



SANDHAIN

TAKING LIBERTY

JODI REDFORD

*From zero to naked at warp speed...*

Rini Campell's one shot at keeping her field agent position with the United Galaxies' repo department means bringing in the spaceship Liberty. Piece of cake. Except she didn't count on the pilot still being on board. Or being buck naked.

Lucus Granger doesn't have time to deal with a pain-in-the-ass repo agent. Not when he's minutes away from dropping off a cargo haul for the psychotic alien dictator of Aquatica. Though he figures it's just about the stupidest bargain he's ever made, he allows Rini to tag along for the flight.

Big mistake.

Stranded in enemy territory, they find themselves fighting a battle on two fronts. Against a creepy dictator who'd as soon drown them as look at them. And against a blazing attraction hotter than the godforsaken planet itself. For these two wary hearts, love could bloom in the desert...if it doesn't kill them first.

Warning: A feisty heroine and yummy hero getting sweaty in the desert. Squid aliens who bring new meaning to the word slimy. Oh, and some close encounters of the sexy kind.

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# Taking Liberty

*Jodi Redford*

# Dedication

To Lynne. You'll always be a heroine to me, sis.  
Also to my editor, Sasha, for inspiring me to write this book.

# Chapter One

*Warddok, Earth outpost sector ten*

*12:45 a.m.*

Eight minutes after Lucus Granger disappeared inside his arro hut, Rini Campell lowered her nightscope imager and skulked from the shadowed alley. Standard protocol typically entailed another fifteen-minute wait until acquiring her target. But judging from the leaning tower of Flyboy beer cans and the way Granger fell into the bushes before stumbling inside the hut, he was well past getting his drunk on.

Good. Made her job *so* much easier.

She tucked the nightscope inside her jacket pocket and pulled out her descrambler card. Fisting it, she darted across the street. Luckily, Granger's hut was one of only six residences scattered in Warddok Ten's abandoned warehouse district. She wouldn't have to worry about some nosy neighbor.

Yeah, nosy neighbors were the bane of any repo agent's existence.

Running her thumb over the edge of the descrambler card, she approached the large hangar she'd seen Granger stagger from. She shook her head. Drinking and flying—pretty damn stupid. This moron needed his license repo'd along with his ship.

The mangy hound camped outside the hangar's secured doors stopped licking its privates and looked at her. Oooh yeah, she was well acquainted with that particular look. Usually it preceded a foot chase and a sharp pair of incisors snapping at her ankles.

Yep, mangy watch dogs were the next bane of any repo agent's existence. "Nice poochie."

The hound responded with a low growl.

"Okay, so much for the sweet talk." She dug in her other pocket for the piece of steak she'd wisely brought along and quickly freed it from its sealed baggie before hurling it across the street. The mutt leapt from its haunches and bounded after the hunk of meat.

Rini jammed the descrambler into the lock-slot and jerked her gaze between the numbers flashing across the display screen and the hound ripping the steak apart. "Come on, come on."

The sequence of numbers flashed solid green and an audible click verified the lock's release. She extracted the card and shoved the heavy metal door open. Bright fluorescent floodlights illuminated Liberty, the HTC-series star cruiser, parked in the center of the hangar. Bug splats and various crud grimed the spacecraft's exterior.

“Looks like I’ll be taking her on a side trip to the fly-and-wash.” Rini strode towards the ship, the heavy clack of her boot heels echoing in the cavernous hangar. She ducked beneath the Liberty’s massive underbelly and slid the descrambler into the lockpad. The debarking door slid open and the ramp descended with a faint hydraulic whine. Fetching the card, she trotted up the stairs and sealed off the station.

She flipped on the overhead lights and wove towards the ship’s bridge, sidestepping several empty cans of Flyboy beer. Wrinkling her nose at the stale, unpleasant odor permeating the cabin, she dipped into one of the various pockets of her black cargo pants for the tiny can of neutralizing ozonator. “Stinky pilots—bane number three.”

Ambling to the controls, she popped the ozonator’s cap and settled the can in the cup holder. She took one look at the pilot’s seat and reached for the anti-microbial cloth tucked in another pocket.

“And my colleagues call me crazy for carrying a medi-store in my pants. *Hah.*” She ripped open the Mylar package. At the first contact with air, the cloth expanded to full size. Humming, she snugged the germ barrier securely over the seat and plopped down, taking inventory.

The ship was old school—powered by a stick throttle and brake. Thank God she’d cut her pilot’s teeth learning to fly on one of these dinosaurs. A flicker of motion caught her eye. Turning her head, she spied the holographic image of a woman with enormous breasts centered on the system’s panel.

“This guy’s the living definition of *pig.*” She gave the hologram a disgusted glare and powered up the star cruiser. Locating the remote for the steel garage doors running the entire back width of the hangar, she clicked the release. The doors rumbled open. Snapping the pilot’s harness in place, she reached for the throttle and coasted out of the hangar.

Warddok Ten’s desert terrain spread beyond the viewing shield, the occasional inky outline of a forroc cactus looming in the distance like gnarled skeletal remains.

She disengaged the pod wheels and the ship began ascending.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Rini jumped at the unexpected deep baritone. Instinctively, she whipped her head around and shrieked when she got an eyeful of naked male bod. Make that *wet*, naked male bod. The ship lurched sideways and she fumbled with the brake stick, downshifting fast. With a fierce buck, the craft descended, arrowing towards a particularly large forroc cactus.

“Son of a *bitch!*”

The sound of feet slapping across the steel flooring snagged Rini’s attention, and she glanced over just as the naked male bod slammed to a halt next to the pilot’s seat.

“Crank it to the left.”

Rini tore her gaze from the dick bobbing near her face. *I hope to God he’s talking about the throttle.* Taking her chances, she shifted to the left. The Liberty tipped sideways, clipped the corner of the cactus and righted. Broken glass from one of the running lights pelted the windshield.

“Son of a *bitch!*”

She was beginning to get the idea that was his favorite phrase.

“Put her down. *Now.*”

Since she had every intention of tossing him into the desert on his naked rump, she reactivated the pod wheels and taxied down a sandy stretch. The second they coasted to a halt, Rini slid her hand down the leg of her cargo pants, beelining for her can of stun spray. She palmed it and looked up. Into the nozzle of a larger canister of stun spray.

“Sorry, darlin’, but it appears mine is bigger.”

Her gaze crawled past the rock-hard abs and sculpted bronze pecs. Past the acre-wide shoulders and clenched jaw covered in dark stubble. Past chiseled lips pulled in a smile menacing enough to send goose bumps jockeying for a spot on her spine.

Finally she locked on glittering moss green eyes.

“Mind telling me why the hell you’re taking my ship for a joyride?”

Lucus Granger kept the stun spray aimed squarely in the little thief’s face. She might be a woman, and sorta cute—if you enjoyed red hair and small tits—but it didn’t change the fact she was sitting in his seat like her butt had every right to be planted there.

“*Your ship?*” A wrinkle creased between her tawny eyebrows. “My paperwork clearly states Liberty’s title is held under Lucus Kennedy Granger.”

A thief who did paperwork? *There’s a new one.* “Yeah, babe. That’d be me.”

“But...I saw you—I mean Granger—stumble inside the arro hut.”

Ah, so she’d been casing his property. He inched the canister closer. A twinge of satisfaction rippled through him when she swallowed hard. “No, you saw Chase, my kid brother, stumble inside the arro hut.” His teeth gritted at the reminder of the past three runs he’d been forced to cover shorthanded, all thanks to his punk brother’s two-day drunken marathon.

She stared at him unblinkingly for several seconds. Finally, her chin jutted up. “Okay. Then prove you’re Lucus Granger.”

“Do I look like I’m carrying damn ID?”

Her gaze made another quick sweep below his waist. Despite her being annoying and a thief, his cock stirred with interest. *Down, boy.*

“Then I guess we have a problem.”

Like a junkyard dog protecting his turf, he bared his teeth. “The only problem here is you trying to steal my ship.”

“I didn’t steal it.” Her hand slid towards her pants again. He cocked the stun can and she froze. “Look, I’m just reaching for my business card. Okay?”



“Since when do thieves hand out business cards?”

Her lips pinched into a thin, obstinate line. “Do you want to see it or not?”

“Fine, but don’t try anything funny. Unless you want to end up permanently paralyzed.”

Moving with exaggerated caution, she dug in her pocket and extracted a thin, black leather wallet. She plucked out a glossy white card and handed it over.

“This’ll be interesting.” Keeping the canister centered on her, he scanned the card. “Rini Campell. Mm, pretty name. If it’s real. Says here you’re a repo...” His voice trailed off when the title in bold-as-you-please print bounced back at him. Jaw locked tight, he jerked his gaze to her face. “You’re a damned *repo agent*?”

“Yep. You can check the seal on the back. Just in case you think the card’s a fake.”

Not put off by her patronizing tone, he flipped the card over. An embossed image of a globe surrounded by laurel leaves—the official mark of the United Galaxies Government—took up the entire back side. His gut clenched like she’d sucker punched him. “Why the hell are you repo’ing my ship?” Oh shit, surely they didn’t find out about—

“Gee, maybe it has something to do with you being four months behind on your payments.”

The air barricaded in his lungs escaped in a rush. A relieved chuckle scooted past his lips. “Darlin’, I think someone’s file got confused with mine. See, I never miss a payment. And on the rare occasion I’m on a shipment run and can’t drop it off, I always have Chase...” He dropped the canister and it clattered against the floor before rolling beneath the seat. “I’m going to kill that sonofabitch.”

“The door’s right behind you. If your brother’s unfortunate death is broadcast on the galaxy network, I’ll play dumb.”

He stared at her. “Lady, you’re not repo’ing the Liberty.”

“Uh, yes I am.”

Gnashing his teeth, he leaned over the pilot’s seat, crowding her. “No, you’re not. This ship is my livelihood. I’m scheduled to drop off an important cargo load a few hours from now.”

“Really.” Her dusky lashes lowering, she checked out his package one more time. “And do you usually make a habit of making shipment drops during the middle of the night...naked?”

“It’s what my client prefers.”

Her eyebrows arched and it took him a second to realize he’d muddled his explanation. “I mean he works odd hours. Showing up naked isn’t part of the deal. I was taking a shower to get rid of the stink from my last haul.” That’d teach him to transport three dozen pallets of overripe kurttu melons. He’d intended to air the ship out but the unexpected side run to Roddarta that had cropped up curtailed the opportunity.

“Ah, now it makes sense.” Nodding, Rini swung her leg.

He gave her a fixed stare, hoping she'd get the point and hustle her ass out of his seat. When she started leisurely drumming her nails on her crooked knee he waved his hand. "Sweetheart, you plannin' to move sometime tonight?"

"Sorry, but no." Her smile was stiff as cardboard and held no trace of apology.

She was way beyond getting on his last damn nerve. "I'll pay you the money, just...get...up." He bit off the end of each word, imagining the syllables were a piece of her hide.

Her hand whipped out, palm up, and he frowned at it. He stood there mute and she wagged her fingers. "Okay, pay up."

"I didn't mean this second."

A huge sigh lifted her chest. "Just once, it'd be nice if someone actually meant it when they said that."

"I mean it."

Neither her expression nor her body budged.

The only two people who'd ever made him consider bailing from an in-flight spacecraft without a floatation suit were his ex-wife and Chase. Compared to Rini Campell, repo agent from hell, those two were a breeze to handle. "Damn it, I don't have time for these games." Gusting a frustrated breath, he pushed from the seat and ran a hand through the damp ends of his hair. "Look, you're just going to have to take my word for it. I'll collect the money from this next run and drop it off at the UGG payment office."

"That isn't standard procedure."

*Jesus.* Fisting his hands, he glared at her, longing with every ounce of his being to tell her where she could stick her goddamn standard procedures. "Maybe you could bend the rules this once." Though it just about killed him, he bit out the necessary word. "Please. If I don't make this run..." *I'm a dead man.*

Blue eyes regarded him intently. The startling color of her irises reminded him of the planetary surface of Yordelon glimpsed from space. She rolled her lips before licking them. His dick responded by bobbing against his thigh. *Why didn't I grab a damn towel?*

"Okay."

He stared at her, half afraid the word he swore fell from her lips was only a figment of his imagination. "Really?"

She nodded and he smothered a whoop of triumph.

"But there's one condition."

"Fine. Whatever. If it's a down payment or something, you can have my stupid-ass brother." He pivoted and jogged towards his quarters in the rear of the ship. If he hustled, there'd still be time to swing by Zondoroc for the two cases of truffles he'd promised his ma before making his drop shipment for General Quarrel.

"That won't be necessary. Because I'm coming with you."

## Chapter Two

Lucus jammed both legs into a pair of wrinkled, mud-colored flight pants, his teeth grinding. “I’m not a bad guy. Honestly. So why do you keep shitting on me, life?”

“Do you always whine this much?”

He spun, almost wiping out on the trailing leg of his pants. Rini stood outside the doorway of his cramped sleeping port, waving a small can of ozonator. The smell of lilacs drifted to his nose and he coughed. “Do you have the slightest concept of privacy? And stop waving that thing. My ship’s going to smell like a florist.”

“Yeah, that’d be such a huge step down from it smelling like dirty socks.” She pumped the nozzle two more times, clearly just to annoy him. “Also, your privacy wouldn’t be an issue if you didn’t grumble so loud. I swear even the earless mutants on Warddok Fourteen could probably hear your bitching.”

He wrenched his pants the rest of the way up over his briefs and secured the snaps. Snatching his shirt and boots, he stormed from the port, forcing her to crowd up against the wall as he passed. Another blast of lilac spray clouded over his head. He sneezed.

“Sorry.”

*Yeah, I bet.* Reaching the bridge, he dropped into his seat and stuffed his feet into the battered moon-tracker gravitational boots. He yanked the shirt over his head as Rini plopped into the copilot seat. Thankfully, the lilac ozonator was nowhere to be seen. “Wouldn’t you rather sit in the back lounge? Much more comfortable.” And farther away.

“Nope.” Giving him a smile that dripped with phony sweetness, she buckled into the harness.

The numerals on the holographic clock reminded him that arguing wasn’t on the schedule.

“Were you able to fix the busted side running light?”

He shot her a hard glare. “No. And don’t you mean the one *you* busted?”

She pulled her hair from the band securing it and the strands floated around her shoulders like a living flame. “Well, if you want to get technical about it, you were the one who scared the bejeebers out of me—which resulted in the collision with the cactus. So you deserve at least half the blame.”

“That’s the stupidest bullshit excuse of all time.” With a growl, he fired up the thrusters.

“Hey, aren’t you going to replace the busted light first?”

“No time.”

“But it’s required regulation to have all exterior lights properly functioning.”

“No one’s going to notice one lousy missing light.”

“I know it’s missing.”

“Who are you, the damn light police?”

The color riding her high cheekbones almost matched her hair. She unsnapped her harness and jumped to her feet, shooting a finger in his face. “You know, flight regulations are in place for a reason. It’s cavalier people like you who cause thousands of traffic accidents every year. If you’re too *busy* to take care of the light, point me to the supply dock and I’ll take care of it myself.”

“I told you there isn’t time. Now sit. Your ass. Down.”

She shook her head. “And I told you I’m fixing the light.”

“Fine.” He slammed the stick throttle forward. The star cruiser took off, toppling Rini into the copilot seat. “The supply dock is outside the cargo bay. Have at it. Course, it might be kinda hard holding on once I hit warp speed.”

A pair of blazing blue eyes glared at him from behind a tousled curtain of hair. “Very funny.” She jerked the harness back on and crossed her legs stiffly. “Just so you know, I am fixing that light as soon as we land.”

“Why am I not surprised?” The pod wheels retracted and the Liberty began its ascent. Below them, desert scrub shrank into the vista.

“Where exactly are we going?”

“Zondoroc. Then Aquatica.”

“Aquatica?” Amazement splashed across her face. “How in the universe did you gain trade access with that planet? Their leader is notoriously anti-UGG.”

Keeping his gaze averted, he recalibrated the stabilizers to combat the strong winds kicking up. “I have my sources.”

Thankfully she seemed satisfied with his answer. She reached for the zipper on her jacket and tugged it down. Despite his major annoyance over her presence, he couldn’t help noticing the delicate arch of her neck when she shrugged the jacket off her shoulders. Her close-fitting black tank top revealed that he might have been off the mark with his original assessment of her breasts. While not huge, they certainly would fill a palm nicely. Not that he was volunteering the palm.

Jerking his gaze away, he stared out the viewing shield. “Isn’t repo’ing an unusual and dangerous career path for a woman?”

“I know how to hold my own when a repo job goes shaky.” She slid him a sidelong glance that screamed don’t-fuck-with-me. “I graduated top honors at the space ranger academy, and trust me, they taught me how to properly kick butt.”

A strangled choke clogged in his throat. “You’re also a cop?” Nervous sweat slid down his neck. *Karma is one vicious bitch.*

“No.”

Up until then, he didn't realize one word could carry so much unhappiness. “I don't get it. Why go through the hassle of ranger academy if you had no intention of becoming a cop?”

She lowered her eyes, waited several beats before answering. “My parents helped me see the wisdom in joining the repo agency instead.”

“Why?”

“Because my great-great-grandfather was the one who started the agency.”

Family responsibility. Yeah, sometimes it could be a real bitch. “Well, that sucks.” Not for him, certainly, but he felt for her plight.

Rini blinked, temporarily dismantling her cool mask of indifference. “Pardon?”

“Babe, you don't need to hide the fact you're pissed about getting roped into a job you never wanted.”  
*Shit, not that I know anything about unwanted jobs.*

She pinned him with a look that threatened to blister his skin. “I'm not pissed. And I love being an agent.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“Why are we even talking about this?”

“Oh, I don't know. To fill some dead air during the twenty-minute flight staring us down?”

Crossing her arms, she snapped her mouth shut with enough force her teeth clinked. She shifted in her seat and grimaced. Digging next to her hip, she pulled out a fork. Gripping its steel handle between her fingers, she eyed the utensil with the same disgust most people would treat a dead rodent. “You really should consider firing your maid.”

He reached out and plucked the fork from her. “What do you know—I've been looking all over for this.”

Shaking off a shudder, she popped a bottle from one of the million pockets stitched into her pants and squeezed several drops of the clear liquid into her palms.

The harsh antiseptic stench of germ killer assailed his nostrils. “Do you always make a habit of carrying a medicine cabinet on you?”

She rubbed her hands briskly, slathering the liquid into her skin. “When you're faced with repo'ing ships that haven't seen a decent cleaning in a decade—like the majority of cases I'm assigned—you learn to be creative.”

He glanced down at the crumpled wrappers littering the floor. “My brother is mostly to blame for this mess. He takes his job as the slob in the family serious.” Unfortunately, it was the only thing Chase took seriously.

“You and your brother have a strange relationship, don't you?”

“What makes you say that?”

She swept her hair to the side and stared at him. “Well, you don’t seem to like him much.”

“I like him fine.” Most of the time. Like when Chase wasn’t drunk off his ass or missing a shipment drop after deciding he’d rather chase some tail.

“Uh-huh.”

He didn’t like the assessing glint in Rini’s eyes. It prodded the dark corners of his soul, making him feel naked and exposed. Hilarious, considering she’d seen him with his Johnson waving free and proud. He returned his attention to the controls and expelled a relieved breath when he noted that they were less than ten minutes from Zondoroc. Soon enough, she’d get her damn money and get the hell off his ship.

## Chapter Three

The instant the star cruiser taxied to a halt and the thrusters fired down, Lucas bolted from his seat.

Rini shook her head. *And I thought I was high strung.* Yanking off her harness, she stood and stretched her arms over her head, working the kinks from her neck and upper spine. “Where did you say the supply dock is?”

He shot a look over his shoulder. “Jesus, obsessive much?”

She planted her hands on her hips. “I told you I was going to fix the light.”

His arm gave an impatient wave. “The dock’s in the rear of the ship, near the back bay. I won’t be long.” He said the last part with a heavy dose of warning.

“Don’t worry. I’m not planning to take off without you.” That was the problem. She should never have allowed her emotions to get in the way of doing her job. If her coworkers found out, they’d ridicule her for giving Lucas a break. If her parents found out, they’d insist on re-stationing her in the administration department—the one place she’d fought tooth and nail to get away from. She’d rather spend a lifetime in a dingy prison cell than another single day behind a desk with a mile-high stack of brain-deadening paperwork staring her down.

So why had she risked everything for someone she didn’t even know? *His eyes.* One faint glimpse at the desperation in Lucas’s expression and her heart had twisted.

She knew what it felt like to be desperate. Trapped by circumstance, trapped by responsibility.

*Trapped by my own stupidity.*

Pushing away her morose thoughts, she strode from the bridge. The steel flooring pinged beneath her boot heels, a lonely echo. She followed the snaking, overhead fluorescent cage lights towards the back of the ship and entered the supply dock. A metal shelving unit housed several spares of interior and exterior lights. Grabbing the box she needed, she swiveled, scanning for an available hover ladder. When a thorough search produced no ladder, she tucked the bulb box under her arm and ventured into the cargo bay. The rotten stench threatened to make her gag. Covering her nose, she journeyed deeper into the room, surveying the stacked cartons.

She spotted the hover ladder strapped to the side wall. “There you are.” Weaving a path around the pallets proved treacherous. She banged her knee at least three times and scraped her elbow twice. Wincing, she rubbed the jagged scratch on her arm.

A large carton blocked her access to the hover ladder. Tightly wedged pallets on either side of the crate squelched the idea of wiggling around it. She set the running light on the corner of the pallet and pushed down on the crate's lid, checking for stability. "Seems solid enough. Here's hoping I don't break my neck." Swinging her leg, she clambered on top of the carton. Balancing on her knees, she fumbled with the lower strap cradling the ladder. Grunts and swear words streamed forth in a steady rush before she finally freed two of the snaps. The ladder canted away from the wall with a groan, breaking through the remaining snaps.

"Oh shit." Rini scrambled to catch the toppling ladder in time. The bulky contraption proved heavier than she'd anticipated and crashed into the crate's lid, splitting it down the middle. She and the ladder tumbled inside. Her cheek smacked into the hard edge of a metal rung. Beneath her, the contents of the crate squished, releasing a ripe, fishy odor.

"Oh man, Granger is *so* going to kill me." Moaning, she shoved onto her elbows and risked a peek at the damages. She was surrounded by bags of black caviar. Correction—bags of *banned* black caviar. Thanks to overfishing and pollution, not to mention the continual evaporation of oceans thanks to solar warming, harvest of Sturgeon roe had been illegal for at least a century.

Picking up one of the demolished bags, she stared at it disbelievingly. "What is he doing with these?" Duh, like she needed to have a detailed picture drawn. Plopping the bag down, she grasped the sides of the crate and swung her leg over the side. Wiping the caviar ooze from the knees of her pants, she grabbed the ladder and running light.

As soon as Lucas returned, he'd have a hell of a lot of explaining to do.

~ \* ~

Lucas secured the boxes of truffles on the hover cart and scrounged inside his pocket for his wallet. "Any discount tonight, Tarik?"

The native Zondorocian waggled his foot-long ears. Bushy gray brows slashed low, forming a perfect V over his enormous snout and wide-set eyes.

"Well damn." Curving his mouth into a grin, Lucas counted out the necessary bills. "Can't blame me for trying."

Tarik snatched the money with another animated ear jiggle.

"Hey, no cause for name calling." Lucas shook his wallet at Tarik before repocketing the worn and scuffed scrap of leather. "And for your information, I'm considered good-looking by earthling standards."

After a colorfully rude comeback, Tarik stomped into his wind-battered canvas tent—one of dozens erected in the all-night trade market. Shaking his head at the surly Zondorocian, Lucas strode towards the air strip where he'd parked his ship. The headlights on the hover cart pattering close behind him slashed through the night, periodically illuminating the swarm of sand gnats intent on dive bombing both he and the



truffles. Slapping the pesky air invaders away, he scuffed along the desert's heat-baked terrain. Up ahead, the exterior lights glowed on the Liberty. His steps slowed when he spied Rini's stretched, lithe form silhouetted against the massive wing.

She was tinkering with the stupid running light. He'd never known someone so determined. So single-minded.

So annoying.

"But she does have a damn fine ass." His gaze drifted past her tailbone and he licked his lips, imagining his tongue exploring the cute little dimples he'd noticed earlier nestled at the base of her spine. Desire pulsed in his dick and he groaned. *Shit*. This was what happened when he went too long without sex. The horndog in him started salivating over the last woman he should be sniffing after.

"You'd think I would have learned my lesson on that one." Scowling, he kicked away a loose stone blocking his path and crossed the final yards to the ship. He pulled up short next to the debarking ramp. Rather than hassle with the cargo doors, he'd stow the truffles up by the bridge.

"We need to talk."

Sending the hover cart up the ramp ahead of him, he glanced towards Rini. She piloted the ladder beneath the wing. If the mulish set of her chin didn't clue him in to the argument on the horizon, the stiff hands planted on her hips sure as shit did. He rubbed the back of his skull, willing his headache to find someone else to torture. "Can we do it on the way to Aquatica? We're still on a tight schedule."

"Why in the universe would you jeopardize your pilot license and your ship to smuggle caviar?"

The pit of his stomach dropped. He stared at her, the eerie drone of desert insects providing a tense backdrop. Just as quick as the cold dread spread through his limbs, it was replaced by sizzling anger. "Who gave you the right to snoop in my cargo?"

"I wasn't snooping." She stepped off the rung and stalked towards him. "I found the crate on accident, during my search for the ladder."

*Son of a bitch*. Why didn't he just fix the damn light himself? Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. Pivoting, he grasped the debarking rail and trudged up the ramp.

"I'm not finished with you yet."

"Yeah, babe, I figured as much. But you'll have to do it inside. Like I said, we're running late." Without waiting for her inevitable complaint, he ducked inside the ship and grabbed the top box of truffles. Ignoring the staccato beat of footsteps trailing him, he stashed the box behind the pilot's seat. Turning, he almost collided with Rini when she shoved the second carton of truffles against his chest.

Her gaze bore into him, accusing and slightly hurt. The expression baffled him. What the hell did she have to feel hurt about? She was the one who'd decided to paw through his cargo—someplace she had no business being. If anyone should be moping around with a look of betrayal, it should be him, damn it.

Dropping the truffle carton atop the other, he pushed past her and went to seal off the debarking station. His jaw locked in a rigid line when he noticed she'd already beaten him to it. Where did she get off performing his preflight duties? A repo contract didn't give her jurisdiction to act like she fucking owned his ship.

Rini sidestepped him and reached for the hover ladder.

His patience—thin as a monofilament fiber—snapped. “Leave it.”

She straightened, a frown pinching tight above the ridge of her brow. “But the ladder needs to be secured.”

“What needs to be secured is your ass. In the seat.”

Her eyes gleamed with defiance. Growling beneath his breath, he grabbed her arm. An instant later, he found himself flat on his back, her boot digging into his sternum. It took several seconds to chase down his breath.

With her heel planted firmly in place, she leaned over him, her eyebrows smugly arched. “It's extremely rude to touch someone without being invited. Might want to remember that.”

“Well, since you've already corrected me for the oversight by cracking my spine, I might as well make it worth my while.”

“I didn't crack your—”

Before she finished spitting out the denial, he grasped the leg pinning him and tugged. Hard. She toppled, sprawling across his chest with an “*Oof*.” Her shocked gasp puffed against his face. Gripping the back of her neck, he dragged her in for an angry kiss that finally managed to shut her up. She attempted to jerk back, but he clamped his hand against the base of her skull and captured her bottom lip between his teeth.

He'd intended the kiss as punishment, never realizing he'd become the victim of his own dirty game when a soft moan spilled from her mouth. The sound wrapped around his cock like silken fingers. Coaxing. Teasing.

Groaning, he let her lip slip free of his teeth and he licked along the seam, easing the sting. Her eyes stared into his, so close he could easily detect the darker specks of blue in her irises. He eased his hold on her scalp, the soft, cool strands of her hair sifting between his fingers. Angling his head for a better approach, he delved his tongue between her lips. Her tongue retreated. Not far, once he captured it and sucked it into willing submission. She tasted like cinnamon and spice and everything sinful. Everything he should be running screaming from. So why the hell were his hands traveling the slope of Rini's neck and feathering past her shoulders to her breasts?

Her nails bit through the thin cotton of his shirt, sinking in just above the waistband of his pants. If she inched a little lower...

Rini shifted her mouth away, earning his frustration. She nibbled on her bottom lip.

“Baby, don’t. That’s my job.” Chuckling, he curled his fingers around her chin, drawing her closer.

She wrenched away from him before his mouth could reclaim its prize. Pushing to her feet, she glared at him, her chest heaving. “You’re unbelievable.”

Why did he have the feeling her words weren’t intended as a compliment to his kissing skills? “Why? What did I do?”

“Don’t try to play the innocent. You don’t wear the role well.”

He lurched to a sitting position. “Mind clueing me in on what the hell you’re blabbering about? I seem to have left my female outrage decoder at home.”

“You kissed me.” She hissed the accusation.

“Yeah, I’m with you so far.”

“Are you going to deny you did it to sidetrack me?”

He didn’t immediately answer. Apparently that was the wrong tack to take. She spun away and stalked into the bridge. Planting his hands on the steel flooring, he hefted to his feet. He arched his back and winced, massaging the tender—and likely bruised—base of his spine. “Babe, if I thought a kiss would sidetrack you, don’t you think I would have done it before we left Warddok Ten?”

“I don’t know,” she shot over her stiff shoulder. “Maybe you’re not real quick on the uptake.”

Moving like a hundred-pound weakling who’d just gone twenty rounds with the intergalactic sumo-wrestling champion, Lucus staggered towards his seat. He’d learned his lesson. His mother hadn’t raised a dunderhead who didn’t know the drill. Okay, maybe she’d raised *one* dunderhead. Regardless, no matter how delectable Rini was, his lips would keep a ten-foot radius from her at all times. He was too attached to his dick to risk anything closer.

He plopped into the pilot’s seat and bit his tongue to keep from whimpering in agony when his sore tailbone hit the hard ridge of the metal seat support. Looking across at Rini, he met her cocky expression. Okay, so she knew how to make a grown man cry like a baby who’d lost his pacifier. Didn’t mean she needed to gloat.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, never been better.” He squeezed the words between clenched teeth.

“Look, I’m sorry if I hurt you. Are you still able to fly, or do you want me to take over?”

Why didn’t she just chop his balls off and be done with it? “Sweetheart, it’s going to take a hell of a lot more than a hundred and ten pound woman to put me in traction.”

A cute pink blushed her cheeks. “Thanks for the compliment, but I’m closer to one thirty.”

Well hell, at least he didn’t overestimate her weight. Maybe it’d put her in a good mood and she’d go easy on him.

“So why are you smuggling caviar?”

Then again, maybe not.

“I prefer calling it a goodwill offering.” He powered up the Liberty and took off. At this rate, it’d be a damned miracle if they reached Aquatica by dawn. The star cruiser hit a rough air pocket and he coasted higher to combat the turbulence. From the corner of his eye, he caught the tell-me-another-bullshit-story expression darkening Rini’s face. He didn’t owe her any explanations, and what he did with his ship was no concern of hers.

So why did it feel like a boulder sat dead center on his chest when she dropped her gaze to the hands clasped in her lap? Her disappointment poked his conscience. Damn it, he *wasn’t* a bad guy. “Sometimes you have to do unpleasant things in the name of survival. But I’m guessing you’ve never had that problem, princess.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He glanced at her, cataloging the giveaway details. Expensive haircut. Small yet tasteful diamond studs tucked in her earlobes. When you’ve been burned once by the social elite, you know what to look for. “You come from money.”

She stiffened. “Whatever you’re implying, you’re wrong.”

“Am I? I’m guessing it took a shitload of capital to start up the UGG’s repo agency. Your family must be swimming in cash.”

“Things haven’t been handed to me.”

“But I bet you haven’t exactly had to struggle for anything either.” His assessing glance lingered on her pink-polished nails. He remembered his ex-wife’s standing weekly appointment at the expensive salon she’d insisted was a necessity and the teary eyes she’d predictably turned on him when he’d asked her to cut back on the spending. In the end he’d caved. When it came to Sandra, that’d always been his M.O.

Tearing his thoughts from dark alleys he’d rather not traverse, he gestured towards Rini’s hand. “Maybe that’s the real underlying reason you decided not to become a cop. Why settle for a low-paying job that’ll only ruin your manicure?” He met Rini’s indignant glower but all he could truly focus on was the dazzle of those damn diamonds in her ears. They brought out the bastard in him. “After all, Mommy and Daddy have a nice, cushy job all set to go at the agency. Way better than having to actually work your way up the ranks, like all the rest of us poor peons.”

He waited for her inevitable denial. When it didn’t come, he shook his head with a scornful snort. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Rini made no move to correct Lucus of his idiotic assessment. Let him think the worst of her. It was better than him knowing the sordid truth.

Hardly anyone knew the real reason she gave up her dream of becoming a ranger. Not her parents, not her coworkers, not her best friend. Only two other people knew the truth, and they certainly weren’t going to blab to anyone. So her story was safe—a painful secret stuffed in the furthest recesses of her heart.

She had every intention of keeping it that way.

Lucus leaned forward and adjusted the temperature control. She hadn't noticed how warm it was in the bridge. Of course, the sight of his shirt pulling snug over his broad shoulders only made it feel a hundred degrees hotter. Jerking her gaze away, she focused on the stars and satellites zipping past the viewing shield.

He didn't like her. She didn't like him. If she had the slightest sense, she'd stop thinking about his yummy body and brain-frying kisses.

The sound of plastic crumpling drew her attention back to Lucus. His hand was stuffed in a bag of Galaxy Gus's potato chips. He looked over and caught her staring.

"Want some?" Lucus extended the crinkled sack, but she hesitated. He shook the bag in invitation. "Don't worry. It's fresh—opened earlier this afternoon."

Reassured, she ducked inside the package and fetched several chips. She popped the first one inside her mouth and her stomach rumbled in anticipation.

Lucus must have heard the embarrassing sound because he chuckled. "When's the last time you ate? Sounds like a mutiny is going on in there."

She swallowed the chip and licked the greasy salt from her fingers before answering. "I had a nice steak dinner planned, but I ended up sacrificing it to your hound."

"So that's how you snuck past Roscoe. Remind me to fire that damn dog."

"Roscoe?" Tapping another chip against her lips, she contemplated the name. "Yeah, it suits him. Kind of butch and no-nonsense. And I get that he's a guard dog, but really, would it kill you to bathe him once in a while?"

A quick snort shot from Lucus. "Trust me, if I could catch him he'd get a scrub down every damn day, considering his love affair with garbage cans leaves him reeking to high hell. As it is, I'm lucky to blast him with the hose on occasion before he runs off."

She nibbled the edges of the chip clutched between her fingers. "Hmm, he doesn't sound very obedient."

"Speaking of which—you're staying in the ship when we reach Aquatica."

The remainder of her chips forgotten, she glared at Lucus. "Excuse me, but that sounded an awful lot like you telling me what to do."

"It is what it is."

"It's *demeaning*. In case you didn't notice, we're no longer living in caves and clubbing wooly mammoths."

A nerve twitched in his jaw and he crushed the chip bag before stowing it next to his seat. "This has nothing to do with sexism. I just don't want you sticking your nose in my business."

“Why, what sort of *business* are you conducting on Aquatica?” She stared at his profile, willing him to allay her suspicions. His mouth stayed fused in its stubborn line. “Well, I guess that explains how you managed to gain trade access with their leader.”

Irritation shimmered off him like an invisible force field. “Like I said, I do what’s necessary to survive.”

He made no move to elaborate further and Rini saw no point in dragging out an argument that was clearly pointless. She settled back in the seat and tried preoccupying herself by finishing her chips and mentally jogging through the rest of her week’s schedule. Most of the jobs were simple—easy enough a drunk monkey could do them blindfolded.

Without warning, Lucas’s earlier statement floated through Rini’s head. *Maybe that’s the real underlying reason you decided not to become a cop. Why settle for a low-paying job that’ll only ruin your manicure?*

A laugh attempted a quick getaway and she choked it down. *Oh yeah, like repo’ing is such a glamorous job.*

The star cruiser began descending, yanking her from her cynical musings. On the distant horizon, a small planet took shape, its dark, craggy surface just visible beyond the glowing moon orbiting the planet’s perimeter. “Is that Aquatica?”

“Yep. Make sure your harness is fully secured. Sometimes the gravitational pull around their moon is a bitch. Normally I wouldn’t approach from this direction, but it’s faster.”

Not in the mood to test the splatter resistance of the Liberty’s viewing shield, Rini tugged on the harness and expelled a relieved breath when the straps remained snug.

They approached the enormous moon and the star cruiser shuddered and dipped. Lucas’s knuckles tightened around the jerking throttle until the bones appeared like they might break through his skin. “Come on, baby. You can do it. Just a little more.” Cooing to the ship like it was a child throwing fits at having to eat brussel sprouts, he maneuvered past the moon’s hazardous pull.

Their safety assured, Rini released her death grip on the harness, her shoulders sagging against the seatback’s rigid spine.

Aquatica’s surface loomed closer, the crags and craters gaining definition. They soared over the highest peak of a mountain range before plummeting in a slow coast towards the arid valley nestled at the basin.

Like the majority of the planets existing in the Daxitron galaxy, Aquatica’s oceans and lakes long ago fell victim to ever-increasing solar warming, leaving each body of water in a barren state. Unlike its neighboring planets, Aquatica’s residents refused to find more hospitable accommodation elsewhere, as evidenced by the sizable warren of dome-shaped buildings clustered in the shadow of a massive water-

drilling rig. The moon's reflective glow glinted off the rig's network of scaffolding. With a slight jolt, the Liberty touched down on the small landing strip situated several yards from the largest of the domes.

Lucus abandoned his seat, but not before giving her a move-a-muscle-and-you'll-regret-it stare. Hah, like that wasn't going to happen. She twisted in her seat and glared at his retreating back.

No force in the universe would keep her from the showdown she had planned for Aquatica's leader.

## Chapter Four

Lucus kept his distaste in check as General Quarrel limped across the lit tarmac followed by a small army of heavily armed guards. Aside from the Aquatican leader carrying excess flab that made him look like an octopus with a major beer gut, Quarrel represented everything Lucus despised in an individual. Top on the list of the general's repugnant qualities—his delight in employing cruel and vicious terror tactics, even on those who possessed less threat to him than a sand gnat.

It didn't help that the general coerced Lucus into this illegal trade operation, with a little help from Chase.

For the millionth time—minimum—Lucus envisioned his hands wrapped around his foolish brother's neck. If Chase hadn't gone looking for a cheap piece of tail on Shiarta three months ago, none of this would be happening. And if Chase paid the damn UGG payments as instructed, there wouldn't be an aggravating, nosy woman prowling inside the star cruiser, waiting for the exact moment to make a huge nuisance of herself.

General Quarrel wobbled to a halt and leaned his massive weight into the walking cane gripped in his hand. His tentacle-like fingers slithered over the sturdy brass knob topping the cane. Watery, bile-green eyes regarded Lucus intently.

"You're late. Do you have my shipment?" Impatience knifed through Quarrel's raspy demand.

Lucus nodded.

"You made the trip here with no incident? I don't need those damn bastards heading the UGG charging in here and raiding my compound."

Willing away the bead of sweat attempting to slide free of his scalp, Lucus swept his arm towards the parked Liberty. "Everything went fine. If you have transport carts ready, I'll start unloading the cargo."

The general rapped his cane against the cracked cement and his guards scurried in the direction of the carts crammed in front of Quarrel's main headquarters.

Giving one more clomp of his cane, the general shuffled across the tarmac. "Come on, I don't have all night."

*Imperious son of a bitch.* Grinding his molars, Lucus stalked after Quarrel. A stiff breeze kicked up, blowing a tattered scrap of packing material over his boot. He reached to pluck the paper free and the sweet, cloying essence of lilacs drifted to his nose. Jerking his head up, he scanned the surrounding area. Why the hell couldn't she stay put? Straightening, he quickened his pace until he was running the final



distance to the star cruiser. He skidded to a stop outside the rear cargo doors. His pulse drummed in his ears—his mad jog only partly to blame. The true source of his high blood pressure stood on the top step of the lowered ramp.

“Who the hell is she?” Quarrel wheezed from behind.

“My copilot.” Lucus kept his gaze trained on Rini, silently commanding her to keep her yap shut.

“Your copilot’s a woman?”

Lucus caught the scornful disbelief in Quarrel’s voice and rushed to ease the general’s suspicion. “Female copilots have their advantages.”

A robust laugh chuffed from Quarrel. “Ah yes. I can see the benefit of having available pussy during those long flights.”

Outrage glimmered in Rini’s eyes. She descended a step, her body tensed for confrontation. Lucus grabbed the rail and blocked the ramp’s exit. Her lips whitened as they flattened but she remained planted in place. Good. If she behaved the next fifteen minutes, they might get off the planet in one piece.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you join me inside while I get the general’s shipment ready?”

Apparently reading the demand beneath his gritted request, Rini spun an about-face and stormed into the darkened confines of the cargo bay.

Quarrel’s chuckle resembled rocks being dragged through a tumbler. “You have a feisty one there.”

Lucus stifled a grunt. *There’s the understatement of the century.*

“I bet she fucks like a wild creature.”

An image of Rini screaming her throat raw, her wild hair streaming over her shimmying breasts while she bounced on his cock flashed across Lucus’s mental big screen. He shook his head. Four months without sex—it was killing him. Clearly his hand was a poor substitute for the nirvana found between a woman’s legs. Soon as this job was finished and he paid Rini, he was flying to Shiarta and taking the first prostitute with the wickedest proposition. So long as she didn’t have red hair. He didn’t need his brain conjuring any more fantasies of Rini.

Turning to Quarrel, Lucus noticed the guards approaching with the transport carts. He took his cue and hurried up into the bay. Rini was waiting for him on the other side of the doors. Judging from the flush gracing her high cheekbones, she’d overheard the general’s crude assumption regarding her bedroom skills.

Head held high, she led the way to the nearest crated pallet. Her curvaceous hips moved with an unintentional, sexy sway. At least he assumed it was unintentional. The possibility of it being anything else was pretty damn slim. Particularly when he had better chances of winning the super-galactic lotto than having Rini deliberately tempt him with her luscious booty.

She plopped down on the edge of the crate that held a collection of raw silk from Jhiordan. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

Yeah, he did. That was the problem with striking a bargain with the devil—you did as told or ended up flame broiled. “Sweetheart, you’re gonna have to move. You’re sitting on part of the shipment.”

Rini crossed her arms over her chest. “What if I don’t?”

“Then I guess you’ll be considered part of the cargo.” His gaze traveled a slow sweep over her torso. “Don’t think General Quarrel will mind.”

She jumped from her perch like a fire had been ignited under her ass. Taking advantage of the opportunity, he wheeled the collapsible conveyor into the center of the bay and released the crank. As the track snaked across the floor, two of Quarrel’s guards entered the bay. They glanced around, bemusement stamped on their squid-like features.

Lucus tossed a crate strap to the nearest guard. “Why don’t you get started over there by the door?”

Grumbling, the guards turned to the stacks of crates and began loading them onto the conveyor. Rini overlooked the operation, her face pinched with disapproval.

“Why don’t you wait up in the bridge?” When she didn’t budge, Lucus shook his head and swiped another crate strap from the bin. The hydraulic hiss and whine of the conveyor lowering its freight onto the waiting transport carts provided a noisy soundtrack while he hustled ass clearing his side of the bay. He almost missed the shout from one of the guards. Wiping his brow, he pivoted. “What?”

“This crate is ruined.”

“It can’t be. I checked them all before I left Warddok Ten.” Tossing the strap over his shoulder, Lucus walked towards the far wall. From a foot away, he spied the splintered crate sitting between the two guards. His stomach bottomed out. “How did it get like that?”

The guards both jerked their heads. He wouldn’t have thought it possible for alien mollusks to look terrified, but these two appeared ready to discharge some serious squid ink.

“We...we did not do it,” the chattiest of the guards stuttered.

“No? Well, I sure as hell didn’t. Who else could it have been?” Lucus stepped back, his attention snagging on a flash of red off to the side. Awareness slowly seeped into his brain. Swiveling, he stared at Rini.

She bit her bottom lip. “Sorry, I meant to tell you but forgot.”

Fury burst in Lucus’s head like an electron bomb. Seven long, angry strides brought him face-to-face with Rini. Her eyes widened as he crowded her against the large crate behind her. “Real convenient.”

“I know how it looks, but I honestly forgot.”

He leaned into her until a slip of paper wouldn’t find space between their plastered bodies. Her soft breasts pillowed against his chest but the static rage buzzing in his head didn’t let him enjoy it. “Bullshit. You’d like nothing more than to see my ass in the frying pan and you figured out the perfect means to deliver me there.”

She blinked and crammed harder against the crate, a useless attempt to put some distance between them. “Are you accusing me of deliberately damaging the crate? That’s crazy.”

“No, baby, that’s sabotage. But your plan backfired, because your ass is going in the frying pan with me. See, Quarrel isn’t as understanding about these things as I am and he’s going to be mighty pissed at the both of us.”

“Lucus, we’re citizens of the UGG. He can’t do anything to us. Plus he broke the law.”

His hands trembled with the urge to shake some sense into Rini. Instead, he shoved away from her and plowed his fingers through his hair. “You are damned naïve. Do you think Quarrel kowtows to any of the laws cooked up by the UGG?”

“Maybe I am naïve. It’s better than willingly partnering with a lawless dictator.” She threw out her arms. “If everyone did that, the galaxies would be flooded with criminals and the innocent would be at their mercy. That’s not the type of universe I want to live in.”

“I didn’t willingly partner with Quarrel.” He never intended the admission to slip free but her heated declaration hit his defense button. Damn it, it wasn’t as if he wanted to live in a lawless universe—and his moral code wasn’t that much lower down the pole than hers.

“Are you saying he forced you?”

Oh shit. He recognized that tone. It reminded him of the one his ma used when he’d come home as a kid, all bloody and bruised from a recent round with the neighborhood bully. “Look, give me a second to think. Maybe I can find a crate to decoy as the damaged one.” If they were lucky, Quarrel wouldn’t discover the switcheroo until they were long gone.

*And preferably after I’ve gotten a face transplant.* Clenching his jaw, Lucus headed in the direction where he’d left the quaking guards. He stopped short, the handful of chips digesting in his stomach threatening to make an early checkout.

The guards and the damaged crate weren’t in the cargo bay.

He whipped his head around, hoping by some miracle the guards might have snuck past him and were in the back corridor of the ship. Nope. “Son of a *bitch*.”

Rini scooted forward. “What is it?”

“Babe, I think we’re about to get busted.”

## Chapter Five

Rini jogged after Lucas as he hightailed it down the corridor. “What are you doing?”

“Getting us the hell off this planet.”

She almost stumbled trying to keep up with his breakneck clip. “But the rear doors aren’t secured. You’ll lose your cargo.”

“Yeah, better than losing our lives.”

Lucas slammed to a sudden halt and she smacked into him. She peeked around his broad shoulder and sucked in a breath. Four of General Quarrel’s guards blocked the entrance to the bridge, their electro-pulse rifles trained on her and Granger. Lucas took a wary step back, nudging her along with him. They got no farther than five paces before a hard object jammed against Rini’s skull. She didn’t need eyes in the back of her head to recognize the muzzle of a triple-scope pulse rifle. Gulping, she dug her nails into Lucas’s thick biceps, stalling his retreat.

“Let me guess,” Lucas said, his voice carrying a fine-honed edge of apprehension. “More guards are behind us?”

Wetting her suddenly desert-dry lips, she squeezed his biceps twice.

He tensed. “Damn, those slippery bastards move fast.”

The four guards in front of them inched forward as General Quarrel waddled through the debarking door.

“We seem to have a problem.” A squishing noise came from the general when he extended a tentacle and plopped one of the caviar bags onto the floor. “How do you expect me to distribute damaged goods?”

Lucas cleared his throat. “I can explain. You see, there was a—”

“I’m not interested in your excuses.” The general slammed his cane down, and a clanging vibration shuddered through the steel flooring. “No one fucks me over. *No one.*”

The biceps beneath Rini’s fingers went rigid, and she swallowed down the fear blooming at the back of her throat. Panic was the enemy in situations like this. If nothing else, the ranger academy had drilled that bit of wisdom into her. She needed to think...and fast. “We’ll replace the crate. Just give us an hour.”

An almost-imperceptible hiss came from Lucas. She squeezed his arms again, hoping he’d understand the silent communication and allow her to try winging them out of their sticky predicament.

General Quarrel’s hideously long fingers slithered along his neck and stroked his chin. “Ah yes, I should just allow you to fly out of here. Why didn’t I think of that?”

For a lawless dictator, he sure knew how to lay on the sarcasm.

The general slashed his tentacles through the air. “Guards, bring them into the compound.”

A cold, clammy tentacle clamped Rini’s shoulder, dragging her back. Another guard reached for Granger. Lucus growled and swung his fist at the guard’s head, knocking the alien on his ass.

Five pairs of electro-pulse rifles took bead on Lucus. His breath whistling between his teeth, Lucus held up his hands.

“Much as this display entertains me, I don’t have time for your pitiful struggles.” General Quarrel’s mouth twisted in a mocking sneer. “Besides, you should conserve your energy. You’ll both need it when you’re testing out my new torture chamber.”

A suffocating blend of terror and dread clogged Rini’s windpipe. Torture and chamber—two words that never mixed well. All the more reason she needed to keep her wits together and figure a way for them to escape.

The guards wrangled her and Lucus down the Liberty’s debarking ramp and across the tarmac to the large metal-sided structure holding center court over the cluster of domes. Inside, they followed a twisting passage to an enormous atrium flooded with artificial light. Strange coral formations and towering, wispy ferns lined a path leading to a miniature castle carved from granite.

Her mouth gaping, Rini stared at the odd sights surrounding her. “Are we inside a...an aquarium?”

“Weird, eh?”

She turned and met Lucus’s stare. “Uh, *yeah*.” The guard imprisoning her wrists shoved her roughly towards the graveled path. It took all her willpower not to kick back with her boot and nail the bastard in the groin. Of course, who knew if alien squids even had balls? Yet one more mystery of life she really didn’t care to discover.

They approached the castle and the rock doors slid open, revealing a steel-walled chamber. Rini’s heart performed a somersault. *I hope to God this isn’t the general’s torture chamber.*

General Quarrel waved Rini, Lucus and their two escorts inside the castle before waddling in after them. The remainder of the guards took up station outside the doors.

“Lower level.” No sooner did the general bark the command and the steel walls spun, locking them in.

Rini’s stomach plummeted along with the chamber as it descended. On one hand, she was relieved they were apparently in an elevator rather than a torture chamber, but going underground would make escape a lot trickier. With a bone-jarring jolt, the elevator stopped and she swayed to keep footing. The guard was kind enough to wrench her upright by tugging hard on her hair. She gritted her teeth, her tear ducts stinging. “Watch it. That hurts.”

“I know.” The jerk-off sounded quite proud of the fact. One of his tentacles slid up her rib cage and groped her breast.

Revulsion shivered along her spine. First chance she got, she was *so* turning this asshole into a sushi spring roll. The doors opened and she and Lucus were thrust into a long corridor. Their captors steered them down the tunnel-like passage until they arrived at a glass-walled room with four small, circular openings cut eye level in the glass. Weird prong-like apparatuses ringed each circle.

The general hobbled forward and pressed a tentacle against the fingerprint analyzer recessed in the wall. Of course, in his case it was more of a suction-cup analyzer. Green numerals flashed on the reader pad and a door swung open in the glass wall. Rini blinked. The door had been virtually undetectable. Whoever constructed this room was a master craftsman. If she ever escaped, she'd have to track them down and commend them for building such a high-quality deathtrap.

"Place them inside," the general said with a tap of his cane.

In Rini's opinion, *placing* conjured images of a gentle nudge and a hearty *there you go*. It definitely didn't entail having her butt smacked with enough force to hurtle her head first into the empty cell. Before she could untangle her limbs and push from the cold tile floor, Lucus went sprawling on top of her. His crushing weight pinned her in place.

Lecherous chuckles sniggered from above, and Rini lifted her eyes to the speaker boxes affixed to the wall.

"Really, you two should get a room." Loud guffaws followed the general's quip.

Talk about suck ups. The joke wasn't even that funny. She shoved at Lucus and he rolled off her with a groan. A click sounded and they both turned their heads just as the door locked in place.

"Make yourselves comfortable." The general gave a magnanimous sweep of his arm. "In a few hours, we'll test out the best feature of the torture chamber. I'm sure you're almost as excited as I am."

*Oh yeah, buddy. I'm so flippin' excited, I could pee my pants.* Unfortunately, her sarcasm wasn't a complete lie. She stood a good chance of being embarrassed any second by her skittish bladder. Rini whisked a lank of hair behind her ear and glanced through the glass at General Quarrel. "What are you going to do to us?"

He pealed a laugh that would be envied in any government-operated psych ward. "If I told you now, my fun would be ruined." With that unhelpful yet chilling explanation, he waddled off.

## Chapter Six

Lucus leaned his head against the wall and stared at Rini. For some unknown reason, she was trying to squeeze through one of the cutouts in the wall. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Trying to find a way out of here.”

“By stuffing our bodies through a six-inch diameter hole?” He propped one foot over the other and grunted. “Babe, unless you’ve got some radical weight-loss pills tucked inside those pockets of yours, it ain’t gonna happen.”

She continued wiggling her arm. “Of course I know we won’t fit through the openings. I’m just testing the width and stability of the glass.”

He used the toe of his boot to scratch the back of his ankle. “So what did you find out?”

“Um...we’re screwed.” Rini pulled her hand out and grimaced. “This glass is deceiving. It’s much thicker than it looks.”

“Terrific.”

Sweeping her hair over her shoulder, she glared at him. “Why are you sitting there like a bump on a log?”

“What do you want me to do? Storm the glass with my goddamn head?”

Her hands slammed onto her hips. “Well, it certainly wouldn’t hurt anything.”

Oh yeah, she was a fucking laugh riot. He hefted to his feet and stalked towards the wall. She popped her fist through the opening again and fiddled with the prong-like apertures circling the hole. Pathetic as it was, her stroking motions titillated his baser instincts.

He faced death with a raging hard-on. His ma would be proud.

Rini continued swirling her fingers over the prongs. “What in the universe could these be for?”

Lucus wiped the sweat from his brow. At the moment, he was convinced the damn things held no further purpose than to torment his overheated libido. “For God’s sake, would you stop doing that?”

Pulling her hand back through the hole, Rini gave him a confused look. Luckily, she didn’t comment on his desperate plea or dripping forehead. Their gazes moved in unison when voices drifted down the corridor. A guard approached with a female Aquatican outfitted in a tight, navy blue jumpsuit.

The female flicked back her seaweed-green ringlets and sniffed. “I don’t care what you say, Fimordan. Your tentacles were all over Saribeth.”

“They weren’t, Jeneet. I swear it. You know how Saribeth constantly throws herself at me. I was just trying to fend her off.” The guard’s ineffectual attempt to hug his companion was met with a sharp slap across his head.

Lucus winced. Shit, that had to hurt. Bad enough being slapped by one hand. Try four.

“If you wouldn’t constantly show her your pleasure valve, it wouldn’t be an issue!”

Rini shot a look at him and he shrugged. “Yeah, I’m thinking we don’t wanna know.” He eased away from the wall, but Rini stayed put, her attention riveted on the lover’s tiff playing out in front of them.

“You’ve grown tired of me. I can see it.” The female Aquatican lifted a tentacle and wiped her eye. “This is what I get for putting out on the first date.”

The guard heaved a sigh. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“So now I’m being ridiculous. Well screw you, Fimordan. *Screw. You.*”

An exasperated groan filtered from Lucus. “Oh for Christ’s sake. This must be the torture Quarrel promised.” His fists thudded against the glass. “Quarrel, you sadistic son of a bitch, just kill me and get it over with.”

Jeneet spun from Fimordan, her expression weepy. She stalked to the section of wall across from the cell and pressed a button. Another hidden door whooshed open, revealing several large coiled hoses. Gathering one in her tentacles, she walked to the glass wall and snapped the end of the hose onto one of the pronged openings.

*So that’s what they’re for.* Discovering the prongs’ purpose didn’t exactly set his mind at rest. Toxic nerve gas? A flesh-eating virus? The hoses could deliver anything.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Rini demanded, her voice quivering with a fine thread of fear.

The idea of Rini being afraid of anything surprised the hell out of him. In the short time he’d known her she acted like she had bigger balls than half the men he knew.

Jeneet lifted her gaze to Rini’s. “Pumping water into your cell.” She said it like it was the most logical answer in the world. “You’re going to become living specimens in your own private aquarium. Won’t that be fun?”

Rini blinked. Her expression reminded him of the look Roscoe always got whenever the word bath was mentioned. “But we don’t have gills. We can’t survive underwater.”

“Oh. Well that stinks.” Giving a sympathetic smile, Jeneet tightened the fittings before strolling to the remaining hoses. Fimordan joined her.

“Do not talk to those earthlings. They can’t be trusted.”

“How dare you tell me what to do?” Turning up her nonexistent nose, Jeneet snagged the next available hose and wrestled it to the glass wall. While she clamped it in place, Fimordan dragged the third hose over.



Lucus stared at the fourth—and final—opening. If he didn't think of something soon, he and Rini would be belly-up in their own death tank.

Fimordan pointed to the farthest hose. "That one doesn't look properly fastened."

Jeneet swung on him, her small, beady eyes bugging from their sockets. "It is. I checked it twice."

"Maybe I should check it." Fimordan started to move to the hose in question and got another tentacle upside his head. "Damn it, Jeneet!"

"Because I'm a female, you think you're so much smarter than me."

Fimordan gingerly probed his skull. "It's been proven that the males of our species have bigger brains."

Jeneet planted her tentacles on her hips and blocked Fimordan's path. "Too bad the same can't be said for your pleasure valve."

Throwing his companion a hard glare, Fimordan stalked to the final hose and twisted it onto the prongs. Once he completed his task, he returned to the room across the way and flipped down a metal lever. A rumbling gurgle pulsed through the hoses. Seconds later, water blasted from the openings. One of the geysers slammed into Lucas's shoulder and he stumbled back, his boots sliding in the rapidly filling cell.

"What are you doing?" Jeneet screeched. "We're supposed to wait for General Quarrel."

"What does it matter? He'll be down soon enough."

Jeneet waved her tentacles in the air. "This is what I'm talking about. You never listen to me."

Lucus sent a look skyward. "God, I know I haven't exactly been a model citizen. But do you think maybe you can just take me out with a quick brain aneurism?"

Rini banged against the glass, catching the attention of both Aquaticans. "Jeneet, girlfriend, don't let him walk all over you like that!"

"*Girlfriend?*" Lucas ducked beneath the cascading water and sloshed to Rini's side. "Hate to break it to you, babe, but getting chummy with the enemy isn't going to save our asses."

"That's where you're wrong. It's precisely what's going to get us out of here." She kicked at the wall, stirring up a small wave. "Listen, Jeneet, I've known males exactly like Fimordan. They only care about themselves. Before you know it, they're stomping all over your heart and leaving you with the shattered pieces to pick up. Alone—while the bastard goes about his life like nothing happened. Like he didn't just send your world toppling off its axis."

Lucus stared at Rini's profile. Either she was freakishly good at improvisation or she'd been majorly burned a time or two. *Shit, no wonder she flattened me with her ninja moves. She probably hates my entire gender.*

Her scrutiny moving to him, Jeneet shuffled closer to the glass. Righteous anger seethed in her sea-foam eyes. "Is he one of the males you speak of?"

Rini flicked him a quick look before shaking her head. “No. And surely you don’t want to snuff the only decent male on your planet?”

“I don’t know. How big is his pleasure valve?”

Ignoring his sputtering choke, Rini held her hands roughly nine inches apart. Well, at least she didn’t shortchange him.

Smiling like she’d just hooked the biggest fish in the ocean, Jeneet trotted to the hose room and reached for the lever. Fimordan’s tentacle slapped over hers. The two battled for supremacy of the lever. Meanwhile, the water rose at an alarming rate, almost reaching Lucus’s upper thighs.

Rini maneuvered around the water spray and pummeled the glass, apparently still intent on cheerleading the showdown between Jeneet and Fimordan. “Kick the low-down bastard in the balls. If he has any.”

Lucus cocked his eyebrows. “Jesus, remind me not to make you mad.”

Rini ignored him and kept her attention centered on the power struggle waging across the corridor. “Come on, Jeneet. Show him the true meaning of girl power.”

A shrill, fingernails-on-chalkboard shriek rang from the female Aquatican and she gave a vicious tug. She stumbled back, the lever clutched in her tentacles. Her tiny lips blossomed into an O. “Whoops.”

“Oh shit.” No sooner did the words leave Lucus’s mouth and a fierce rumble convulsed through the hoses, followed by an icy torrent. One of the jets nailed Rini and pulled her in its undertow. When she didn’t immediately surface, he dove after her. Grasping her waist, he dragged them both above water.

Rini gasped, holding onto him with a bone-crushing grip. “This probably is a bad time to bring this up, but I’m a lousy swimmer.”

Keeping her anchored at his side, he slammed his fist on the wall, praying the combination of his pounding and the stress from the pumping hoses would fracture the glass. The water kept pouring in, forcing him to tread furiously to keep both he and Rini afloat. He could feel the spastic pressure of her chattering teeth against his collarbone.

“I-I’m s-sorry. This-s all my f-fault. Should have mentioned sm-smashed crate.”

He slid his hand from the glass and hugged Rini tighter, trying to calm her. “Babe, give me some of the credit. I’m the one who agreed to smuggle it.”

“Tr-true.”

The water level kept steadily climbing and Lucus glanced skyward. His gut gave a kick. If he reached up, he’d be able to touch the ceiling.

A massive shiver quaked Rini and her cheek bumped his shoulder. “In case I d-don’t get another chance—thank you. Th-thought maybe you’d prefer let-letting me drown.”

He searched for the words that might banish the bleak hopelessness in her eyes. “What, and deprive myself the opportunity of copping a feel?”

A quivery smile overtook her face. “Glad you’ve g-got your p-priorities straight.”

Pressure scraped the crown of his head. The ceiling. Reading the panic on Rini’s face as the water sloshed around her neck, he hoisted her higher. Her arms banded around him. They didn’t have much time. He needed to keep her calm and focused. “Breathe.”

“P-pretty soon th-that won’t be an option.”

“I know. That’s why you’ve got to do it now.” The water crept to their chins and she began to shake harder. He bobbed his head to gain her attention. “Here we go. One big breath. Then another. You can do it.”

They both sucked in a huge lungful of air and held it. The water surged up, forcing them under. Strangely enough, his entire life didn’t flash before his eyes like a big, bad cliché. Just Rini, staring at him in panic, her hair fanning around them like exotic red kelp. A series of bubbles rippled between them. At first he thought she’d exhaled. Then he felt them spinning, spiraling, funneling in a free fall. Helpless to do anything but ride the current, they held on to the only thing they could—each other.

Lucus broke above the water and pure, undiluted oxygen filled his mouth and nostrils. The next second, the back of his head slammed into the glass and the crushing water flipped him onto his stomach and mercilessly hammered him against the wall. He slid to the floor, his breath knocked into the next universe. Through narrowed eyes, he stared at the small river congesting the corridor and the splashing advance of boots. He worked his jaw, trying to spit out the words and the water ebbing inside his mouth. “Wh—what the fuck just happened?”

“I opened the door.”

He recognized the tinny voice above him. Jeneet.

“Don’t just lay there. You’ve got five minutes before stupid Fimordan gets here with General Quarrel. Trust me, neither will be happy when they see you out of the cell.”

Her astute observation managed to push him onto his elbows. Planting an arm against the wall, he leveraged to his knees. “Rini.”

“She’s over there.”

Following the direction of Jeneet’s tentacle, he spied Rini sprawled farther down the corridor. Lurching to his feet, he loped to her side. Relief crashed into his chest when he peered into her blinking eyes.

“Am I dead? Somehow I didn’t imagine heaven looking like this.”

He knelt and helped her stand. Jeneet jogged up beside them. “You’re both going to be dead if you don’t bust some hiney.”

Rini swiped her streaming hair from her face. “There are probably guards upstairs blocking the elevator.”

“There’s another way. The worker’s passage. This close to lunch, it’ll be deserted.” Jeneet pointed straight ahead. “See that flashing red light? Just beyond there, you’ll come to it. Follow the passage to the end and you’re home free.”

Lucus grabbed Rini’s hand but she didn’t immediately budge. She gaped at Jeneet quizzically. “Why are you letting us go? Won’t you get in trouble?”

“Nah, I’ll blame it on Fimordan. He deserves it for cheating on me with that tramp Saribeth. And I did it because we females have to stick together.” Jeneet winked. “Besides, it gives me a good excuse to visit the Earth outposts sometime.”

He remembered the earlier conversation regarding his *pleasure valve* and grimaced. Oh hell with it, it was the least he owed Jeneet.

The female Aquatican shot a nervous glance towards the opposite end of the corridor. “You two get going. Now.”

Heeding Jeneet’s advice, he tightened his hold on Rini’s hand and took off running. As promised, he found the door leading to the passageway. Steering Rini ahead of him, he followed her fast clip until they halted outside another steel door. “Why don’t you let me go first, in case...” He didn’t bother filling in the rest of the blank. They both knew what would happen if guards waited outside.

Surprisingly, she didn’t balk when he moved her aside and twisted the knob. The door swung outward and sunlight momentarily blinded him. Thankfully they weren’t greeted with a dozen electro-pulse rifles cocked and ready. Directly across from them stretched the tarmac. The Liberty waited like a beacon beneath the blazing sun.

A siren’s blaring wail blasted overhead.

“We’re gonna have to haul ass.” Snagging Rini’s arm, Lucus sped towards the untended ship. He tried his damndest to ignore the shouts ringing out to the left of him and the whizzing *ping-ping* of laser fire ricocheting off the tarmac.

God must have been listening to his prayers, because the debarking ramp was still lowered. He propelled Rini up the stairs and clambered after her, his boots barely making contact with the metal steps. Hurling inside the star cruiser, he slammed a fist on the ramp release button and hustled to the bridge. While Rini fumbled with the straps on the copilot seat, he powered up the engine.

Several guards darted in the direction of the two bulky rocket racers parked at the end of the landing strip.

“Looks like we’ll have company for this flight.” Lucus rammed the throttle forward and disengaged the pod wheels. The Liberty lifted and he swung a hard right, heading in the opposite direction of the mountain peak.

“What are our chances of outrunning them?”

He met Rini's worried expression. "Slim. That's why I'm going to take them out before we leave the magnetosphere."

"Uh...how do you plan on doing that? Last time I looked, your ship isn't equipped with external weapons."

"Those rocket racers are top heavy. If I get them within close range of Aquatica's moon, the magnetic pull just might crash them."

Rini's gulp was loud enough the guards pursuing them could likely hear it. "Won't that require *us* flying too close to the moon?"

"Yep."

"I was really hoping you wouldn't say that."

He yanked on his harness, preparing for one hell of a bumpy flight. "Look at it this way. Either we die courtesy of the moon or the rocket racers. Which would you prefer?"

"Can I hold out for a third choice?" Her wet hair squished on the neck rest as she leaned back and dug her fingernails into the seat arms.

They punched through the sparse cloud cover hovering mid-latitude and the star cruiser continued climbing higher. On the radar panel, Lucus noticed the rocket racers closing distance. "All right, you bastards. You want a chase, you've got it." He executed a cork spin swoop that earned a weak groan from Rini.

She clutched her stomach. "Where's the motion-stabi pills when you need them?"

He eyed the soaked leg of her pants. "You're kidding. You don't have any stashed in those pockets of yours?"

"No," she croaked. "Usually it's not an issue."

"Hang in there." He scanned the gauges. "We're less than one hundred kilometers from the moon."

"At this point, I'm almost welcoming the idea of being crushed to death."

"Sorry, babe, but I'm hoping to deprive you that outcome." Pulling back on the throttle, he fired the thrusters until the Liberty hit maximum velocity.

"How many times have you attempted a maneuver like this?"

He didn't answer and Rini groaned again. "This is your first time. Sweet mother of God, we're going to die."

"Ever consider becoming a motivational speaker?" Despite his sarcasm, a bead of sweat trickled down his neck. Dying definitely wasn't how he wanted to start the day.

The sky darkened and the exterior temperature steadily plummeted as they approached the moon's orbital path. Ice crystals began forming around the edges of the viewing shield.

"Is it supposed to ice up like that?"

Hell if he knew. “Yeah, perfectly normal. Happens all the time.” He rechecked the radar. The rocket racers were gaining on them. Fast. *Shit, I really hope I know what I’m doing.*

“Why are you making that face?”

He glanced over at Rini. “What face?”

“That holy-crap-what-was-I-thinking face.”

“I’m not—” His denial snapped off when the entire ship shuddered and the throttle jerked spastically.

“What’s happening?”

“I think we just took a hit from one of the rocket racers.” Fighting to regain control of the throttle, he scanned the system’s alert panel. Sure enough, the left rear thruster was reporting malfunction. Clenching his teeth hard enough his jaw ached, he hammered the bouncing throttle into the highest gear and mentally crossed his fingers that the remaining thrusters would hold.

“Uh, Lucus...I know the viewing shield distorts distances, but that moon looks real freakin’ close.”

“Don’t worry. Got it covered.” Another quake rumbled through the cockpit. The rocket racers hot on their tail had taken out the right rear thruster. “*Motherfucker.*”

The ship rocked and dipped, losing altitude. “Come on, baby. Don’t crap out this close to the finish line.” Clutching the throttle tight enough every jolt ricocheted inside his bones, he shifted the Liberty into a free fall. On the radar, the rocket racers tailing them attempted the same nosedive. As he’d predicted, the moon’s magnetic tide locked onto the top-heavy vehicles and reeled them in like a pair of oversized flounders. The racers slammed into the moon’s surface with a fiery explosion.

“*Holy crap.* I can’t believe your plan worked.”

“That makes two of us.” He caught Rini’s stare from the corner of his eye and cleared his throat. “I mean, of course it worked. Hell, I’m a pro at this sort of shit.”

A buzzing alarm pealed from the alert panel.

“What’s that?”

He saw no way to downplay the situation facing them. “We’ve lost another thruster.”

“How? We’re not being fired on anymore.” Panic bubbled beneath the surface of Rini’s voice.

“Maybe the moon’s magnetic field is playing havoc with the system circuits.” As if to verify his suspicions, the navigation and alert panels blinked off. “Damn, sometimes I hate being right.”

With the alarm’s insistent buzzing silenced, the sound of his own heartbeat pounded in his ears. He eased off the throttle, bringing the ship level.

“We’re not going to make it, are we?”

He looked over and met the uncertainty in Rini’s eyes. She took a shaky breath and released her death grip on the harness. “You can tell it to me straight. Better knowing what to expect, right?”

He hoped to hell she meant that, because what he had to tell her wasn't pretty. "We're flying on one thruster and the navigation system is shot. Our best chance is flying back the way we came and finding a landing surface. If we're lucky, I might be able to bring us in manually."

The white sheet of her face stood in direct contrast to the determined set of her chin. "Okay, let's do it."

Cranking the throttle, he steered the ship in a loop and descended towards the vaporous cap of clouds scuttling across Aquatica's surface. How ironic that minutes ago he couldn't get away from the damn planet fast enough and now it was their only hope of salvation.

They broke through the stratus of clouds. A patchwork quilt of rolling landscape spread roughly ten thousand feet below them. Hope started to blossom inside Lucas's chest.

Then the final thruster crapped out.

## Chapter Seven

The high-pitched scream of metal reverberated inside Rini's ears as the Liberty crashed into a stand of cacti and continued plowing onward. While the ship racked and stacked dismembered cactus parts outside the viewing shield, Lucas battled with the reluctant brake.

A boulder roughly the size of a small house loomed directly in their path. If the curses streaming from Lucas's mouth were any indication, he must have noticed the rock the same instant she did. He attempted veering around it. Easier said than done with a runaway spacecraft.

They collided with the boulder, the impact shearing off the left wing. The ship spun, executing several mad three hundred and sixty degree circles. Once the star cruiser coasted to a halt Rini groaned and dragged her head from the seatback, her vision blurry from the ship's spinning-top routine. She stared at Lucas, trying to determine which of the two figures wavering in front of her was the real him. "Are you okay?"

He unclipped his harness and staggered from the seat, peering around the bridge like he couldn't believe he was still alive. Shaking his head, he looked at her. "Yeah. How about you?"

"I think so." Unsnapping her harness, she did a quick inspection for damage. Other than her double vision and the red crisscrossed welts where the straps dug into her torso, she seemed in overall decent shape.

She lifted from the seat and took an unsteady step. Her upper body swayed in the opposite direction of her feet and she stumbled into the control panel.

"You're walking like my brother after he's imbibed one too many cases of beer."

"It's my head." She clamped a hand on either side of her skull. "It won't stop spinning."

"Then park your butt for a minute while I check things outside."

"No, I'll go with you." Dropping her hands, she shoved away from the panel and almost fell over.

Lucas grasped her shoulders and edged her sideways until her rear end nudged the arm of the copilot's seat. "Stay put. You'll do neither of us any good if you fall out of the ship and break your neck."

Okay, he definitely had a point. Grudgingly, she watched him march off. Both of him. "*Ugh.*" Wincing, she massaged her temples. It really sucked having the same side effects that came from six rounds of margaritas, only without the accompanying buzz.

After giving her head five minutes to rest, her vision cleared enough for her to risk standing. When her legs remained sturdy, she decided to join Lucas and assess their dismal situation for herself. With the



electrical system officially out of commission there was no way of opening the debarking doors. Fortunately—or not—a large gaping hole took residence in the same spot the wing used to be. The cock-eyed angle of the ship made it a fairly easy drop to the valley's floor. She followed the loud grumbings coming from somewhere near the front of the star cruiser and spied Lucus bent at the knees, glaring at the severed wing.

“Oh man, it's going to take a lot more than duct tape or Super Glue to fix that puppy.”

Lucus looked up and his gaze stalled on her chest. Glancing down, she noticed her black tank top clung snugly to her skin, courtesy of the dunking in the general's death tank. She crossed her arms over her breasts.

Dragging his attention to her face, he pushed to his feet. “Not that it matters. Without the system control, we can't exactly fly out of here anyway.”

“Speaking of here—where are we? I know we're on Aquatica, but how close are we to General Quarrel's base?”

“See that peak?” Lucus pointed to a mountain ridge on the far horizon. “That's where we flew out of.”

A shiver charted her spine as she stared across the valley. “Do you think there's any chance he knows we crashed back on the planet?”

“Let's hope to God not. We've got enough shit to worry about without adding Squid Face to the list.” He scuffed a hand through his hair and scanned the wreckage for a minute before pivoting and heading towards the exposed hole in the Liberty.

Rubbing her arms, Rini abandoned her station to investigate the enormous boulder responsible for the mangled wing. The rock towered over her by at least ten feet and spanned twice that in circumference. Strange symbols were carved near the center of the rock. She traced a fingertip over the grooves, wondering about the origins of the symbols and their meaning. During her four years at the ranger academy she'd studied the various alien languages, but there were so many it'd take a lifetime to learn them all.

“What are you doing?”

Jumping, she jerked her hand away from the rough-textured stone. Lucus tossed her the shirt draped over his shoulder. Apparently interpreting her blank stare, he shrugged. “Your skin's so fair I worried you'd blister beneath this sun.”

*He was worried about me?* She immediately brushed away the tickle of happiness brought by the idea. It would be epically stupid getting warm fuzzies where Granger was concerned. The man was a smuggler, for crying out loud. If life had played out the way she'd originally planned she might have been faced with arresting him.

*But he does kiss like nobody's business.* A fierce hot flash swamped her at the reminder. Tugging the shirt on, she flapped the collar, trying to stir forth a poor excuse for a breeze. She followed Lucus's

interested scrutiny to the carved symbols in the rock. “I was trying to decipher them. I’m afraid my knowledge isn’t—”

“*Khian tu jidah.*”

She stared at Lucus, shocked beyond words that he was versed in archaic alienese. “*Okaay.*”

“Translated from Illonican, it means Starflight Folly.”

Buttoning the shirt, she tied the bottom tails into a knot. “Just a tad bit cryptic.”

“Not really. It’s the name of another ship that crash-landed in this valley.” He tapped his forefinger against another of the symbols. “Khtar. He’s one of the crew members buried here.”

“*Buried?*” Her gaze immediately darted to the ground. “Are you telling me this rock is a freakin’ headstone? Good God, how big were these aliens?”

Lucus chuckled. “I suspect the boulder is more a monument than a headstone.”

“Then I don’t need to worry about disturbing the grave of Khtar, the ginormous alien?”

Lucus shook his head and she exhaled in relief.

“This might actually be good news. With a little scouting, maybe we’ll find something from the Starflight Folly’s wreckage to jerry rig the Liberty’s control panel long enough to transmit a distress beacon.”

For the first time in what seemed like forever, hope seeded in Rini’s heart. “Good idea. I’ll start checking the area past those cacti over there.”

A warm palm clamped around her elbow before she could dash. She glanced up into Lucus’s narrowed eyes. “What? We’re wasting precious daylight.”

“You’re not gallivanting off by yourself, damn it. We have no idea who or what could be prowling around.”

“I wasn’t planning to stomp into the desert with a big flashing *eat me* sign.”

“Babe, you aren’t stomping anywhere without me right beside you.”

“Terrific.” She threw her hands out in disgust. “We’re back to you dishing the sexist ultimatums again. Look, I know you’ve got bigger muscles than mine and that extra appendage between your legs, but I’m fully capable of fending for myself. I’ve been doing it my entire life.”

Irritation shimmered in his dark irises. “You mean like how you were perfectly capable of fending for yourself back in the cell?”

The taunting memory of her meltdown slapped her like an icy hand across the face. Having Lucus witness that mortifying scene was bad enough. Having him rub it in was just plain obnoxious. “Unless you want to end up winded, flat on your back like before, I advise never bringing that up again.”

“If you start doing as I say, you and I won’t have any issues.”

Her fingernails biting into her palms, she stared at the arrogant set of his jaw. Oh man, it was tempting to say the hell with it and remind Lucus how capable she was of taking him down. But one quick scan of the area drove home the disheartening truth. To survive, they needed to stick together. “Fine.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Giving her arm a patronizing pat, he sidled past her and headed into the surrounding desert. “You coming?”

A lizard scampered up the side of the rock and flicked out its long tongue. Great, even the local reptiles were mocking her.

They spent what felt like hours combing the nearby terrain for remains from the Starflight Folly. Other than a few stray pieces of twisted metal, nothing useful cropped up. Certainly nothing that would get them off the godforsaken planet.

Rini used the toe of her boot to clear sand away from a strip of metal protruding from the ground. Satisfied she’d uncovered most of it, she stooped and pried the object from the desert’s tenacious grasp. She buffed the metal with the hem of Lucus’s shirt to get a better look at the symbol etched on the corroded surface. “This looks like one of the symbols from the rock.”

Lucus stopped poking through a stack of charred cactus husks and strode to her. She handed him the metal piece for inspection. “Yep. This is probably from the Starflight’s masthead. Used to be captains would fly their ships with their crew’s names and rankings displayed. Not sure why the practice isn’t kept up.”

She stared at the shadow of day-old beard gracing Lucus’s jawbone and became seriously irked when her nipples tightened at the idea of being teased by the dark bristles. “How is it you’re fluent in ancient Illonican?” she demanded in hopes of distracting her aggravating hormones.

He gave the metal strip a final look before tossing it on top the burnt cacti. “When I first started trading, I did business with this grizzled farmer on Orrik who used to be a professor of languages.” A grin overtook his rugged features. “Guess Cal needed a change of pace from harvesting melons all day because he’d toss lecture books at me every chance he got.”

“Hmm, wish I’d known Cal when I was busting my hump trying to keep my grade point average steady at the ranger academy.”

A teasing hint of challenge danced in Lucus’s eyes. “The girl who graduated top honors had trouble keeping up her grades?”

“Just in languages and anthropology.” She batted away a persistent army of gnats trying to roost in her hair. The damn things were a nuisance, particularly when she already felt sticky and grimy.

Lucus’s palm suddenly squashed against her forehead. She gave him a double blink and one corner of his mouth quirked. “One of the gnats snuck by you.”

“Um...thanks.”

“Anytime.”

The heat of his skin continued seeping into her and she began to wonder if he’d forgotten where he’d plastered his hand. But then an intense look crept into his expression and she had no doubt he knew exactly what he was doing. His face inching closer, he snuck his hand along her cheek. She licked her lips. “Before this goes any further, I think we should both remember we don’t like each other.”

“I like you fine.”

His lips brushed just to the side of hers and she released a shaky breath. “You said the same thing about your brother.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have this overwhelming urge to lick my brother’s nipples.”

“I should hope not, because that would be majorly twist—” Lucus’s mouth swallowed the remainder of her sentence. His tongue coaxed its way inside and she had trouble remembering why kissing him back was an incredibly lousy idea. Her hands crept under his shirt and roved over the damp skin above his rib cage. Talk about unfair. Here she felt like a gross, sweat-soaked dishrag, yet Lucus’s body was a slick and delicious yummy treat.

His lips trailed to the underside of her jaw and she gasped, blinking against the overhead glare of the sun. “What are we doing?”

Lucus’s chuckle vibrated against her neck. “If you have to ask, I’m severely out of practice.” His teeth scraped the sensitive hollow beneath her earlobe.

“This...” She swallowed and tried again. “This is a residual effect of our close call with death.”

“Mm, you think?” His tongue traced the shell of her ear, making her shiver.

“Yes. I mean between the near drowning in the cell and crashing, it’s a miracle we haven’t ripped each other’s clothes off.” *Oh man, why the hell did I say that?*

“Excellent point. Maybe we should do something about it.” His fingers swept to the buttons on her shirt and flicked the first one from its hole.

She should stop him. She should really, really stop him.

Eventually.

He made quick work releasing three more buttons. Her shirt gaped open and his hand slid inside, molding perfectly over one breast. His thumb rasped the cotton and lace covering her nipple. Gasping, she arched into him. Warm, firm lips resettled over hers with a groan. The sound rumbled through her, striking a match to her already inflamed senses.

His tongue glided over hers. She tasted desire and hot, aroused male. Dizzy from the sensory overload, she curved a hand around the nape of Lucus’s neck, the ends of his dark brown hair tickling her knuckles.

She pulled back slightly, the oxygen leaving her lungs in staccato bursts. “You and I. Bad idea.”

“The worst.” He pushed her tank top upward until it was anchored beneath her armpits. Dipping beneath her bra cup, he caressed one traitorously eager nipple.

“You need to stop doing that.” Even as she forced the wispy words from her mouth, she leaned into him, effectively offering more of her breast to fondle.

“Yeah, I should.” Lowering his head, he eased the lace away and circled her nipple with the tip of his tongue. The touch might have been feather-soft but it sparked a lightning-bolt reaction throughout every nerve receptor in her body. His teeth enclosed her nipple before he suctioned the bud inside the warm, wet cavern of his mouth.

“*Oh God.*” Her knees started to give and he caught her tight against him. So tight, there was no mistaking the solid nudge of his erection against her belly. *I want that.* Much as she debated telling her inner slut to shut up, she couldn’t deny the truth in those three embarrassing words.

Lucus pressed his face between her breasts, his harsh, uneven breaths ballooning against her skin. “Maybe we should finish this inside the ship.”

She opened her mouth to agree and jumped when a loud shriek sounded nearby. *Very* nearby.

Tensing, Lucus jerked his head up. “What the hell was that?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

He shoved away from her and grabbed the strip of metal from the cacti pile before walking in the direction of the eerie noise. Not about to be deprived of her own flimsy excuse for a weapon, Rini bent over and snatched a good-sized rock. Stuffing her boob back inside her bra, she raced after Lucus. Another shriek shattered the oppressive stillness, and they both ducked as a huge red-tailed buzzard swooped from its perch atop a forroc cactus and soared away.

Lucus’s shoulders relaxed. “At least we know where the screams were coming from.”

Rini’s gaze remained fixed on the departing bird. “Call me crazy, but that thing looks big enough to carry both of us off without breaking a sweat.”

“Yeah, but I bet he’s damn fine eating.”

She scrunched her nose. “Think I’ll pass. Anything that likes snacking on roadkill isn’t going anywhere near my lips.”

“Babe, you might not have any choice if we’re stranded here without food.” Lucus stashed the strip of metal inside the rear waistband of his pants and waved towards the dusty path they’d traversed. “The pickings are pretty slim back at the Liberty. Come next week, that buzzard will be looking like a gourmet feast.”

Being reminded of their situation managed to throw her into the same glum mood she’d been in before Lucus’s mouth made chummy with her breast. “What do you suppose our chances of survival are if we don’t get the Liberty’s control panel operational?”

Lucus leaned over and swiped a lone red feather left by the buzzard. He ruffled the feather's serrated edge with his thumb. "Let me put it this way. *We* might end up being Big Ugly's main course."

Goose bumps homesteaded her skin at the unpleasant picture conjured by his statement. "We are *so* fricasseeing him first chance we get."

"Thought you'd see it my way." Smoothing her hair back, he tucked the feather behind her ear.

The second he touched her, the tingles returned. Judging from the darkening of his pupils, he was experiencing the same side effect. She swallowed, desperately wishing her sanity hadn't decided to take an inconvenient vacation. "I know I wasn't very adamant about stopping things earlier, but—"

"You've had time to think," Lucas finished for her.

She fiddled with the tail ends of the oversized shirt and noticed how his eyes heated with interest while he stared at her breasts. Quickly refastening the buttons, she edged away and clasped her hands behind her back. "Lucus, you and I come from different worlds. I crave stability and order. You run illegal goods and fly the messiest ship this side of the Milky Way. We're a match made in hell."

"Yeah, you won't get an argument from me there."

Relief shuddered through her at his unexpected compliance. She wasn't sure her defenses could have withstood any seductive coaxing he might have tried to weasel by her. "Good, then you see the stupidity in pursuing this."

"What I see is someone who's digging for excuses." He ignored her sputtering rebuttal and swung his arm to encompass the surrounding desert. "Have you taken a look where we're at? Out here it doesn't matter if I'm a lowlife smuggler and you're an uptight repo agent with a major stick up your ass."

Her hands balling into fists, she glared at him. "I do *not* have a stick up my ass!"

"Babe, any farther up there and you'd be walking funny."

"*Arrgghh!*" Whirling, she stalked towards the Liberty.

"You're doing a great job proving my point for me."

"Go blow yourself." God, what possessed her to kiss the giant jerk wad? Sunstroke. Yeah, that must have been it. She slipped on a stone poking from the parched valley's soil and twisted her ankle. Smothering a few swear words, she limped to a nearby boulder and parked her butt.

Lucus's shadow fell across her, providing a momentary reprieve from the invasive sun. "What did he do to you?"

Furrowing her brow, she massaged her throbbing ankle. "Who?"

"The guy responsible for your fight-or-flight M.O."

Her fingers tightened around the cuff of her boot. *He couldn't know. It's just a lucky guess.* "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"No? How about the bastard who sent your world toppling off its axis? Ring any bells?"

She forced a laugh that sounded mechanical even to her own ears. "I said all that for Jeneet's benefit."

“And here I thought Chase was the shittiest liar of all time.”

Moving with less grace than an elephant on crutches, she hopped to her feet. “Believe me or not. I really don’t give a crap.”

A heavy shroud of silence accompanied them on the return journey to the star cruiser. Lucas muttered something about tapping into the ship’s water tank for drinking water and climbed inside the exposed hole. She waited until his broad back disappeared before letting her body slump against the Liberty’s cockeyed belly.

No matter how far she ran or how many planets she crash-landed on, her past would never release its ugly hold.

## Chapter Eight

For the hundredth time since sprawling on the lounge, Lucus rearranged Rini's jacket under his head and rolled onto his side. Sleep was one hell of a teasing bitch tonight. As if that weren't bad enough, the dried beef from dinner sat like a rock in his gut.

The soothing hum and rattle of the coolant pipes, something that usually lulled him into la-la land whenever he camped out in the Liberty, was annoyingly absent thanks to the system's control being shot. Instead, he was stuck with dead silence and way too many thoughts tumbling around in his brain. The scariest of them was the realization he wasn't the least bit shocked to be staring down death in the middle of an alien wasteland. No, the only surprising part was Rini. He'd always assumed he'd die alone—and more than likely cursing his brother. Hell, he was batting two out of three.

Rini's scent clung seductively to her jacket, a teasing blend of spicy floral. It was driving him fucking crazy. Grunting, he swung his legs over the side of the lounge and stood. He traversed the corridor in the dark. Good thing he knew the ship's layout better than the back of his hand. The tarp he'd secured over the Liberty's damaged wing area made a whispery soft *frippt* noise as the stingiest of breezes played with the canvas. Peeling the material back, he jumped to the ground and scanned the area for potential predators and other nosy, unwanted nocturnal guests.

The moon, freakishly large overhead, spilled its phosphorescent glow across the valley. Satisfied no threatening creatures lurked in the shadows waiting to make a midnight snack out of him, he walked to the fire ring he'd erected earlier. The dying coals radiated just enough heat to chase off the desert chill.

Despite the persistent chattering of a family of gelinka lizards scurrying from cactus to cactus, Lucus couldn't get his thoughts to leave him be. This time, Rini took starring role. Having her around was one huge complication—one he worried would ultimately do him in. If he didn't get his libido under control, he stood a ninety-nine percent chance of trying to sweet talk his way into her pants again. "You'd think fifteen years and a failed marriage would have cured me of any weakness for rich, pampered princesses."

The problem was Rini didn't exactly come across as being spoiled. A huge pain in the ass—yes. Spoiled, no. Sooner or later, he wouldn't be able to blind himself to the fact and then the true misery would kick in. Because he wanted her, with an intensity that was downright scary. Tasting her, touching her, had been a sublime journey. One he couldn't stop reliving in his head. Over and over and over.

Groaning, he scraped a hand through his hair. "If I keep this up, I'm gonna have to resort to a date with Rosie palm and her five sisters."



“Rosie who?”

Lucus swung sideways and gaped at Rini. Her face a mask of confusion, she hopped from the star cruiser.

*This is awkward.* Clearing his throat, he adopted a scowl and gestured to the opening behind her. “Next time let me know you’re there. Almost gave me a damn heart attack.”

“Sorry, I thought you heard me.” Huddling deeper into the baggy shirt he’d loaned her, she joined him at the fire ring. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

“No.” He shoved his hands into his pants pockets to stop from drawing her close. Sharing body heat was a temptation that would only lead to bad things. Sexy, naked bad things. *Don’t even go there.*

Apparently oblivious of the turmoil inside his head, Rini chuckled. “Crazy, you’d think we’d both be exhausted from the lack of sleep these past twenty-four hours and the constant dodging of death.”

“Yeah, you’d think.”

She peered at him, her smile fading. “You’re not talking much.”

He responded with a grunt and she hugged her chest. A strange pensiveness seized her face while she dropped her gaze to the glowing embers near their feet. Tense silence dragged between them. He took a step back, intending to retreat with a hastily uttered good night, when Rini’s soft voice cut him short.

“His name was Mark.” Still staring at the fire’s remnants, she traced the toes of her bare foot against a crack in the heat-baked soil. “Mark Sommers.” She blinked and looked up at him. “It’s been so long since I’ve said his name out loud, it almost sounds weird to my ears.”

It took several moments to realize she was finally answering the question he’d egged her with earlier.

“Maybe it’s just because he was...my first...but I thought I loved him. And I thought he loved me.”

Everything told him not to ask. Not to open the door that would potentially make him understand her. Make him want to be everything that Mark Sommers couldn’t be. But the words bullied their way past his mouth anyway. “What happened?”

Her fingers repeatedly smoothed through the ends of the hair draping her right shoulder. “He was my instructor at the ranger academy, came in as a replacement towards the end of my final year after my previous instructor suffered a massive stroke and had to retire early. Plenty of voices inside my head warned me not to get involved with Mark. Unfortunately, I didn’t listen to any of them.”

Lucus conjured a picture of a young, naïve Rini being seduced by some suave academic type with leather elbow patches on all his jackets and a pipe constantly sticking from the guy’s mouth. The description probably fell short from reality, but it was better than imagining Rini with some young, handsome stud who’d quiz her on combat weaponry while he banged her on his cherry wood desk. “Let me guess. The academy found out about you two and he called it off.”

“No, his fiancée found out,” Rini said flatly. “I was quite surprised when she showed up unexpectedly at his campus house, since I had no idea of her existence.”

*Of course not.* Clenching his fists, Lucus shoved his hands deeper in his pockets. What Sommers needed was a good ass kicking. “I hope you nailed instructor boy in the balls.”

“I was too devastated to even think of it. And everything that happened afterwards...” She dragged in a shaky breath and expelled it slowly. “Well, it pretty much shut me down physically and emotionally for a long time.”

“The fiancée freaked?”

“That’s putting it mildly.” A hollow laugh broke between her lips. “She took the only dream I had in this world and destroyed it.”

He didn’t know what to make of her statement. Was she saying she’d wanted to spend the rest of her life with the dickhead instructor? Just the idea of it left a sour taste in his mouth. “Babe, you’re better off without the creep.”

Rini stared at him unblinkingly for several seconds before shaking her head. “Trust me, I know. Our relationship wasn’t what his fiancée destroyed. That was ruined the instant she walked inside his house.” Her fingers briefly returned to fidget with her hair. Apparently catching the nervous habit, she clasped her hands in front of her. “You wondered what my real reason could be for not becoming a cop. Well, it was her. She doctored a phony set of my school records to look like I was failing and threatened to tell the school board I was sleeping with Mark in order to graduate.”

“Jesus. What a ruthless bitch.”

“I wanted to be a cop more than anything, but when she came to me with those records and promised to spread her vicious rumors if I didn’t drop out of the job placement program...” Rini dropped her hands, her shoulders sagging. “I didn’t have only myself to consider. There were my parents, and the agency. I couldn’t allow that kind of blight to damage them.”

“So you protected them and gave up your dream.”

She offered a small, reluctant nod.

“You know none of that nonsense is your fault, right?”

“I ignored every instinct screaming at me to run the other way when Mark first started showing me attention. But I was weak and caved.” Her chest lifted on another shuddering inhale. “Maybe I’m really stupid when it comes to men.”

Their eyes met. He didn’t need a secret decoder to decipher the hidden words in her assessment. “Letting one asshole slip past your defenses doesn’t make you a lousy judge of character. It makes you human.”

The corners of her mouth tugged upward in a ghost of a smile. “There’s my problem—I should have been born a Shiartan. Or maybe even an Aquatican.”

“What, and have to deal with all those tentacles? Not to mention the occasional disastrous date with an Aquatican packing only a three-inch pleasure valve.”

The laugh bubbling from Rini was full of life this time. A warm rush of pleasure washed over him at the sound.

Grinning, she wiped her cheeks. “Okay, you might have a point.”

“Damn straight I do.”

The humor lighting her eyes dimmed, seriousness taking its place. “Why do I get the feeling I don’t know who you truly are?”

“Babe, with me, what you see is what you get.”

“I sincerely doubt it. Deep down, I think you’ve been wounded by something too, but you deflect it by cracking off-color jokes and playacting like you couldn’t give a shit.” She stepped closer, her gaze probing, chiseling away at his layers, trying to ferret out God knows what.

“Would you rather I deflect with a pair of strap-on balls like you do?” The minute the sarcasm left his mouth he realized his tactical blunder.

“Then you admit it? You *have* been wounded.”

He spread his arms out. “Hell yeah. You should see some of the scars I’m sporting. And those are just from the past week.”

“I wasn’t talking about physical scars and you know it.” Sad resignation settled on her face. “I thought we were sharing an intimate moment here. A mutual baring of souls. Guess I was mistaken. Just like you.”

He frowned. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re wrong. I am a lousy judge of character.” Hugging herself tight, she shuffled towards the ship.

## Chapter Nine

The next two days passed in a slow haze. Despite spending endless hours scouring the desert, they'd yet to find anything to use as a signal beacon. Hope was growing slim.

Dunking the bandana Lucas had loaned her into the bucket of water stashed near the nose of the Liberty, Rini mopped her face and neck before ringing out the camouflage fabric. The desert's greedy soil soaked up the moisture within seconds. Pulling her hair back, she tied the bandana loosely around her scalp and lifted her hand, shading her eyes. In the distance, Lucas's form looked like a wavering mirage trekking across the furnace-blasted valley.

They hadn't talked much the last thirty-eight hours. Certainly nothing that came close to comparing with the confidences exchanged in the dark the other night. Correction—the confidences she'd given. He'd yet to fess up to anything.

She shook her arms, trying to lose the thin layer of dust that seemed permanently fused to her skin, and reached for the small canteen clipped to her belt. A quick jostle verified an adequate ration of water sloshing inside the metal. Squaring her jaw, she stalked towards the stand of cacti where she'd last spotted Lucas.

His steps slowed while she approached, the wariness she was growing weary of shifting across his face. "What are you doing out here?"

"I could ask you the same." She held out the canteen. "Take it—yours must be bone-dry. You've been gone all morning."

Though she'd kept the accusation from her voice, a guilty flush crept up his neck. "Sorry. You looked so peaceful sleeping I didn't want to wake you."

*Sure.* She watched him unscrew the cap off the canteen and gulp down a healthy swallow. "So what possessed you to take a hike through the desert at the crack of dawn?"

He took another swig of water and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "I wanted to see what sort of terrain is between us and Quarrel's compound."

His answer caught her off guard. "Why?"

Scratching the accumulating stubble taking over his jawbone, he handed her the canteen. "We need a signal beacon. Quarrel's base might be our only option of finding one."

The canteen slipped from her trembling fingers and smacked into the dirt. "You're not planning to go back there!"

“We don’t have much choice.”

“If he catches you, you’re dead.”

A wry grin curved his mouth. “Hence the reason I’ll try like hell not to get caught.”

“Maybe we should think about this.” Ignoring the canteen rolling at her feet, she paced restlessly, earning the chastising trills from a lizard scurrying out of her warpath. “We haven’t checked every square inch of this desert. There’s got to be more wreckage from the Starflight Folly.”

“Rini, we stand a better chance of finding an ocean in the middle of this valley than a transmitter that might or might not even still be here. Or be functional.”

She knew he was only being pragmatic. But it didn’t mean she had to like it. Or agree. “What does it hurt to keep looking?”

“We’d only be postponing the inevitable.”

Fisting her hands, she stopped directly in front of him. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I know.”

“Then I’m going with you.”

He leaned down and grabbed the canteen. “I’d get it done quicker if you didn’t. Plus, I’d only worry about you the whole time.”

The same excited belly flutters that kicked up the last time he said he worried about her returned. *God, I’m pathetic.* “How do you think I would feel stuck here while you’re sneaking around the general’s compound?”

“You’ll probably throw a party.”

“Who am I going to invite? The lizards?”

Grinning, he tapped his thigh with the canteen. “Only if they bring their own booze.”

After talking it over, they decided it made the most sense to wait until nightfall for him to set out across the desert. Well, pretty much Lucas thought it made sense. She thought it was nuts. Grumbling beneath her breath, she rifled through the galley’s cupboards, pulling out items that could easily be transported in Lucas’s pac-sack. The rest of the dried beef. A container of hubarra nuts. Some wheat wafers packaged in a collapsible tin. The remainder of limited space inside the pac she reserved for canisters of water, enough to hopefully last him three days. Three and a half if he paced himself.

Lucas strode into the galley and tossed an expandable huddle tent onto the metal tabletop. She gave the device a dubious glance. “Have you ever slept in one of these?”

“No. You?”

“They were standard issue in most of our training ops at the academy.” She fingered the tissue-thin, metallic fabric. “Be careful where you pitch this. The tiniest breeze can knock it over.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

His glib, cheery responses were like needles pricking at her skin. “This isn’t going to be some grand adventure you’re reliving from the glory days spent at camp Wig-A-Wam.”

A slow grin crept across his face. “Camp Wig-A-Wam? Is that where you went?”

“No, I made it up. My parents never let me attend camp.”

“Mine did. And as you can see, I survived.”

Biting the corner of her lip, she reached for the mini medi-kit she’d put together. “I’m still stashing this in your pac, to be on the safe side.” She released the closures on the Mylar and rolled the bag out, displaying its contents. “There’s antiseptic pads, bandages, venom blocker, sting balm, my little can of stun spray in case you encounter a hungry bear—”

“In the desert?”

“Okay, a hungry buzzard,” she countered, rolling her eyes. “I also included a tiny pair of scissors, tweezers, and a tube of insta-patch in case something needs stitches.”

“Good thinking. I’ve got a pair of pants I’ve been meaning to hem.”

She shot him a dirty look and he chuckled. “I’m glad you find me so hilarious.”

“Babe, I find you adorable.” Without warning, he squeezed her in a tight hug.

It was the first body-to-body contact they’d shared since their hot kiss in the desert on the day they crashed. Though the touch was in no way sexual, it still felt mighty good. Unable to resist, she snuggled against him with a soft sigh. “No one’s ever called me adorable before.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Tilting her head, she slid him a narrow-eyed look. “You know, if you stayed mute for a second, I just might be able to keep up this illusion of liking you.”

“Don’t think you’ll have much problem there. I can be unbearably charming.” His eyes twinkling devilishly, he leaned his face close. *Very* close. Their breath mingled. If she inched up a fraction, her lips would meet his. It’d be that easy.

He dropped his arms and stepped back. Disappointment settled over her like a musty old coat—smothering and uncomfortable. She should be happy he hadn’t tried to kiss her. What good would falling for him do when they were as different as two people could be? If they somehow did manage to get off the planet, she’d go back to her job at the agency and he’d probably return to illegal trading with creepy dictators.

She scrunched her forehead at the reminder of Lucus’s business dealings with the general. Or more precisely, the cryptic comment he’d made about being forced into it. During all the recent excitement, she hadn’t pursued further explanation from him. Well, that was going to change, and fast. Why should she be the only one spilling her guts around here? “How did General Quarrel convince you to set up trade with him?”

Lucus blinked, the last traces of his grin vanishing. “Do we need to talk about that now? There’s still a shitload of last-minute stuff to finish.”

Stacking her arms over her chest, she stared him down.

“Jesus, you could give pointers to a pit bull.” He leaned against the tabletop with an expression that was best labeled bone-dead weary. “Three months ago, my brother decided to treat some friends to a night of fun on Shiarta.”

She’d never been to Shiarta but she knew darn well the type of fun typically dished up on the pleasure planet. “That was awfully generous of him.”

Lucus gave a wry twist of his lips. “Money has a habit of flying out of Chase’s wallet.”

Whatever caused the animosity existing between Lucus and his brother, she was willing to bet there was more to it than just Chase’s lackadaisical attitude regarding finances. Rather than waste the next hour trying to pry the truth from Lucus, she decided to keep him focused on the current story. “What does the general have to do with Chase’s adventure on Shiarta?”

“Unfortunately, my stupid-ass brother decided to hit on Quarrel’s favorite concubine.”

Rini stifled the urge to gag. “Ugh, all the money in the universe wouldn’t convince me to have sex with the general.”

“Glad to hear you have lofty standards.”

She caught the amusement sparkling in Lucus’s eyes. “If I had to choose between a five-second quickie with General Quarrel or having a thousand slugs dumped on my naked body, I’d pick the slugs. Come to think of it, the two would probably feel similar.” Shuddering at the disturbing picture floating in her head, she waved a hand at Lucus. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No problem.” Reaching out, he snagged the tiny jar of sting balm from the medi-kit and rolled it between his palms repeatedly.

She noted the nervous gesture but didn’t comment. Lucus remained quiet for several moments. Just when she was about to give up on him, he flipped the balm onto the mylar bag and pushed away from the table.

“I got a desperate call from one of Chase’s friends that night. Quarrel had every intention of dragging my brother back to Aquatica with him. Probably would have dumped Chase inside the cell you and I became acquainted with three days ago.”

“But you showed up and somehow bailed your brother out.” The puzzle pieces started clicking together. “That’s where the bargain came in, isn’t it? You agreed to smuggle for Quarrel in order to save your brother’s life.”

“Yep.”

Lucus pivoted and she stared at the back of his head. “Why did you let me think the worst of you all this time?”

He gave a disinterested shrug. “Would it have made any difference?”

“How can you even ask?”

“Because with you everything is pretty much black and white.”

“No it’s not!” Trying to disguise the spiral of hurt unfurling inside her, she stepped around Lucas and shot him an incensed glare. He returned it calmly.

“Rini, you live your life according to a set of clearly defined rules.” He held his palms facing out. “Over here are the people who’d never dream of breaking the law. They’re the ones you understand—the ones you feel obligated to protect and serve. But over here is everyone else.”

“You make me sound...rigid. I don’t compartmentalize to that degree.”

He cocked an eyebrow. Amazing how such lack of faith could be conveyed with one annoying facial quirk. She tossed up her hands. “Fine, believe whatever you want. Even if it’s dead wrong.”

A heavy exhale escaped him. “Do you think we can save the bickering for when I get back? Right now, I’d just like to enjoy a peaceful dinner under the stars.”

Since there was no way she could do anything but agree without looking like a total bitch, she nodded. “What do you feel like eating? There’s a tin of processed ham or dehydrated meatloaf.”

“Hell with it, let’s splurge and go with the ham.”

Beneath his over-the-top enthusiasm, she heard the unspoken truth. This might be the last meal they shared. Better make the most of it.

“Why don’t you go stoke the fire? I’ll get things prepped and meet you outside in five.” She waited until Lucas’s whistle departed down the corridor before slumping against the metal table. It made no sense. Part of her wanted to clobber him for painting her as a controlling stick-in-the-mud. The other part worried that after tonight, she’d never have the opportunity to argue with him again. “Could I be more warped?”

She pried open the tin of ham, scraped off the mysterious gelatinous coating, and plopped the meat onto an available platter. After slicing the ham into slightly more appetizing wedges, she sprinkled two handfuls of Galaxy Gus’s potato chips around the perimeter of the plastic dish and carried her culinary masterpiece outside.

Settling the platter onto the crate they’d fashioned into a table, she watched Lucas feed packing material to the fire. A shower of sparks erupted, casting him in a red glow and highlighting the bead of sweat sliding down the bronzed column of his throat. An overwhelming urge to follow the trail of sweat with her tongue crashed over her. She stuffed a potato chip into her mouth to combat any stupid ideas about making her fantasy a reality.

He turned, his scrutiny falling on the dish of food. A sexy smile playing on his lips, he sauntered over. “Perfect timing.” He munched a chip and leisurely licked his fingers clean.

*Is he trying to kill me?*

Lucas stared at her, his forehead scrunching. “You’re looking at me weird.”



“I am?”

“Yep.” He narrowed his eyes. “I thought we agreed no more bickering.”

She gaped at him. “I didn’t even say anything.”

He shook a chip at her. “You don’t have to. I can hear the argument brewing inside your head.”

“You’re craz—” She snapped her mouth shut. Hey, if he wanted to think that, fantastic. Better than him knowing the only thing inside her head at the moment was a vision of him eating potato chips off her naked body.

“Look, I’m sorry if my calling your worldview narrow sounded harsh.” He crushed the chip and the decimated pieces fell from his fist. “And maybe I should have told you about the situation with Quarrel sooner. I’m not used to sharing everything with people. It’s always been easier just to do my own thing. Not depend on anyone.”

“Not even your brother?”

He snorted. “Especially not my brother. He can barely function on his own.”

Something besides sarcasm lurked in Lucus’s tone. Before she could ask him about it, he changed the subject to the upcoming mission, effectively dead-bolting the door on any possible revelations.

“Hopefully this trip won’t take me more than a couple days. Regardless, while I’m gone keep an eye out for unwelcome visitors. The fact none of Quarrel’s men have shown up doesn’t mean they’re unaware of us.”

If that was the case, Lucus could be walking into a trap. “Maybe we should take one last look—”

He cut her off by shoving a wedge of ham into her mouth. Glaring, she chewed then swallowed the piece of meat. “Was that necessary?”

“Yep. Worked pretty good too. Might have to remember it for future reference.”

“Hah, good luck.” She planted her hands on her hips. “I’m on to you now. I’ll hide all the food. What’ll you do then, Mr. Smartypants?”

A wicked gleam danced in his eyes. “Guess I’ll have to find something else to stick in your mouth.”

She blinked. Surely he didn’t mean... *Oh man, I need to get my mind out of the gutter.*

Lucus reached behind him and grabbed one of the wooden cartons stacked next to the star cruiser. He patted it invitingly. “Here, take a load off. I’ll be back in a sec. I’ve got a surprise I think you’ll like.”

Her curiosity piqued, she dutifully plopped her butt onto the carton. Less than five minutes later he returned with an assortment of truffles arranged on a tin plate. Somehow she managed not to drool on herself.

“Where in the universe did those come from?”

“Remember when we stopped on Zondoroc? One of the traders from the market specializes in them. My ma has me stock up for her every six months.” He selected a truffle dusted with white chocolate shavings and held it to her mouth. “Open up.”

She parted her lips and he slipped the morsel inside. It melted on her tongue like a decadent dream. This time she wouldn't complain about having food stuffed in her mouth.

"What do you think?"

Words couldn't adequately describe the sinful party happening for her taste buds so she hummed in appreciation.

"Want another?"

"Please."

"Since you asked extra nice." Wearing a teasing grin, he plucked a dark chocolate truffle from the dish and fed it to her.

Closing her eyes, she released a blissful sigh. "If I keep eating these, I won't care about us being stranded. I'll also end up weighing three hundred pounds and our rescuers will require a hover crane to airlift me into their ship."

Laughing, Lucus nudged another carton next to hers and eased down. He wolfed two wedges of the ham and smacked his lips. "Those weren't half as disgusting as they looked."

"Admit it, you only ate the ham so you wouldn't feel bad stuffing yourself with chocolate."

"Damn, I'm that obvious?" His smile unrepentant, he popped a coconut-crust truffle in his mouth.

*So he likes sweets.* At least she could say she knew something about him. "What made you decide to captain your own cargo ship?"

"Seemed like a good way to make a buck. Plus it gave me a chance to see the galaxy, forget about things for a while."

"Forget about things?"

The firelight at his back made reading his expression difficult. Still, she could sense the tension radiating from him. *Great, now he'll go into lockdown again. Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut?*

"I was going through a divorce. An unpleasant one."

His reply triggered a multitude of emotions inside her. Shock stood at the forefront. Lucus—loner space-trader extraordinaire—had been married?

"Sandra drew the shortest stick."

She blinked. "What?"

"You're looking at me like you're trying to figure out how a woman got roped into marrying me. She got the short stick."

He was back to cracking jokes. The divorce must have been way worse than he was letting on. "I'm sorry you had to go through it. Do you ever...see each other?"

"No. We don't exactly run in the same circles these days." Heavy silence stretched between them and he stood, reaching for the plate of truffles. "Better take these inside before they melt all over the place."

Without giving herself time to rethink her actions, she placed her hand on his forearm. “Please stay. We don’t have to talk about any of that stuff.” He hesitated and she freed the dish from his grip, resettling it on the crate. “I’ll be stuck here for the next few days with no one but the lizards to talk to. Take pity on me.”

Lucus sat, his large body angled at the very edge of the carton—more than likely so he could escape without banging his kneecap in case the need arose. Behind him, the fire popped and crackled, blue-tipped flames licking the night air.

The scent of wood smoke drifted to her nose, its sharp essence oddly comforting. “Aside from us hiding out from a diabolical dictator, is this anything like camp?”

Lucus’s shoulders relaxed and he chuckled. The sound lifted the strain between them and they spent the next half hour talking politics and the chances of Warddok Fourteen’s all-pro team winning the title of intergalactic mutant bowling champs. In other words, any topic was fair game but his wife and his brother. She didn’t care. It was enough just hearing his husky baritone and occasional laugh.

*Oh crap. I’ve fallen for him.* The queasy excitement trembling in her stomach wouldn’t let her deny it.

“Are you okay? You look like you’re going to puke or something.”

She swallowed hard. “Think I ate too much chocolate.” *God, I’m a liar and a chicken shit.*

Lucus stood. “Come inside with me. You can rummage for an antacid while I put the rest of my pac together.”

Though she doubted a pill would help with her problem, she traipsed after him. She waited until he disappeared down the corridor to his sleeping port before slinking into the galley. *Why do I have this habit of falling for the worst possible guy at the worst possible time?* She leaned against the steel wall and dug her knuckles into her temples. “A shrink would have a field day with me.”

Disgusted with her apparent lack of sense, she stalked to the table and bundled the medi-kit together. Remembering the nightscope imager tucked away in her jacket pocket, she abandoned the galley for the bridge. It took a few minutes to find her jacket. Somehow it left its post on the copilot seat and ended up squashed beneath the arm of the lounge. She straightened just as Lucus rounded the corner.

Shifting the bulky pac-sack strapped to his back, he glanced at the jacket balled in her grip. “I was using that for a pillow. Hope you don’t mind.”

“You’ve been loaning me your bed. I’d look a tad ungrateful if I threw a hissy about you sleeping on my jacket.” She dug inside the interior pocket and pulled out the nightscope.

“Shit, no wonder it felt like I had a rock jamming into my skull.”

She frowned. “Why didn’t you take it out?”

“Yeah, right. I know how territorial women are about their belongings. I didn’t want you kicking my ass for invading the inner sanctum of your pockets.”

“Inner sanctum, huh? High title for something that’s lined in microfiber and houses lint.” She released the nightscope’s retractable neck cord. “Bend down so I can slip this on you.”

Lucus stooped. Standing on tippy-toe, she hooked the cord in place and tried to ignore the tantalizing heat of his skin. He smelled of wood smoke and musky sweat, a strange combination that shouldn’t have made her tingly in all sorts of embarrassing places. She dropped her hands and backed up.

“Thanks.” His voice held a gravelly undertone and his pupils seemed darker than usual.

“No problem. I figured the nightscope would come in handy.”

“Yeah, might save me from accidentally crossing paths with that hungry bear.”

“True.”

He tightened the strap on his pac-sack, jostling the huddle tent anchored beside it. “I should probably get going. Before the sun rises.”

She nodded. They stared at each other for a long, awkward moment. Her hands shook with nervous tension and she hid them behind her back. “Yep, you really should.”

His gaze slid away and he stepped around her. With effort, she swallowed past the lump of anxiety lodged in her throat and turned to watch him leave. “Please be careful.”

Lucus halted, took two steps forward and hesitated again. He stood there silent for several seconds before pivoting.

“What’s wrong? Did you forget something?”

“Yeah.” Two long strides later, he was in front of her, his arms engulfing her and his head descending.

The kiss ignited like an electrical fire, zipping through all her synapses. When her knees threatened to give out, Lucus tightened his grip, one palm curving the base of her neck and the other riding low near her tailbone. His tongue continued its mission of short-circuiting her brain.

*I’m going to need a heart defibrillator after this.* She cupped his face and kissed him back with enough force to bruise her lips. Didn’t matter. She’d gladly endure it to savor this moment.

He pulled back, his breath ragged. “When I get back, I’m going to make you forget asshole Mark Sommers ever existed.”

She blinked. “Mark who?”

His mouth tugging into a smug, masculine grin, he turned and strode towards the exit.

## Chapter Ten

Fatigue started prodding at Lucas around midday. The sun was nearly at its zenith, which only added to the torture. Once the desert turned its furnace dial to full blast, it'd be impossible to continue. His motions sluggish, he loosened the straps on the pac-sack and huddle tent before dropping both burdens to the ground. The loss of the excess weight quieted the complaints of his straining muscles. If he possessed an ounce of moisture in his body, he would have teared up with relief.

A large outcropping of rock provided a good location for pitching the tent. Less than five minutes later, he crawled inside the enclosure and secured the flap. The huddle's heat-repellant material kept the cramped interior relatively cool. Stripping off his shirt, he wadded the fabric into a ball, intending to use it as a pillow for his nap. His body shivered in anticipation of sleep, but first he desperately needed hydration.

Unzipping the pac-sack, he fetched one of the canisters of water and unscrewed the lid. He battled the urge to slug down the water and took measured sips instead. When his gut didn't revolt, he risked a lengthier swallow and recapped the canister. Giving into the exhaustion yanking at his limbs, he stretched out on the tent's padded floor with a groan. There wasn't enough room to fully recline his legs but he wouldn't bitch. Wedging his shirt beneath his head, he closed his eyes and within seconds, fell asleep. Rini filled his dreams—her mouth sweet and teasing as it traversed along his abdomen and lower, until her lips closed over his cock and sucked him inside the hottest heaven he'd ever known.

"Yeah, baby, like that. Deeper." He jerked awake, blinking. The vibrant dream dissolved like a fine spider web in a rainstorm. Glancing down, he noticed the position of his hand and the status of his raging hard-on. "Great, I'm jerking off in my sleep now."

Shaking his head, he scooted to his knees and unfastened the tent flap. The sun had begun its trek towards the west. Deciding he'd best get a quick meal in before resuming his journey, he unpacked the dried beef and tore off a small portion. He washed down the meat and a handful of the hubarra nuts with a few gulps of water. By the time he reassembled and strapped everything onto his back, the sun had dipped even farther on the horizon, striping the desert with its sherbet hues.

For the next two hours he concentrated his sight on the mountain ridge in the distance, using the focal point as motivation to keep one foot stepping in front of the other. He was so wrapped up in that deliberate task, he almost missed the glint of metal towering beyond a cluster of boulders. Veering off track, he went to investigate.

“I don’t fucking believe it.” Crouching behind the shortest of the boulders, he stared at the dome-shaped hut that squatted in the middle of the desert terrain like a giant steel mushroom. From the architectural design, he was willing to bet the structure belonged to Quarrel. *An outpost station?* Possibly. Seemed logical Quarrel would have guards patrolling his base, even this far out. It also stood to reason that there’d be a beacon transmitter stashed in the building.

Shading his eyes, he scanned the hut’s exterior and the surrounding area for surveillance optics. Unless Quarrel had invested in cutting-edge equipment that was undetectable to the human eye, the coast looked clear. Moving cautiously, he slipped the pack and huddle tent free of his shoulders and stacked them at the base of the boulders. If guards were inside the building, his only hope would be launching a sneak attack.

He started to inch away from the rocks just as a door recessed in the steel siding swung inward. Ducking, he watched two guards amble outside.

“I’ll see you in two weeks,” the taller one said.

“Are you certain you wouldn’t prefer switching shifts? I don’t mind.”

“You just don’t want to be around the general when he’s on the rampage.” Slapping his comrade on the back, the tall Aquatican disappeared inside the hut.

The other guard made an obscene gesture with one of his tentacles. “Fish breath. Hope you get molested by a lizard.” With an irritable grumble, he stalked around the perimeter of the building and sped off seconds later in a transport rover.

Lucus stared at the plume of dust fanning behind the departing vehicle. “Shit, wish I’d seen that earlier.” Gritting his teeth, he left his hiding spot, keeping low to the ground as he approached the hut. The door remained ajar, squeaking slightly on its hinges. He spied a series of suspended cage lights leading deeper into the bowels of the station. The remaining guard was nowhere in sight.

*Here goes nothing.* He pried the door open all the way, wincing when the steel issued another rusty whine. Balancing his weight so no heavy boot tread would alert the guard, he skulked past the entry. Trash littered every available surface of the small vestibule he stood in. The noxious odor of rotting kelp also fouled the air.

Too bad he didn’t have a camera. It’d be a perfect opportunity to show Rini that a grosser place existed than the bridge of his ship. Venturing closer to the hallway, he pressed against the wall and peeked around the corner. No guard lurking in the shadows. So far so good. He stepped over the threshold and crept along the corridor, his senses on high alert. Muffled noise came from up ahead. It took a minute to recognize the faint strains of Jhiordan jungle music. Inching closer to the sound, he came to a room fronted by dirty windows. On the other side of the grimy film coating the glass, the guard gyrated to the throbbing beat, wearing nothing but a leopard-print thong.

*That is wrong on so many levels.* Grimacing, Lucus hunkered beneath the window ledge and crab-walked past the room. A few yards farther up the hall, he came across the control hub of the station. Three enormous tables piled high with logbooks took up most of the space. Unfortunately, no central computing system was in evidence. He strode to the cabinet situated in the rear of the room and started wrenching drawers open. With each unproductive attempt, the anchor suspended from his heart plummeted lower. His hopes riding a shaky rail, he searched the final bin. He pushed the clutter aside and bit back an exultant whoop at the sight of the transmitter nestled at the bottom.

“Come to papa, you beautiful thing.” Crooning to the inanimate object, he lifted the transmitter and cradled it in his palm. He toggled the switch and a green light appeared on the face of the device. “Thank you, Jesus.”

Tucking the transmitter into the back pocket of his pants, he exited the room—the same instant the guard boogied into the hallway. They gaped at each other mutely.

Lucus was first to break the silence. “Son of a bitch.” *Do I really want to tackle a half-naked Aquatican dude?* Not giving himself time to dwell on the godawful fate staring him down, he barreled towards the guard.

## Chapter Eleven

Rini eyed the pinkish underbelly of the lone cloud hovering mid-sky. “Doesn’t it *ever* rain here?” Heaving a disgusted breath, she tossed another piece of splintered crate into the fire ring. She backtracked to the makeshift table and stared at her unappetizing meal of dehydrated meatloaf. Bad enough having to eat alone. Try gulping down a slab of sawdust that attempted to pass itself off as meat. Unfortunately, with the rehydrator out of commission, she didn’t have much choice.

She sawed off a corner of the meatloaf and took a nibble. “Ketchup—that’s what it needs.” Throwing her fork on top of her plate, she raced inside the star cruiser. A quick rummage through the galley’s cupboards produced an unopened bottle of the condiment. She returned to the table outside and smothered her dinner with a thick layer of ketchup. With the meatloaf’s bland flavor masked, she managed to choke down most of it.

She pushed the uneaten portion away, her thoughts returning to Lucus. All day she’d been stressing over him, her overactive imagination conjuring all sorts of terrible scenarios. What if he took a nasty spill and broke his leg? He’d be hobbling around the desert for days, at the mercy of the relentless sun and nighttime predators. Or what if he was captured by General Quarrel and thrown back inside the death tank? Even Jeneet wouldn’t be able to spring him if that ended up happening.

Rini buried her face in her hands and groaned. “*Stop it.* Imagining the worst isn’t going to do anything but give me a migraine.” Jumping up from the carton, she paced in front of the fire. A few minutes of that and she started to feel like a human sponge, pouring sweat in massive quantities. Peeling Lucus’s shirt off, she placed it on the crate and turned towards the washing bucket. She splashed her torso and face, blinking as fat water rivulets ran into her eyes. Reaching out blindly, she groped for the discarded shirt. Her fingers scraped against the edge of the crate and she frowned. A chorus of high-pitched chirps disturbed the peace.

Her vision blurry and waterlogged, she spun in time to catch a family of lizards absconding with Lucus’s shirt into the desert.

“Come back here, you scaly thieves!” Stumbling around the crate, she dashed after the fleeing reptilians. The shirt zigzagged between a pair of cacti, one flapping arm nearly snagging on a cactus quill. Chattering away, the trio of lizards darted behind an enormous rock. Noisy squeals erupted and the exposed tail-end of the shirt started whipping wildly. Figuring the lizards were busy playing tug-of-war over ownership of their stolen prize, Rini lunged forward.



“Got you, you little—” Shock held her immobilized. A lizard at least three feet in length crouched on the other side of the rock, a flicking tail disappearing between its wickedly sharp teeth. Once the ginormo lizard finished chowing on its puny cousin, its beady eyes trained on her.

“Oh shit.” Heart tripping, Rini backed up.

An ominous hiss rasped from the beast. With dizzying speed, one of its front claws struck Rini’s leg, slashing the cotton barrier of her cargo pants. Pain seared her flesh but she had no time to yelp as the lizard sprang for her throat. The weight knocked her off her feet, slamming her to the ground. She beat at the creature, trying to dislodge it and avoid its snapping jaws at the same time. Giving it a fierce pummel upside its head, she knocked the lizard from her chest. She rolled, frantically scrabbling onto her elbows. Surging to its feet, the lizard leapt at her.

A horrific scream ripped through the night and scarlet-tipped wings flapped overhead, colliding with the lizard.

Rini fell back with a gasp as the buzzard dug its talons into the lizard and carted it off with a triumphant squawk. She slumped, stunned relief forcing a laugh from her. “I can’t believe Big Ugly just saved my ass.”

Her limbs wobbly, she stood and swiped Lucas’s shirt. She managed two steps before a strange numbness crawled up her leg and seized her calf muscles, making her stumble. Frowning, she shuffled forward. The tingly sensation traveled to her other leg. Dragging her right foot, she scuffed towards the Liberty. Less than twenty yards from the ship, she lost all mobility in her legs and thumped to the ground like a toppled domino. Except for the sting radiating from the gashes where the lizard attacked her, everything from her rib cage down was deadened. Remembering the warnings in the various zoological textbooks she’d studied prior to her ranger training ops, she mumbled a curse, her heart rate spiking.

From the look of things, she’d just had her first encounter with a brown-bellied nictick lizard. Once infected with the nictick’s venom, the victim suffered complete paralysis. She didn’t need to worry about the lizard returning to savor his slow, leisurely dinner but that didn’t mean she was out of the woods. Or out of the desert, to be more precise. She stared at the hulking outline of the Liberty in the distance. In her condition, the sixty feet separating her from the ship might as well be a thousand miles.

The clod of dirt beneath her cheek absorbed her anguished moan. “Fate, could you be a bigger smart aleck?”

A hungry scream echoed above.

She gulped. “Forget I asked.”

~ \* ~

Lucus plowed his fist into the guard’s jaw and the Aquatican reciprocated by whipping a tentacle out and slamming Lucas against the corridor wall. They’d been at it for close to fifteen minutes and it was

beginning to wear on Lucus. At least that's what he told himself as he staggered sideways, his vision going wonky. Under normal circumstances, he would have kicked this eight-armed, thong-wearin' freak's ass six ways to Sunday.

"Getting tired?" A raspy chuckle trickled from the guard and he lunged forward.

Sidestepping the guard's flailing tentacles, Lucus squeezed a laugh past the harsh breaths hogging his windpipe. "No. You?"

"Hardly." A wicked gleam of excitement shone in the Aquatican's eyes as he circled Lucus with the nimble quickstep of a pugilist's dance. "Perhaps I should have warned you earlier. My cousin is Sammer the Hammer. Perhaps you've heard of him?"

The undisputed intergalactic boxing champion. Shit, who hadn't heard of him? Lucus narrowly ducked a flying tentacle. "So I take it the Hammer taught you a few tricks."

"Only his best."

*Fuck, time to level the playing field.* Lucus twisted to the left and brought his boot up hard between the guard's legs. The Aquatican fell, his shrill, girlish shriek rattling the windowpanes.

"Learned that trick from an ex-girlfriend. Pretty damn certain you haven't heard of her." Grasping one of the limp tentacles sagging near his foot, Lucus dragged the guard into the room behind them. He spied a steel door propped open on the farthest wall and towed the blubbing Aquatican inside what turned out to be a pantry. After grabbing four boxes of powdered soup and a bag of biscuits from the shelf, Lucus wedged a chair under the door handle, ensuring no convenient escape for the guard. By the time he exited the station, the sun had officially cozied down for the night.

He gave the star-riddled sky a wry grimace. "Seems no matter how I time it, I'm always stuck stumbling around in the dark." Returning to the cluster of boulders, he stuffed the newly acquired rations of food in the pac-sack and reloaded himself. The good news was if he kept a brisk pace and didn't stop to sleep, he'd reach Rini and the Liberty by midafternoon.

His stiff resolve took a hike several hours later when the sleep-deprived hallucinations began setting in. Every time he came across a cactus, he damn near jumped out of his skin mistaking the plant for some chubby specter of death. Considering the cacti-filled desert surrounding him, his chances of suffering a heart attack within the next five minutes looked good. If that weren't bad enough, the load he carried started to feel about as comfortable as a walrus riding him piggyback.

Defeated, he dropped his gear and erected the huddle tent. This time no erotic dreams involving Rini played havoc with his mind. But he did get in a quick snooze, which actually made the homeward stretch of his journey less of a living hell.

The sun stood at full blast by the time he hit the outskirts of the crash site. Sweat poured off him faster than his body manufactured it. Wiping his dripping brow, he scuffed past the large forroc marking the end of the path he'd blazed. The star cruiser loomed ahead. "Honey, I'm home," he croaked.

Ignoring the merciless pain and exhaustion draining him, he limped closer to the ship. He spotted Rini sprawled on the desert floor, not far from the shadow cast by the Liberty's tail fin. Something about the utter stillness of her form made his heart do a slow plummet to his toes.

Adrenaline renewing his energy, he jerked the pac-sack and huddle tent off and ran. He dropped to his knees beside Rini. With trembling hands, he cupped her neck, feeling for a pulse. The shallow heartbeat was weak, but it was there. His focus lowered to the bloody leg of her pants.

Rini's head shifted a tiny fraction and his attention returned to her face just as her eyelashes fluttered. "Bout time you showed up."

"Baby, what the hell happened to you?"

"Got into a bit of a brawl. With a poisonous lizard. Don't worry, he looks worse than me." Her voice floated to his ears, a mere whisper. The frailty of the sound brought a lump to his throat.

"You can't walk?"

Another slight movement of her head gave him his answer. Tucking his arms beneath her shoulders and lower spine, he cradled her against his chest and stood. Pushing the strain in his muscles to the back of his mind, he carried Rini inside the Liberty and lowered her onto the lounger. "I'm going to get you some water. I'll be right back."

"Not going...anywhere."

She was cracking jokes. That had to be a good sign. People having the life sucked out of them wouldn't feel up to one-liners. Fortifying himself with that thought, he rushed to the galley and snagged one of the drinking jugs. When he returned to Rini he found her convulsing. He dropped the jug and it crashed onto the floor, spilling its contents. Unconcerned with the minor catastrophe with the water, he rolled Rini onto her side. Her pant leg rucked up and his gaze landed on the nasty scratches branded on her calf. Through the haze of his fear, he remembered her saying something about being attacked by a poisonous lizard.

"Fucking son of a—" Biting off the remainder of the curse, he raced from the ship, tearing the ground up at a mad clip to reach his pac-sack. He flew back to the Liberty like a pack of rabid dogs were snarling at his heels. Skidding to a stop next to the lounger, he ripped open the sack and tossed its contents onto the floor. He scrounged through the pile until he came to the medi-kit Rini had put together. Ripping the ties free, he unrolled the bag and searched for the venom blocker. He located the small hypodermic syringe and uncapped it. Fisting Rini's wrist, he inserted the needle just above her biceps and released the plunger, watching the clear liquid disappear from its chamber.

Minutes passed like long, agonizing hours before Rini stopped her thrashing. He drew her close, wrapping her tight inside the cage of his arms. Who knew if the blocker would continue to work its magic? In the meantime he'd pray for a miracle.

## Chapter Twelve

Lucus gave the soup-filled pan suspended over the fire ring a final stir before ladling the broth into a bowl. He ducked inside the Liberty and settled on the carton he'd dragged next to the lounge. Rini remained locked in unconsciousness. The hair plastered against her perspiring cheek stirred with her soft breaths. He flicked a strand away from her forehead, and she mumbled something low and unintelligible.

His fingers brushed the smooth arch of her brow. "Sweetheart, are you awake?"

"No."

A hot rush of relief flooded him and he smiled. "Faker."

She opened her eyes and stared at him. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"Probably not long enough. But while you're awake, I want you to eat this." He held up the bowl.

"What is it?"

"Soup. I brought it back with me from the guard station."

"You carried a bowl of soup across the desert? How'd you keep from spilling it?"

"It was damn hard, believe me." Emotion roughened his voice. Half an hour ago, he hadn't been certain she would pull through and now they were joking. The moment felt bittersweet and surreal.

"What do you mean by guard station? I thought you were going to the general's base."

"So did I. There ended up being a change of plans."

Curiosity momentarily banished the deep exhaustion lining Rini's face. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you—after you eat this." He waggled the soup bowl in reminder, sloshing its contents.

"I'm not hungry."

"Yes you are."

Her expression turned mulish. "What, you have a direct link to my stomach?"

"Yep. And it let me know you need nourishment in order to get better." He adjusted the lounge, raising her into a semi-reclining position.

"Fine." Looking extremely put out, she reached for the bowl and gasped. "Hey, I can move."

*Thank you, Jesus.* "Better let me feed you anyway. Otherwise you'll end up slopping all over yourself."

Surprisingly she didn't outright balk when he nudged the spoon against her lips, but he detected her slight hesitation as she inspected the utensil.

"For God's sake, woman, I washed it."

“With soap? Because if you only did a quick dunk and rinse...”

Growling, he slipped the spoon inside her mouth. He got four scoops down her before she insisted on talking again.

“This stuff is pretty good. Where’d you say you got it again?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “That was about as transparent as cling wrap.”

“You promised.”

“Yeah, I did. But you owe me at least four more bites.”

“How about two?” She returned his stern look with a long, petulant exhale. “Three. It’s my final offer.”

“Deal.” He fed her the agreed-upon spoonfuls, brimming the last one to nearly overflowing—a sneaky trick Rini caught on to, if her irate glare was any indication. Since she’d—mostly—behaved with minimal fuss, he filled her in on the exciting events of the past forty hours.

“I can’t believe you boot-balled Sammer the Hammer’s cousin.” Rini’s eyes doubled in size. “Or that he wears leopard-print thongs. What do you think that’s all about?”

“Babe, I really didn’t want to ask.”

Her scrutiny moved to his hip. “Can I see the transmitter?”

He dug inside his pocket and removed the tiny device. Rini plucked the object from his upturned palm, wistfulness softening her face. She cradled it with great care, almost as if she feared it’d disintegrate. “Do you think the signal will be strong enough for someone to find us?”

No way would he be the dark cloud on her hopeful horizon. “Without a doubt.”

Her smile dazzled to the point it almost hurt to stare directly at it. “That’s the best news I’ve heard in five days, eleven hours and twenty-two minutes.”

“Been keeping track, have ya?”

“I worried if I didn’t, time would become meaningless. Just a quaint concept from life...before.”

He blinked. “Damn, that’s one heavy thought. Kind of makes my hidden fear about being separated from my visioncaster remote for the rest of my life seem pansy ass.”

“Not necessarily. I hear you men are inordinately attached to your remotes.”

Leaning close, he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Between you and me, I’ve been known to sleep with mine. If I could train it to spoon, we’d be a match made in heaven.”

A drowsy chuckle escaped Rini, and he frowned at the fatigue starting to show renewed signs. “Speaking of sleep, I think we need to get you undressed and into my bed.” Realizing how awkward that sounded, he averted his gaze.

“You’re blushing.”

“Men don’t blush. It’s a sunburn. I’ve been roaming the desert for a day and half, for Christ’s sake. Things are bound to get fried.”

“No, you’re definitely redder than you were a minute ago.”

“Rini, zip it.” With that fierce warning issued, he picked her up and stalked down the corridor.

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During the middle of the night, anguished moans awakened Lucus from a light doze. Hurling from the lounge, he ran to check on Rini. She writhed restlessly on the bed, the twisted sheet a mangled disaster around her waist.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” When she didn’t answer, he stooped and touched her cheek. Her skin was roasting. *Fuck*. Panicked, he rushed to the galley and fetched the drinking jug and a couple clean rags. Returning to his sleeping port, he grabbed the glass resting on the overhead shelf and filled it partway. He tried to give Rini a sip but she thrashed wildly, making the water splash all over the place. Frustrated, he returned the glass to the shelf and soaked one of the rags. Prying her mouth open, he squeezed the cloth, wringing its moisture onto her tongue. She sputtered, forcing most of the water to dribble out.

“Rini, you have to drink. You’re dehydrated and feverish.” He didn’t know why he felt compelled to state the obvious. Odds were good she was delirious and unaware of his presence. He re-soaked the rag and fought to get more water past her lips. By the time he finished, her face and hair—not to mention the pillow—were drenched.

Weariness welled inside him. Recalling their earlier conversation regarding his fear of never holding his stupid remote again, he dropped his head. Rini was right. His whole life he avoided his real fears by making jokes instead. Well he had one big fucking fear staring him in the eye and no wisecrack would make it go away.

He picked up the rag and mopped it across her brow. Murmuring gibberish, she groped for the trailing cloth.

“Does that feel good? You want more?”

She didn’t answer, of course, but he dipped the jug over the rag anyway, wetting it. He soothed her overheated skin with the cloth. When he reached the neckline of her tank top he pushed the fabric above her breasts and continued his ministrations. He pretended to ignore the way her nipples tightened when he swirled over their rosy-pink tips. Swallowing hard, he coasted towards her softly rounded belly. He dipped into her navel and tried not to think about the black lace bikini he’d gotten a brief glimpse of when he’d yanked her cargo pants off and helped her climb under the sheets.

A raging fever racked the poor woman and he couldn’t get his mind off her panties. *Talk about a sick fucker*. Disgusted with himself, he lifted the rag. Rini clamped onto the cloth, her fingers twisting. Water oozed, splattering her abdomen. She pulled his hand against her, tugged it lower. Lower. Way lower. When they reached the crotch of her bikini he had every intention of doing the right thing—mostly.

Maybe he hesitated a second too long. Regardless, Rini decided to take the decision from him by rolling onto her side and trapping his hand between her thighs. Through the lace, he felt dampness that had nothing to do with the rag clutched in his grip.

“Rini, I know you can’t hear me, but I need you to let go of my hand.”

Rather than oblige, she rocked her hips in a sinuous glide that made sweat crawl down his spine. “Please. Need...”

*Oh hell.* Praying she wouldn’t later despise him for what he was about to do, he shifted her onto her back and eased beneath the elastic of her panties. “Okay, baby. Let me help you.” His fingers encountered wet, hot flesh and he decided he should be nominated for sainthood for having the willpower not to climb between her legs and bury his cock to the hilt. He caressed her, the slick sound of her arousal making his blood pump straight towards his groin. With a little maneuvering, he found her clitoris. Having no idea how much speed or direct stimulation she preferred, he circled the nub with a light yet firm pressure. Her torso bowing off the bed, she dug a hand into the tangled sheet and howled in climax.

Okay, apparently he got it right.

Rini’s entire body went slack and she sagged onto the mattress. He wished he suffered the same problem with limpness. Exact opposite for him at the moment. Extracting his hand, he bent to kiss her cheek before exiting the port. Once outside, he dunked his head in the water bucket and prayed for sanity.

## Chapter Thirteen

Rini didn't show much improvement when morning came. Afternoon crept up on him fast and he abandoned her briefly to fill more of the drinking jugs. Digging into his pants pocket, he pulled out the transmitter. The green light remained on. So where the hell was the search and rescue ship? For all Lucus knew, Quarrel had a signal blocker orbiting the planet. Wouldn't that be just their fucking luck?

Pushing his black thoughts aside, he returned to Rini. One look at the sodden sheet as he walked back into the port convinced him a bedding change was long overdue. Not so easily executed however when an unconscious woman stretched across half the mattress.

He yanked the covers off one end before re-shifting Rini and freeing the other side. Then began the patience-zapping chore of dressing the bed with fresh sheets while Rini continually flip-flopped around. By the time he'd tucked everything in securely—including Rini—he'd sweated excessively, to the point he needed a changing too. Stripping down to his briefs, he slicked off his perspiration with one of the rags. The lack of clothing felt so damn good, he decided to forgo pants and shirt for the time being. Hell with it. Rini was oblivious to the world and wouldn't give a space rat's ass about him sitting around in his skivvies.

Sinking on the corner of the bed, he stroked her neck, reassured by the soft, steady thrum of the pulse beating beneath his thumb. Strange, this connection he'd forged with Rini. Maybe it was being forced into close confinement together. Or struggling for the same goal—survival and rescue. Whatever the cause, he'd never felt this kind of bond with a woman before. Not even with his ex.

His fingers ruffled through Rini's snarled hair. "I was a fool to compare you to Sandra. She would never have lasted through all this. Doesn't have the fortitude." He smiled. "Or the balls."

Now that he'd opened the gates, all the painful memories he'd kept miserably away the past fifteen years insisted on bullying their way from his mouth. "She never liked being out of her element—which was usually the nearest department store. But hell, I knew that going into the marriage. I have no one to blame but myself. I was young and stupid and thought love always won out. It didn't. No way could I compete with her daddy's overflowing pocketbook."

He stared down at Rini, for once grateful she remained unconscious. It might be cowardly, but it made it easier admitting to his failures knowing she'd never remember their one-sided conversation. Gripping the edge of the sheet, he tugged it over her shoulders. His attention shifted to the pile of laundry on the floor and he gave an exaggerated sigh. "A man's work is never done."



Rini listened to Lucas's footsteps padding away. Her head hurt like a royal mother, which was why she'd decided to keep her eyes closed. At the time it seemed like a brilliant idea. Now she wondered if she shouldn't have given him some indication she was awake.

*If he'd known, he wouldn't have confided those things to me.*

There it was. The ugly truth. She'd played at being asleep so he'd keep talking. Some way to treat the guy who'd apparently taken such great care of her when she was dead to the world. Groaning, she rolled over and blinked at the ceiling. Hiramhi tribal drummers were throwing a party behind her skull—probably karmic payback for her being deceitful. She massaged her temples and fought off a wave of queasiness. Lying in bed was doing nothing but providing her head a steady place to throb. She scooted the covers aside and inched her legs towards the edge of the mattress. God, it felt wonderful to achieve even that basic movement. Never again would she take her mobility for granted.

Lurching into a sitting position, she rocked to her feet. And almost fell backwards. She gripped the steel frame bolting the bed to the wall. Once she felt reasonably steady, she shuffled clumsily into the corridor. Halfway to the galley it occurred to her perhaps she shouldn't be wandering around in only a tank top and bikini. Not that Lucas hadn't already seen her skimpy ensemble. She snuck a glance behind her and her shaky legs protested any notion of making a return trip.

"Guess that's decided." She resumed her snail-paced journey until she reached the entrance to the bridge. Guilt lanced her heart the moment she noticed the threadbare sheet crumpled on the lounge. While she'd been recuperating in comfort, Lucas had spent another night out here. "How does he even fit on that thing?" A sudden image of him contorted with his knees jabbing into his chest sprang into her mind. *Ouch.*

"Rini!"

Yelping, she lost her balance and toppled onto the lounge.

Lucas rushed forward and stopped her head from banging into the side rail. "Damn, didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm okay." Clutching his arm, she levered upright.

"Yeah. You are." Disbelief mingled with pure joy in his voice. "Sweetness, I was beginning to lose hope."

*He called me sweetness.* Before she could ponder too hard on that revelation, he grasped the sides of her face and kissed her enthusiastically. *Very* enthusiastically. By the time he pulled away, she was more than a little tempted to yank him onto the lounge and have her wicked way with him. Apparently being zoned out of her mind really revved her sex drive into high gear. Or maybe it was the sight of his snug, navy blue briefs and the memory of the impressive appendage it concealed.

Licking her lips, she tasted the lingering remnants of his kiss. "You ate chocolate." She didn't hide the accusation in her voice.

Lucas grinned. "Want some?"

*Amongst other things.* Warning her inner slut to behave, she nodded.

“Hold on.”

She watched him trek to the front of the ship, his nicely sculpted buns flexing with each long stride. A second later he returned with the box of truffles and fished one out. While she nibbled the morsel and prayed her stomach wouldn't reject it, Lucus gently kneaded her ankles. His constant attention to her needs brought her guilt roaring to the forefront again. “Okay, I can't take it anymore!”

Lucus immediately dropped her legs.

“Um...I didn't mean the massage. You can keep doing that if you want.” She released a blissful exhale when he continued. “I faked being asleep. I know it was wrong and I shouldn't have let things progress so far without telling you.”

His fingers stalled against her skin. “You were conscious during...all of it?”

“Pretty much.” She snuggled closer and laid her palm over his rigid knuckles. “There's no reason for you to feel awkward or anything. Just look at it as us reaching a new level of intimacy.”

He sputtered on a choke and she thumped him between his shoulder blades. With a final wheeze, he angled against the support bar and eyed her. “Gotta say, I sure wasn't expecting you to be so casual about this. Most women I know would be too embarrassed to pleasure themselves in front of a man much less beg him to lend a hand.”

She jerked away from him like she'd been scalded. “*What?*”

He stared at her, his face frozen in a deer-trapped-in-headlights expression. “You weren't referring to— Oh shit.”

Scooting onto her knees, she gaped at him. “What are *you* talking about?”

“Maybe we could forget I said anything.”

“Yeah right. Out with it.”

Lucus gulped hard enough she could see his throat spasm. “The other night you were feverish and delusional. I tried to get some water in you, but it was like wrestling a greased pig. Best I could do was wipe you down with a rag.”

She wasn't sure she enjoyed being compared to a greased pig. “Then what happened?”

His gaze bore into hers. “Sure you want me to go into the gritty details?”

Okay, she'd already determined the basic lowdown from the little he'd let slip. A graphic play-by-play would only be humiliating. And probably arousing. Like she needed to load her raging libido with more ammunition. “No. But that was all that happened right? We didn't...?”

Lucus looked slightly offended. “If we'd slept together, you'd remember.”

“Well, you did say I was delusional.”

“Trust me, you'd remember.” Smoky promise underscored his assurance.

Her hormones danced an excited jig and she silently whacked them upside their horny little heads. To make matters worse, her bladder suddenly decided to remind her of its presence. She hoisted from the lounge and began walking towards the canvas-draped hole. Lucus got up and joined her. When he started to follow her outside, she shot him a narrow-eyed look. "I don't think so, buster. You've seen enough as it is. I'm not adding to my disgrace by squatting behind a rock in clear view of you."

He grunted before moving away. She stumbled outside and quickly ducked beneath the Liberty's nose just in the nick of time. Feeling immensely better and lighter in the bladder, she crossed to the stone monument and rested in its shade. "God, I hate being this weak."

A chirp sounded above and she glanced at the gelinka lizard clinging to the side of the boulder. "You be quiet. It's partly your fault I'm in this predicament."

The lizard twitched its tiny head and scampered off.

"Yeah, you better run." She pushed from the rock and aimlessly wandered to the carton perched near the edge of the extinguished fire ring. Plopping her rear down, she surveyed the haze of heat shimmering between the clumps of far-off cacti. She didn't bother turning when the unmistakable rustle of canvas sounded behind her.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Sitting."

A growl came from Lucus. "I can see that. It's too damn hot for you to be out here in your condition."

"I've been cooped in that ship for more than a day." She swiveled and gave him her best puppy-dog-pleading stare. "I need a change of scenery."

"You'll be more comfortable tucked on the lounge. Plus it's cooler."

"No."

A brief glimmer of calculation simmered in his eyes before he masked it with feigned resignation. "Look, truth is I planned on stripping down and scrubbing off some of this desert dust."

"Go ahead."

A frown settled between his eyebrows. Clearly he hadn't expected her to call his bluff. "You don't understand. When I said strip, I meant all the way. The full monty."

She lifted her shoulder in a half shrug. "I understood you perfectly. And considering you're only wearing briefs, that's what I assumed anyway. Unless you've got something else on under there." No way would that be possible. There'd be no room.

"But..."

"You don't have anything I've never seen before. Remember?"

Judging from his sudden dark glower, he'd overlooked that relevant tidbit. Grumbling a curse, he shucked his briefs and stomped towards the wash bucket.

She made no pretense at pretending not to ogle. Hell with it. She'd wanted a change of scenery and he was providing a perfect, gorgeous view. He snatched a rag hanging from a bent section of the front running light and dunked it before reaching for the tube of gel-wash. Turning his back to her, he began lathering his torso in stiff, jerky motions. She cleared her throat loudly and he glanced her way.

"No need for haste on my account."

His eyebrows slashed towards the bridge of his nose. "What do you want me to do, give you a show?"

An amazingly wicked thought entered her brain. "Actually, I've got a better idea." She lifted from the carton and smiled at the wary set of his face as she approached. "I believe a quid pro quo is in order."

"A quid what?"

"You know, tit for tat. Returning the favor?" She stole the rag from him before he could hold it out of reach. "It's the least I owe you."

"Rini—" He broke off with a surprised yelp when she smacked his right butt cheek.

"There's plenty more where that came from."

"Didn't realize you're so kinky." Despite the sarcasm lacing his words, there was no mistaking the rise she'd gotten out of him. Literally.

Licking her lips, she stared at his growing erection and slicked the rag down the center of his chest.

"I already did that area."

"What are you, impatient?" Just to torment him, she ran teasing little whorls over his abdomen, playing with the line of silky-fine hair arrowing towards his groin. Stopping short of touching the head of his cock, she rinsed the rag in the bucket and wrung it. This time when she resumed, she focused on the firm globes of his derriere. He stood silent but she could feel the heat of his scrutiny lasering into the crown of her head. Fighting back a giggle, she dragged the cloth along the curve of his hip, testing how far she could taunt his barely leashed patience. He lunged sideways. She had just enough time to jump out of the way as he upended the bucket over his head.

He shook himself like a big dog, sending water droplets flying everywhere. Grinning, he grasped her against him. "Now that's dispensed with..." He lifted her, hooking her legs around his waist.

"You big brutus, you're getting me all wet."

"Baby, I plan on getting you *very* wet."

"Pervert."

Chuckling, he buried his face in the crook of her neck. "Mm, you're delicious. I could eat you like a giant truffle."

His husky voice and the innuendo hidden in his promise caused her to squirm in anticipation, making him laugh. He licked a path along the side of her neck until he reached her ear. Rumbling a sexy chuckle, he gave her lobe a teasing bite. "Now who's the impatient one?"

"Fine, I admit it." Gasping, she wiggled in his grip. "Now let's get inside and get the feasting started."

He practically ran into the side wall of the Liberty trying to hustle to the canvas closure. She loosened her hold around his rib cage. “Maybe you better let me tackle the climb on my own.”

Setting her on her feet, he assisted her up and followed after her. The second he cleared the opening, he swept her into his arms and beelined for the lounge.

She kicked the tousled sheet out of the way and reclined in an inviting pose. “Boy, you’re insistent on keeping me contained in this darned thing, aren’t you?”

His hands sliding in a lingering caress along her calves, he stretched over her. “Maybe it’ll actually work this time.” He lowered his head and skimmed his lips across her cotton and lace-covered nipple. The bud tightened, eagerly seeking more attention. With a deft flick of his tongue, he generously delivered it. She arched her back and he tugged off her tank top before unhooking her bra. Pushing the cups aside, he licked his lips. “Come to papa, pretty babies.”

He scraped his teeth gently over one nipple and she bucked, her nails digging into his broad shoulders. “Lucus, please...”

“Hmm, last time you begged this sweetly, you trapped my hand between your legs.”

“I did?” Jeez, talk about pushy.

“Yep, and I’m planning a return trip there real soon. Only this time, you won’t be coming around my fingers.”

His frank and raunchy pronouncement made her clitoris throb. As if he’d somehow gotten a direct transmission from the tormented nub, he roamed the valley of her stomach, edging his way south. Nibbling the sensitive hollow where her thigh and hip met, he hooked his fingers in the elastic of her bikini. He lifted to his haunches long enough to free her of her panties before resettling between her legs. He spread her labia and studied her, the rugged planes of his face set in rapt concentration. Just the faint touch of his breath down there threatened to send her rocketing over the cliff. When his tongue traced from her entrance up to her clitoris she jerked and grabbed the side rail for dear life.

He sucked her clit hard, his tongue swirling in a firm, deliberate rhythm. The orgasm welled inside her with a speed and ferocity that were overwhelming. Holding her flesh imprisoned in a throbbing peak, Lucus speared her with the hot intensity of his stare and she crashed into the shattering climax. Her scream bounced off the steel surrounding them, its echo endless. The aftershocks rippled through her, leaving her in a dazed glow. She drowsily blinked at Lucus when he rose onto his elbows. He hung his head with a massive groan. “*Damn it.* My condom stash is back on Warddok.”

“No worries. I decided to get inoculated a few years ago.” She rolled onto her belly and pointed to the barely discernible pinpricks on her upper left butt cheek. “Got re-injected last week, so I’m safe for an entire year.”

“Thank you, Jesus.”

She started to flip back over but Lucus pinned her hips in place with his big hands. “I’ve been dying to explore these cute dimples. No way am I passing this opportunity up.”

His tongue dipped into the hollow at the base of her tailbone and she writhed under the ticklish sensation. He apparently enjoyed tormenting her because he lingered there for several minutes before raining kisses on her rear end. His fingers slipped between her legs and delved inside her pussy. She gasped and clenched around him.

“Mm, feel good, baby?” His mouth brushed along the nape of her neck.

“Yes, but I want...more.” She groaned in frustration and need when he plunged another finger inside to join its mate. “You know that isn’t what I meant, you evil bastard.”

He laughed. “Maybe you should be more specific next time.”

She abandoned any thoughts of making him suffer when the head of his cock nudged her opening. With unbearable slowness, he eased into her, his delicious thickness stretching her to the limits. Her over-stimulated senses made it impossible to hold the rising orgasm at bay. She cried out, her inner muscles clamping onto Lucus before he’d completely lodged himself. Moaning, he remained rigidly still until the quakes subsided and then he sank to the hilt with one smooth thrust.

Being filled by him, connected in the closest way two people could be, made her tremble. The intensity of emotions Lucus stirred within her was exhilarating and frightening. His arms encircled her, drawing her up against him as he rocked his hips and stroked impossibly deep. Silky chest hairs teased her back—another exquisite point of friction. When his fingers sought her clitoris again she shook her head. “No more. There’s no more in me.”

“Yes, there is. Come one more time, sweetheart. Take me with you.”

Apparently Lucus knew her body better than she did. She wailed as the tidal wave struck. Holding her tight, he shuddered and came, her name an agonized shout muffled against her damp shoulder. They both slumped forward onto the lounger.

His breath sawing near her ear, he crooked his thigh over hers and almost fell onto the floor. “Yeah, this isn’t going to work. Time for a change of scenery.”

“Oh, *now* you see my point.”

Grinning, he scooped her into his arms. “I was thinking more along the lines of my sleeping port.”

She pretended to consider her options before releasing a put-upon exhale. “Fine, guess I’ll compromise.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Lucus awoke to the softness of a breast cupped in his palm. *Damn, this is what I should wake up to every morning.*

The fact he easily envisioned Rini taking up half his bed for the remainder of his days should have terrified him. It didn't. He'd nearly lost her. Potential death tended to make a person look at things in a new light. Nuzzling her hair, he inhaled the faintest trace of lilac.

Rini wiggled temptingly. "What are you doing?"

"Sniffing." His fingers flexed around her breast. "And squeezing."

"I must reek."

"Nope. I did a damn fine job bathing you every day, and don't you forget it."

She snorted. "I'm fairly certain you won't let me."

"Hell no. Men always get a bad rap for being insensitive, undomesticated assholes. This is my opportunity to set the record straight."

His hand glided along her rib cage and she stretched like a luxuriating cat. Her bottom bumped into his swelling cock and he rubbed into her suggestively. "You're probably too sore. What with the four rounds of hot loving I gave you last night."

"Is that your backhanded way of bragging about your enormous girth and outstanding virility?"

"So you think I'm well-endowed, huh?"

"Like I'm going to touch that with a ten-foot pole."

He gave her another nudge with his cock. "Speaking of ten-foot poles."

"Let's not get carried away."

Chuckling, he shifted her leg on top of his and slid into her from behind. The wet, hot heaven of her pussy enveloped his cock like a snug glove. It took every ounce of control he possessed not to immediately come. He buried his face in her hair and hugged her close. "You okay? I wasn't just fishing for compliments when I asked if you're sore."

She shook her head. "But this position is kind of awkward."

He rolled onto his back and brought her astride his hips. She lowered onto him again in a silken glide. Soon enough, she found a rhythm that had him seeing stars. And a few comets. Even the occasional solar eclipse. By the time they came together and she collapsed on his chest, they were both drenched in sweat.

"Woman, if that was your way of roping me into giving you another sponge bath..."

Her hand flopped in a weak smack on his shoulder. They stayed in a companionable sprawl, their heartbeats drumming in a syncopated beat. He was seconds away from drifting into a contented snooze when Rini poked him in the sternum.

“Are you sleeping?”

He grunted. “How can I do that when you’re jabbing me?”

“I just realized I didn’t come completely clean with you yesterday.”

“Mmm...”

She leaned onto her forearm and peered at him. When he closed his eyes she tweaked his nipple. “Oh no you don’t. You’re not faking being asleep so you can drag an apology out of me twice.”

“An apology for what?”

She played with his nipple, plucking it. If she kept that up he was going to have a hard time concentrating on anything besides sweet talking her into round number six.

“I heard what you said about your ex-wife.”

He dropped his hands from her waist. The sense of exposure descended on him, trapping him in a state of naked vulnerability.

Rini cupped his face, her fingertips stroking his bristly jaw. “Please don’t lock me out.”

He met her sorrowful gaze and his heart twisted. “I didn’t want you to know what a...failure I made of my marriage.”

“You’re not a failure.”

Swallowing past the thick lump of regret in his throat, he settled his cheek against the pillow and stared blindly at the adjacent doorframe. “I couldn’t give Sandra the things she needed. Wanted. Instead of partying all the time and basically being an irresponsible eighteen-year-old punk, I should have busted my ass trying to become a better provider.”

She gave him a shrewd look. “Did she give you everything you wanted?”

Her question threw him for a loop. “It’s not the same for women. You’re not supposed to be the breadwinner.”

She pinched his nipple again—hard—and he yelped. “Before you go all caveman, let me point out we’re living in the twenty-fourth century. The glass ceiling was blown to smithereens long ago.”

He dug his thumb into the ridge of his brow. “I know that. What I meant to finish saying before you decided to give me a titty twister is women don’t have the same pressures as men. They don’t have to worry about living up to expectations of being the perfect provider.”

Rini rolled her eyes. “Oh Lord, this just proves my theory that sprouting a dick must kill off vital brain cells.” Before the insult could fully sink in, she climbed off him and jumped to the floor. “Women face plenty of pressures. True, the majority of our issues don’t revolve around perpetrating stupid stereotypes, but it doesn’t mean we don’t have them.”



“Sure, but—” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Shit, I should probably zip my mouth while I’m ahead.”

“Great plan, Stan.”

Curving his mouth into a grin, he stacked his arms behind his head. “God, you’re adorable when you’re feisty. And naked.”

“Nice try, but you’re not distracting me.” She pointed to his semi hard-on. “And put that thing away. It won’t get you out of this conversation.”

Grumbling, he hiked the covers over his cock.

Rini sat on the farthest corner of the mattress and tucked her knees beneath her chin, effectively concealing the parts he would have enjoyed ogling. “Your ex is a fool for choosing material possessions over the love of a good man. In my book, she’s the one who failed, not you.”

“Exactly when did I become a good man?” He gave an indulgent smile. “As I seem to recall, a couple days ago I was a smuggler who ran the messiest ship this side of the Milky Way.”

She fiddled with the edge of the sheet. “Okay, you might have been right about me being...rigid...with my worldview.”

“Mind repeating that?” He wagged a finger inside his ear. “Didn’t quite catch it the first time.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t push your luck. The point I’m trying to make is I underestimated you. You’ve taken such amazing care of me the past few days. If not for you, I probably would have died.”

Hearing the catch in her voice, he whipped the covers off. He scooted to the end of the bed and pulled her against him. “No way in hell would I have let that happen.”

Rini nestled her cheek against his shoulder. “I owe you my life.”

Resting his chin on the crown of her head, he pretended to consider her solemn statement. “Guess I’ll have to think of a good way for you to pay me back.”

Her snort ruffled his chest hairs. “I have a fair idea where your mind is leaning.”

Laughing, he flipped her over his arm and nibbled her jaw. She gasped and tried to squirm free. “Wait, we’re not done—”

“You’ve got that right, babe.” He worked his way down and captured her nipple between his teeth.

A good thirty minutes later they finally decided to crawl out of bed and get dressed. Much as he liked the idea of frolicking around naked all day, Rini insisted on clothes. Since she also insisted on making breakfast—her small way of repaying his tender loving care from the past few days—he wasn’t about to balk. Securing the snaps on his flight pants, he left her sorting through the cupboards in the galley and ventured outside. The heat was already oppressive. It’d be a perfect day for holing up inside the ship. Maybe after breakfast he could convince Rini to ditch the clothes again and try out some inventive places for making love. The pilot’s seat...the table in the galley. Oh, the possibilities.

*Jodi Redford*

Reaching into his pocket, he checked the transmitter. It still appeared functional. For once, he didn't let the stress of their missing rescue ship weigh on him. That was the benefit of indulging in lots of hot, mind-blowing sex.

He stepped around the tail of the Liberty and a blunt crack against his skull knocked him on his ass. Pain burst across his temple. Dazed, he stared into the barrel of an electro-pulse rifle.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Tie him up.”

Lucus’s stare traveled between the two guards from the outpost station. The one he’d boot-balled unraveled a length of cord. “Bet you weren’t expecting to see me.” A nasty grin slashed the guard’s face before he wrenched Lucus’s arms back and bound them tight. Apparently the dude was still holding a grudge.

“Yeah, can’t say I’m excited about this reunion,” Lucus muttered.

Static crackled through the transmitter clipped to the other guard’s coveralls, followed by Quarrel’s raspy voice. “Keep the prisoners secured. I’ll be there shortly.”

Lucus winced. He had to keep Rini safe. If he could somehow postpone these two from searching the ship, maybe she’d have a chance to hide. “Your boss has his facts mixed up. I’m the only one here.”

“Then why did we hear a female screaming?”

*Son of a bitch.* Who would have thought they’d be busted by an orgasm? “What can I say? A big ole rat jumped out at me.”

Neither guard laughed. *Humorless dickheads.*

“Watch him while I look for the girl. And don’t let him get the upper hand on you this time.”

The guard standing over Lucus growled and jammed the rifle’s muzzle into the side of Lucus’s head. “Don’t worry, he’s not going anywhere.”

A bead of sweat slid into Lucus’s left eye, obscuring his vision as he stared at the other Aquatican’s departing back. Fury and helplessness battled inside him. *Rini, damn it, hide.* Unless she was telepathic, there’d be no way she’d receive his silent warning. His gut continued churning acid while seconds stretched into agonizing minutes.

“Not feeling so smart now, huh?” the guard taunted, grinding the rifle into Lucus’s temple, forcing his head down. “I should blow your brains out, but I want you to be able to watch while Yufin and I fuck your pretty girlfriend.”

Lucus gritted his teeth. “Touch her and I’ll kill you.”

A robust laugh fell from above. “I think you’ve forgotten who’s holding the gun.”

“That’d be me, asshole.”

The rifle digging into his scalp eased off and Lucus jerked his gaze up as Rini and the other guard jumped from the ship. She had the electro-pulse rifle aimed squarely on the shaking Aquatican in front of

her. One of the guard's tentacles seemed to be missing a couple inches from the tip. Rini noticed Lucas staring at the severed appendage and shrugged. "Never mess with a woman when she's in the middle of making breakfast."

"You *idiot*. Here you accused *me* of losing the upper hand."

If not for the tenseness of the situation, Lucas would have found the guard's ironic declaration damn hilarious.

"At least I'm wearing more than a leopard-print thong!" Yufin flinched when Rini poked him none too subtly between his shoulder blades.

"Here's how this is going down." Her voice loaded with steely authority, Rini prodded her prisoner forward. "On the count of three, you're dropping your weapon and kicking it behind you."

The Aquatican standing beside Lucas barked another laugh. "Think I care if you shoot Yufin?"

"I think you'll care if I shoot you."

Lucas heard the guard above him gulp. The rifle swung away from his head and clattered onto the dirt.

"Good. Now untie my friend." When her command wasn't immediately obeyed, Rini lifted the rifle and took bead. "*Now*, squid head."

His motions jerky, the guard loosened the cord and Lucas rose to his feet. On the not-too-distant horizon to the east, a plume of dust billowed.

"Shit." Lucas tossed the bindings aside and hustled to grab the abandoned pulse rifle before loping to Rini's side. "Babe, we'd better haul ass. We've got company coming."

She nudged her prisoner with the rifle. "Where's your vehicle?"

The guard stuttered something about his transport rover being parked a quarter mile away—thankfully in the opposite direction of the advancing dust cloud. While Lucas kept her covered, Rini searched the Aquatican's coveralls for the vehicle's power card.

"Found it." She held up the triangular piece of plastic.

Hitching the rifle's barrel against his shoulder, Lucas grabbed Rini's hand. They ran across the desert like devil hounds were chasing them. Not too far off the mark, only these hounds possessed eight arms and drove a lightning-fast desert clipper. Returning his gaze to the terrain in front of him, Lucas swore beneath his breath and ratcheted his pace up a notch, praying Rini could keep up.

"We're never going to outrun that." The words propelled from Rini's mouth in short bursts.

She was right. Even if they reached the rover in time, it'd never be a match against the clipper. From the corner of his eye, he spotted one of the many clusters of large boulders dotting the desert landscape. Far as cover went, it wasn't the best he could hope for, but it just might give them a fighting chance in hell of holding off Quarrel and his men.

"This way." Clamping onto Rini's arm, he dashed to the rocks and hunkered on the other side.

Her fingers dug into the cloth covering his knee. “Do you think they spotted us?”

The approaching clipper slowed, its corroded copper platform resembling a giant hovering penny. Quarrel stood near the captain’s rail, his beady eyes zeroing in on the ring of boulders.

“Damn, guess that answers my question.” Rini’s hand slipped from his thigh and tightened on the butt of her rifle. She glanced at him and took a deep breath. “I always told myself I’d never go to my grave with important things left unsaid. Well, I love you. I figure as far as important stuff goes that ranks pretty high up there.”

He stared at her, a strange glow starting to well inside his chest. It took a few seconds to recognize it as happiness. *This has to be the weirdest moment of my life.*

Rini bit her bottom lip and returned her focus to the clipper slowly creeping their way. “I hope my saying that didn’t make you uncomfortable or anything. Like I said, I just wanted—”

“I love you too.”

Her attention swung back on him and he almost laughed at the shocked look on her face. “Honey, you might want to close your mouth. There’s a whole swarm of gnats buzzing this way.”

“I didn’t expect you to say it back.”

Quarrel’s voice suddenly boomed from the clipper’s telecom speakers, preempting Lucas’s reply. “You have ten seconds to surrender yourselves.”

“Take your ten seconds and shove it up your ass.” Lucas angled his rifle around the boulder and fired off a shot.

A tsking sound floated from the telecom. “Your attempts at postponing the inevitable are both amusing and pathetic.” Quarrel waddled to the side, making room for a guard outfitted with a Halzatron laser scope strapped to his shoulder. One hit from the weapon, and the boulders would disintegrate, right along with Rini and Lucas.

His lips twisting in a cocky smile, the general tapped his cane. “We’re now at five seconds.”

Lucas reached out and squeezed Rini’s hand before lifting to his feet. “Let her go, Quarrel. She has nothing to do with this.” Ignoring Rini’s distressed cry, he stepped away from the rocks and began walking towards the clipper. The guards immediately trained their guns on him and he tossed the rifle aside. “I’m the one you want. Take me.”

The sound of running footsteps alerted him to Rini’s approach. *Damn it, why can’t she ever stay put?* She hauled up short next to him and he speared her with an irate stare. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Rini—”

She grasped his hand, her grip steady and sure. He wished he could say the same for his heart rate.

“I’m not leaving you,” she repeated.

God, she was stubborn. And more than a little whacked. *No wonder I'm crazy about her.* He leaned down and kissed her hard.

"Enough! All this lovey-dovey shit is giving me indigestion."

Lucus released Rini and glared at Quarrel. "You've got us, you son of a bitch. Let's not drag this out any longer than it has to be. Forget your fancy death tanks and whatever other bullshit torture devices you have. Just shoot us in the back like the fucking coward you are."

An angry red stain mottled the general's face. "*Coward?*"

"What else am I supposed to call someone who brings along a dozen guards to protect himself from one man and a woman?" Lucus squared his jaw combatively.

Sucking in his massive gut, Quarrel straightened his spine. "I'm not afraid of either of you. Especially not the woman."

Rini gritted her teeth but surprisingly didn't say anything. A ramp extended from the clipper and the general limped down, followed by two of his guards. Quarrel stopped a few feet from them and leaned on his cane.

Lucus grunted. "Only two, huh? Mighty brave."

Pure evilness glinted in Quarrel's cold eyes. "I'm going to enjoy killing you. Men, seize them."

Both guards stepped forward. The closest one grabbed Lucus's arm but the other shuffled to a halt and blinked at the sky.

"What are you doing, you moron?" Quarrel appeared on the brink of having an epileptic fit while he waved his tentacles in the air. "Grab the girl!"

"Uh, sir..."

"Do I have to do everything myself?" Quarrel waddled forward the same instant a sonic boom shook the ground. Everyone tumbled sideways and few screams pierced the air.

In the chaos that ensued, Lucus reached for Rini. She was no longer by his side. Panicked, he pivoted and noticed her sprawled a few yards to the left of him. He scrambled towards her just as another quake rippled through the atmosphere. The disturbance propelled him to his knees. "Jesus Christ, is the goddamn planet exploding?"

Rini rolled onto her back. Her groan turned to a gasp. "I don't believe it. Lucus, look!"

He followed her gaze to the sky. Ten enormous wing guard carriers were hurtling towards them. Each bore the official seal of the UGG on their shiny bellies.

Hysterical laughter bubbled from Rini. "They found us."

"About damn time." Lucus pushed from the ground, his attention locked on the squadron of ships. "I never thought I'd say this, but fuck am I happy to see those bastards."

A furious shout came from Quarrel. Lucus turned and spied the general hobbling after his departing clipper. He gave up when the vehicle sped out of sight and instead made an obscene gesture with four of his tentacles.

Lucus's chuckle petered off as dozens of scout pods ejected from the overhead battleships. Seeing all those armored cylinders descending through space was enough to give a man shivers. He was just grateful his ass wasn't the one with the big ole bull's-eye on it.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?"

He heard the awe in Rini's voice and glanced at her. She looked like a kid who'd woken up Christmas morning and discovered an entire toy store beneath the tree. "They're all right."

She gaped at him. "That's over a billion tons of sleek, highly efficient fighting machines up there, and all you can say is they're—" She broke off when he grinned. "You are such a smart-ass."

The first scout landed. Its hatch door hissed open and three soldiers decked out in camo flight suits climbed from the pod. The tallest pushed up his helmet shield and peered at Rini. "Are you Ms. Campell?"

Rini frowned. "Yes. How in the universe did you know that?"

"Ma'am, your family put out a search request for you two days ago. When headquarters picked up a distress call from Aquatica of all places, your parents feared you might have gotten yourself in a bit of trouble."

Lucus snorted. "Wonder what'd put that loony idea in their heads?"

She elbowed him in the ribs before turning a beaming smile on the soldier. "You have no idea how ecstatic we are to see—" Her statement broke off with a shriek when eight tentacles wrapped around her body and yanked her against Quarrel's blubbery gut.

Three red dots appeared on the general's forehead—courtesy of the soldiers' laser subguns. Despite the heavy artillery surrounding them, a wash of queasy dread churned in Lucus's stomach. "Let her go, Quarrel. You're outnumbered."

Desperation etched the general's rubbery face. "I want one of those pods and a free ticket out of here. If you don't honor my demands, I'm snapping her neck."

Rini's exaggerated sigh blanketed Lucus's growl. "You know, it's extremely rude to touch someone without being invited." With a shrill warrior's cry, she swung her leg back and crunched the heel of her foot into Quarrel's groin.

Roaring, the general released her and flopped to the ground. Rini wiped her hands on the seat of her pants. "Man, he's slimy." Grimacing, she glanced towards the soldiers who were all staring at her slack-jawed. "Hey, anyone have any antibacterial wipes?"

The soldier who'd spoken earlier sidled up next to Lucus. "Is she always this...?"

"Nuts?" Lucus filled in the blank for him. "Hell, you have no idea."

## Chapter Sixteen

“This is the last one, I promise.”

Rini eyed the slim cylinder the doc was inserting into the inoculator chamber. “You said the same thing the last eight pokes you gave me.”

“True, but this time I actually mean it.” He pressed the wand on her biceps. Searing heat pricked her skin, followed by a puff of air. “See, that wasn’t so bad.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Chuckling, the doc exited through the sliding stainless-steel door, leaving her alone in the small medi-port room her parents had insisted on admitting her into. Much as she appreciated her parents’ concern for her well-being, the austere white walls were starting to give her a major headache. Plus she missed Lucas. All this would be way more bearable if they could snuggle together in the same bed.

The door whisked open and her heart gave an excited leap. Her parents walked into the room, all smiles and happy tears. She immediately felt guilty for the momentary twinge of disappointment that struck when she realized they weren’t Lucas. Guilt morphed into a heavy tightness in her chest as her mother burst into racking sobs. She never could handle seeing her mom cry. “It’s okay. I’m fine now.”

Popping onto the corner of the thin mattress, her mom wrapped her in a fierce hug. “Darling, we were so terrified. Don’t ever scare us that way again.”

Rini stifled a smile. “Yes, Mom. I’ll try very hard not to crash on any more planets.”

“This is why I never wanted you to become a field agent.” Her mom’s head lifted, and Rini peered into red-rimmed eyes that were a mirror of her own. “Your father and I have been talking and we think it’d be best—”

“No.”

“Darling, don’t be stubborn.”

Dragging in a deep breath, Rini struggled to remain calm. The only way to tackle her parents was with reason. Flying off the handle or throwing a temper tantrum would only bite her in the butt. She settled her focus on her dad. He looked like he’d inherited several more gray hairs in the past week and deep lines of fatigue bracketed his mouth. She hated making them worry this way, but they needed to let her be her own woman. “I’m not going back behind the desk. I hate it there.”

“We’ll lighten your load. Jeffrey has been eager to pick up some overtime. I’m sure he’ll—”



“Mom, listen to me.” Frustrated, Rini scraped a hand through her tangled hair. “I need more out of life than shuffling papers. Please understand that.”

Her mother’s mouth pinched in disapproval. “This renewed stubbornness you’re showing has something to do with that pilot you were stranded with, doesn’t it?”

“Lucus has nothing to do with this.”

“According to the doctor, you and the pilot seem very...close.”

Rini tossed up her hands. “How in the universe did this conversation twist around to my relationship with Lucus?”

Surprised flickered over her mom’s face. “The two of you have developed a relationship? Rini, you’ve just met this man.”

“Yes, but in the short time we’ve been together, I feel closer to him than any man I’ve ever known. Except for dad, of course.”

Her father gave a weak smile. More than likely he was trying to keep out any nightmarish images of his daughter having wild, sweaty desert sex with a pilot.

“Lucus also took extremely good care of me after my brush with the nictick.” She spared both her parents with a censorious look. “He’s the reason I’m lying here, safe and sound, rather than stuck as a pile of ash in a crematorium tube.”

“Darling, do not forget you were sent to repossess his ship.” Her mother squeezed her hand reassuringly. “Surely that isn’t the sort of individual you want to be in a relationship with?”

“All that was a misunderstanding. His brother Chase forgot to drop off the payments. And with all the drama of rescuing his brother from Quarrel and then submitting to the general’s demands of running his smuggling operation, Lucus had too much on his mind the last few months.”

“*Smuggling?*” Her mother swayed and clutched at the bedframe.

“Well, he wasn’t in it by choice. The general backed him into a corner. See, Chase was caught doing the mattress mambo with Quarrel’s concubine and Lucus couldn’t let his brother go belly-up in a death tank.”

Both her parents goggled at her and she inwardly groaned. *Oh man, what was in those inoculations? They’re making me run my mouth off.*

“Maybe we’d better let Rini get some sleep.” Clearing his throat, her dad strode to the bedside and gave her a peck. “Rest, honey, we’ll be back to check on you later.”

Wearing an expression like Rini had just sprouted an extra head, her mom rose and slumped against her husband’s side with a melodramatic sob. Waiting until her parents abandoned the room, Rini rolled her eyes. “Oh brother.” She fluffed her pillow and tried not to stare directly at the glaring white ceiling. After a few minutes boredom began to sink in and she started to drift off. The sound of the door opening jerked her back to consciousness. “Hey, I thought you guys wanted me to sleep.”

“Well fuck, I had other plans in mind for you.”

At the sound of Lucus’s amused baritone, she snapped her head around.

A delectable grin spread across his face. “Guess I’m shit out of luck, huh?”

She yanked back the covers and patted the mattress. “Get your cute buns over here.”

“Damn, I love me a woman who knows how to take charge.” He locked the door and stalked towards her, his gait loose and easy, the gleam in his eyes promising her a whole hell of a lot of fun. Her gaze ate him up, loving the way his navy blue T-shirt clung to his muscled torso and the placket of his jeans cupped his steadily growing erection.

He stopped in front of her and she swung her legs over the side of the bed, straddling his thighs. With impatient fingers, she shoved his shirt out of the way. He pulled the fabric over his head and she kissed his chiseled abdomen. His soft groan made her pussy clench. She fumbled with his zipper, wishing she could be all smooth, practiced seduction and teasing temptress, but her need for him outweighed all else.

The zipper gave and she rucked his jeans down his hips. He’d decided to go commando. An appreciative sigh filtered from her as she feathered a fingertip over the prominent vein running along the underside of his magnificent cock. When she reached the plump head, she hunched forward and engulfed it inside her mouth.

A hiss snaked from Lucus. “Jesus.”

Encouraged by his reaction, she opened her mouth wider, taking in more of his thick shaft. His hands slid through her hair, holding her steady as his hips rocked. The taste of him, the silky way he moved between her lips, escalated her need even more. She dug her fingers into his buttocks and bobbed her head, swallowing him towards the back of her throat.

“Baby...God...” Moaning, he pulled her up off him and kissed her hard, his tongue thrusting deep.

She groped for his shaft again but he twined their fingers together, stalling her. His tongue retreated and he sucked her bottom lip between his teeth, earning an anxious whimper from her.

“It’s okay, sweetness. I’m going to make this good for you.”

She almost laughed at his soothing words. *Good for me?* She was five seconds away from combusting in flames. He eased her onto the mattress and reached for the hem of her short nightie. His mouth crooked in a smile when he spotted the purple kitties marching across the material.

“I know. Not exactly sexy.”

“Baby, anything on—or off you—is sexy.” He peeled the nightie from her body before removing his jeans. She reached for him but he stretched her legs wide and combed his fingers through her triangular patch of ginger-colored curls. A sound of deep satisfaction rumbled from his chest. “You’re wet.”

She gave him an exasperated look. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you the past ten minutes. So think you could speed things—” A gasp broke from her when he slipped his index and middle fingers inside her soaked channel and pumped.

“You were saying?” Hooking both fingers, he found her G-spot and rubbed with excruciating accuracy. She thrashed on the bed, the sensations so intense she struggled to escape them. He wouldn’t let her, the bastard. Flattening his free hand on her belly, he held her in place, his focus fused on her flushed face while he continued his exquisite torment with his questing fingers. His thumb flicked over her clitoris and she bowed off the mattress, a mute scream trapped in her throat. She milked his fingers in an orgasm that lasted forever.

Finally he removed his hands. Before she completely came down from the glow, Lucus lifted above her and drove his cock home in one powerful thrust. He caught her cry against his mouth. Wrapping her arms tight around him, she quickly matched the rhythm of his strokes. His tongue danced with hers, mimicking the slick in-and-out glide of his cock.

Her entire world existed within Lucus at that moment. The shift of damp skin beneath her hands. The harsh breaths pouring from his mouth. The look of agonized pleasure that seized his features moments before he shuddered and emptied his seed inside her.

Loving someone with your whole being—it made sex so much more wonderful and devastating.

Lucus pulled the covers over Rini’s shoulders before kissing her on the brow. She continued snoring softly. He felt bad for slipping from the room like he was trying to make a quick getaway, but he didn’t want to risk someone walking in and finding him buck naked in her bed. Might be a little embarrassing explaining that one to her folks.

He stepped into the corridor and winced when he spotted the elegant red-haired woman camped in the lounge across the way. *Shit.*

She rose and strode purposefully towards him, her heels clicking their authority on the gleaming white tile. “Mr. Granger, may I have a word with you please?” She formed it as a question but her tone implied there’d be no negotiating his options.

“Sure.” Scratching the back of his head, he gestured to the lounge she’d just vacated. She turned an about-face and he trailed after her, his nostrils getting the full treatment from her heavy rose perfume.

Perching on the edge of one of the leather chairs, she twisted the pearls roping her neck. “I don’t know how to put this delicately, Mr. Granger.”

Taking his own seat, he cleared his throat. “Nothing was happening in there. I just wanted to peek in on Rini and see how she was doing.”

She pinned him with a tell-me-another-bullshit-story stare. Now he knew who Rini had inherited the expression from. “I’m concerned for my daughter, and frankly all of this has me more than a little troubled.” She waved towards the medi-port. “Rini is in a vulnerable position right now. She’s not thinking clearly.”

He didn’t need to read between the lines. “You think it’d be a mistake for her to be with me.”

“Yes.”

“Well damn. Thanks for not beating around the bush.”

“When it comes to my daughter, I’m not going to play coy. Rini is a very special woman. She has her entire life ahead of her.”

A hollow ringing pinged in Lucas’s ears. Her words might as well be a ghostly imprint from the conversation he shared with Sandra fifteen years ago—the night she’d told him she wanted a divorce. *I have my entire life in front of me, Lucas. And it scares me because I don’t like where it’s headed. I want more than this.* “More than me.”

“What?”

The memory disintegrated and was replaced by the frowning woman sitting beside him. He shook his head. “Nothing.”

Rini’s mother crossed one leg over the other and the sound of her wool slacks scratching together was almost deafening in the tense silence. “I’m sure you’re a nice man at heart, Mr. Granger.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her placating tone. “I assume there’s a *but* popping in here soon.”

Her fingers returned to her pearls. “My daughter informed me of the...unsavory...business arrangement you had with General Quarrel.” She held up her other hand when he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Rini explained the situation, so you can stop giving the exit doors covetous glances.”

Ignoring his surprised choke, she stood and blocked his chair. Apparently she didn’t trust that he wouldn’t make a dash for it. “It’s unfortunate the general put you in such a sticky predicament and I understand it isn’t your fault, but I can’t overlook how this will impact Rini.”

He frowned. “How would Rini be affected? She didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“It doesn’t matter. The instant the galaxy broadcasters glom onto the story of the general’s takedown, they’ll be looking for all kinds of sordid gossip they can spread on the network. The more Rini is connected to you, the more chance they’ll have to drag her through the mud.”

A sick feeling clawed his gut. Much as he wanted to, he couldn’t pretend Rini’s mom didn’t have a valid point. Once the newshounds uncovered the ugly details of his arrangement with Quarrel they’d have a field day flinging the dirt. And it’d be one hell of a juicy tidbit if they could tie a smuggler with an agent of the UGG repo department—the great-great-granddaughter of the founding father, no less.

His thoughts drifted to the anguished expression on Rini’s face when they’d stood that night by the bonfire and she’d admitted her deep dark secret to him. She’d given up her biggest dream to protect her family. He’d be the biggest bastard if he made her sacrifice all for nothing.

## Chapter Seventeen

The last damn person Lucas wanted to see swaggered into the hospital cafeteria with a shit-eating grin. “Hey, bro, sounds like you had a hell of an adventurous couple a days.”

He gave Chase a narrow look. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Chase’s smile slipped a little. “When Ma told me what happened—”

Lucas stood, the obnoxious screech from the metal chair legs cutting his brother off. He stalked from the cafeteria, his stride stiff. Chase caught up with him halfway down the corridor.

“I fucking hate it when you walk away from me like that.”

He didn’t bother glancing at Chase. “I don’t give a good goddamn what you hate.”

“No shit. That’s been real clear for a while now.”

His brother’s sarcasm managed to haul him to a stop. Clenching his fists, he glared at Chase. “You’ve got a lot of nerve coming here.”

“I came to apologize.” Stubbornness and strangely enough sincerity lurked in Chase’s eyes. “It’s my fault all this crap with Quarrel went down. It should have been me paying the price, not you.”

Chase’s admission stunned him but he was nowhere near ready to let him off the hook. “Let’s not forget the four payments you *forgot* to deliver to the UGG office.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Can the act.” Lucas shoved his arms over his chest. “So what’d you do with the money? Blow it on booze and prostitutes?”

Deep furrows homesteaded the middle of Chase’s forehead. “Bro, I made the payments every time you asked. Swear to God.”

He wanted to believe Chase. The drunken marathons and constant fuckups made it hard though. “You’ve got a lousy track record.” *Just like I did at your age.* The inner dialog slammed him out of the blue, leaving him stunned. He’d never consciously compared Chase’s irresponsibility to his own innumerable faults—the same faults that more or less contributed to the breakdown of his marriage fifteen years ago. Rather than pick apart what it could mean, he pushed the thought to the farthest corner of his mind. He had too many other things to worry about at the moment.

Instead of resorting to his typical M.O. of launching into argument mode, Chase hung his head. “Yeah, I’m real sorry for that too. In fact, I’ve been kinda meaning to talk to you about it.”

Lucas tweaked the bridge of his nose. “Could we do it at another time?”

Chase didn't completely hide his disappointment. "Sure."

"Since you're here, mind giving me a ride home?"

"Uh, bro, I think it's the least I owe you."

Shooting a glance towards the wing housing the medi-ports, Lucus steeled his spine. "First I've got to take care of something. I'll meet you outside in a few."

With a nod, Chase ambled down the corridor. His heart hammering like he'd run fifty laps around the hospital complex, Lucus made the short journey to Rini's room. He stepped inside and his stomach cramped. Rini lay curled with her cheek pillowed on her hand, her face relaxed in sleep. She was so damn beautiful it hurt to look at her.

Dusky eyelashes fluttered open and she gave him a dreamy smile.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay." Her mouth stretched in a hearty yawn. "I need to get up anyway. I've been a regular sloth the last twelve hours."

He crossed to the bed and she hiked into a sitting position. "Hey, how about I order room service? I hear the food here is actually decent." She stretched her arms out to the side and laughed. "Maybe they never got the memo that hospital food is supposed to be unappetizing."

"I already ate." Or at least he tried to. His gut had pretty much nixed the idea of allowing more than a few bites of the hot turkey sandwich.

"Mind if I get something? The surf-and-turf special sounded yummy." She wrinkled her nose. "As long as it doesn't come with calamari. I never want to see another squid for as long as I—"

"I'm leaving."

She blinked. "Oh. Well, guess I'll see you in the morning then."

"No. You won't." Scrubbing his face, he tried to swallow past the ball of misery anchored in his throat. "I'm returning home."

"Can't say I blame you. Soon as I get the go ahead from the doc, I'm *so* out of here." She reached for the clip resting on the nearby cart and secured her hair in a loose updo. Her fingers played nervously with one of the escaped tendrils. "Speaking of which, I...have a large apartment back on Wardok Seven. Lots of extra closet space."

The vise cinched around his heart. "Rini, this isn't going to work. We're better off stopping things between us now."

Her hand plummeted to her lap. The two minutes spent staring at each other were the longest two minutes of his life.

"You said you loved me." Her voice came out small and uncertain. "*Why?*"

He stared at the wall behind her. No way could he witness the pain and anguish washing across her face and be able to spit out the necessary lies. “We didn’t know if we were going to live or die. People facing death say things they don’t really mean.”

“*I* meant it.” She hurled the recriminating words at him. “Lucus, we made love in this bed less than an hour ago. *Love*. Not sex. You’d be lying if you called it anything less than that.”

She was right. What they’d shared had been amazing. Brain-frying. He’d never experienced anything that came close to touching it. And he probably never would again. “It was just sex. Incredible, yes. But don’t read any more into it than that.”

Rini flinched like she’d been slapped. “Why are you doing this to us?”

*I’m trying to protect you, baby*. He couldn’t tell her the truth. She’d be stubborn enough to downplay the inevitable shitstorm surrounding his dealings with Quarrel. And fifteen years from now, she’d look at him with contempt and realize she wanted more out of life.

“Rini, there is no us.” Before he could do something monstrously stupid, like take the words back, he turned and left the room.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Damn, girl, this is the eighth repo you’ve brought in this week. Keep it up and ain’t no one gonna be flying the friendly skies.”

Rini ignored the mechanic’s rusty laugh and instead nodded to the series eleven Air Commander parked in the crowded hangar. “Noticed this one has a touchy brake stick. Might want to give it a good overhaul.”

“Will do.”

Fritz gave a cheerful whistle and started to mosey away. Rini gritted her teeth. Though she tried to temper the urge, she spilled out the question that had been circling in her head the last few days. “Did Martin have a chance to drop off the replacement star cruiser to Lucus Granger?”

The whistling petered off and Fritz swiveled, a mile-wide grin stamped on his grizzled face. “Yup. According to Martin, Granger just about fell over in shock when he saw the agency pony-upped for the newest model.”

She’d almost keeled over too. Her parents generosity had been a little over the top, particularly considering they hadn’t been too thrilled about her involvement with Lucus. Maybe they’d felt the need to repay him for saving their daughter’s life. *And breaking her heart.*

Refusing to dwell on that pathetic reality, she abandoned the garage and made her way to the agency’s main headquarters. A handful of her colleagues stood clustered near the receptionist’s desk, trading war stories while they attacked the tray of donuts like a pack of wolves with bad table manners.

Jean, the front receptionist, smiled in apology. “Rini, I tried saving you one but Paul found it.”

Paul mumbled around a mouthful of donut. “How was I supposed to know you were saving it for someone?”

“Having it locked in my file drawer didn’t clue you in?”

“It’s okay, Jean. I’m not hungry anyway.” Rini stepped around the reception desk. The only thing she cared about at the moment was sealing herself inside her office and logging in the reports. Much as she despised paperwork, the monotonous job would be a welcome reprieve.

“I don’t care what the computer tells you. It’s fucking wrong.”

Rini halted dead in her tracks. Heart racing, she glanced towards the familiar baritone coming from Jeffrey’s cubical. Even while she wondered why the hell she was torturing herself, her feet carried her to the other side of her assistant’s partition. A mix of disappointment and relief swirled within her as she



scrutinized the broad back facing her. She'd only gotten a brief glimpse of Chase that fateful night three weeks ago, but she knew every curve of Lucus's body intimately. It definitely wasn't Lucus standing in front of her.

"Jeffrey, is there a problem?"

Chase pivoted, his hot, angry focus transferring to her. "Hell yeah, there's a problem. You people are making me look like a goddamn loser in my brother's eyes and trust me, I don't need any extra help in that department."

Behind Chase, Jeffrey glanced from his monitor screen, his effeminate features locked in a frazzled expression. "Mr. Granger, like I explained to you fifteen minutes ago, your best bet is going to the UGG payment office. They're the ones who have the most up-to-date records."

A growl came from Chase. "And like I explained to you—fifteen minutes ago—I already tried that. Those morons have their heads so far up their asses they can't see daylight."

A weary exhale rolled from Jeffrey. "I'll give it another look."

Before her assistant could tap his network screen, Rini spoke up. "I'll take care of this one, Jeffrey. Mr. Granger, would you follow me, please?" She strode into her office. After a responding grunt, Chase stepped inside and loomed over her paper-strewn desk.

His attention zeroed in on the bronze nameplate holding down the largest stack of files. "*Rini?*" Hazel eyes pinned her in place. "You're the one who was stranded on Aquatica with my brother."

She nodded and a flush crept towards his ears.

"Shit." He scratched the back of his neck. The gesture so reminded her of Lucus it actually made her chest ache. "Sorry for coming across as such an a-hole earlier. This business with the missing payments has me ready to bust some heads open. Not yours of course. That'd be pretty damn ungrateful of me considering the trouble I put you through."

The last thing she wanted to do was mentally relive the bittersweet memories of her days with Lucus. Holding out a hand, she indicated the chair near the wall. "Take a seat."

He did and she moved behind her desk. While she booted her system, he thumped the chair closer. "Wow, Lucus was holding out on me. He didn't say how pretty you are."

Rini's fingers hovered over her network keypad. *Maybe that's because he doesn't think I am.* "What makes you suspect the payment office messed up?"

"I dropped off every single check like clockwork. Pretty damn obvious they fucked up." He coughed. "Pardon my French."

"Did you get a receipt?"

"Damn, was I supposed to?" He scrubbed his jaw. "Son of a bitch."

“Do you recall the name of the processor you dealt with?” She reached for the telecom resting on the corner of her desk and highlighted the number for UGG’s payment center. “If we’re lucky, she might remember you and help us get this straightened out.”

“Can’t say I do. But she had these enormous...”

She looked up when Chase’s voice trailed off. Flashing back to the female hologram dancing over the Liberty’s system’s panel, she held up a hand. “Say no more.”

A perky female voice chirped from the telecom. “Good morning, this is Candace. How may I assist you?”

Rini introduced herself and fumbled her way through an awkward explanation of the situation.

“Sounds like you’re talking about Adrianna,” the receptionist said. “She quit two weeks ago to take a month-long cruise around the straits of Vortega. Don’t ask me how she could afford that kind of trip on the salary she made here.”

Peering across the leaning stack in front of her, Rini met Chase’s darkening glower.

“Thanks, Candace. You might be hearing back from me soon.” She ended the telecom transmission just as Chase leapt from his chair.

“I’ll tell you how she could afford it. With my and Lucus’s money!”

“We don’t know that for sure.” She smothered a sigh when Chase shot her an irate stare. “Okay, it’s a high probability.”

“You bet your sweet ass it is.”

They spent the next hour in a tense telecom conference with the bigwigs at the payment center. With a little digging, they discovered a quarter of the accounts assigned to Adrianna ended up being turned over for repossession—an inordinately high figure. Embarrassed and spouting effusive apologies, the head honchos promised to correct the false calculations on Lucus’s statement and look further into the matter. By the time she clicked off the speaker, Rini’s temples throbbed and a fifth of vodka sounded real tempting. Lifting from her seat, she escorted Chase to the door.

“Can’t wait to make Lucus eat his words on this one.” Grinning, he trapped her in a hug. “Thanks for doing that. Don’t think I would have gotten far if you hadn’t stepped in.”

*They use the same soap.* Extracting her nose from the soft cotton of Chase’s T-shirt, she pushed away from him. “It’s no big deal. If you don’t mind, I’ve got a ton of paperwork to catch up on.”

“Sure.” Chase started to swagger from her office but hesitated. “Hey, why don’t you swing by our place sometime? I know Lucus would get a kick out of seeing you.”

*Yeah, right.* “My schedule’s pretty full right now.”

“Well, the invitation stands. Drop by whenever.”

She watched Chase walk away. The second she lost sight of his white shirt and jeans, she quietly shut her door and cried.

~ \* ~

“Hey, handsome, you lookin’ for a good time?”

Tuning out the catcalls coming from the prostitutes plying their trade from their front stoops, Lucus cut across the street and entered the sports bar situated in the middle of splashy and tacky Pleasure Row. He found an empty booth near the back, far from the noisy drunks trying to make time with the local ladies.

An animatron waiter strolled to his booth and took his order for a Flyboy beer. Raucous hooting shot from the drunks when one of the ladies whipped off her top. *Why the hell did I come here?* He shifted his attention from the voyeuristic party at the front of the room to the line of hover screens rotating the perimeter of the bar. Most featured the mutant bowl-a-rama taking place on Warddok Fourteen. His thoughts drifted to Rini. Nothing new there. She was a main fixture inside his head these days. Still, when one mutant with a foot growing from his back nailed a strike on his first play, Lucus couldn’t help wondering if Rini had followed through on her boast and wagered a week’s pay on the home-team champs.

“You look like you could use some company.”

Reluctantly tearing his attention from the game, he eyed the prostitute sliding onto the vinyl bench across from him. He barely registered the miniscule sequined tube top she wore. Her hair—a dirty, washed-out shade of red—shone lifeless beneath the harsh, unforgiving glare of the track lighting.

Without uttering a word, he shoved from the booth and exited the bar. Cajoling propositions trailed after him as he returned to the Liberty II. He fired her up and wasted precious fuel slumped in the pilot’s seat, staring blindly out the viewing shield. Not giving himself time to rethink his decision, he eased back the throttle and nosed the star cruiser in the direction of Warddok Seven.

Thanks to the million times he’d flown this particular route the past couple weeks, the Liberty II practically found its way to Rini’s apartment community on its own. The adjacent lot couldn’t accommodate his ship so he parked a few blocks away and took the bullet-rail. Debarking with the other passengers, he made his way towards Zennecka Boulevard. He approached the intersection just as Rini exited one of the restaurants lining the strip. His heart thundered. *God, I’ve missed her so much.*

He had only a moment to catalog the basics—her dark green top and cream slacks, the faint shadow of fatigue beneath her eyes—before a tall, impeccably dressed man joined Rini. The guy leaned close to her and whispered something that earned her animated laugh.

Lucus’s gut pitched. He should be the one tickling her funny bone and getting showered with her sparkling smiles. Battling the jealousy raging inside him, he shook his head. No, this is what he’d wanted. For her to be happy. After a final glimpse that did nothing but feed his agony, he turned and wove his way back to the bullet-rail station.

Less than an hour later, he arrived home. Shutting the lights on the Liberty, he stalked into his arro hut and went in search of Chase's stash of Flyboys. Popping the top on the chilled can, he slugged half of it before his brother trekked into the kitchen.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, Lucus slammed the beer down. "That's hilarious coming from you of all people."

Chase's jaw went rigid. "Yeah, I'm a fuckup. I know. Just like I know I'll always fall way short of living up to the perfection that is Lucus Granger."

"Have you been drinking?"

"No, haven't touched a drop all day. Shocking, huh?" Chase leaned against the countertop. An air of pensiveness clung to him. "If you want to know the truth, I figured it best we have this conversation with me stone-cold sober." He scuffed the heel of his boot on the tiled floor. "Bro, I don't wanna be partners anymore."

The tumultuous emotions Lucus had harbored the past hour ripped open their cage doors. "Fucking typical. Springing your bullshit on me when I least need it."

"If you'd listened to me three weeks ago when I asked, we wouldn't be dealing with this now."

Lucus granted Chase a blank stare and his brother scowled. "Did you even hear anything I said that day?"

"I had a lot of shit on my mind." Why the hell he felt inclined to explain himself was a mystery. If anyone should be defensive here, it was Chase. "So you're saying you tried to tell me then that you wanted out of the business?"

Chase relaxed his combative stance. "Amongst other things."

Shit, this was all news to him. "You've been walking around with this idea for three weeks?"

"Actually more like three years."

"What?"

"Bro, I never wanted to be a trader. I only stuck with it this long because I wanted to make you proud of me. But it's pretty damn clear that's never gonna happen."

The weariness in Chase's tone twisted a knife in Lucus's belly and made him feel like a universal bastard. "Don't say that."

"Why not? It's true. I'm a big fucking loser shitting my life away. I can see it in your eyes every time you look at me."

*Tell him.* The inner voice prodded at his conscience, demanding he acknowledge the uncomfortable realization he'd avoided for so long. "What I see when I look at you is me—fifteen years ago."

Chase's mouth went slack. Clearly he hadn't been expecting that answer.

"I've been punishing you all these years for my own sins." He plowed his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry. Go ahead and call me an asshat, fucktard, or whatever inventive name you've got in store for me."

"Nah, I'd rather not ruin the moment. But remind me later."

Dropping his hand, Lucus grabbed the half-empty Flyboy and drained the remaining beer in the sink. "If you truly want out of the partnership, it's okay." He tossed the can into the garbage, his thoughts once again circling around to Rini. "I won't shackle you to a job you hate. Plus it's not like I can't find someone to copilot her if it comes down to it."

"That reminds me. I stopped by the repo agency this morning. Turns out the chick with the big hooters was pocketing the payments. Scammed a whole bunch of people, not just us."

The least important part of Chase's statement was the one part Lucus paid attention to. "You went to the repo agency?"

"Yeah, and I met Rini. She was the one who got it all straightened out. Why didn't you tell me what a fox she is?"

His head was reeling too much to give his brother's smart-mouthed retort its proper due. "You talked to her? How is she? Did she say if she's been sleeping all right? She looked so damn tired earlier."

Chase frowned, and too late, Lucus realized his mistake. "Earlier? Wait a minute, is that where you've been? With Rini?"

"No. I saw her from a distance. That's all."

The lines burrowed in Chase's forehead slowly smoothed and the corners of his lips tilted. "No way. You're in love with her."

"Don't be a moron."

"You are!" Chase lunged forward and playfully punched Lucus in the stomach. Unfortunately, with the queasy shape his gut was in, it nearly made him barf. "Dude, you should go after her because she is one hundred percent babe-a-licious. And nice too. The total package."

"I can't."

His brother gaped at him like he was the biggest asshat fucktard in the universe. Expelling a heavy breath, he explained the nature of his and Rini's relationship, minus the gratuitous details.

"So you decided to do the noble thing? God, you're an idiot."

He brushed off Chase's unflattering remark. "It had to be done. Rini deserves better than the little I can offer her. Not to mention what would happen if the media got a hold of our story."

"You think they give a rat's ass about that? Hell, the general is practically old news now. Once his trial is out of the way, the broadcasters will move on to the next scandal. And what about Rini? She doesn't strike me as the type that'd care what a few stupid jack-offs think of her."

*No, but she'd care for her family's sake.* "Just drop it, all right? What's done is done."

*Jodi Redford*

Chase didn't look thrilled by his request but he thankfully honored it. "I still think you're a fucktard."

*Me too.*

## Chapter Nineteen

“Damn it.” Grimacing, Rini rammed her foot into the uncomfortably tight sapphire blue satin pump balanced in her hand. “Explain to me again why I’m going to this stupid fundraiser with you guys?”

Her mom held out the other shoe. “Darling, you’ve been cooped inside this apartment for weeks.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been coming into work every day.”

“Exposing yourself to sunlight merely for work purposes doesn’t count.”

Rini sent her dad a pleading look. The doorbell suddenly rang. Wearing an expression like he’d been saved from a forced skinny dip in Hell’s lake of fire, he dashed from her bedroom. “I’ll get that.”

Fluffing the skirt of her cocktail dress, Rini craned her neck, trying to get a clear view of her backside. “Is it my imagination or is my butt huge? I really shouldn’t appear in public looking like I’ve got a couple of basketballs stashed back there.”

“Darling, your derriere is fine. Now stop trying to find excuses to get out of tonight.” Her mom snatched the tiny compact of powder resting on the nightstand and dabbed some on Rini’s cheekbones.

“Were you in labor with me for forty-eight hours or something? Is that why you’re torturing me now?”

Raised voices filtered from the living room, breaking through Rini’s disgruntled musings. She slashed her focus to the doorway and got a nose full of powder courtesy of the brush clutched in her mom’s fingers. Sneezing, she walked into the hallway to check what all the ruckus was about.

“I told you she’s not available right now. If you don’t leave this minute, I’m calling security.”

Hurrying her pace, Rini rounded the corner. “Dad, what’s—” Her heels dug into the plush carpeting, jerking her to a halt. “*Chase?*”

Lucus’s brother glanced her way. An appreciative male smile stretched his mouth. “Whoa, that is some dress. Babe, you look killer.”

Despite the strangeness of the situation, she couldn’t help feeling a spark of feminine pride. *Guess my butt isn’t too ginormous.* “What are you doing here?”

“I had this brilliant idea of helping out my pigheaded brother. But now I’m wondering if *I’d* be the fucktard for not making a play for you.”

An indignant sputter came from her father. “Rini, who is this foulmouthed individual?”

Rini made the introductions just as her mom entered the living room.

“You’re the pilot’s brother?” Her face paling, Rini’s mom fidgeted with the pearls wreathing her neck.

“Yes, ma’am, and judging from your expression, I suspect you know why I’m here.”

“She’d have to be a mind reader because even *I* have no clue what’s going on.” Planting her hands on her hips, Rini peered at the three faces in front of her. “Maybe one of you could fill me in?”

“My brother is in love with you.”

Blood pounded in Rini’s ears. “I don’t know where you got your information, but you’re wrong. He corrected that lie when we were in the hospital.”

“No, he lied to you then.” Chase’s gaze slid to her parents. “He wanted to protect you. Apparently someone convinced him he’d be screwing your life up if he didn’t walk away.”

Both Rini and her father stared at her mother, but it was her dad who spoke first. “Gwen, what the devil have you done this time?”

Tears crowded her mother’s eyes. “I only wanted to save Rini from those horrid broadcasters. We all know how cruel the media can be.”

“Oh God.” A groan tumbling from her lips, Rini crossed to her mother’s side. “I’m a big girl. You can’t protect me from everything. It’s time to clip my wings.”

Her mother’s chin quivered. “But you’re my baby.” Sniffling, she reached up and cupped Rini’s cheek. “I want the best for you.”

“Lucus is the best. He’s the man I love.”

“Shit, am I happy to hear you say that.” Chase’s grin broadened. “Even though you do look wicked hot in that dress and I’m kicking my own ass for not being the one you found naked in the Liberty.”

“What?”

Rini squeezed her mom in a hug before the poor woman could crumple in a faint. “Look at it this way—it’ll be one heck of a story to tell your grandchildren.”

~ \* ~

Lucus tuned out the insistent drumming on his bedroom door. If Chase didn’t knock it off, he was going to be minus a hand real soon. “Go away. I’m trying to sleep.”

“We just got a call for an emergency shipment pickup on Helix Prime. Their coolant systems have gone wonky and they’re losing produce left and right. A warehouse in Jhiordan has offered to make space for them.”

“Let someone else take care of it.”

“There is no one else.”

Grumbling, Lucus shoved from the bed. “Fine, I’ll be out in five minutes.”

“Better make it two. We don’t want a thousand pounds of rotting lettuce giving us a bad reputation.”



Lucus snorted as he tugged on his flight pants. “Since when do you care? I thought we’re no longer partners.”

“The ink’s not completely dry on our dissolution papers yet.”

Rolling his eyes, Lucus yanked his shirt over his head and opened the door. Chase stood on the other side, the Liberty II’s keycard pinched between his thumb and index finger. Lucus gave the card a quick glance before giving his full concentration to the task of buttoning his cuffs. “Why don’t you go fire up the ship? I still have to find my boots.”

“Uh, think it’d be best if you took care of that. Besides, I’m not joining you for this job.”

Lucus jerked his head up. “The fuck you’re not. I’m not moving a thousand pounds of produce on my own.”

“Don’t sweat it. I’ve already lined up a replacement copilot to take over for me.”

A growl snuck from Lucus. “Did it occur to you I might want a say in the hiring? Particularly since I’m the one who’ll be working with them?”

“Pretty certain you’ll approve of my choice. Course, she does have this weird obsession with antibacterial wipes and she’s kinda bossy.”

Lucus’s heart stuttered.

“Clock’s tickin’, bro. Might want to speed things up.”

His senses surging back to life, Lucus swiped the keycard from his brother and ran towards the exit.

“Dude, you forgot your boots.”

Slamming out of the arro hut, Lucus cut Chase’s laughter short. Oblivious to the rough gravel scraping his bare feet and the anxious howls coming from Roscoe, he tore inside the hangar and barreled to the star cruiser. Fingers shaking, he jammed the card into the slot and jumped onto the ramp before it completely lowered. A pair of satin high heels lay discarded in the middle of the debarking station, their toes pointing in the direction of the bridge. Stepping over the shoes, he walked slowly down the corridor. A fancy blue evening dress blocked his path. Shortly after that piece of clothing, he encountered a lacy bra and panties. By the time he reached the bridge, his heart was pounding and his cock was at full mast.

One bare arm—the only body part he could see—dangled languorously over the edge of the pilot’s seat. “Sheesh, took you long enough.”

“I know. Three weeks, eight hours and fifteen minutes too long, if you want to get technical about it.”

Rini climbed from the seat and turned to face him. He swallowed hard. “You usually make a habit of making shipment drops naked?”

“It’s what my boss prefers.”

“Wise man.” He closed the distance between them in four long strides and crushed her tight against him. Burying his nose in her hair, he breathed deep, the scent of lilacs making him dizzy with longing. “I’ve missed you, baby.”

She grasped his jaw and pulled him down for a luscious kiss. Their tongues collided, each seeking for that elusive something that only the other could give. Emotion thick in his chest, he angled his head back. His fingers touched her everywhere. He couldn't get enough. "Rini, I love you."

"I love you too." She smiled tremulously. Eyes bright with the same incredible passion shimmering through his veins, she took his hand. "Now how about we properly christen that pilot seat?"

## About the Author

At the ripe age of seven, Jodi Redford penned her first epic, complete with stick figure illustrations. Sadly, her drawing skills haven't improved much, but her love of fantasy worlds never went away. These days she writes about fairies, ghosts and other supernatural creatures, only with considerably more heat.

She has won numerous contests, including The Golden Pen and Launching a Star.

When not writing or working the day job, she enjoys gardening and way too many reality television shows.

Currently residing in Michigan with her husband and overgrown lapdog, she is a member of RWA national and Greater Detroit Romance Writers of America.

She loves to hear from readers. You can email her at [jodiredford@jodiredford.com](mailto:jodiredford@jodiredford.com) and visit her online at [www.jodiredford.com](http://www.jodiredford.com).

Look for these titles by Jodi Redford

*Now Available:*

Lover Enslaved  
Taking Liberty

*Sometimes love is the only prize worth stealing...*

## Lover Enslaved © 2009 Jodi Redford

*Thieves of Aurion, Book 1*

Mara Sheppard has no love for the Fae, but to free her brother from prison, she'll do whatever the treacherous Queen Nalia asks. Even kidnap Dashael Rhyder, a womanizing thief.

She should have known the deal would go sour.

It's almost too easy to bait and trap Dashael. Resisting his potent Fae allure isn't. Especially since Nalia's unexpected demand for a missing magical rune means Mara will have to hold strong far longer than she'd planned.

Dashael's best shot at escaping? Seduce her. If he can survive a few dozen of his closest enemies out for blood and the queen's scheme to make him her personal stud...he might just make it.

Then his game of seduction trips over a snag named Mara, and he falls. Hard. For a commitment-phobic thief, love might as well be a prison sentence. Yet the idea of losing her makes him miserable.

Mara can't deny that her enemy has stolen her heart. But their love is about to be tested by a lifetime of secrets. The risk may not be worth it. Especially if a life together means death for one of them.

*Warning, contains one or more of the following: Hot, sexy thieves, pain-in-the-butt sprites, handcuffs, intriguing new uses for a silk bed curtain, and scorching, shake-the-ceiling-tiles sex.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Lover Enslaved:*

Hidden path lights blinked on when they approached the wide front porch. Dash pushed aside the antler-like foliage of a stag fern sprouting from the porch's center support beam, revealing a keypad. He punched in a code and the house's massive oak door swung inward. A cozy glow spilled across the threshold.

Mara swore the incessant thudding of her heart drowned out the trills and chirps of the resident firewing crickets. For the sake of Gideon, her brother, she wouldn't chicken out. Her jittery nerves were inconsequential compared to the daily cruelty he must suffer inside Zalan's fairy prison.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped inside and more lamps clicked on. She stopped and surveyed her surroundings. Centered in the room, weathered leather couches grouped around a circular stone fireplace. Dash snapped his fingers and fire instantly crackled in the pit's grate.

"You must be handy on a camping trip."

Dash laughed before stripping from his jacket. She stared at the interesting ripple of muscles beneath his white linen shirt. He tossed the jacket over a nearby armchair. "Hungry? I've some excellent filet in the cooler."

Her stomach flipped at the thought of food. She shook her head. “Not unless you want some.”

The firelight reflected in his dark eyes. “It’s not steak I’m hungry for.”

*Okay then.* Swallowing past a lump of apprehension, she fumbled with the satchel, needing its reassuring weight. Dash noticed her awkward motion and stepped towards her.

“Here,” he said, holding out his hand. “Let me put that somewhere for you.”

She shifted the bag behind her. “No.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t steal it.” His lips curled in a half smile.

*Very funny.* “Um...there are a few things in here I’ll need later.”

“Really?”

Mara realized there’d be no deflecting his curiosity this time. With a sigh, she hauled the satchel forward and unzipped it. She hooked a finger around the object settled on top and pulled it out.

Dash’s jaw went slack. “That what I think it is?”

She lifted the handcuffs and eyed them. Giving her finger a little twirl, she nodded. “Yep, believe so.”

The breath expelled from Dash’s lungs in a whoosh. “*Sweet goddess.*”

Wariness stole across Mara’s face. He groaned, battling the urge to bite his cursed quick tongue. Did she worry he’d ridicule her desires? Mentally head-slapping himself for his lack of gentlemanly tact, he strode to Mara and cupped her chin. His thumb brushed beneath the little dip in her bottom lip, tempting him, but first he needed to ease her mind.

“Don’t fear shocking me. It’s impossible. Besides, whatever you have in mind, I’m more than game.” He punctuated the fact by sliding his mouth over hers. With some work, he coaxed her tongue into play.

“Delicious,” he whispered, nibbling along the sweet curve of her lips. His mouth lowered, discovered her neck’s graceful slope. Her breathing sped up. Ah, he’d found a sensitive spot. Murmuring in appreciation, he suckled her there, laving her skin. His hands glided along her shoulders. He brushed the sides of her breasts and she slumped into him. The handcuffs clattered to the hardwood floor, their metallic ring jostling them from their sensual reverie.

“Damn it.” Mara ducked and scrabbled for the handcuffs.

He hunkered next to her. Looking to halt the frantic motion of her hands, he cupped her chin again, tilting it until she revealed the vexation in her eyes. “Don’t worry, it’s just a floor. Far worse punishment has been thrown its way.” He gave her a teasing grin. “Though your handcuffs win top prize as the most interesting.”

The flush in her cheeks deepened. “You must think I’m a clumsy oaf.”

“No, I think you’re beautiful...” his fingers traveled down her neck and grazed the delicate ridge of her collarbone, “...sexy...” he stroked the vee between her breasts, watching them rise and fall with the sharp intake of her breath, “...and far too overdressed.”

He reached for the leather bustier's center hook. She jumped and her elbow went flying into his chin. Grunting, he thudded onto his ass.

"Oh gods," Mara groaned, leaning over him. "I'm worse than clumsy—I'm a menace."

He shook his head, trying to clear the spinning stars. "Not at all."

Well, maybe a little. To be on the safe side, they should probably stick to the missionary position. Much as he loved the sight of a woman riding him, he didn't need her falling off and breaking her neck.

Pushing to his feet, he smiled and extended a hand. "Come, I'll show you the rest of the house."

After the briefest hesitation, she tucked her hand in his. The kitchen received a cursory walkthrough. She oohed and ahed over the original Lia Mavrick watercolors and Stellic bronzes scattered between the various guestrooms. Outside the den, she stopped and ran her fingers over the nubby texture of the vessel holding a freeform arrangement of wild grasses.

"Is this a Rucca pod?"

He smiled at the wonderment in her voice. Here he possessed a houseful of priceless art and antiques, and a nut husk thrilled her most. Females were such strange, delightful creatures. "I picked it up during my last trip to Frittona." Along with a square cut, ten-carat ruby that fetched a handsome finder's fee.

"I've never seen one so big." She stooped and surveyed the pod. Her skirt lifted, granting him a mouth-watering peep show.

Dash's jaw dropped. *Sweet goddess, she is wearing pink panties.*

Mara glanced over her shoulder. He forced his attention from her curvaceous rear, but apparently not fast enough. Giving the hem of her skirt a firm tug, she scrambled to her feet. "Where next?"

Delirious with the need to peel those pink panties off, he led her into the master bedroom. He followed her stare to the massive canopy bed centered in the room.

"Perfect," she blurted.

*Couldn't have said it better.* Fumbling with the buttons on his shirt, he stepped towards her. She swiveled on her heel and strode to the bed, plunking her bag near her feet. Her handcuffs reappeared and circled the nearest pine post with a decisive click.

Dash's lust exploded. Impatient with his shirt, he yanked. Hard. The buttons popped free and bounced along the wood floor with a *plink-plink-plink*. Mara turned, her wide-eyed stare tracking the rolling path of the buttons.

Dropping his ripped shirt, he advanced, kicking off his dress shoes before unbuttoning his trousers with shaking fingers. He was too far gone, too primed, to take things slow. Three weeks without sex—what the hell had he been thinking?

"Dash?"

The uncertainty wobbling her voice knifed through his single-minded focus...slightly. He forced a strained grin. "Perhaps you'd best remove your own clothing."

She blinked before releasing a slow breath. “Okay.”

Her hand snaked towards the miniskirt’s waistband. The sex-starved beast in him snapped its leash. Plowing his hands through Mara’s hair, he claimed her mouth in a fierce, hungry kiss.

The taste of her inflamed his senses. He untangled one hand from her hair and cupped her breast, growling in frustration when his fingers met leather rather than soft skin. She gasped and tumbled sideways, taking him with her. They knocked into the post, rattling the handcuffs. Before he regained his balance, she grabbed his wrist and secured it inside the dangling cuff. Not the way he’d expected things to roll, but it might prove interesting.

Leaving him slumped on the bed, she ducked to the floor. He watched her wiggling rear end and groaned. “*Sher’ tian*, you’re killing me.”

She fumbled through her bag before returning to him. The hem of her miniskirt rasped against his thighs and he reached for her with his free hand. Ignoring him, she climbed onto the bed and straddled his lap. Lust hazed his vision. He lowered his head towards her breasts, fully intent on ripping her bustier open with his teeth if need be.

Cold metal locked around his neck with an ominous clank. The sound—along with the chill biting into his flesh—managed to edge past the fog clouding his brain. Disoriented, he glanced down. Purple lights flashed across the base of the bizarre collar encircling his neck.

Mara pushed off his lap and he frowned up at her.

“What is this?”

A strange expression crossed her face—one bordering on pity. He didn’t like it at all. “Mara?”

“I’m sorry...truly. Please, just don’t make any sudden—”

Agitated, he lurched at her. An electrical shock zinged his neck. “*Son of a bitch*,” he roared, jerking back.

Mara winced before finishing her sentence. “—movements.”



*A prehensile tail has its advantages...*

## Satin Spar

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Scar's marbled skin and stunted tail aren't all that make her stand out. Her Caraniae DNA has a strange effect on the male of the species, which makes her career as a pilot perfect. The less interaction she has with people—with men—the better. She won't risk her wayward pheromones bonding her forever to one man.

Then there's her boss's new bodyguard, Anthony Tyler. The pure-human is tight-lipped about his sketchy past. He also seems determined to work her prehensile tail off.

Once imprisoned and drummed out of the Corps for conduct unbecoming, Tyler is intrigued with his ship's unheard-of, human-Caraniae hybrid. He spent his career fighting her kind, but when a message from home throws Scar into a tailspin, he finds himself drawn to help her in any way he can. Even if it means risking life and limb to help her sweat out her anger.

Their sparring session turns into something else. Something wildly sexual. Something so wrong as to be suicidal—if Scar's father discovers she's bonded with anyone other than the husband he's forcing her to marry...

*Warning: This book contains violence, nekkid wrestling and hot, alien-human naughtiness.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Satin Spar:*

"What do you want me to do?"

She smiled that wicked Caraniae smile. Her strong thighs gripped him and before he knew exactly how, he was on his back. Surprise had worked his grip free and now she pinned *his* arms to the cool sand.

"You disobeyed orders. How?"

"That's not what I thought you'd ask."

She smirked. "Satisfy my curiosity first."

Time for the sanitised truth, the woman was half-Caraniae after all. "There was a suspected nest. We went in." The Corps had ordered an atrocity at Vistern Ridge. With the end of the war, they'd buried that order and his career. Tyler pushed back the memories; they were a part of his old life. "I refused to authorise the clean up."

"And that's a euphemism for...?"

The muscles in his jaw tightened. "It's not open for discussion."

Scar leaned forward, pressing deliciously along his erection. Her mouth hovered over his, her lips almost touching. Just a simple tilt of his head would— “Want to discuss it now?”

“Why are you pressing this?”

“What? This?” And she shifted her hips in a slow slide that had him involuntarily thrusting up to meet her. “So...why are you here, Tyler?”

She was still asking him questions. Why the hell was she still asking him questions? “Scar...?”

“Rochester told you who my stepfather is, didn’t he?”

Tyler held down a curse. Sparring with her would’ve seemed natural. Throwing her on her back and offering her whatever she wanted...yes, didn’t he look obvious now? “He mentioned it in passing.”

Scar’s expression was unreadable as she sat up. The friction made him wince. His erection mocked him. “And you just thought you’d drop by, say hello, curry favour?” She wiggled and he sucked in a breath. “Offer me this?”

“*That* wasn’t planned.”

Her mouth twisted and there was a hardness to her eyes, hiding...what? He wanted to label it nerves, but that would be crazy.

“An unexpected bonus?”

“Scar...”

She leapt up with an unnatural agility and offered her hand. “Let me try not to kill you.”

Tyler grabbed her hand and she pulled him effortlessly to his feet. “Suddenly this is not a good idea.”

“Really?”

Tyler shucked off his jacket and threw it beyond the edge of the arena. His fingers moved to his shirt and stopped. What was he doing? A fight felt more real, more immediate to him when air brushed his skin. But now, that would be so *very* wrong. He kicked off his boots and pulled at his socks instead. His toes curled into the warming sand.

“Finished?” Scar lifted an eyebrow. “Can we fight now?”

“Impatient for me to beat you?”

She burst forward, but he stopped her attempt to grab him, blocking her with a palm-strike. Dropping, she tried to strike him. Another block. She swung around and struck out again. She was quick, fast and strong. It was fun to play with her—

“You’re grinning. Think this is funny?” She growled and his balls tightened.

He staggered at the kick to his shin. She leapt, crashing him to the sand, and ripped at his shirt. She nipped at his neck with her teeth and Tyler’s vision blurred. Blood raced south. Her scent burned through him and he tugged at her undershirt, the thin cotton tearing across her back.

“Ah, so that’s what you want to play.” Her lips brushed against his throat, searing the words into his skin.

His hands slid down her spine and found her tail curling tight around his right wrist. It squeezed hard. “Scar...” He couldn’t help the low, warning snarl. “This is not playing fair.”

She lifted her head and grinned at him. “I want to fight, not fuck, Tyler.”

She whipped free of him, standing back, her body loose and ready to attack him again. Tyler rolled to his feet and tried to keep his eyes off her small, firm and now very *exposed* breasts. Fire flickered under his skin and the only thought that consumed him was his need to get her shorts off. Some insane voice in the back of his head screamed that she had to be naked. And so should he.

“Shall we make this interesting?”

Her green eyes narrowed as she edged around him, matching his movements. “Interesting, how?”

“You take a fall, you lose clothing.”

Scar stared down at her body. She looked back up at him from under her lashes, her eyebrow lifting. “I only have these. You have trousers *and* underwear. What say we make it even first?”

Tyler paused, to give the illusion that he was reluctant. But that small voice wanted his fingers to fly. His mouth pursed. “Fine.” And his trousers pooled at his feet. He threw them and both of their shredded shirts out of the arena. “Happy?”

Her smile was wicked. “When you’re on your back, I will be.”

His cock twitched. Her scent drifted above the sterile odour of the filtered air and the dryness of the sand, something sweet and intoxicating. His chest tightened. He wanted her—

Scar’s foot connected with his knee and he grunted. Muscle instinct took over and he grabbed her arm, yanking her forward and kicking out her legs. She thumped into the sand, face down. Tyler straddled her thighs. “One for me, I think,” he murmured. His fingers slid down her spine, easing over her ribs until he reached her hips. He hooked a finger into her shorts and twanged them.

“Okay, you got this one,” she muttered and he was certain there was a curse mixed in under her breath. “But after I get you...” her head turned and bright green eyes speared him, “...and I will, then the one who beats the other into submission is the winner. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Tyler murmured. “Now I take my reward.”

*Trust will either destroy them...or save them both.*

## The Promise of Kierna'Rhoan

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Kira Farseaker led a sheltered, privileged life—until her discovery of a cruel secret plunged her into an underworld of danger. Now she vows to use her money and position to save an alien species, the Shifters, from government-sanctioned extermination.

A secret planet, a Farseaker legacy known as Kierna'Rhoan, could offer at least some of the evolving Shifters the sanctuary they need to survive. To get them there safely will be the most dangerous mission Kira has ever attempted—a task that isn't made any easier by her attraction to the dark, hungry eyes of a suspected spy.

Officer David Cario's assignment to a Shifter extermination squadron is just the break he needs to learn why his sister was executed. Earning the trust of his commander's ex-wife, suspected terrorist Kira Farseaker, is easier said than done, especially when crossing into her world brings him face to face with truths he isn't prepared to discover.

Swept up in a growing whirlpool of corruption and treachery, Kira and David find themselves locked in a struggle between duty and a growing passion that could destroy everything they've worked for. Or save both their lives.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Promise of Kierna'Rhoan:*

Kira stood staring at the door that led to David, trying to settle herself for another confrontation. The fights and accusations were wearing on her. The exhaustion that had swept her in the lift sat heavily on her shoulders. And dread mixed with a tingling of anticipation at seeing the Guard. Just the thought of his kiss made her lips burn. Knowing she'd remember the feel of his touch all too vividly in his presence, Kira wasn't sure she'd be able to manage this meeting. But it had to be done.

Pushing her hair behind her ears, she left Command. Raf stopped her in the corridor just outside the air-sealed entrance to the fan rooms.

"Kira," he began, then fell silent and stared at the floor for a few minutes, his brow deeply creased with unspoken thoughts. After a time, his brow softened and he grinned. "You're something else, Farseaker. And for what it's worth, I think liars are the best kinds of people."

A laugh burst from Kira so suddenly it surprised her and made her laugh harder. "Glad to know it," she said when she could talk again. "Thanks." She tapped his arm gently. "Now, get off your ass and make sure you're ready to pilot us off this rock."

He smiled, winked and squeezed her shoulder before walking away. Kira shook her head, baffled by the scene but thankful for the release of tension. When she stepped through the air seal into the smoking rooms, she was grinning.

David leaned against a wall, taking a deep drag on his cigarette. He'd seen Kira and Raf's brief exchange—the air seal was transparent—but he hadn't been able to hear them. It didn't matter. Seeing was enough to make his blood boil. Her grin didn't help his state of mind any.

He took another deep pull on the cigarette, waiting for her to notice him. When she did, her step faltered. She slowed, moving toward him with a wary gaze.

"I think there are a few things you'd better explain to me," she said.

Her hard tone made him bristle. "I was going to say the same thing." He puffed at the cigarette again, the glowing tip almost to his fingers. He dropped it to the floor, smashed it beneath his boot heel and lit another.

"Me first," Kira said, ignoring his glare. "What was all that about Ennoren killing Raf if he thought he was my lover?"

"A fact," David answered with a shrug. "The commander would kill him for the simple fact that he was having an affair with you."

Her brow creased. "I doubt that. He might kill Raf, but not because I was having an affair with him." She stopped, her gaze unfocused and turned inward, then quietly said, "Unless he thought it would hurt me. Then he might kill him."

"Would it?"

"What?"

She snapped her gaze back to his face, and David felt the strength of her golden eyes in his every cell. "Would it hurt you if Raf were killed?"

She dismissed the comment with a wave of her hand. "It always hurts me when someone I know gets killed."

"But would Tygran's death hurt you especially?"

She puffed out an impatient breath and paced away. David could see the conversation wasn't going the way she wanted it to. He didn't care. He needed these answers.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, David," she said. "And it doesn't matter anyway. I want to know why you didn't want Ennoren to think you were here last night. You tell me I'm keeping you a prisoner—"

"You are."

"But you warn me before I go to talk with your commander," she continued over his interruption, "so that I'll make a specific effort not to mention you." She stopped and turned to face him. "Why? I could have slipped. I could have given away that I knew where you were. He'd have a warrant to search the

mansion within minutes if he thought I was keeping you here. Why would you give me a warning you must have known would put me on guard?"

"Why would I want him to know I'm here?" David countered, throwing his half-finished cigarette to the ground and stalking closer to her. "You said you'd release me within the week. Why would I want Ennoren, of all people, to find me here when I know he'd kill me on sight?"

The statement made her gasp. "What...?"

He got in her face. "I told you already. I don't want him to think you've slept with me. He'd kill me for that as easily as he'd kill Raf for it."

"First, why would he assume I'd sleep with you just because you were here?"

"After our meeting at the blockade, he has every reason to suspect that you wanted more from me than conversation."

"Oh! You arrogant son of a bitch," she nearly shouted in indignation.

David grabbed her chin, none too gently, and lifted her face. "Don't dare deny your attraction to me, Kira. There were two of us involved in that kiss in the canteen."

She jerked her head out of his grip and stalked off. "You're as delusional as Ennoren."

She stopped abruptly and David, following close behind her, almost knocked her over. He grabbed her shoulders to balance her, but as soon as she steadied herself, she wrenched away from his touch.

"None of this has anything to do with anything," she spat. "Whether I'm attracted to you or not, whether Raf is my lover or not, has nothing to do with anything. I have less than three days now, and I don't have time for this pettiness. You don't want Ennoren to find you here? Fine! He won't. I've got—"

David grabbed her shoulders again and hauled her close. "Is he?"

"What?" she demanded.

"Is Raf Tygran your lover?"

Her mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you're still..." She expelled a disbelieving breath, shook her head and shoved away from him.

She started to walk off again, but David kept pace with her easily. "Answer the question, Kira."

"It's none of your goddamned business!"

His arm dropped like a bolt against the steel-plated wall beside her, stopping her retreat. She turned, her golden-eyed gaze sparking like lava. Her breath came in deep, angry heaves that made her chest rise and fall sharply. And David felt his blood reaching critical heat. "I'm making it my goddamned business," he answered, his voice low and rough. "Are you having an affair with Tygran?"

She lowered her gaze and pushed against the arm that blocked her retreat. "I don't have time for affairs," she mumbled. "With anyone."

He gripped the back of her neck, barely maintaining his control against the storming desire riding through him. Forcing her head around, he tilted her face up, bringing her lips only a breath away from his. "Make time," he whispered hoarsely, then covered her mouth with a hard, desperate kiss.



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