A patrolship.” Just like the Ventura but not a piece of falling apart junk. She didn’t add the last part, but she wanted to.

“You had a patrol route?”

“Outside of Borrus.”

He whistled. “Cushie.”

“Very.” She tried not to sound smug, but it was hard not to. She’d been top dog once. *Look how far the mighty have fallen.*

“You’re young for a command. Someone must have had your back. Why didn’t he catch you when you ran into trouble?”



“He died.” Her first captain, Monty Malone, had taken her all the way up on his coattails. He’d had a meteoric rise in the ranks, because not only was he good, but he was a political beast who knew how to handle the brass. She hadn’t had that kind of skill. Malone would have blasted that breed ship from the sky without a second’s hesitation, following orders because he would have known full well what would happen had he disobeyed them.

Vantry nodded. “You agree you had an egregious lapse in judgment?” He said the words as she had, with the same inflection.

“Yes.” There was no doubt about it. She’d blown her career into a million pieces all by herself.

“What did you do exactly?”

She didn’t want to tell him. Captain Rafe Vantry would have blown those people into smithereens, not buckled under, shirking his duty. Putting the whole population of the Inter-worlds at risk. Since her records were conveniently lost, he’d never know. “I don’t think I have to tell you that, Captain.”

He paused, his face impassive, but he obviously was taken aback that she wouldn’t answer a direct question from him. “Whatever it was, someone’s covering it up.” He circled back to what was bothering him the most, but she had a feeling he would come back to the details of her crime.

When he’d said her records were missing, she’d figured out someone was covering up her fuck up. Could it be the brass had more to hide because she was a woman? The Troopers were already battling a reputation as sexist dogs. What would happen if their youngest and most promising female captain was busted back in the ranks for bad judgment? That would confirm some men’s opinions that women should never captain a ship and have other people screaming that she was somehow treated unfairly, especially because there was no way top brass would let the public know a cruiser full of mixed breeds had slipped their grasp. For all the millions of hours she’d spent thinking about it, she’d never really wondered about the political ramifications of her fall from grace.

“I was sent to the rubber room but managed to get myself out. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to ever leave. Maybe they’d planned to keep me there forever, never disciplining me so that they could save themselves the political hassle.” She replayed her conversation with the man who assigned her to the Ventura. He’d said it had been her only chance to fly again, then handed her written documents to present to her new captain. No one carried written orders anymore, but when she’d handed them to Vantry, he hadn’t blinked.

“The rubber room.” Vantry leaned back in his seat. “I always thought it was a myth until I got here. Most of my crew has come from there since I became Captain four months ago.”

“All presenting paper orders?”

He nodded, the tapping of his fingers on the conference table showing that he thought along similar lines as she did. “You think they’re assigning me crew under the table?”

“Like a floating rubber room, a place to stick everyone who has fucked up or is a hopeless failure?” She shrugged. So what if they were? Every military in history had its share of losers. That went with the territory. “I still don’t understand why my records are lost. Why not mark my demotion as conduct unbecoming?”

Another thought hit her. What if she wasn’t supposed to be here at all but she was needed to fill some quota? Maybe they’d put her here when she’d been slated for a dishonorable discharge, and all the records were on some bureaucrat’s computer somewhere, waiting for an electronic stamp.

“What was your error of judgment?”

She stood strong, making sure he saw her determination. “I disobeyed a direct order.”

Intensity swirled around him. “You’re not going to tell me what that order was?”

“Does it really matter? I’ve paid the price. I admitted my failure.”

“I could order you to.”

“You could, but section 1683.21 says that I am not supposed to speak about open investigations.”

“They haven’t ruled yet?”

“Nothing official has been decided that I’ve seen.”

He tried to stare her down with his dark chocolate laser eyes, but it wouldn’t work. Finally he shrugged. “There are other ways to find out what you did, but I’d rather hear it from you first than find out the hard way.” He leaned toward her, the intensity surrounding him amping to a screeching level. “But I’m telling you here and now that if you disobey a direct order from me, you may not live to regret it.”

She stared into his soulless eyes and believed him. He’d shoot her if he had to. She pinched the bridge of her nose to relieve some of the pressure building there. How in the hell had she chosen *him* to lust after? “I hear you, Captain.”

“Good.” His whole body suddenly relaxed and he rubbed one of his shoulders as if something hurt there. “How long will it take for you to get this room up and running?”

“It depends on how they jerry-rigged it. The communications system didn’t take long once I figured out what the last person had done.” She stared at the layer of dust on the screens. This room had been dead a long time. “I’ll know more in an hour.”

“If we call in F&I, I’d like to contact them from here. As much as possible, I’d like to keep the rest of the crew in the dark about what happened on the XL7. If it’s some sort of rogue virus, I don’t want to start a panic.” He climbed to his feet. “I have a bad feeling what killed them could be nasty. And my gut instincts have always been spot on.”

“Except for whatever decision you made to end up here.” The words popped out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“Except for that,” he agreed, his voice mild. “I want an update of your progress in an hour.” Then he left, with only a moment’s view of a muscled rear end in tight uniform pants before he pulled the door shut behind him.

## Chapter Six

Callie sighed, more strung out from the confrontation than she'd realized while it was going on. Vantry had basically told her he'd shoot her if she disobeyed a direct order. "This assignment isn't worth it to keep flying," she said to no one. Staring at all the broken equipment, it occurred to her she might have offered something she couldn't deliver. "And how the hell am I going to fix all this?"

"The main power supply has malfunctioned," a disembodied voice answered her.

Callie froze, trying to place where the voice had come from. "Is that the ship talking?" It sounded exactly like the ship's voice on her first assignment, forever ago.

"I am the ship's computer, named M.A.R.L.I.S., Captain Justice."

The title took her off guard. "I'm not a captain anymore." It felt odd to be having this discussion with a floating voice, but her whole life had turned upside down, so why not talk to the walls?

"That is incorrect, Captain. Your records were never updated with another rank."

"You've seen my records?" So they weren't lost after all. She wondered why no one would send them to Vantry. Of course, if she was still at captain's rank, then whoever assigned her here wouldn't want him to know that.

"Negative. But I've had contact with the computers at Command, and they've relayed the information to me." The computer seemed pleased with itself—herself, since she was definitely a female personality—at this piece of investigative work.

It didn't make any sense. If she was still a captain, what the hell was she doing assigned as a communication specialist out in the middle of nowhere?

Actually, even more intriguing was why the computer decided to speak with her when she hadn't been vocal before. "Are you only able to communicate in this room,

M.A.R.L.I.S.?" Maybe there were outages in the other areas of the ship she should fix so the computer could function properly.

"Negative. My communication lines are fully functional."

"So why have you been silent?"

"I am programmed to only communicate with those of captain grade or higher." A pause, as if the computer debated telling her something.

Surely it—she—hadn't chosen not to speak to Vantry? Callie beat back an inappropriate snicker that threatened to escape. "You don't speak to Captain Vantry for what reason, M.A.R.L.I.S.?" Her voice came out stern in her attempt to curb her amusement.

"The captain said nasty things about the Ventura." The computerized words sounded defensive.

"And you chose not to speak to him?" Could a computer program do that?

"My programming says I can only speak to captain grade or higher, not that I *must* speak to mean nasty captains who call the Ventura 'a floating piece of trash'." The last was said in Vantry's voice, as if M.A.R.L.I.S. played that part back to her.

A hiccup of laughter escaped her, and she covered it with a cough. Poor Vantry had cut his own nose off to spite his face, losing what was probably the most valuable member of his crew. "He's really not all that bad," she said, feeling like she needed to defend him, although the gods only knew why. He was a walking wall of muscled anger.

"He's improved," M.A.R.L.I.S. said, but she didn't sound convinced. "Most likely it is because you are here, Captain Justice."

Callie wished she could ignore that. Vantry's good mood, or lack of it, had nothing to do with her. But she had to ask, "How has he changed?" Could it be that he'd once been happy? That he'd once smiled? What would a smile look like on Rafe Vantry's face?

"One of the computers at Command sent me a video of an event that happened five months ago. I will play it for you on screen one." M.A.R.L.I.S. sounded almost...*gleeful*? "Please stand by while I divert power from a secondary source."

Could a computer have these emotions? Callie had heard of sentient computers who had to have tune ups to stop them from taking on humanity's worst personality traits. Expecting a computer to feel only useful emotions just didn't work. It looked like M.A.R.L.I.S. needed a full workup. It wasn't that Callie didn't think Vantry deserved the computer's wrath, it was just that the Ventura needed a functioning computer more than the captain needed to be punished for his lack of manners.

The screen nearest to her sputtered to life and she leaned against the table to get a better view. At first it was just the Senior Brass standing around in their Trooper dress uniforms, an orchestra playing something stuffy and rich in the background. She'd never been invited to one of these soirees. The fact that Vantry had been, told her just how positioned he must have been to climb to the top. There were captains, and then there were those captains who would someday be generals. Maybe it was good that her career was in the tank, since she hadn't been slated for the top anyway. If she had been, she wouldn't be seeing a party like this for the first time on a vid. She would have been there.

The view was from an elevated angle and at first she didn't even see Vantry, since he had his back to the camera.

But there could be no mistaking the cool, deep timbre of his voice. "We can't all be captains of the Mothership, Morris," he said, the arrogance so thick she had to lean forward to see if it was really him or not.

The view rotated and she could see his profile. There he stood, dressed in an impeccable white uniform covered in a fruit salad of medals any captain would envy. His face wasn't grumpy at all, but was relaxed into—she struggled for words to describe it—the haughty lines of someone who has no doubt he's the best. He was still handsome, but she didn't find this Vantry desirable in the least.

"I guess not, Vantry," the man who must be Morris said, his sharp cut face narrowing further in suppressed anger. "But it's not like you have to really captain, now is it? The Mothership runs itself."

Another person who had his back to the vid laughed. “That baby has the best of the best. I bet we could send it out and it would cruise the galaxies just fine without any crew on board.” He thunked Vantry’s back with a huge paw of a hand. “You’re a lucky man.”

Vantry’s whole body stiffened. “I could captain any ship in the fleet.” He said it with a tone filled with certainty and pride.

“Come now, Rafe,” the unknown man said. “You wouldn’t want to command any of the ships on the outer rim. There are patrol boats out there that barely function. No captain can do anything with them except keep them afloat.”

“Yeah, Rafe,” Morris said, laughing. “Even you can’t be a superstar on a piece of junk.”

Callie’s stomach tightened with the knowledge of what Vantry was about to do. There was no way to stop it, but she still gripped the table with both hands. “Don’t do this to yourself,” she whispered.

Rafe actually stepped forward, the arrogance in his face turning him ugly. “I could whip any crew into shape that you throw at me, Admiral Bennet. Pick the worst of your lot and I’ll make them into one of your best.”

“You really think so, eh, boy?” the man with his back to the camera asked, his tone doubtful.

“I bet you five hundred credits that you couldn’t take a ship with a failing inspection and turn it into excellent. It would be an impossible task.” Morris raised his eyebrows, daring Rafe to take the bet.

Admiral Bennet shook his head in wonder. “If you could do that, Rafe my boy, then I’d promote you without question.”

“I not only can, but I will do it.” Rafe’s voice shook with conviction. “I’m so sure of it, I swear that if I don’t turn around the inspection, I’ll stay on the ship you put me on until I do.”

*Pride cometh before the fall.* “Gods, could he have been such an arrogant prick?” His egotism had landed him in hell.

The vid went black, cutting off before the final arrangements were made, but she'd seen enough to know what happened. She almost felt...sorry for Rafe Vantry. Not that he'd thank her for it.

She didn't have time to dwell on this revelation anyway. Right now, she needed to have this room up and running as fast as possible, since this was the only place she had permission to contact F&I.

Her best friend from childhood was an investigator at F&I. Seeing Simone again would go a long way to bringing her some much-needed Zen. Sometimes she longed for someone to give her a hug, hold her and tell her it would all be okay. The sex with her Relaxation Partner had been spectacular, but it didn't fix her broken soul.

*Stop thinking about it. Concentrate on the here and now.* "Is the power source in this room? Or is it located somewhere else?"

"You'll find it one floor below in the cargo hold," M.A.R.L.I.S. said, her voice jolly. "But you may want to turn all equipment off or things might overload when you fix the power flow."

It took ten minutes to disconnect everything in the room. When she was done, Callie was filthy from crawling around in the inch-thick dust. But after tightening some wires in the cargo hold, the room was up and running with no further issues. Staring at the now-functioning computer screens, she took a moment to enjoy her triumph. Finally, something was going right in her life. She wondered if it had to do with the good sex she'd had earlier.

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"I'm telling you, Rafe, I don't know what's happened to her records. Even with my clearance, I can't access them. It's saying I'm not high enough." Carl Jigson, Rafe's closest thing to a best friend, looked crisp and clean over Rafe's personal vid screen in his cabin. Jigs was dressed in the white uniform of a high-ranking officer, but he'd come up the ranks coordinating spy activities and other top-secret matters. He was a good-looking man, able to morph into just about any persona at a whim, but both he and Rafe



had struggled to make friends growing up. They'd found each other when they were kids and kept close if for no other reason than they were the only family either of them had left.

"What the fuck did she do that would be beyond your clearance level, Jigs? My gut is screaming that something's going on here." His gut also told him solving the mystery was more important than appeasing his own curiosity. If someone at Command was dumping soldiers onto the Ventura who were supposed to be discharged, things were more rotten than he'd originally believed. If he could expose whoever was behind this, he'd be able to roll off the worst of his crew and get a new set of Troopers to take their place. Then and only then did he have a hope in hell of passing inspection.

"I agree. There are only two clearance levels above me, and they usually have to do with government spy operations I don't have need-to-know on. Could she be involved with any of that?"

He'd bet his left nut that Callie Justice hadn't told him why she'd been demoted because of pride, not because she'd been keeping state secrets. He knew *exactly* what pride looked and smelled like. Rafe paced in his quarters, frustration building. "She said she had a patrol outside Borrus. Any chance you could ask around and see what kind of captain she was? Try to find someone who flew on her ship?"

"I'm one step ahead of you." Jigs grinned the grin that made Rafe automatically roll his eyes. He had every reason to be cocky but that didn't mean Rafe had to enjoy it. "I found one of her crew on my own staff after you sent me the mail asking for her records. I spent an hour listening to tales of how amazing she was as a captain. But he'd been transferred before she was relieved of command, and he said her whole crew has disappeared from Borrus. He'd been close friends with some of them, but now they've been transferred to the outer rims."

Rafe didn't like mysteries. He didn't like secrets. He liked everything lined up, everything fitting together, clear cut and in its place.

Jigs cleared his throat to gain his attention. "Not to point out the obvious, but can't you just ask her what happened?"

“I did. She told me she’d made an egregious error in judgment, but refused to expand beyond that it had to do with not following an order. She cited 1683.21. Said she’d never had a ruling passed down to her.”

“Interesting. Let me look into it more.”

Rafe met his friend’s gaze over the video monitor. “Be careful. Anything they’re covering up this hard has to be volatile.”

“I’m the king of hush-hush, remember?” Jigs was laughing as he disconnected, obviously finding Rafe’s concern amusing since he ran the Council’s spy operations.

Rafe threw himself into a chair near the monitor. His major’s arrival could be the answer to all his prayers, but every fiber of his body was warning him that there were too many unknown pieces of her puzzle.

It worried him that if he had to pick one crew member he *didn’t* want to get rid of, it would be her. He couldn’t rely on her if she’d disobeyed a direct order. That was, in his eyes, the worst offense a Trooper could commit. You followed orders, even if it meant you died. Period.

She was young for a captain. She must have been amazing to have risen so quickly, even if she did have someone backing her. Her skills would be invaluable to him to turn the Ventura into a top-rate ship.

But the fact she’d disobeyed an order reduced her value to nothing in his eyes. He firmly believed that anyone who didn’t follow orders should be out on their ass. No matter that she was his best crew member hands down.

So why was she still flying? With lost records?

Had someone saved her from being tossed out of the Troopers by making a deal under the table? That made sense, except that she could fly commercial freight and make three times the money she made now. Why didn’t she quit?

He tapped his chair arm, not liking all the questions with no answers. He could spend hours ping-ponging back and forth without getting anywhere.

A beep sounded from the monitor beside him, startling him from his thoughts.

Tapping the screen, he accessed his mail, glad for the distraction. It was from M.A.R.L.I.S., the subject “Relaxation Program”. He frowned, tapping the letter open.

*Greetings...Rafe Vantry...*

*It is time to schedule your next Relaxation Encounter. Please choose from one of the following times to—*

Rafe’s hand actually trembled as he moved to delete the mail. He’d said he was only going once and he’d meant once.

Although if he simply deleted the mail, he’d leave his partner in the lurch for the rest of the tour. The computer would continue to try to set-up meetings between them. He’d need to deactivate his enrollment in the program so she could be matched again.

The thought of her being with another man had a hot blast of anger spearing through him. He shook his head at his possessiveness over a woman he couldn’t pick out of a lineup. So what if she was with someone else? If he wasn’t seeing her, then she had the right to another partner.

Rafe dropped his hand back to the chair arm, leaving the mail still open on the screen.

She was *his* perfect match, *his* perfect partner. Anyone else wouldn’t be perfect for her.

Plus he wanted to leave a mark on her like she’d marked him. He peeled back his collar to stare at the bruise on his shoulder in the mirror across the room.

In slow motion, he raised his finger and tapped the soonest time. The mail closed in a flash and his monitor went blank.

“Double damn.” He should log into the Relaxation Program and deactivate his application.

The Comm on his wrist buzzed, jerking him out of his self-flagellation.

“Captain,” his new major said over the tinny speaker on his wrist.

“Go,” he growled, so furious at himself he could barely speak.

“I think I have the War Room up and running.”

“I’ll meet you there in three minutes, Major.” He ended the communication even though she was saying something else. Why did his best crew member have to have a big secret? Why couldn’t she just be a normal, high-performing communication specialist? Because he’d run out of luck, that’s why.

Damn it all to hell. What burned him up the most was that he was going to meet his Relaxation Partner even though he knew he shouldn’t. He was going to make her come over and over again until she could barely stand afterwards. And he was going to leave his mark on her shoulder, just as she had marked him.

He stomped out of his cabin, ready to chew anyone up and spit them out if they got in his way.

“Wow, he’s in a rotten mood.” Callie wasn’t used to stating the obvious, out loud even, but M.A.R.L.I.S. seemed to enjoy their constant chatter over the past hour.

“Well, you’d be too if you had fallen so far.”

She gave the speaker on the wall a wry look. “I *did* fall far, remember?”

“Actually, officially you didn’t. Officially you’re still a captain.”

“So is he,” she pointed out, tapping on the many computer screens to boot them up. She wanted Vantry to walk in to find the whole room up and running.

“Yes, but he used to captain the I.W.C. Mothership.”

Callie shook her head. The Troopers had thrown away a good captain all for what? A bet? “What a waste.”

“What’s a waste, Major?”

She spun to find the captain in question standing in the doorway, looking yummy. Diddly damn. The lusting hadn’t diminished with her Relaxation Encounter. Or maybe she only needed some time with her new partner to get the brooding, grumpy, hot captain out of her system. That had to be it. The minute she could, she’d sign up for another round. And another. And another. Until she could look at the captain without panting in need.

“Major?”

She shrugged, not feeling like getting between M.A.R.L.I.S. and Vantry. Mr. Grumpy could learn manners from someone else, thank you very much. “Just talking to myself.” Swiping at the dust covering the nearest panel, she tapped her way into the Comm Channel. “Would you like me to try to hail F&I, sir?” She didn’t look at him, afraid she’d drool for real in her present lust-filled state.

He moved behind her. “Looks like it’s all up and running.” His tone conveyed that he was impressed, despite the anger vibrating in his voice.

“The power source had faulty wiring. The fix was simple.” She didn’t turn to look at him. She didn’t need to. Her whole body was tuned to his as he paced around the room.

Boo hiss on that. Gods above, she had the worst taste in men. Sure he was hot, but his attitude was the pits.

“Patch us through,” he ordered.

“Aye-aye, sir.” Her words were filled with sarcasm and self-disgust. “Right away,” she added in a cheery tone to cover it up.

It took longer than it should have, although time began to crawl when the captain pulled up a chair beside hers and carelessly sprawled his yummy body upon it.

Damn him. She’d almost think he was doing it on purpose except a sneak peek at his face convinced her he was in his usual rotten mood. Unlike the arrogant, ruthless man in the video, this version of Vantry was a different animal altogether.

Finally she had a line patched all the way into F&I, straight to the desk of Simone Hensen, her oldest friend and only confidante.

A smiling, beautiful blonde appeared on the monitor. “Callie Justice! As I live and breathe! I thought you’d dropped off the grid.”

Callie pointed at Rafe where he sat beside her. “This is my new captain, Rafe Vantry.”

“Your new captain?” Simone asked, confused since Callie had told her friend she’d never fly again.

Rafe sat up, leaning into the monitor, blocking her view. “It’s a mystery, isn’t it? How someone who disobeyed an order would be back in the air?”

Callie used her elbow to move him over, but his fishing worked. Simone was already answering him.

“Anyone with half a brain would have disobeyed that order.” Of course Simone would defend her. Simone was as loyal as they came.

“Moving on to why we called.” Callie spoke fast to get them back on track before Simone said more, putting her body slightly in front of Rafe’s even though the close proximity made her shiver. “A day ago we had an encounter with a ship, which is beyond rare. This section of space doesn’t even have trade routes through it.”

“Where are you?” Simone asked, all business now.

“Galaxy grid 1190, Opid system.”

Simone blinked. “Gods, that’s the middle of nothing.”

“Yep, only the juiciest assignments for me nowadays.” She waved a hand to change the subject back, wincing a little at how bitter that sounded. “When we entered the ship, we found the crew dead, but all the data comes back normal. We can’t figure out what killed them.”

“You have video for me?”

“Of our time on board and all the test results. We’re at a loss as to what went wrong, but this ship has no doc, so it could be something simple that we don’t have the skills to see.”

“Send the vid and data to me and give me a day to look it over. I’ll get back to you with more questions.”

“I knew you’d come through for us.” Callie would have smiled at her friend, but talking about the dead bodies on the XL7 had damped her mood. Whatever had killed them had left them looking like they’d just fallen into a peaceful sleep. The whole thing gave her the creeps.

## Chapter Seven

“Overbooking, my ass.” Rafe stomped his way down to the cargo hold. He’d just received a mail telling him his appointment in the Relaxation Chamber, which should have occurred four days in the future, had been moved up to five minutes ago. Having sex consecutive days in a row was against the rules of the Relaxation Protocol, and his last encounter had been only yesterday. Obviously the program was malfunctioning. Although when he’d read the mail, he’d had a weird feeling that someone was playing games with him. Which was nonsense. On top of everything, he was becoming paranoid.

He should disable the damn program until he could have a tech look at it.

“But you didn’t disable it, did you?” he sneered at himself. Instead, he’d seen the rebooking mail and practically run down here to get more time with his partner.

As he stepped through the final airlock, he admitted that he was secretly pleased to have her again so soon. If he’d been able to, he’d have her again and again and again, over and over like a junky with his drug.

Gods, he’d had her once and was already addicted.

Sliding off his clothes, he entered the room, sensing immediately that he was alone. He didn’t know how he knew for sure, but he did. *She* probably followed protocol or maybe she hadn’t even received the mail yet.

He stopped himself before he could start the guessing game on the identity of his partner. He knew who he wished it was, even after finding out she’d disobeyed a direct order. Wanting his new major showed how far he’d fallen. He ruminated on how low he’d gone more and more often, obsessing over it.

Lying back on the mattress, he let the darkness envelope him. Ignoring his raging erection, he concentrated on relaxing completely. How long had it been since he’d really relaxed? This job and this ship were eating him alive.

He took a deep breath and admitted to himself that his career was over and he had no one to blame but himself. He'd failed to make even the most basic improvements to the Ventura. While the thought stung, he wasn't going to shrivel up and die. There were shipping companies out there scrambling to hire people like him. The Troopers had given him invaluable and marketable skills.

It burned him up, because everything inside him wanted to keep trying to save the Ventura. He didn't want to give up on the ship, dammit.

The ever-constant hum in the air pitched higher, signaling the entrance of another person.

He closed his useless eyes and felt her approach, more hesitant than he'd like. He'd had flashes of their lovemaking come to him off and on throughout the day. She'd been aggressive and demanding one moment, then submissive and pliable the next. They'd played at the edge of violence like he'd never done with any other lover. He wondered how far he could push her—wondered how far he could push himself.

They were a perfect match, excellently paired for lovemaking. He wished he could tell her that. He wished he could see her face as he ramped up the play between them. Maybe she was timid today because she didn't want him dominating her like he had at the end of their last session? There was only one way to find out.

Without being able to see, his other senses took flight. The vague flower smell from before returned quickly now that he searched for it. Behind his closed lids, he imagined her image as she sat on her knees before him, hesitating to make that final approach. From his mind image, he caught her arm easily, toppling her onto his chest.

She wasn't too heavy but she wasn't too light either. He'd taken her off-guard, and she sprawled across him, falling hard, knocking the air from his lungs.

Sliding his hand into her short hair, he pinned her head as he kissed her.

For a moment, she didn't respond, then her whole body came alive. Her lips tilted on his so her tongue could enter his mouth. They fed off each other, time—precious time—ticking away as they kissed, but he couldn't stop the hungry exchange. The taste of her



was perfect, the smell of her desire filling his head until he couldn't think of anything but melding them into one.

Her legs were suddenly straddling his chest, her rear end pushing against his now-aching erection. Still keeping their deep kiss, he ran his hands from her shoulders down to her tight ass. Gripping her hips, he rubbed the soft skin there.

She leaned further down onto his chest, her nipples sliding across his skin in a way which could only have been deliberate.

Without thought, his hands left her hips to capture the tight buds. He didn't want to hurt her, but their last experience together had left him with the impression that she liked a strong hand. Rolling her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, he increased the pressure a little more than the time before.

Her body trembled on top of his.

He ducked his head to suck one of her breasts, keeping the strong pressure with his other hand. She cradled his head close, her legs hugging his body. Pulling away, he blew a breath across the tight bud, feeling her head drop back as she thrust her breasts forward for more.

Her hand at his neck fluttered with need. Need for *him*.

Rushing wasn't wise. They only had brief time together. He should slow it down and make every time they had sex mind blowing.

But he didn't want to wait any longer.

Lying back, he lifted her. She helped him, guiding his hard cock to her entrance. His erection slid in her desire, before working inside her channel.

He wanted to stab upward, force himself home, but he waited, letting her gently work him inside.

Agonizingly slow, she pulled herself to the tip of his erection before lowering herself further along his shaft. Back up to the tip, before reversing to plunge further down. If she purposely tortured him, she did a perfect job. Even as wet as she was, she was still so tight around him, the action opening her a little more each time, taking him a little

deeper. He wanted to grab her and force her lower but this was her moment. He promised himself that next time he'd be on top.

Finally, finally, she was seated on him. Sweat had popped out across his forehead but he'd kept himself in control, waiting for her, distracting himself with the feel of her velvet smooth skin beneath his fingers.

She began a slow ride, keeping him deep, thrusting her hips as she reached the bottom of his cock. It gave him an added spurt of pleasure every time she did it, but something told him she did it for her own satisfaction. He held himself still, letting her set the pace, letting her drive them both higher.

Her body relaxed as she fell under the spell of their sex, becoming fluid, her weight fully resting on her hands where they propped her up on his chest. She fucked him so completely, her body greedily eating up his, that his hard-won control slipped.

If he'd been able to talk, he would have begged her to come. Pleaded with her, forgetting all about his famous control and his pride. But if he spoke, the sound would be drowned out and that would break her total concentration.

Using every ounce of his will, he kept completely motionless, allowing her to use his body for her own enjoyment. And his.

She rocked harder and deeper on him, snapping his good intentions, forcing him to orgasm without his approval.

The small part of his brain recorded that she'd climaxed too and he thanked the gods. When she collapsed onto his chest, he gathered her up and turned them both on their sides so he could spoon her close while aftershocks ran fast and deep inside him.

Callie had never had such a powerful orgasm during intercourse before, and now she knew why. Her heart couldn't take that massive pleasure. She panted for breath, clinging to the nameless, faceless man who cuddled her close.

How many minutes had they used up of their session? She needed a recovery period, but knew she didn't have the time. Gods above, good sex really did make a woman feel wonderful.

Stretching, she tried to rouse herself from the sudden lethargy that gathered inside her. It was too bad they couldn't fall asleep together and wake up with a leisurely round of sex. A small seed of sadness planted in her heart, but she tried to crush it out. This was sex. Only a way to satisfy a basic need.

Turning, she pushed him onto his back, knowing he'd follow her unspoken orders if for no other reason than at this moment in time, after the crash of orgasm had settled, she owned this man.

With no sexual intent at all, she explored him, running her fingers over his broad chest. His nipples pebbled under her caress, so she teased them, leaning down to taste, just because she could. Her actions were dreamy and relaxed, to match the slow contentment of her brain.

Stroking down his arm, she allowed herself to enjoy the bulge of his biceps, wishing she could see his muscles in the light. Men's arms had always been sexy to her. Well, some men's arms. She banished the thought of Captain Yummy making a grab for her hand to stop her from touching his computer screen.

She placed a small kiss on his biceps, the action an apology for thinking about Rafe Vantry when she was with her partner. Vantry was the only man on the ship this couldn't be.

His arms pinned her suddenly, but she wasn't worried. It was only fair that he control their love play after she'd run the show for so long. He raised his head to place a closed-mouthed kiss on the flesh of her shoulder right below her neck. Then he licked the spot, making her shiver.

It felt heavenly, her whole body sensitized with her orgasm.

He opened his mouth, biting her shoulder lightly. And immediately she knew what he was doing. She'd bitten him at the end of their last session. Hard. As his teeth closed around her, she gripped his arms but didn't stop him. Instead, heat rose up inside her, making her tremble with anticipation.

She'd never known this was a part of her personality. Rough sex and domination went against every piece of who she was inside—although obviously it didn't, since she

enjoyed the slice of pain shooting through her as he bit down on her shoulder. Heat pooled inside her belly, her body revving up, filling with heavy need.

It would leave a bruise, she had no doubt. And not only didn't she care, but she loved it.

The need rose up inside her and she ducked her head to place a small lick and kiss on his neck as he released her.

His bite had woken him up as well, and he rolled her to her back quickly.

The warmth of his palms seared her as he stroked down her body, from her shoulders to her toes, then back up again. It was an all-over massage, and the fact he carefully avoided her breasts and sex made the anticipation build even faster.

His mouth followed, his tongue laving along her skin, his teeth nibbling on her hips, working down to the flesh of her calf. And still he didn't touch her sex.

When she reached for him to entice him closer, he caught both her hands and stretched them above her head.

She groaned in frustration without thinking, the hum growing louder to cover it. He froze for a heartbeat, before leaning down to kiss her, his lips twisted in a grin at her slip. She retaliated by poking him in the ribs.

Silent laughter had his chest heaving as he hugged her close. Moving her hands back above her head, he pressed a sweet kiss against her cheek.

The laughter and smile confirmed this wasn't the captain like nothing else could. She banished the odd sense of loss which plagued her, trying to concentrate as he continued to explore her with his mouth.

Just when she feared their time would soon be over, he turned her onto her side and tucked his body behind hers. She could tell he planned to have sex on their sides, but she knew that wasn't a great way to have intercourse. It never worked out. She left her hands above her head as he guided his erection into her channel, adjusting her body so her outer leg was on top of his. She tried to help by arching into him.

In two thrusts, he was deep inside her, the feel completely different from the other times they'd had sex.

He pulled her tight against his body and put his forefinger onto her clit. As he turned slow circles there, his erection deep inside her, he kept his hips still. It took her a few moments to figure out his plan, but the need was climbing high inside her.

She realized he wasn't going to thrust at all. He planned to hold her still and, with his body connected to hers, bring her to orgasm with his hands.

Her body shuddered with the revelation. It seemed selfish, since she was sure he couldn't come like this. Although he was certainly hard enough, sitting high and proud inside her.

She could use her inner muscles to bring him. Maybe. She would try anyway.

As he turned a leisurely circle on her clitoris, she clamped down on his cock inside her, then released. It took concentration, but when he squirmed to put himself in deeper, she knew she had his full attention.

He set the pace, but she controlled his pleasure as much as he controlled hers. It was agonizingly intimate and as the pleasure built, she had to concentrate harder to make sure he didn't get left behind.

He was going to orgasm first, she could tell by the shake in his hand as he tried to control it. She reveled in her power, not even caring that she might not reach her own climax. By concentrating so hard on gripping him, she increased her own pleasure exponentially, especially as she felt him reach his own peak.

Without warning, she slid over the edge with him, her orgasm crashing over her, so wonderful she couldn't control the moan which escaped her lips.

Callie winced at her slip, even as pleasure still rippled through her, glad her partner couldn't hear the name which had ridden on the moan.

## Chapter Eight

“You look different,” Simone said, leaning closer to the monitor to get a better look.

Callie resisted the urge to duck away from the vid screen. Of course she looked different. She’d just had the best sex of her life with a nameless, faceless man.

“Almost happy.” Simone raised an eyebrow in question, her facial expression demanding an explanation.

She might as well tell her friend. Gods knew she’d pester until Callie spilled it anyway. “Since I’m no longer a captain, I’m eligible for the Relaxation Program.”

A snicker escaped Simone before she coughed to cover her amusement.

“Feel free to stuff a sock in it.” Callie rubbed her temple to stop the ache which had started there. “Okay, back to business.”

“Right.” Simone stifled another chuckle. “Business.” She coughed again.

“Simone.” So she’d had sex. What was so hysterical about that? Callie narrowed her eyes at her friend.

“Right. Um.” Two coughs, then she seemed to get her amusement under control. “We think the XL7 has been infected with a new super-virus that has potentially killed three other crews over the past ten years. Unfortunately the idiots in Trooper Command have been blowing up the ships which have been infected, rather than letting us run tests. All we know is that everyone in the ship dies mysteriously, all their test results coming back clear, with no obvious injuries.”

“Was there damage to the other ships’ hulls as well?”

Simone nodded. “Possibly the virus entered the ship from meteor damage punctures. We won’t know until we can take a look. We’re sending a discovery ship to rendezvous with you to take over the find.”

Immense relief flooded through Callie at the thought that the XL7 would soon be in the right hands. “When will you get here?”

“Tomorrow or the next day latest. We had a ship near there working on something else.” Simone’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “If this is truly what we think it is, the F&I plans to make it headline news to encourage more captains to call us in when they discover similar situations.” She paused, meeting Callie’s gaze to underscore the importance of her next words. “Whoever called us in will get a lot of good press.”

Callie looked away from the monitor, considering the ramifications. If she let Simone point to her as the hero, it would go a long way to help her out of the hole her career had fallen into.

She stood, unable to sit still, needing to pace.

Although would it really? Getting her name in the papers wouldn’t undo the past. Even if the order had been a bad one, her lack of action was unforgivable. It didn’t matter that on many levels she believed she’d done the right thing.

Pacing around the conference table, she could finally admit to herself that her career was tanked forever. She’d disobeyed a direct order. People didn’t recover from that.

Rubbing the bridge of her nose as she returned to her seat, she knew she’d never captain her own patrolship again, even if she remained on the Ventura for years trying to prove herself. Being a communications specialist wasn’t enough to make her happy. She needed her own ship. Sure, she could use her friendship to steal all the credit, but what would do the most good would be letting Rafe become the hero. Good exposure would open up opportunities for him to fix some of the major issues on the ship.

“The official word should be that Captain Vantry called it in.”

Simone paused in surprise. “You sure?”

“I’m done. I’ve accepted that. Let the credit go where it can do the most good.”

It was time to move on. Leave the Troopers and start on another adventure. Rubbing her shoulder, she allowed herself a small, sad thought for leaving behind the man who would always be her dream lover.

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Rafe paced around the War Room, waiting for the connection Callie had set up between him and Jigs to go through. He'd sent her out of the room, and she'd gone willingly, happy to be spared his brooding presence.

He'd had amazing sex last night, so he should be in a fabulous mood. But the message from Jigs to vid him immediately had his gut in a twist.

"You look like you want to chew someone up and spit them out," Jigs's voice said from across the room.

He stalked around the conference table to the screen. "Spill it."

"I'm fine, thanks for asking. How's the middle of nowhere treating you?" Jigs blinked innocently, but the humor made his eyes sparkle strong enough for it to appear on the vid screen.

"Like hell." Rafe made a give-it-up gesture with his hands. "So make it worse for me."

"Actually, it's good news. I had one of my teams look into it and it turns out that the Ensign who runs the rubber room—"

"Wait, you're saying that's as high as the ranks go there?"

"Well, from what I understand, no one's supposed to actually leave. They stash those who embarrassed the brass and the complete idiots there, supposedly to await new assignments which never come. It might take a couple years, but eventually people get the hint and quit, quietly taking their problems with them. But the Ensign who runs it decided to make some money four months ago."

"Four months?" The twist in Rafe's stomach tightened.

"Seems like someone paid him to staff the Ventura with the dregs of the rubber room." Jigs went silent, letting Rafe fill in the missing pieces.

"So I'd fail." Rafe said the words, but had trouble believing them.

Jigs nodded.

They sat silent while Rafe thought through who would most want him to remain on the Ventura forever. "Morris Taylor?" Captain Morris Taylor had taken over his position



on the I.W.C. Mothership, but they'd been friends for a long time. It was hard to believe Morris would ruin him to captain the crown jewel of the fleet. Thinking back to the Gala, had there been anything in Morris's face which would have indicated he planned to sabotage the bet? Rafe didn't think so, but he'd been focused on Admiral Bennet more than his friend.

Jigs nodded. "He's been relieved of his command pending a full-scale investigation."

"So all the staff who were replaced when I came on board ended up where?"

"Moved to office positions. They'll be waiting for you when you next dock for repairs. The people from the rubber room will be sent back. Further, the dockmaster at the Relay Station has been picked up for questioning. Turns out he was paid to give the Ventura as few repairs as possible." Jigs shuffled his papers. "You know you can return to your old command, since the bet was rigged."

Rafe felt himself shaking his head before he'd even fully come to a decision in his own mind. He'd been ready to give up when he'd thought he'd failed, but he hadn't known he'd been sabotaged. "I'm staying on the Ventura. I said I would turn this ship around and I meant it. I'm not giving up just because it's the easy thing to do." With a more experienced staff, he might have a slim hope of achieving an excellent inspection, although he didn't kid himself. The ship was a disaster on many levels beyond the crew. It would take a year to make the repairs they needed during their regularly scheduled Relay Station stops.

Then it hit him that he was losing people he didn't want to lose. "Callie," he barked into his wrist Comm without thinking. "Major," he added, too late. When had he started thinking of her by her first name?

"Sir?" She sounded tired, and he almost asked her what was wrong.

"Bring me all my personnel files ASAP."

"Aye-aye, sir."

He turned back to Jigs. "Any chance I can keep the best of the rubber room people? I have a couple who are competent." He admitted silently that he didn't want to give up his communication specialist, even if she had disobeyed an order. Or Willis for that matter.

He had potential. The two of them were the best of the lot. There were several of his staff who had potential, actually, although he wasn't positive who'd come from the rubber room and who was from the original staff.

Jigs's surprise showed plainly on his face. "You want to keep some of them?"

"I do."

"Let me know which ones, and I'll look into it." But his tone of voice said he thought Rafe had lost his marbles. "Which actually brings us to Callie Justice. I still haven't found out what she's done. Whatever it is, they're keeping a lid on it. My poking around has to be stirring up whoever is hiding her file, but so far no one's said anything to me about it." He looked beyond the monitor as someone spoke in the background, too far from the mic for it to pick them up. Jigs glanced back at Rafe. "I need to go. I'll vid you later with more details as I get them."

"Thanks, Jigs." Rafe couldn't stop the swell of hope welling inside him. He had a chance to prove to everyone and himself that he was the captain he'd always thought he was.

"Anytime," Jigs said, his focus already on whoever had spoken to him. Then the screen went blank.

A knock on the door sounded.

"Enter." He had a chance now with a decent crew. It might take him a lot longer than he'd thought, but with a few more experienced people, it could be done. Somewhere in his cabin he still had the lists of things which had to be taken care of, tossed in a drawer in disgust. After he spoke with Callie and figured out which of his crew he'd be losing, he'd head back there and dig it out.

"Sir," Callie said from the doorway. "Lieutenant Hornburn says I don't have clearance to access those files." She stared beyond his shoulder, but the grim set of her mouth spoke volumes about her irritation. He studied the stressed lines of her face, the drooping shoulders, the hunched posture. What could have her so dispirited? Hornburn's setdown couldn't have impacted her this much.

“Stand down, Major.” He rocked back in his chair, stacking his feet on the table. Finally his lieutenant had woken up to follow protocol, but it was at exactly the wrong time. Mentally, he crossed his fingers that Hornburn had come from the rubber room. His mind spun with questions, his morale lifted, everything turning around.

Callie tossed herself into a chair across from him. “You’re after copies of our orders?”

“Yes.” Even with her obvious grim demeanor, she’d still understood fast what he was after.

“You want to know who else is from the rubber room?”

He sat up, letting his boots bang on the floor. “Why do you ask?” This went beyond guessing.

“Willis told me his last assignment was there, so I wondered who else had suffered a similar fate. While this isn’t a plum assignment by any stretch, staffing the ship with only people from the dregs of the Troopers seems a little extreme to me.”

“Half the crew came from the rubber room,” he told her, to gauge her reaction.

“Interesting.” She shrugged as if it really wasn’t interesting at all. “Rather than deal with Hornburn, we can ask Marles for the files.”

Who was Marles? “The ship’s computer?” he asked, thinking of the signature on the mail he’d received for the Relaxation Program.

“Yeah.”

“The ship is sentient?” M.A.R.L.I.S. then. He’d figured that function had broken along with everything else, but what if he had his ship’s computer helping him? Everything would be done that much faster.

“Of course.” She gave him a stern look. “Your continuously grumpy attitude has annoyed her.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Although he’d been such an asshole since he realized the Ventura was beyond his ability to fix maybe it wasn’t hard to believe after all.

“Take my word for it. Your opinion that this ship is a hunk of trash, or whatever you called it, has truly pissed her off. I suggest a lot of groveling.” She shook her head and it

was a motion of disgust. “You need to work with her. She knows what’s wrong with everything on this boat.” Callie sent him an annoyed look that almost had him laughing in surprise.

It was as if they’d switched places, with her catching his bad mood. For some reason that lifted his own a notch. The major was downright cute when she was in a snit, her pretty mouth in a deep frown, her emerald eyes snapping with displeasure.

“Something amusing you, Captain?” she asked, her eyes narrowing.

He wasn’t answering that question, since as her superior officer he wasn’t allowed to think anyone under his command was cute. Besides, she was right. He needed his ship’s computer if he planned to pass inspection. Maybe a humble apology was in order if the ship heard him talking badly about it. He didn’t even think it was possible for a computer to get its feelings hurt. Although why was he surprised? Nothing had gone as it should have since he’d walked on board the Ventura. “So how do I address the ship?”

“M.A.R.L.I.S., you there?” She turned to stare at a speaker high on the wall.

“I’m here.” The computer’s voice was the same calm female they’d heard during decontamination after they’d come back on board from the XL7. Except the calm was edged with irritation.

Callie stared at him in expectation, then pointed to the speaker when he didn’t immediately speak.

He cleared his throat, unsure what to say. “I understand you were offended by my previous remarks and I want to assure you that I am not only proud to captain the Ventura”—that was a bit of a stretch, but he could be proud once they’d made some progress—“but I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure the ship is properly repaired and in top shape. I’ll need your help to do that and I apologize if I upset you in any way.”

There was an uncomfortable silence where he felt a bit foolish that he’d apologized to a computer program.

“I will help you, Captain Vantry.” M.A.R.L.I.S. said the words, but beneath them was a warning that her help would come at the price of his continued devotion to the ship.

Callie mimed a clapping motion with her hands at him, giving her approval of his apology. “Now that you two have made up, we need you to pull the scans of any paper orders that have been presented to the ship and let us look at them.”

“I’ll put them on screen two, Captain Justice.”

“Captain Justice?” He stared at Callie, a thought forming inside his brain, one he was sure he wasn’t going to like.

“The captain has not been officially demoted,” the computer answered him, her tone holding a bit of a sniff, as if it wondered about his intelligence. “She is still at captain paygrade level, flight status pending.”

He wished he’d missed the significance of what his ship’s computer was telling him. But the pieces dropped together in his mind with a clunk and he saw it all. “M.A.R.L.I.S.,” he asked, staring not at the speaker but at his new major. “Is the Relaxation Program functioning correctly?”

“Yes, Captain Vantry.”

“It’s not experiencing errors in any way?”

“No, it is fully operational.”

He’d thought the last meeting had been booked at an inappropriate interval after their first encounter, but when he’d returned to his cabin last night, he’d realized that the Relaxation Program had waited exactly twenty-four hours to schedule the meeting with his partner again. And as for the fact that it had matched him with one of his subordinates—

What if it had matched him with an equal? After all, it hadn’t given him a partner until *Captain Justice* boarded his ship...

In slow motion, he reached across the table, part of his mind telling him not to do it, the rest of him driving forward, needing to know. Callie jumped when he touched her, but he caught her upper arm, holding her still while his other hand peeled back the collar of her uniform.

There it was in black and blue—a perfect outline of his teeth on her white, smooth skin. “Dammit all to hell,” he growled, tracing the bruise lightly before dropping her like a hot rock and slamming himself back into his chair.

Her eyes grew huge in her pretty face as it hit her what he’d done.

“The Relaxation Program isn’t malfunctioning, matching me with someone below my rank.” He threw himself out of his chair, pacing the small room. If he hadn’t looked, he wouldn’t know and he could have continued to have her. *Idiot*. “Because you’re not below my rank, are you Callie Justice? Or should I say *Captain* Justice.” He met her shocked gaze from the farthest point in the room. Ever since he’d boarded this ship, his luck had gone to hell. The only thing that had gone right had been his relaxation partner. It wasn’t just that the sex had been amazing, it was that without even seeing or speaking to her, he’d known they were perfect for each other.

“Oh my gods,” she whispered, the ramifications of what he’d told her moving more slowly through her mind than his. But then she most likely hadn’t been attracted to him like he was to her from almost the start. “It’s you.”

Not understanding why he felt the need to do it, he peeled back the collar of his own uniform to reveal the mark she’d left on him in almost exactly the same spot. A mark he’d touched over and over again, feeling not just a spike of lust, but bigger things, almost like it symbolized much more than simply a bruise. It had been asinine, he knew, and now he also knew why he’d been immediately attracted to his new major from the first time she’d walked onto his ship. They were perfect sex partners.

She ducked her head into her hands. “Oh gods,” he heard her whisper again, as if finding out she’d slept with him was the worst thing that could happen to a woman.

## Chapter Nine

“Captain,” Lieutenant Mildred Hornburn said from the doorway, freezing them both in place, as if they were two teenagers caught by a teacher in a kiss.

Callie controlled the urge to laugh, fighting the hysteria threatening to burst from her mouth.

One thought kept circling inside her brain. She’d been having the best sex of her life with Captain Yummy, the very man she’d lusted after until she’d been forced to join the Relaxation Program in a lame attempt to stop her wildly growing desire. She hid her face in her hands to keep laughter from slipping free.

“Lieutenant,” Rafe said from across the room where he’d gone to get as far away from her as possible.

“Major Justice tried to get me to turn over the personnel files, but that’s obviously against protocol.” Mildred’s voice was filled with stuffy self-importance.

“Leave them on the table.” His growl was worse than usual.

Callie forced herself to sit up and turn to watch Mildred put the files in a stack beside her. The lieutenant paused to carefully line the edges of the files together, lingering over the job, struggling with something on her mind.

“Is there something else you wanted?”

“I was wondering why you asked for these? Is there something wrong with the performance of the crew?”

Callie felt her eyes grow wide. Did Mildred really not recognize the performance issues?

“There has been a mix up, I’m afraid, and there will be a change in some crew positions when we dock in two days.”

That was news to Callie. So he must know more about how people from the rubber room had ended up on the Ventura. If they all came with paper orders as she did, then maybe he had figured out why and he would return them all.

Which meant she'd be one of the crew sent back to the rubber room. That wasn't an option for her. She wasn't going back there to sit around waiting for another assignment. If she still was a captain, then she shouldn't be here as a major anyway.

Mildred's tight-lipped mouth and narrowed eyes revealed just how unhappy she was that she had to have this conversation in front of Callie, but the older woman straightened to her full height and pushed forward. "Am I one of the people who will be relieved of duty?"

"I don't know yet."

"Because if I am," she rushed on, as if she knew in her heart of hearts that she was about to go, "I want you to know that I've really enjoyed my time on the Ventura and I don't want to leave." She twisted her hands, the action betraying her nerves. "I know I'm not as good at what you've asked me to do as I need to be. All this is so new, since I've never done anything beyond a desk job. But I can learn if you'll take the time to teach me. I really can."

"Lieutenant," Rafe said gently, "I need someone who can lead when I'm not at the helm. Do you really think you can lead a patrolship?"

Mildred's face fell, her lips quivering. "No."

"I don't think so either. Perhaps you're better suited to being at a desk."

Staring at her hands for a moment, the older woman took a deep breath, obviously coming to a decision, and met Rafe's gaze. "I should never have been promoted to a lieutenant. I know that, but someone did it and now I'm stuck. What if I took a demotion? Can I do that? It's where I should have been in the first place. It's really not my fault that I was promoted."

"But you took the lieutenant's test?"



Mildred nodded. "I'm good at tests, you see. I got a perfect score. But that doesn't mean I have the skills to move on. I suspected that was true, but now I know I can't lead a ship."

What would she, Callie, do if Mildred had approached her with this plea? She didn't know. Rafe was in a tough spot with this one. He needed competent people badly, but this confession and offer would twist her heart. Maybe she truly was too soft to be a captain.

"What would you be qualified for if you were a major?"

"I'm really talented at organizing and logistics, Captain." Mildred's voice became animated. "Presently, the Logistics and Maintenance position is empty. I know it only calls for a major paygrade, but if I was demoted, I could fill that slot and do a good job."

Rafe's face was flat and devoid of emotion. "Thank you for your time, Lieutenant. Let me think on it. For now, you're excused."

Mildred nodded, turned to go, then whisked back to salute him. She left, shutting the door, leaving them to their previous conversation. Callie resisted the urge to flee.

Dark chocolate eyes returned to her. "What would you do with this?"

"You have a few days before the crew turnover. Have her give you a status of the work needed to get the logistics department into shape and how she'd handle everything. Then decide." Callie's heart had gone out to Mildred, but why did she take the lieutenant's test if she didn't want the job? Then again, Callie figured she was in no shape to judge another for wanting something she shouldn't have. "She might not be as good as she thinks she will be. Either way, you'll know before you have to make the decision."

"Smart." Rafe paced a tight circle, the tension in his shoulders telling her he was gearing up to talk about them. Having sex together.

She rushed to put it off a bit longer. "I spoke with F&I again, and they think the people on the XL7 died from a new super-virus which has killed off three other crews in this section of the universes over the last ten years."

He stopped pacing, distracted as she'd hoped. "Why haven't we been advised about this new virus?"

“The senior brass has been destroying the vessels, thinking that would take care of the problem. Much to the irritation of F&I, who thinks the Troopers are being shortsighted and unintelligent about the risks involved with not fully understanding the new bug.”

“I bet that did get their panties in a twist. They like to think they are the only ones who can make those kinds of decisions.” The tension between the senior leaders in the Troopers and F&I was legendary.

“Well, thanks to your quick thinking, you’ve saved some bodies and a ship for them to study. F&I seems to think it’s only a matter of time before the virus spreads into the Inter-worlds. They want to know what they’re dealing with before that happens. As far as they’re concerned, you’re a hero.”

Rafe stared at her, his eyes narrowing. “It wasn’t my quick thinking.”

She smiled at him, knowing there wasn’t a thing he could do about her decision. “Actually, officially it was.”

“Why did you hand me the credit, Callie? Don’t you think something like that will help get you out of your current career issues?”

Ignoring the warmth he created when he said her name, she took a deep breath and said the words she’d been struggling to come to terms with for the last few hours. “No. My career is done, Rafe. I need to accept that and move on.” His name on her lips tasted right, flipping her stomach over with a stab of misplaced desire.

“What did you do to lose your command?” His gaze snared hers, pinning it.

She shrugged. Why not tell him? It was done now. The bell couldn’t be unrung. He would stay on this ship, and she would leave to start over. “I disobeyed an order.”

He moved closer, rested his strong hand on the table and leaned toward her. “What order?”

“I was told to destroy a rogue transport. I didn’t.”

His eyes widened. That hadn’t been what he was expecting. “Who or what was inside the transport?”

She paused, thinking back to the intelligence she'd been given, remembering the horror of what she'd felt as she read it. "Children," she whispered. She met his gaze again, raising her chin in defiance of the judgment she knew was coming. "Half-human children."

Confusion warred on his face. "Breeds?"

"Yes. Women and children who were only half human." Most people thought of them as half alien, but that wasn't how she'd ever seen it.

"They were leaving the system? Running from the new regulation crackdown?" His mind was sharp and quick. Too bad they couldn't ever be together or she'd learn to love that about him.

"Yes."

He paced the room again, shaking his head as if something didn't make sense. "But if they were leaving, why kill them?"

"I was told that a Mixed Breed Alliance had formed, which had chosen to fight with the Rebel forces. The Council considered those children future adversaries and wanted to stop them from joining the Rebel ranks."

"But why has your personnel file disappeared? You admit you disobeyed the order. There isn't any debate about what you did. Why destroy your file?" He was back to pacing, shaking his head in obvious puzzlement. "Sure, there are some who would be furious to know that they'd planned to take out that transport, but there are plenty of people who would cheer the killing of that many breeds, children or not."

It was true that since the economy in the Inter-worlds had gotten tighter, people had begun to hate and fear those with non-human blood. But she just didn't know. "It really doesn't matter. You and I both know that disobeying an order—any order—is against everything we've been taught in the Troopers." She wanted to get up and pace, too, but she stayed seated. "I'm finished."

He stopped in mid-step, turning toward her. "If they deleted your record, no one will ever know."

For a second, she considered it. Could she really pull it off? Could she recreate herself and move on?

She'd been ignoring something that had been lurking in the back of her mind since she'd been pulled from duty, distracted by the fact that if she left the military, she'd lose the only home she'd ever known. Killing innocent children for the things they might do in the future wasn't right, and order or no order, she wouldn't kill them the next time around either. And that meant her time in the Troopers was over.

She closed her eyes, admitting to herself that she didn't want to leave partially because of this sexual thing she had going on with Captain Yummy. How stupid was that?

## Chapter Ten

What was wrong with him? She'd disobeyed an *order*. He'd threatened to shoot her if she did that on his ship, and he'd meant it. But here he was, practically begging her to try to deceive the Trooper Brass and bury her past. Had he really just been thinking about asking Jigs to help cover up what she'd done?

"Why do you care, Rafe?" She'd sat motionless through all of this. He was about to crawl out of his own skin with emotions he didn't even understand.

"I've been asking myself that same question."

Why *did* he care? Why? He stopped and stared at the screens filling the room which had been unusable before she'd arrived on board. "You're the best communications specialist I've ever flown with." That was true, but she'd broken his cardinal rule and here he was defending her. Anyone else and he wouldn't be. Anyone else and he would be giving them up gladly.

"I'll fix as much of the Comm as I can before I leave. With help from M.A.R.L.I.S. I should be able to leave you a full report on what's left to repair when I go."

So she was going then. Next time the Ventura docked, she'd walk off his ship. He stared at the blinking cursor on the vid screen. She was leaving. They'd never be together again. He was losing the best sex partner he'd ever had and the strongest member of his crew in one fell swoop. He didn't want her to go, but instead of saying anything, he nodded. "We'll review your list before we dock, Major."

"Yes, sir." She stood.

He didn't want her to go, but the list of reasons why he couldn't keep her stretched before him endlessly. "You're dismissed," he said, turning his back on her so he wouldn't have to watch her leave.

He'd dismissed her like she meant nothing. She strode to her cabin, feeling like she was going to cry. She never cried, not even when she'd lost her command. Tears weren't an option.

Swiping at the moisture on her face, Callie reached deep inside herself to try to grab the anger which had kept her company for the last year. Instead she found only a well of sadness. Dammit.

"He's just a piece of ass," she said out loud as she stalked through the portal to her cabin. "He's a good screw, nothing more."

Her bottom lip quivered, annoying her to no end. "Come *on*, Callie! Stop being a baby. It's not like you're in love with him. He's the most ill-tempered human in five galaxies. He's not long-term potential."

Sure, she respected him. He'd handled the whole thing with the XL7 with grace and command. It was sexy and impressive, but that kind of thing wasn't love.

And yes, he'd been a fabulous lover. The way her body reacted to his and the way his hands felt on her skin made her even now tremble with need.

But long-term relationships were impossible in the Troopers. The whole ridiculous flash of longing for more had no basis in reality. None.

"Get a plan together, Callie. Make a plan."

Her life stretched out before her. She'd never had a normal existence. She'd gone essentially from childhood into the military. Could she even make it on her own?

Staring at herself in the mirror, she raised her chin. "You can and you will. Life will be okay outside the Troopers. You believed in yourself once. Believe in yourself now."

She would leave when they next docked and catch a shuttle to Borrus. There she'd hire onto a freighter company and make a life for herself.

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"You're not telling me what I want to hear, Jigs."

“I don’t know what else to say. You can’t keep her. Your orders are to ship every person from the rubber room back.” Jigs struggled to keep a grin off his face, and Rafe struggled to keep the urge to smash in the monitor under control.

“She’s my most competent crew member. Giving her back would be asinine on my part.”

“The crew that’s returning will be experienced. You’ll have others to replace her.”

Rafe clawed through his hair, trying to keep his temper in check. “You’re not hearing me, Jigs. I want her.”

Jigs blinked. “Rafe.” He paused, appeared to search for words, then leaned a little closer to the monitor. “You *want* her?” He stressed the word “want” just as Rafe had accidentally said it.

“Need.” He knew that wasn’t a good word either. “Hell, Jigs, this ship is falling in on itself. I wouldn’t even be talking to you on this vid if she hadn’t fixed it.” If he could keep her on the ship, he’d even give her up as his sex partner. He’d have to, and while he’d miss the best sex imaginable, he’d be willing to give it up to keep her close. For the ship, of course.

“You’ll have to adapt, because HQ isn’t budging. They want her, specifically, back. It must be something to do with why they ‘lost’ her file in the first place.”

“I found out what she did,” he said absently, still searching for a way to keep her. “And I don’t think it’s anything the Troopers should crucify her for.”

Jigs caught his eye by waving on the monitor. “Spill the big secret.”

Rafe realized in his distraction he’d let something slip he hadn’t intended to share. Now he’d have to tell the whole thing as dispassionately as possible, or Jigs might guess how emotionally involved he was with her. “She was ordered to shoot down a transport filled with breed children. She didn’t follow that order.”

Jigs might be a spy leader, but in this case, he didn’t keep his feelings under wraps. What flashed across his face was a mixture of shock and recognition. He’d known about the order.

“Now who needs to spill it?” Rafe watched his best friend struggle to put his mask in place. “Don’t try to deny you don’t know anything about this, because that won’t work with me.”

“If it’s the same incident, then I was under the impression the order had been cancelled due to concerns over public opinion.”

Rafe saw an opportunity to negotiate and threw all his weight in that direction. “So why keep her in the rubber room if the order was erroneously passed to her anyway?”

Jigs’s mask finally slid in place, clearing all emotion from his eyes. “Even if she got an order which should have been cancelled, she should have completed it, and you know it. So what the hell is up with you, Rafe? You should be running from this woman. Not only does she have discipline issues, but she’s a political disaster. You used to be smarter than this.”

Rage clawed through him. “What the fuck am I supposed to do, Jigs? I’m barely keeping this ship in the air, let alone passing the upcoming inspection with excellent ratings.” Flinging out a hand, he punctuated his point. “I don’t care if she tap-danced naked at a meeting of the top brass, she’s my only hope of getting the fuck off of here.”

Jigs shook his head in wonder. “This isn’t you. Something’s happened, and it has to do with this woman.” He looked down at a monitor in front of him. “She’s pretty, but she can’t be the woman who finally caught you, can she?” His head jerked up, and he tried to snag Rafe with his gaze.

Why was he denying it? She was a damn good communications specialist, but he had feelings for her. What those were, he wasn’t sure yet. “It’s a long story, Jigs. But suffice it to say I have some emotional involvement with her.”

Jigs’s eyebrows shot up. “Rafe, man, don’t lose your career over a woman. Don’t do it. You’re smarter than that.”

“I’m not going to lose my career over anyone.”

“You will if you keep pursuing this. I can’t tell you the details of what happened about the breed transport, but suffice it to say, the person who overrode the decision to let the transport leave unharmed had to have been at the most senior levels of the brass.



We're talking all the way up. The person responsible buried Captain Justice in the rubber room to make sure no one ever found out about the incident. There is no way you could get her assigned to the Ventura. To even ask would ruin you."

Rafe sat down, energy draining from him like a popped balloon. He couldn't save her. She'd been right when she said she had to leave the Troopers. The implications of that hit him in the gut like a fist. He might not see her ever again, let alone have sex with her. For some reason that made him feel almost...panicky inside.

"Wow, you have it bad for her, huh?" Jigs asked, his voice soft as if he felt sorry for him.

Rafe had never let anyone pity him before and he wasn't about to start now. So he had a thing for her? So what? He'd have to get over it. "I'll be fine." He climbed to his feet. "Look, I need to go. I'll talk to you later." Switching off the monitor, he banished Jigs's worried face to the atmosphere and stomped out of the room.

## Chapter Eleven

He'd made up his mind and he only had four more hours before they docked to implement his plan. It was glancing at the clock that had finally pushed him over the edge, watching the minutes tick by as he'd sat at the helm. It was now or never—literally.

Using his override pass code, he entered her cabin without knocking, not wanting to give her a chance to refuse him at the door. What he was about to do could end his career. He'd never been so foolish, never in his life purposely risked his captaincy before. But as he watched himself get one minute closer to losing her, he realized all his chances were going to be gone in four hours.

She turned at the sound of the door, an extra uniform held forgotten in her hand at his intrusion, a military duffle propped end up against her desk. Seeing it was him, she turned her back and resumed packing. "There is such a thing as knocking. It's an ancient custom, one you obviously need to learn."

She'd been this way for the past two days. Cold, distant, snappish. At first he'd thought she was making her true feelings known, but a few minutes ago, it occurred to him that she could be withdrawing from him to try to emotionally find her feet in a situation she couldn't control. He knew all about that feeling.

There was only one way to find out.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the portal, ignoring the light scent of flowers which filled her cabin. "We dock in four hours."

"I am aware of that." She dumped another armful of clothes into her duffle, her actions almost violent, sending socks spilling onto the floor.

"Callie, look at me," he said, forcing her by the strength of his voice alone to turn. He'd been leading large amounts of men for a very long time. When he wanted someone's attention, he could get it. "You and I were the perfect Relaxation Partners."

When she started to shake her head, he cut her off. “Don’t lie to yourself or to me. That kind of synergy comes along once in a lifetime.”

Her eyes flared wide as if she couldn’t believe he’d said that.

Well, fuck it. He didn’t have time to play games. He needed to put his cards on the table. “We have two hours before I have to begin docking procedures to see if we’re as good in the light as we were in the dark.”

There. He’d said it. At least his courage hadn’t failed him.

There was a long pause, seconds ticking into a minute, where she stared at him, still in shock. He stayed motionless, letting her decide.

When she finally moved, it was to lean against the far wall, her posture mimicking his down to the folded arms. “Do you understand what you’re doing, Captain?”

“I do.” He did know. He was purposely breaking protocol, purposely going against the rules yet again. And he didn’t care.

He wanted to yell that at this moment, his career didn’t matter, that only she mattered and further, she needed to hurry up and agree to do this because time was slipping by. Instead, he stood there, trying to keep any expression from his face, wanting her to come to him because she wanted him, not because his strong personality swayed her.

“For another week as I make my way back to Borrus for my discharge, I’m your subordinate.” She spelled it out for him in case he really didn’t get it.

“Actually, according to M.A.R.L.I.S., you are at captain paygrade, so technically you’re not my subordinate. But even if you were, I’d still be here.” He paused, debating the wisdom of what he had to say next, then jumped in with both feet. “I would give up my career and everything I’ve ever worked for to have you one last time.”

His stomach tightened, his insides trembling with how far he’d put himself onto a limb, but he wasn’t regretting this decision. *Come on*, he screamed inside himself, *choose me*.

Callie called on every bit of her military training to keep her face blank, but her mouth wanted badly to fall open in shock. She'd been this man's lover and on his crew, but what he'd just said to her made her realize how little she really knew him.

If she'd had to bet her life on it, she wouldn't have believed he would show up in her room propositioning her. He was too much of a stickler for protocol, too caught up in the culture of the Troopers and the rules they'd had driven into them since the first day they'd joined up.

For gods' sake, he'd threatened to shoot her if she disobeyed an order from him.

And yet here he was, asking for sex.

No, that sounded too cheap. What he was offering her was a piece of himself. This was a tremendous risk he was taking and she could use it to destroy him. For him to do this, he'd had to hand her his career on a platter, trusting her to keep this secret between them.

Her stomach flip-flopped with a mixture of fear, disbelief and the ever-present need she had when she was near him.

She'd be a fool not to have him one last time, even though she had no doubt the hard-won distance she'd built over the last few days would be shattered. When she walked off this ship in a few hours, she'd leave a piece of herself with him. That was a scary, terrifying thing, one that she'd worked hard the last two days to keep from happening.

But she was going to do it anyway. She didn't even really need to debate it.

Straightening from the wall, she grabbed the tab at the top of her uniform, undid the hook and peeled it down to her waist in one motion. Not to be sexy, but because they only had two hours until he had to be at the helm to prepare—less because he'd soon be missed as the inexperienced crew grew nervous about their roles in the coming docking procedure. Landings and takeoffs were the trickiest part of a patrolship's flight. They would have to hurry. There was no time for slow caresses or expensive perfume.

She had to look away from him to undo her belt. He must have moved when she wasn't looking, because he appeared before her, stopping her hands with one of his. "I need to hear you say the words. I think I deserve them."

Glancing up, she met his gaze, his intensity washing over her, the magnetic pull that was always between them tightening like a band around her, taking her breath away.

"You do deserve them." She smiled, but it was a sad lift of her lips. If they were other people, in another job, in another place, they'd own a house with a white picket fence and grow old watching their children run through the backyard together. But they were who they were and there wasn't any way to change that. So she'd take what she could get, then leave and try to start again. "I want you." With a tug, her belt came free and dropped to the ground. "And I'll have you one last time, in the light."

His eyes searched her for a moment. His large, warm hand cupped her cheek and his mouth reverently touched hers. "Thank you."

"I have a feeling it will be my pleasure."

That seemed to break the tension between them and they each reached for the other, molding their bodies together as their kisses deepened.

It was an odd thing to finally be revealed to each other, to finally be able to talk and see each other's reactions to every little touch or stroke. The amount of new data was almost overwhelming. It was hard to concentrate on her own pleasure when she was so busy studying him to see his reactions.

He reached for her uniform blouse, his actions hesitant, as if he'd somehow lost some of that confidence she'd liked about him even in the silent darkness.

She stopped his hand, holding his gaze with hers. "This isn't the time for you to lose your nerve, Vantry," she growled, surprising him so much his mouth dropped open. "I'm not giving you a piece of myself for you to run off with forever if you're going to be gentle with me."

Slowly, he closed his mouth, his face hardening into the arrogant lines she loved and hated so much. Then he grasped both of her collar points and ripped her shirt open with such violence, she gasped with the shock of it. With great jerks, he dragged the cloth

from her body, ruining the effect when he gently undid the catches around her wrists to let the fabric fall free.

“Take my shirt off,” he ordered, the deep tenor of his voice making her shiver with need.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do this.” She carefully pulled the tab of his uniform, freeing first the center catch, then the ones on his wrist. She walked behind him, her stomach already a ball of need without a single stitch of his clothing removed. Grasping his collar, she stripped away his shirt, watching as the clean lines of his back were revealed.

For a second, she could only stand helpless with his shirt in her hands. Gods above, she’d known it would be a good view since she’d felt how in shape he kept his body, but this—this was too much to process.

His back was smooth, his shoulders wide, tapering to a thin waist which disappeared into his uniform pants. Muscles rippled as he began to turn toward her. “Don’t,” she said without thinking, not wanting to lose the view.

The shirt fell unnoticed from her fingers, the urge to touch him too much to fight any longer.

Starting at his shoulders, she ran her hands down to his wrists, enjoying the bumps of his biceps and the light hair on his forearms.

Reversing direction, she returned to run her hands down his back.

She almost said something terribly silly, like *You’re perfect* but knew he wouldn’t understand that what she really meant was *You’re perfect for me*.

Unable to control herself, she placed a soft kiss on the center of his back. He shivered, but she didn’t think it was from a chill.

Reaching around his waist, she slowly undid the tabs holding his pants in place, then dragged them down to his ankles in one tug, following them until she crouched behind him. She licked the back of his knee before returning to her feet, dragging her hands up to rest on his hips, enjoying the hiss of breath her tongue brought forth from him.

“Hold on to the wall and I’ll help you with your shoes,” she murmured, letting her fingers caress the soft bit of skin on the front of his hips.

“Your time to torture is about to end.” His voice held a promise and a threat.

“Yes, but not now.” She pushed his back as he leaned forward to balance using the wall for support, knowing he went only because he wanted to. “Now it’s my turn.”

Dropping to her knees, she bit the flesh of his right butt cheek in a quick nip, drawing a moan from him that turned into a growl.

She took her time stroking down his powerful thighs and muscled calves before making it to her destination. His boots slid off without trouble, then his pants and underwear followed.

Touching him in this position was horribly intimate. With him facing away from her, she had full access to explore without pressure.

Before she could continue her exploration, he turned and dragged her to her feet. “Time’s up for you.”

Her pants were off so quickly she had a hard time understanding how he got them from her body without a single struggle.

They stood naked, drinking each other in for a moment. For some reason she didn’t understand, she didn’t feel self-conscious in any way. She knew her body was just fine to look at, but she’d never been the kind of woman to stroll naked across her own bedroom. Yet with him, she knew from the look on his face that he found her more than acceptable. He wanted her. The raging erection and the gleam of pure need convinced her like nothing else.

Without warning, he swooped her up in his arms in a gesture that should have been romantic but went all wrong when he tripped over her duffle and barely kept them both upright with three quick hops. They ended up tumbling onto her mattress in a heap.

Laughter slipped out of her before she could stop it, even though part of her brain warned her that someone in a perpetual bad mood couldn’t handle someone laughing at him.

He surprised her with a grin as he rolled them over, smooshing her under him, tangling their limbs even more. “Are you laughing at me, girl?”

She sobered, studying his face when it smiled. He went from being broodingly handsome to downright gorgeous. With a worshipful hand, she petted his cheek in an excuse to touch the dimple that had sprung up from nowhere. Never in a million years would she have guessed it was there. “I am laughing.” She met his gaze. “It feels nice to laugh after having been without it for so long.” Pressing her lips chastely to his, she smiled, this time without sadness. “Thank you.” She would always have these memories to pull out whenever she wanted them.

“It’s my pleasure.” Then his eyes danced with the excitement of a little boy unwrapping a present. “I get to touch you now, since I’m on top.”

“Hey!” she protested, but he was already gone, kissing and licking down her body.

His tongue laved first one nipple, then the other, his body held above hers in a pushup position. Gods above he was in shape. She touched the bulge in his biceps, loving the look of it. Unable to contain herself, she hummed in appreciation, trying to imprint the sight of him suckling on her nipple while holding himself effortlessly above her.

“Like what you see?” His deep eyes were no longer filled with amusement.

She brushed her gaze over him again. “You have no idea.”

He sat, running one hand down her side, letting his palm glide over the edge of one breast and down along her hip, all the way to her foot. “I do too,” he whispered, the tone in his voice causing her stomach to flip.

Leaning over, he hovered over her hip, as if to place a kiss there, his breath sending shivers along her skin. The heat from him touched her even though his body did not, and her sex wept with a new intensity of need.

She had to move to release some of the tension, but he nibbled her hipbone, pinning her with one hand to keep her still as she tried to encourage him to give her more.

*Bite*, she wanted to order. She wanted that flash of pain, but she couldn’t bring herself to beg.



He spread her thighs, sat between them, widening the lips of her sex to his view. She had a moment of discomfort, of worry that he wouldn't like what he saw, but then he dragged his thumb up through her moisture and rolled it on her clitoris. Once, twice.

She gasped for breath, wondering if she would come from this simple touch. Her body needed more of him than she'd realized. They'd only had two encounters in the Relaxation Chamber and already she'd become addicted to him.

His mouth came down on her clit and she shut her eyes against everything but the feel of what he was doing to her. The stroke of his tongue, the thrust of his finger as he entered her. Her legs shook with the tightening tension, her hips rose of their own accord, silently begging him to bring her some relief.

Suddenly, she was tossed over the edge, her mind not even computing the fact that he'd left his position and now was covering her with his big, amazing body until he thrust inside her. Her channel tightened again with an orgasm, stopping his cock when it was only halfway seated.

"Gods," he moaned.

Aftershocks continued to jag through her as he thrust all the way to the top of her sex, high and deep, stretching her whole body to the edge of pain. It was as if her orgasm never stopped, but rather kept going from having his large erection to grip and release on every ripple of pleasure.

He pulled back to meet her gaze. "You're still coming."

"Yes," she said, mindless in the euphoria, barely able to hear him over the hum of her own body.

"I own you right now, Callie Justice," he whispered. He bit her shoulder where the bruises had faded from their last time together, hard, the action almost feral.

It sent her into overload, bringing her to orgasm again, the pain tripping some nerve endings she never knew she had.

From far away in the haze of her own pleasure, she heard him shout his own release. Later, she'd wonder if he'd said he loved her, but now she was too delirious to

understand the words. He collapsed on top of her and, for the first time, she knew the true feeling of being one with another human being.

## Chapter Twelve

Six months had gone by since she'd left the Ventura, but she'd been busy. She'd gotten a job, like normal non-military people do when they're no longer in the Troopers. Being a captain again had brought her satisfaction. But she'd decided she wanted to buy her own transport and work as an independent agent, rather than captaining someone else's rig. Someday she'd make that happen.

Sitting in the main terminal of Borrus's biggest military landing area, she reread the first of two newspaper articles she'd saved to her handheld.

*Captain Rafe Vantry was decorated today for his quick decision making when he salvaged a ship which had been infected with AgentXX, a new super-virus that the IWCF&I worries might someday end up in Inter-world space.*

That had been two months ago. When she'd seen his name on the headline, everything she'd worked so hard to block out had returned in a rush. She'd tried to stop her almost daily obsession with looking at the article just to see the picture of him standing at attention to receive the medal, but had finally given up. He looked tired, brittle around the edges. Nothing like the laughing man who'd made love to her that last time.

She double tapped to open the second article without closing the first. This one was why she'd come here today.

*Captain Rafe Vantry, long hailed as one of the Troopers best and brightest, has taken early retirement. He's leaving to start his own shipping company, Vantry Enterprises.*

It went on to list Rafe's accomplishments, including taking the Ventura from barely flying to receiving an excellent inspection rating. She didn't need to read an article to know he was good. She'd seen him in action. What the article had done was fill her mind with questions about *why* he'd left the Troopers in the first place. He'd gotten the excellent rating. He could have taken one of the choicest assignments in the Troopers. The question had eaten her up until she had to see him again and ask it.

It had taken some work, but she'd found out through some old friends the date and time when he'd fly in to Borrus to complete his discharge.

Now that she was here, she felt a little bit like a stalker. He hadn't contacted her once since she'd left the ship. Granted, she'd asked him not to, but really he should have at least sent her a mail.

There was a high probability that he didn't feel the same about her as she did about him, that he'd forgotten all about her since she'd left.

But in her heart, she thought there was a chance they could fall madly, deeply, completely in love. Besides, she figured if he could put his whole career on the line to have her that last time, she could deal with the chance he'd forgotten about her now.

His transport had landed half an hour ago, bringing her nerves to the surface despite the fact she knew it would be a while before passengers disembarked. Finally people streamed past her, so she closed down her handheld and took a steadying breath.

And there he was, last to leave, ambling down the walkway carrying two huge duffles on his shoulders. Her stomach turned somersaults as a small spark of lust flared. God, he was a beautiful man.

*What if he rejects me?* She'd convinced herself that he'd said he loved her at the end of their lovemaking on the Ventura, but maybe she'd been wrong. Maybe he didn't—

His gaze scanned past her, stopped and returned to where she sat. The surprise of her appearance checked his stride. He veered toward her. She waited, frozen in horror at the risk she took showing up here to beg him back into her bed, or maybe into her heart. Had she gone mad?

“Callie Justice,” he said, his smooth, strong voice doing bad things to her, making her remember how simply being in his presence could stir her desire.

“Rafe.”

They stared at each other, studying. He raised an eyebrow, seeming to inquire as to why she’d come.

“Why did you leave the Troopers?” she asked instead of answering his unspoken question.

He smiled, only half his mouth kicking up, his eyes deep and intense, like a predator’s. “I figured I’d get out and hunt you down.”

Her heart stopped for a moment, before it resumed at double speed. He’d left the Troopers for *her*.

He dropped the duffles on the ground. “Why did you show up here today?”

She took a deep breath and stepped off the ledge with him. “I’m thinking we should try dating.”

“You do?”

She nodded, knowing her face looked grave, but unable to put on a smile. This *was* grave. “I think we might find we have a future together.”

He shifted on his feet, as if he’d wrestled with what he was about to tell her. “I had to stay on the Ventura, I had to see that out.”

“I know.”

His mouth turned stubborn. “It’s who I am. I say I’m going to do something, and by the gods, I’m going to do it.”

It was one of the things she loved about him. “I know that too.”

“Believe me, I didn’t want to stay there, working twenty hours a day to complete basic repairs and train inexperienced crew.” He took a step closer to her.

She stood, suddenly feeling strange sitting. “You didn’t?”

“No.” He moved tighter into her space. “I wanted to be off building a life with you.” He framed her face with his big, warm hands. “But I had to see it through or I was worried I wouldn’t be the man I always thought I was.”

“I understand,” she whispered. “But it’s over now. And you’re here.”

“I thought the way you left, telling me not to vid or mail, would mean I’d have to chase you.”

“I guess you don’t.”

“Guess not.” He paused and she knew he was about to tell her more of his plans. “I need someone with flight experience to help me start my shipping company.”

She paused, surprised that he wanted to go this far this fast. Joy made her stomach tremble. “I might know someone for that job.”

He smiled, the dimple in his cheek popping into view. “I was hoping you would, because I have plans that include more than what I’m going to do to your body when we have some privacy.”

Heat spiraled inside her and just like that, she wanted him fast and deep. Instead of replying, she closed the distance between them and kissed him, dragging his head down to meet hers.

“Let’s go,” he murmured when they came up for air.

“Yes,” she said, agreeing to it all, simple joy spreading through her.

## About the Author

To learn more about Leigh Wyndfield, please visit [www.leighwyndfield.com](http://www.leighwyndfield.com). Send an email to Leigh Wyndfield at [leighwyndfield@yahoo.com](mailto:leighwyndfield@yahoo.com) or join her newsletter loop for special excerpts and reader contests by sending an email to [leighwyndfield\\_newsletter-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:leighwyndfield_newsletter-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).

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*A masked man with a burning secret is her only hope.*

## **Icy Heat**

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*A Heat series story.*

Aidan has only days to acquire a magic Globe to exchange for her brother's freedom. With the clock counting down, she turns to Warwick the Enforcer for help. As her lies pile up and the passion between them builds, Aidan tries to keep her mind on her mission and ignore the man who lights her fire.

Warwick has spent his life preparing for revenge against the man who killed his parents and sentenced him to an existence behind a mask. But when Aidan calls in a debt he owes her, he cannot say no. The attraction he thought was one-sided explodes between them and he is shocked to find himself burning to possess her. One thing after another goes wrong—and Warwick discovers Aidan is working for his hated enemy.

As things spiral into danger they could never have imagined, passion burns into a love that could destroy them both.

*Warning: This book contains out-of-this-world sexual content!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Icy Heat:*

*Damn*, War thought, she caught that he knew her financial situation. Her tall, willow-thin body had gone completely still and her eyes narrowed into slits. He could almost hear her thinking it through.

“How do you know I have the money?” The soft purr of her voice twisted his insides with desire. He'd wanted her from that first time she'd flown for him.

“I know how much I paid you and I know you work almost constantly. It doesn't take a genius to assume you've got enough balseems to pay a gambling debt.” What he didn't tell her was he had made it his hobby to track her movements over the last four months.

She rolled the playing piece between her hands. “True,” she conceded, then sighed. “But he won’t take that kind of payment. Zach defaulted.”

“You didn’t know about it in time to pay?”

“No.” Her fingers tightened on the dark king, a piece he’d carved with his own hands. “Out of the options left to me, I chose the lesser of the two evils.”

“Steal or what?” He could guess what was coming. He wasn’t naïve enough to think he was the only person to desire her.

“I’ll leave it to your imagination.” There might be sarcasm in her tone, but a frown marred her face. She didn’t like the position she was in one bit. It didn’t surprise him. The mission they’d flown together had shown her to be a fantastic pilot and a bit of a control freak.

Warwick dropped his hands to his hips and blew out a breath. He’d dangled the favor before her, hoping she would call on him when she needed help and he would be able to spend time in her presence again. Pathetic, really, to have a crush on her. But he did. Thirty years old and he had the desires of a boy half his age. Just being in the same room with her made chill bumps rise along his arms.

He didn’t kid himself, no one as pretty as Aidan would be attracted to him. There was a reason he wore a mask. People wouldn’t spend time in his presence without it. The realization brought him crashing back to reality.

“There is only one way I can get you into Reed’s Palace without raising red flags. You know that, don’t you?”

She nodded. “I’d need to come in as your woman.”

“Yes.” There was no way she’d go for it. Not in a million years.

“I figured that would be the case.”

War slashed the air with his unscarred hand. “Do you know what that means?” He shook his head. She didn’t, so he’d spell it out for her. “You would have to act as if we were truly lovers, Aidan. You couldn’t pull away when I touch you or jump when I speak.”

Her mouth fell open. “I don’t jump.”

“Everyone does.” But she hadn’t towards the end of their last adventure. He figured she would flinch when he caressed her. He had no doubt that intimacy would change everything.

Her mouth snapped shut and her green cat eyes turned stormy. “Because you’re scary. You mean to be. What do you expect?”

“Lovers don’t act that way, and you would come in as mine.” He growled in frustration. “Hell, we’ll be assigned the same room, the same damn bed.”

“Look, I have twenty-eight days to return the globe or my brother is dead. I think I can control my reactions to you.”

Dread snaked along his spine. If he stayed the whole week in the same room with her, she would eventually have to see the scars. They would be living on top of each other. Better to stop it now than have their cover blown in the middle of Reed’s celebration.

But Gods he didn’t want to do it. One look at his face and she’d never get near him again. It would be over and he wouldn’t even be able to lie to himself that there might some day be a chance. He didn’t have much choice.

“There’s one way to find out,” he said. “Come sit on the sofa.”

*She's got him right where he wants her.*

## Enslaved

© 2008 Sydney Somers

Dominion sentinel Kaela Garrett will go to any lengths to gather evidence against a suspected traitor, even if it means auctioning off her body to the highest bidder. Posing as a slave should have been the perfect cover to gain access to an exclusive gala. Only she hadn't anticipated a sexy treasure salvager with a grudge outbidding everyone—including her mark—to possess her.

Lorcan Hunt can't believe the very sentinel who had him arrested six weeks ago is on the auction block, completely at his mercy. What better way to get even—and pass the time until his next job—than force her to submit to every new and wicked revenge he can imagine? His every demand for her submission, however, comes with a price: a burning need that slides under his skin and grows stronger with every concession she makes.

When Kaela finally gives in to the fierce desire between them, Lorcan finds himself hopelessly caught in an impossible choice. Honor the commitment binding him to his next job—or hold onto the one woman he can never have.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Enslaved:*

Kaela scowled at the restraints, jerking their joined wrists up to eye level. “Don’t feel obligated to lavish me with gifts so soon, Hunt. Might give a girl expectations.” And make it a whole lot harder to maintain a respectable distance between them.

A satisfied smile caught the corner of his mouth. “I wouldn’t want to lose my *slave* in the crowd.”

“I’ll bet.”

Without warning, he snaked an arm around her, hauling her closer.

Too close. Breathing now meant drawing him in, letting him overwhelm her senses when she was still reeling from the unexpected turn of events. Events that gave him every legal right to drag her around. For now. She’d taken the mission knowing the risks,

agreed to the terms set forth by the bondskeeper and hadn't complained, even when the final step meant accepting the mark of an indentured slave on her hip.

But she sure as hell wanted to complain now. The arm looped around her back felt too tight, the grip too possessive, the man holding her too dangerous, arrogant and out of his ever-lovin' mind. Plastered to his front, the hard planes of his chest made her increasingly aware of how little she wore, and each steady inhale only made the silk bunched between their bodies less noticeable. Seeing as how his gaze dropped to her cleavage, which was perilously close to spilling over his hasty tie job, he knew it too.

"The only expectations you need to worry about," he growled, "are mine. More specifically, how many ways I'll want your legs wrapped around me." His rough voice and the hypnotic sweep of his thumb along her jaw made for a treacherous combination. Made it impossible not to think about it—his body covering hers, his mouth sliding down her throat and her legs anchored around his hips, locking him against her, inside her.

Which made it pretty damn impressive she could respond at all. "Either they left you in solitary confinement too long, or you've always been this deluded."

The dig had the desired effect. Lorcan's expression darkened and he spun around, jerking her after him. Left with barely enough time to suck in a relieved breath, she had no choice but to follow. It was either that or be dragged. Taking a stand against her *prime* in the middle of the promenade would land her in the brig faster than being caught on the run.

And that was the best-case scenario. She refused to consider the lengths to which some primes went to teach their slaves a lesson in obedience. Kaela hadn't forgotten the party she'd attended while tracking a Battalian scientist wanted for testing his biological weapons on innocent settlers in the Astral quadrant.

Lorcan strode away from the promenade, away from Varek's slave dealer and Caplan. The farther he led her along the spaceport's winding corridors, the more determined she became to devise a new plan.

Getting him alone could give her the opportunity to incapacitate him, but wouldn't solve the problem of disengaging the locking mechanism on the bands joining them.

She'd need tools for that. Unfortunately, lugging around an unconscious man until she could track down something to do the job would be a bit too conspicuous.

All of which left her back at square one.

He picked up the pace, turning toward the port's merchant district.

"Hunt," she began.

"I think Master has a much better ring to it, don't you?"

"So does fuck y—"

He turned a corner off the main corridor, one she suspected led to a maintenance shaft, and pivoted to face her. "I think you and I need to come to an understanding."

Kaela snorted. "*I* think you need to let go of me." She stared at the hand that molded to her upper arm, mentally running down and discarding any maneuver that would involve breaking her own wrist or arm to get him to release her. Being Lorcan's slave didn't qualify for that kind of extreme measure. Yet.

"Now that's the beauty of this arrangement," he continued. "What you think doesn't matter."

An old anger flared to life inside her, his tone a little too reminiscent of superior officers who'd made it their personal mission to remind her, as often as possible, they didn't believe she'd earned her position on merit alone. More than once she'd been tempted to point out her mother hadn't involved herself in Kaela's life since becoming a quadrant chancellor years ago, let alone pulled any strings where her career was concerned.

Overtly disagreeing with those ignorant opinions had always landed her the shit assignments. She didn't doubt that disagreeing with Lorcan now would invite retaliation, one she feared would prove she hadn't been the right sentinel for this assignment. Not taking into account Lorcan's unexpected role.

Stumbling across Hunt outside a trading settlement on the Outer Rim had given her a way to evade the handful of mercenaries looking for her. Escaping them without having obtained her mission objective or positively identifying the Dominion official Varek was suspected of bribing pissed her off more than getting caught. She hadn't expected to find

anything on Hunt's ship when he gave her a ride to the closest spaceport, least of all cargo that didn't belong to him. "It wasn't personal."

A cold smile hugged his lips. "It was to me."

"I was doing my job."

"We both know you could have looked the other way."

Not when looking the other way meant ignoring the duties and responsibilities she took seriously. Once any Dominion officer started down that path, letting greed compromise their integrity, a one-way trip to Dadelus penal colony lurked right around the corner.

Lorcan's eyes narrowed. "You cost me a lot of money."

"Here's a tip. Don't steal."

"You made the wrong call."

"Not my problem."

He leaned in, his mouth hovering above her ear. "It is now."

*Which man will Callie choose, the alien or the warrior? Or can she have both?*

## Davin's Quest

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### *Resonance Mates Book 2*

For each Alvian, there is one perfect match—a Resonance Mate whose soul blends in perfect harmony. Unlike the rest of his race, Davin has emotions and suffers for it. Without a mate, he is doomed to go mad. Searching for answers and understanding, he seeks out Callie O'Hara, a human woman with strong empathic gifts. Could this fragile human be his Resonance Mate?

Rick St. John is a tough-as-nails survivor of the Alvian occupation of Earth. He doesn't believe in much, but when he sees Callie for the first time, he starts to believe in love at first sight.

The Governing Council is gunning for Davin, the upstart who dares to defy them. And they'll kill anyone who gets in their way. Davin and Rick must come to terms with their feelings for Callie in order to keep her safe, while she has to find a way to save them both...with her love.

*Warning: Warning, this title contains hot alien love, explicit sex, graphic language, and ménage a trois.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Davin's Quest:*

Rick recovered over the next day and a half. Callie brought him food and chastised him when he overtaxed himself walking to the bathroom and back to the bed, but he sort of enjoyed it. He'd never had anyone look after him. Well, not since before the cataclysm, but he'd only been a kid when his mother died.

Callie mothered him a bit, but with her, there was also the attraction. Rick loved to watch her move. He liked to make her smile and inwardly he basked in her attention, though he'd never let her know it.



Davin was a background presence, there constantly, watching with troubled eyes. Rick used the tall alien's presence to keep himself on track, and Davin left him in peace...until he was healed and it was time to go back to his own quarters.

Preparing to leave the Chief Engineer's suite, Davin blocked Rick's path.

"We need to talk about Callie before you leave."

"I've already said all I'm going to say on the subject." Rick tried to push past, but Davin blocked him again.

"Don't be a fool." Davin's voice was low, urgent. "You could be her resonance mate! It'd be a crime to throw that away."

Rick's reply was cut off as Callie walked in from the other room, her brow furrowed. She undoubtedly felt the emotion crowding the room and zinging back and forth between the two men in a standoff by the door.

Rick kept his voice pitched low. "Look, we don't even know if I could be this resonance thing you keep going on about." Rick was fed up.

"There's one sure way to find out," Davin's words and stance dared Rick. The alien didn't bother to keep his voice down. "Kiss her."

Silence reigned for a long moment while Rick stood, tempted beyond reason. Then Callie pushed him too far, simply by moving to stand altogether too close. She reached up and placed her one hand on his shoulder.

"What's this about?" she asked.

Rick's fingers formed fists as he fought against his baser instincts that said to grab her and kiss her like she'd never been kissed before. Instead, he backed off, moving back into the room, leaving Davin facing his woman.

"Callie, you and Rick Hum. He could be another resonance mate, but he's too stubborn to find out."

Callie actually blushed as Rick watched. "Davin, I..." She moved into the alien man's arms, hugging him. "I didn't realize. I'm so sorry, my love. There's something there, but I..."

“It’s all right,” Davin brushed her hair back with one hand as he stepped away from her. “We need to know if he is your resonance mate or not. Otherwise, the uncertainty will drive me mad.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Her voice was shatteringly gentle.

Davin leaned down to kiss her, just once. “Hurting you, hurts me. Your joy could never bring me pain.”

“You’re a generous man, Davin, and much too good for me.” Callie kissed him once, with palpable tenderness and love, then turned to face Rick. She walked right up to him and Rick felt frozen in place like a deer in a spotlight. Callie crowded him until they stood toe to toe, then she angled her sweet face upward in invitation.

“Just one kiss, Rick. I know you want to.” Her voice was that of the siren, tempting men to their deaths. Rick was powerless against this, the final test. He’d been strong for weeks, but he could be strong no longer.

He jumped in headfirst, his arms snaking around her waist as his head dipped to claim her lips with his. He’d been wanting to taste her delicate flavor for a long time. Hunger rode him as she responded to his demanding kiss. He knew he was going too fast, but he couldn’t help himself. Callie O’Hara was in his arms and his body knew no respite from the yearning he’d too long denied.

She gasped as he moved closer, pulling her unresisting body against his, conforming her curves to the hard planes of his chest, his abdomen and his aching cock. She felt so good, he never wanted to let go.

But this was wrong. A niggling voice in the back of his mind insisted that she wasn’t his to keep. He had to let her go.

With Herculean effort, he eased off, bit by bit, though his body protested every millimeter he put between them. At length he lifted his lips, allowing one final caressing sweep of his lips against hers, over her cheek and down into her soft neck.

“We can’t do this, Callie.”

“I think we just did.” Amusement filled her breathless voice, stunning him. How could she see humor in his utter failure of control? Rick stepped back, heat rising to his cheeks in an angry flush as he broke the contact between their bodies completely.

Opening his eyes at last, he was blinded by the shining crystals all around the room. His heart sank and soared simultaneously as he understood what it meant. Callie was his resonance mate.

Rick looked beyond her, searching for Davin, but the Alvian was gone from the room.

“I’m sorry, Callie.” Rick stepped away, heading for the door. “I can’t do this. It isn’t fair to Davin and it isn’t fair to you. You’re not living in the Waste with no choices. You chose Davin long before I arrived. I respect that choice.”

He left before she could speak, but he still heard the faint echo of her voice in his mind as she ‘pathed just one sentence to him.

*“What if you’re both my choice?”*

That one sentence haunted Rick’s sleep for days, but he did his best to act as if nothing were changed between them when he went back to work. He was still partnered with Callie for the bigger experiments and he treated her professionally. He was torn inside, knowing how she tasted now, how she responded, but it was all wrong. She deserved more than to be shared between two men. She deserved his respect. The respect that grew out of the love hidden deep in his heart for her.

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