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Marshals' Most WANTED

Raina James

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Tasty Treats

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MARSHALS' MOST WANTED

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DEDICATION

Joss Whedon, for creating such a wonderful space western in *Firefly* and an equally fab rough-around-the-edges hero in *Serenity*'s captain, Mal Reynolds.

MARSHALS' MOST WANTED

Tasty Treats

RAINA JAMES

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Prologue

Farrah's Resort, Leisure Station 10, Fourth Quadrant

"Down!"

Stev Lan Garron dived behind a stack of net-wrapped cargo before his bond-brother's telepathic warning registered. Even so, he felt the sting as the laser shot aimed at his belly skimmed his hip, leaving a blackened streak of burnt fabric on his trousers. Sensing Tarik Lan Garron's concern, he 'pathed, *"I'm fine."*

Crouching behind the crates, Stev fingered his singed hip and winced. Painful, but not serious. His eye caught on the label on one of the crates: Madame Olga's Parti-Colored Party Favors for Big Girls and Boys. He snorted softly in wry amusement. The sparkling holograph of a gaily festooned erection of slightly scary proportions made it certain the delivery wasn't destined for one of the more conservative planets.

"Where in the frozen pit is station security?"

"Locked out," Rik answered, sending him a mental image of the screen of his law enforcement issue wristcomp. *"Looks like a pirate override was hacked into security. Pretty sophisticated, too."*

Stev snorted. *"Of course it is. The crooks always get the best tech."*

“Ten credits says it’s an inside job.”

“No bet.”

With the ease of long habit and a flurry of mental images, they planned their next moves. Stev popped out from behind the crates long enough to lay down a barrage of fire in the general direction of the crew tube at the far end of the loading bay. Tarik sprinted to a new position behind a stack of crates within sight of the one Stev huddled behind. Unfortunately, they didn’t even have the hope of a ricochet taking out one of the fleeing thieves. Unlike the laser pistol that nearly roasted Stev’s gut, the weapons issued to Galactic Marshals featured governors that precluded anything but stun-capacity electric bolts inside the space station. Collateral damage. Wouldn’t want to scorch any high-priced goods. Or people. Sometimes Stev thought they’d get better results throwing rocks.

The gang that just knocked off the main counting room at Farrah’s most exclusive casino wasn’t restricted by such niceties. Stev heard one of the gang members clip out terse orders in a rumbling, masculine voice but couldn’t make out the words. The response to those orders wasn’t long in coming. An explosion of sound rocked the bay. Stev was shoved violently back as the crates in front of him burst from their netting in a hail of plas-metal splinters. He threw his arms over his face to protect his eyes and grimaced as a number of the splinters punched through the fabric of his shirtsleeves and needled his arms.

“They’ve got a farging disruptor cannon!” Tarik ’pathed. Three more explosions followed in quick succession. Tarik grunted a vocal curse at the same time Stev felt a stab of phantom pain in his left shoulder.

“Rik!” Stev pushed the larger pieces of shattered plas-metal off his chest and thighs and rolled to his side. The stacks of cargo all around them had been transformed into a jumbled mass of unbroken crates, sharp-edged plas-metal pieces, and the rags and remains of their contents. Shakily, Stev pushed himself up on his elbows. His

head spun. Streams of smoke rose to join the layer forming near the ceiling. Three people raced down the crew tube to the gang's ship. A man stood in front of the tube with the cannon cocked and ready on his shoulder to fire off another salvo. A smoke alarm blared to life, and, along with it, the bay's sprinkler system. Water poured from the ceiling in a forceful deluge reminiscent of the daily rainstorms on Stev and Tarik's tropical homeworld, Geminus.

Stev ignored the water that slicked his black hair to his head and stared down the wide, empty barrel of the cannon as it came to bear on him. That was when he realized he'd managed to hold on to his gun through the shattering blasts. His arm, seemingly of its own volition, lifted to point it at the other man. They stared at each other, neither flinching. The man's lips spread in an unpleasant smile. They both knew Stev might as well have threatened him with one of those rocks he thought of earlier. With water pouring over every surface, pooling on the metal floor around him and Tarik, firing an electric energy bolt would be the last thing he would ever do.

A soft groan at his side reminded Stev of the pain he felt scream across the bond he and Tarik shared.

"*Tarik?*" He tensed when his bond-brother didn't immediately respond. It seemed like eons before Stev sensed Tarik's increasing alertness. His shoulder throbbed in sympathetic agony, and he knew he had to get Tarik to a medic.

An echoing *click-click-click* sounded out of place under the steady thunder of water from the sprinklers. Stev was surprised he could hear anything after the cannon roars and resulting explosions. The *click-click-click* resolved itself into the distinct sound of high heels connecting with metal as a woman stalked down the crew tube to stand beside the man with the cannon. Sheltered in the tube, she eyed the downpour with a moue of distaste. A diaphanous silver skirt swirled around long, shapely legs, and creamy breasts spilled from the top of the fitted metal corset that comprised the standard uniform of one of Farrah's backroom hostesses. On this woman, the suggestive

outfit looked more like a challenge to the male of the species than an invitation. She spoke into the gunman's ear. He half-heartedly shrugged her away, but nodded. Cannon never wavering from Stev, he tipped him a mocking salute and backed up the tube, woman at his side.

Stev heard the airlock engage and cursed the luck that saw him and Tarik in the vicinity when the casino was hit. Now, Tarik was injured and he sat here with his ass in his hands watching the thieves escape. Even if he could get up and across the bay in time, what would he do? Hammer his useless gun against the airlock porthole as the ship blasted away?

He bit off another expletive. Holstering his weapon, he got painfully to his feet and went to help his bond-brother.

Chapter 1

Terminal City, Jokers Wild, Fourth Quadrant

Stev pushed through the swinging plas-wood doors, Tarik close on his heels. Both men paused to let their eyes adjust to the dimmer indoor lighting after the brilliance of the midday sun—or suns, rather, since Jokers Wild had three of them—on the dusty street outside.

“Any sign of our guide?” Tarik asked.

Scanning the room, Stev shook his head. “Doesn’t look like it. At least, no one’s rushing to greet us with open arms.”

The store, like this section of town, was done up to fit someone’s idea of a general store from the fabled Wild West of Old Earth. It was crammed to the rafters—literally, since the shelves lining the walls reached all the way to what appeared to be genuine wooden rafters—with everything anyone could possibly need, from foodstuffs and clothing to liquor and feminine sundries. There was even a reclining chair positioned in the front window with a chalkboard display advertising a cut and a shave for an antique nickel. If a fella didn’t have that, the postscript jovially added, the proprietor would accept thirty credits.

The swinging doors crashed open, forcing the bond-brothers to quickly step aside to make way for a boisterous group. The newcomers wore flashy fringed shirts, pristine cowboy hats and cowboy boots so new they squeaked as they walked. The women on their arms were just as flashy, although their scanty fashions ran more to the pricey synth-fabs preferred by off-worlders than the greenhorn

garb the men wore. Stev and Tarik ignored the women's coquettish glances. They weren't here for an easy fuck or three.

The bond-brothers recognized the group from the passenger liner flight to Jokers Wild. The men were here for the annual high-stakes poker game that was the backwater planet's one claim to fame. The women were along to indulge in some of their own games. Stev and Tarik were on the hunt for another kind of jackpot—the Rogan Gang.

The gang slipped through their fingers on Farrah's, but that wouldn't happen again. A few reliable sources and months of planning had brought the Galactic Marshals to Jokers Wild, where they planned to foil the gang's attempt to make off with the winnings of the high-stakes game.

Without speaking, Stev and Tarik moved away from the entrance to wander around the store.

"We're a bit early," Tarik said.

Stev nodded. Examining a shelf of small, hand-carved items, he picked up a roughly made tobacco pipe and struck a pose. "Is it me?"

"Sure! And I dare you to light it up around your mother."

"Only if I wanted it stuck somewhere other than my mouth."

Tarik grinned appreciatively.

A loud giggle was their only warning. Seemingly in slow motion, the free-standing shelf behind them shuddered, then tipped, then toppled over.

Stev dropped the pipe and staggered as the shelf hit the back of his head. Tarik tried to grab it and hold it up, but it was too heavy for one man to handle. He and Stev went down under a shower of tiny white boxes.

"Ooops."

The bond-brothers, trapped but unhurt, glared at the woman who spoke. One breast dangled unrestrained over the top of her form-fitting synth-fab dress, the hem of which was caught on one unnaturally round hip. The duded-up gambler beside her stooped to struggle with the toppled shelving unit. Unfortunately, from Stev and

Tarik's position on the floor, surrounded by a mound of white boxes, they had a perfect view of his tenting pants. It didn't take a marshal to deduce what the couple had been doing to rock the shelving unit off-kilter.

Looking harried, the store's rotund proprietor bustled over. It took the combined efforts of the aproned man, the gambler, and his buddies to lever the unit high enough for Stev and Tarik to wiggle free and wade clear of the mound of white boxes. Looking at her waving breast, the woman giggled again and tucked it back into her dress with a little bounce.

"She could be the best lay in three systems and I'd still pass her by on principle because of that pit-spawned laugh," Tarik 'pathed.

Stev rolled his eyes in agreement.

The red-faced gambler launched into an explanation about how his companion merely brushed against the shelving unit and it toppled with the barest touch. The shopkeeper nodded, but it was plain he didn't buy a word of it. With a subtle hand signal, he sent a couple of assistants scurrying to tidy the mess.

Stev sneezed, violently. Tarik made an odd choking sound as he tried to sneeze and cough at the same time. Stev sneezed again, blinking rapidly as his eyes filled with tears.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Tarik 'pathed.

Stev picked up one of the white boxes. Words written in an unfamiliar Old Earth language decorated the packaging in an elaborate swirling design. The plain type underneath in Galactic Standard was much more informative: Hand-made rose-scented soap.

Tarik snuffled and put his hand to his mouth, his normally golden complexion turning a pasty white. Stev dropped the box and took his bond-brother's arm to get them as far away from the allergy inducing scent as possible. As they neared the swinging doors, he swallowed down the urge to vomit and concentrated on taking deep breaths.

"I'm guessing you two are the travel writers I'm supposed to meet," drawled a low, feminine voice.

* * * *

Hope Kennedy squelched a sigh as she took in the two pathetic men propping each other up on the boardwalk outside the general store. After an abrupt greeting, they asked to step outside to finish their introductions. Hope was left to follow as one man helped the other through the swinging doors.

They both stood about a head taller than her. It was a unique experience, since in her stocking feet she could generally meet most any man eye to eye. They had the lean, muscled physiques of men used to a lot of physical activity, but she didn't put a lot of stock in that. The food most off-worlders ate was so bioengineered it would take a real glutton to pack on the fat. Their wavy black hair curled at their collars and their eyes appeared to be dark brown, although it was hard to tell since they were so bloodshot and watery. Some kind of exotic tattoo, an elaborate creation of lines and circles, marked their temples. It caught the eye, yet made one think of spirituality rather than vanity. Interesting. She wondered what the tattoos meant, if anything.

The men's chiseled features were so similar they could have been blood-related, although the information they'd sent to the Bar-K indicated Stev Jordan and Tarik Donnelly merely worked together.

Chiseled features! This time the suppressed sigh was one of self-disgust. Since when had she ever gotten hung up on a man's looks? Or two men, as the case may be. So what if they were a couple of handsome bucks. She had a job to do.

"Maybe it would be a good idea to check you into a hotel here in town while you recover from your flight or...whatever is ailing you," she said. "Everything's pretty full with the poker tournament about to start, but I'm sure I could find you somewhere to stay."

Instantly, the two men straightened as if they weren't seconds away from vomiting. To be on the safe side, she stayed where she

was—out of the puke zone. Just because her boots were beat up and had stepped in more than one road apple didn't mean she relished the prospect of wiping vomit off them.

"No, we're fine," the one who'd introduced himself as Stev said.

"Just an allergic reaction to something in the store. I'm sure we'll be okay in a little while," Tarik said, then ruined it with a lusty sneeze.

"Right." Hope tried not to sound too skeptical.

She'd promised to treat the off-worlders with every courtesy. Just because her brothers outvoted her in the family's decision to turn the Bar-K into a tourist spot instead of keeping it going as a working ranch didn't mean she could ride roughshod over their plans. She was intelligent, dammit. She'd been to college. She knew the Kennedys couldn't afford to keep losing money as they had been for years. They had gone as far as they could with ranching. If catering to tourists kept the Bar-K in the family, so be it. Giving these two travel writers a personal tour and the run of the spread was the first step in the next incarnation of the Bar-K. Hopefully, the publicity would drum up more tourists who wanted to experience life on an Old Earth-style cattle ranch.

Hope gestured at the wagon and horses tied up at the edge of the boardwalk. "In that case, why don't we load up and get back to the ranch. You can rest up tonight at the Bar-K, and we'll head out tomorrow."

"Sounds good," Stev said.

The men fell in step with Hope as they walked to the wagon.

Stev looked at her. "You don't use grav-cars?"

"We have a couple at the ranch, of course, but we figured our guests would prefer the buckboard and horses. Part of the whole rancher-for-a-week thing. I thought you'd want to get the entire experience. For your articles, I mean."

"Right," Stev said. "Our readers will want to know all the details."

“Are those real horses?” Tarik stopped a respectful distance from the animals hitched to the weathered wagon and eyed them with interest.

“Real as we get here,” Hope said. “Their ancestors were decanted from fertility machines when the first settlers came to Jokers Wild, but we’ve been breeding our own stock at the Bar-K for generations.”

The near horse whickered as she patted its rump, which bore the white genetic “brand” all Bar-K animals were born with. “If you gentlemen want to hop aboard, I’ll drive the wagon around to the luggage hangar to pick up your gear.”

The men complied, jumping up to the bench seat with an agility that said maybe their lean bodies weren’t entirely the results of a good diet and lab-refined genetics. She really liked the way their denim pants hugged their muscled thighs and truly fine asses. Hope shook her head ruefully when she realized she was staring at her clients with sensual interest instead of a more appropriate businesslike detachment.

“Right,” she said, more to herself, and climbed aboard to sit beside Tarik. “So, on to the luggage hangar.”

She lightly snapped the reins, and the wagon jolted into motion as the horses moved into the busy street where saddle horses trotted alongside chauffeured grav-cars. Hope caught herself watching Tarik’s profile from the corner of her eye and forced her attention back to the road. The urge to look her fill of them was hard to resist. It baffled her. She’d never felt such an instant, powerful affinity for anyone. What was it about these men that made them so hard to ignore?

* * * *

Shirrah Spencer stepped from the shadows of the overhanging porch a few doors down from the general store and watched the old-fashioned buckboard carrying the woman and two men clatter away.

Narrowing her eyes, she took a delicate drag off the thin black cigarillo balanced between two silver tipped nails. She blew out a contemplative cloud of blue, spice scented smoke from pursed lips. She didn't recognize their faces—watery, bloodshot eyes, flushed cheeks and reddened noses might have made them unrecognizable to their own mothers, she thought—but there was something familiar about the way they moved. She had an eye for just that sort of long, lean frame on a man, and two such fine specimens definitely merited a second glance. Maybe even a third, if she had the time. But duty called.

Shirrah fished the quaint timepiece that came with her costume out of the tiny pocket in her fitted peacock blue vest and looked at it. The dove gray tailcoat and slim-leg pants were hot in the midday sun, but she appreciated the way the closely tailored fashions of an Old West dandy on a very female body drew appreciative stares. Sometimes the best way to lay low was to hide in plain sight. Snapping the watch closed, she returned it to her pocket and sauntered toward the general store to attach herself to the group of gamblers. One had a connection with the local “sheriff” who was helping the security consultant at the hotel for the duration of the tournament. She doubted he'd have any worthwhile information for her, but she liked to be thorough. Later, she'd contact Rogan and see if he recognized her description of the two men.

Course of action decided, Shirrah dropped her cigarillo in the can of sand by the entrance and pushed through the swinging doors.

Chapter 2

Hope felt her brother's eyes on her as she walked into the family room without so much as a hello. She did spare a pat on the head for Rounder when the border collie heaved himself up from his mat to greet her with a slowly wagging tail. He returned to his bed and lay down with the creaky movements of an aged canine.

Poor old dog.

Plopping down on the well padded arm of a lounge chair, Hope tugged off one battered cowboy boot, then the other, and dropped the pair to the floor with a decisive double-thud. Then she let her butt slide off the arm and land in the soft cushion of the chair, legs and arms sprawled wide as she heaved out a heartfelt sigh.

"You know Mom would kick your butt for walking through the house with your boots on." When she failed to respond, Garrett asked, "Rough day?"

"Don't," she pointed one finger at him without bothering to open her eyes, "you start in on me. This is all your stupid fault, anyway."

"How is it my fault?"

The sound of the vid Garrett had been watching dropped to a murmur. Hope cracked an eyelid in time to see her youngest brother, two years older than her twenty-seven, put the remote down and shift his leg on the coffee table. He moved awkwardly, thanks to the thick gel cast encasing his right leg from ankle to thigh. He winced, and she couldn't stand it anymore.

"Oh, let me do that!" Getting up with a mock put-upon groan, she plucked a pillow from the couch beside him and used it to cushion his heel on the table. She shoved another one behind his back, adjusting it

until he sat at a more comfortable angle. "Idiot," she grumbled. "You've gotta be the oldest kid to ever fall out of a hayloft."

"I'm twenty-nine!"

"My point exactly."

"So I was just supposed to let those kittens stay up there where they could be the ones to fall out of the loft?"

"They're *cats*, Garrett. They'd probably have landed on their feet and waltzed right out of there."

"Gee, heartless words about helpless kittens. You *really* must've taken a dislike to those writer guys."

"I said, don't start in on me. You were supposed to be the one taking them out, not me. How convenient that you happen to bust up your leg just a couple of days before your all-important travel writers touch dirt."

He let the "convenient" comment pass but scoffed, "Oh, come on. How bad could they be?"

"For starters, they're sick."

"Sick? Sick how? They can't be sick, they've gotta write a bang-up piece and snap some snazzy pics of the Bar-K so we can start bringing some tourist credits in."

Hope flipped her hand in annoyance. "Sneezing and coughing sick. I don't know the specifics. They said it was an allergic reaction to something in the general store and it would clear up on its own."

Garrett relaxed. "That's good then, right?"

Hope shrugged.

"That doesn't sound like enough to put you in such a foul mood," her brother said. "What else is wrong with them?"

She worried her lip with her teeth and thought of her strange reaction to the off-worlders. For the first time in her life, she couldn't sit still for thinking about a man. Men. Whatever. Tarik's firm, muscular thigh felt wonderful pressed against hers on the ride back to the ranch. She wondered what it would feel like without the two layers of denim separating his skin from hers. Worse, it seemed every

jolt and jostle of the wagon sent a charge from her pussy to her breasts until her nipples were hard as nuts. When they reached the yard, she practically leapt from the wagon to start hauling their gear out of the wagon bed and into the bunkhouse assigned to Stev and Tarik. She mumbled something about them getting some rest and that someone would fetch them for supper, then bolted with the horses and wagon to the barn.

“Hope?”

“Hmm?”

“Is that it? Just that they’re ailing?”

She looked away from his narrowing gaze and slowly sat beside him on the couch. “I just don’t like them.”

“Did they do some—”

She interrupted his growl of brotherly outrage with an impatient grumble. “No, of course not. As if I couldn’t handle a man who got out of line.”

“Hell, Hope, then what is it?”

“I told you, I just don’t like them.”

“If you really feel that strongly about it, Reid can take them out.”

Hope shook her head. “Don’t be dumb, Garrett. Lannie’s baby will be here any day. He can’t be riding a horse out on the range with those soft-hands,” she said, referring to the uncalloused palms that typified non-ranchers. “What if she goes into labor and we can’t contact him? Mom and Dad won’t be back from Aunt Gemma’s until next week, so it’s not like Dad can take them out. I said I’d do it. It’s just for a few days, anyway, and I might as well get used to it. If this business takes off like you and Reid hope it will, they won’t be the first annoying guests we’ll get. At least they aren’t dandied up like those gamblers in town.”

Garrett watched her for a long moment without speaking. “Well, all right. If you’re sure.”

Hope forced a breezy smile to show him she was over her rant. “I’m sure. Everything will be fine. You just make sure you mend that

leg, so I'm not the only one who has to suffer when all those tourists start stampeding into the yard."

Garrett slung an arm around her shoulder and dropped a smacking kiss on the top of her head. "Deal."

* * * *

Stev and Tarik watched with raised brows as Hope Kennedy left their room at a trot, slamming the door behind her.

"That went well," Stev said.

"Wonder what's bothering her?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. Wish we had some time to find out, though."

Tarik slanted him a grin. "You, too, huh? She's a sexy thing, isn't she? Always did favor a woman who could almost look me in the eye. At least you didn't have to suffer with her curvy body pressed up against you all the way here like I did."

"Suffer, right. Poor lad." Stev picked up Tarik's bag of "camera gear" and pitched it at him. "Why don't you check in and see if Control has any more info for us on the Rogan Gang."

Six single beds, each with its own small nightstand, took up most of the space in the bunkhouse. A spartan wash area and a simple table with four chairs were at the back of the room, notched into the cubby created by the jutting vertical box Stev assumed housed the lavatory. While he pulled the curtains on all the windows, guaranteeing their privacy, Tarik took out his wristcomp and unpacked the rest of his gear. A myriad of surveillance and security gadgets was soon spread in neat rows on one of the beds. With economical motions, Tarik assembled a portable com station and power booster and logged into the secure feed all planetary satellites dedicated for use by law-enforcement agents.

Tarik paused in his typing as another sneeze rattled his body.

"*Still feeling sick, Tarik?*" Stev 'pathed.

“Not really,” his bond-brother answered aloud. “Mainly just stuffed up.”

“Me, too. Ten credits it’s gone by tomorrow.”

The joke was a standing one between them. They’d been betting credits on everything from raindrops to women since they’d been bonded in their teens. Tarik made a distracted sound, neither accepting nor refusing the bet. At the moment, he was more interested in information than their perennial game. “What the pit was that stuff again?”

“Rose-scented soap.”

“Rose?” Tarik tapped out a query on his wristcomp. “Some kind of Old Earth flower. Gah!”

Stev peered over his shoulder at the tiny screen. “What is it?”

“Lucky thing we didn’t swallow any. The database says residents of Geminus and a few other planets have developed ‘violent allergic reactions’ to roses.”

“No shit.”

“There’s a toxicity alert here to health officials.”

“Woulda been nice to know beforehand.”

“I’ll make a note to check the local toiletries the next time we’re hot on the trail of an intergalactic band of thieves and killers,” Tarik said dryly.

Chapter 3

The next morning, Hope's very pregnant sister-in-law served up an elaborate breakfast in the comfortable kitchen used by the family. It would have been more impressive if Stev and Tarik could smell it. While the watery eyes and urge to cough and sneeze were gone, their sense of smell had yet to return. Hope, Lannie Kennedy told them, had eaten earlier. Since she also ducked out of having dinner with her family and their guests, they hadn't seen her since the previous afternoon.

Lannie explained that the working ranch hands, who slept in a bunkhouse nearly identical to the one prepared for the Bar-K's paying guests, had their own cook and dining area. Hope was in the horse barn getting everything ready for the first item on their agenda: a three-day, two-night ride to explore different features of the ranch. The Bar-K hoped to offer tourists a variety of options, from nothing more than simple accommodations in the bunk house to tailored excursions that included overnight campouts of different durations.

Garrett Kennedy, propped up on crutches to see them off the back porch, pointed out the horse barn where they'd find Hope. Now, travel and gear bags thrown over their shoulders, Stev and Tarik ambled across the yard to find their guide. They watched as a number of cows and calves, penned in a large corral beside the barn, watched them with reciprocal interest. The huge animals batted long lashed eyes, tails flicking periodically as they tracked the men's progress. A small white chicken pecked industriously in the grass sprouting up around one fence post. A red rooster strutted up, and she hurried off in a flutter of ruffled feathers and chortling clucks.

As they approached the huge open doors, a knee-high dog with black and white fur emerged from the barn's shadowy interior. It stopped and surveyed them with intelligent eyes.

"Rounder." A whistle followed Hope's voice. The dog's ears pricked up, and it glanced over its shoulder before turning back to face the men. By then, they were close enough to see Hope inside, leading a saddled horse into the wide center aisle. Two others, similarly equipped, waited with stamping feet, secured by their halters outside their stall doors.

Hope looked up. "Stev. Tarik. Good morning." Her eyes went to the bags they carried. "Why don't you bring your gear here, and I'll load it up while you get acquainted with your new best friends."

* * * *

Hope closed her eyes and fought to maintain her composure. Fortunately, she didn't have to worry about steering her horse into a tree. Unfortunately, closing her eyes didn't help. Instead, it made her even more aware of the way the animal's rolling stride rocked the saddle between her thighs, sensuously rubbing the seam of her jeans against swollen, sensitive flesh. Her breasts were heavy and tight, her nipples visible points under her shirt. More than once, she caught herself hugging her arms close to her sides, pressing the hungry globes together in an attempt to get some relief. Her skin tingled as if subjected to a million tiny shocks, not quite painful, but almost. It was torture.

What was wrong with her?

This wild desire was a thousand times worse than what she felt yesterday when she drove Stev and Tarik to the ranch. Afraid of what would happen if she had to kick her horse into a trot, she reined in their pace until the horses moved at little more than a walk. At the drastically reduced pace, it would be after dark before they arrived at the first campsite.

Thankfully, Stev and Tarik appeared to be oblivious to her condition. They took to riding with ease and now held their horses in the same position they had all day, one on either side of her. Her initial antipathy to the off-worlders had faded. As they talked, she was surprised to find Stev and Tarik both interesting and intelligent. They didn't ask stupid questions, seeming genuinely interested in Hope, the ranch, and Jokers Wild, in that order. Where Tarik was faster with a quip and a hearty laugh, Stev amused in his own way with a dry wit she appreciated.

She wondered if she'd find them just as likeable if she weren't so hot to drag them off their horses and rip their clothes off.

She'd only been in the general store for a few moments, but maybe she'd been exposed to the same thing Stev and Tarik had, only her body reacted differently. She'd never heard of an allergic reaction that presented itself as voracious lust, though.

Hope considered contacting her brothers and having one of them take over. One of them. Right. She knew it would have to be Reid, since Garrett's leg meant he couldn't ride a horse. She couldn't do that to Reid and Lannie. Her eldest brother couldn't leave the ranch, even for just a day.

She glanced to either side. Stev and Tarik had obviously recovered from their allergic reaction. Their complexions were a healthy, honey tan, brown eyes clear and bright. Without the bloodshot veins, they proved to be a melting chocolate. Both men smiled easily, and every time they did her eyes went to their lickable lips. Speaking of lickable, she wouldn't mind tangling her tongue in the sprinkling of hair she could see where Stev left the two top buttons of his shirt unfastened.

Hope jerked her eyes away. Maybe it would be best if she slept on it and took stock in the morning. If she still felt like a mare eager for a stallion, she'd com her brothers and go home.

* * * *

Stev watched the delectable sway of Hope's ass and hissed out a breath through his teeth. The gun belt strapped to her waist only emphasized the lush curve of her hips. Her dark blond curls bounced against her shoulders as she walked down the path to the freshwater spring behind a jumble of rocks near their campsite. The single moon was high in the sky, its silvery light changing Hope's hair to liquid platinum against the darkness of her shirt. A shirt that molded faithfully to the high, rounded globes of her breasts. He liked to think he was somewhat of a gentleman, but a gentleman wouldn't have repeatedly honed in on her beaded nipples the way he had through their simple dinner.

"Brother, I say as soon as we're done with business, we come back for a real tour of the Bar-K," Tarik 'pathed.

Stev met his bond-brother's gaze and knew his own was just as hungry. It wasn't unusual for them to share a woman. On the contrary, it was expected. Just as they would be expected to eventually share a bondmate.

On Geminus, the human settlers had taken on the genetic traits of the majority of the mammals on the planet. Unlike most human worlds, where the sexes were roughly evenly split, males outnumbered females on Geminus two to one. Instead of forcing the males to fight for the few females available, nature added another quirk to the equation—only the semen of two compatible males combined could impregnate one female. But only the right female, the one whose body chemistry reacted to the pheromones of a bonded pair of males.

That wasn't the case here, of course. Neither Stev nor Tarik scented anything unusual about Hope. What they did notice was a sexy, beautiful, desirable woman whom they wouldn't mind getting to know a lot more intimately.

"You're on," Stev said.

He sat cross-legged on the sleeping bag Hope assigned him. “Now,” he *’pathed*, “*while Hope’s gone for her bath, how about you check in with control.*”

“*Already done.*” Tarik shared what he saw on his screen. Stev closed his eyes to better visualize it. “*It was faint, but the satellite caught traces indicating there’s a good chance the Blackjack is still hidden in that series of canyons we’re supposed to tour in the morning. We should be able to get a better bead on it as we get closer.*”

“*Any sign of the Rogan Gang in Terminal City?*”

“*Maybe.*”

“*Nothing like a firm ‘maybe’ to hinge an operation on.*”

Tarik shrugged. “*You said it yourself, the crooks get all the good tech. That said, while it’s possible to get around the best face-recognition program, you can’t beat good, old-fashioned visual confirmation. The team stationed in the hotel think they’ve spotted Spencer around and about. This time, instead of a hostess, she’s posing as one of the players.*”

Stev thought of the woman who stopped Orin Rogan from blasting him with the disruptor cannon. Not as any favor to him, he was certain. She’d likely done it because killing a marshal would bring a world of hurt down on the gang and effectively end any bid for clemency if—when—they were captured.

“*What about Hope?*”

“*I’ve got my wristcomp wired to silently alert me if we get anywhere close to the Blackjack. As soon as I pick anything up, I’ll ’path you, and we’ll get her out of there.*”

“*Okay. If it comes down to it, we can probably convince her we’ve had a relapse or something and have to get back to the ranch.*”

“*And then?*”

Stev stretched out on top of his sleeping bag and stacked his arms behind his head. “*Then, Rik my brother, we swoop in, save the day, arrest the bad guys—*

“—do the paperwork—”

“—do the farging paperwork, and take ourselves a much needed vacation at a getaway on a quiet, out-of-the-way planet.”

Tarik grinned and started shucking out of his boots and pants, readying for bed. *“Like Jokers Wild?”*

“Now you’re talking.”

Chapter 4

A sensation somewhat like his eardrums popping under pressure yanked Stev out of a sound sleep. Disoriented, he noted his cock was a hard rod tucked tight against his belly under his shorts. He reached to adjust himself, surprised when his hand came away sticky and wet. He'd come in his sleep? He hadn't done that since...His nostrils flared. What was that scent? That delicious, mouth-watering, gotta-have-it scent?

A whimper and the rustle of fabric nearby made him sit up in one motion. The fire had burned down to coals, but the dull glow of it painted Hope's skin in tones of scarlet and gold. A lot of skin. As if transported there from his dreams, she lay atop her own sleeping bag, naked of all but her glorious golden curls. One hand was thrust between her thighs, wrist working as she stroked herself. The other tugged at her breast, fingers pinching one turgid nipple. As he watched, she arched her back, breasts quivering, thighs shaking, toes curling deep into the sleeping bag. A sheen of sweat glistened on her cheeks, and she let out a moan of pure frustration.

Stev found he was panting, sucking in deep gusts of air as she writhed in passionate despair mere feet away. The last of the sleep clearing from his mind, he inhaled deeply. The scent of aroused woman and Hope's unique aroma grew stronger—as did something else. His blood quickened and his cock throbbed. Hope was in *zusha*. His eyes shot to Tarik. His bond-brother slept, but his chest rose and fell with fast, uneven breaths. Without waking, Tarik restlessly shoved the top of his sleeping bag aside and rolled to his back. The

insistent flesh straining against his shorts proved his cock was just as hard as Stev's.

Hope moaned again, galvanizing Stev.

"*Rik!*" Stev fumbled from his sleeping bag, tearing the zipper when it balked. He crouched beside his bond-brother and roughly shook his shoulder. "*Rik!*"

Tarik startled awake, his eyes cloudy with arousal. "Stev?"

"It's Hope. She's...she's in *zusha*."

Tarik leaned up on one elbow, and they both stared at her. Oblivious to them, Hope futilely worked her fingers between her thighs, trying to drive herself to an orgasm that stayed just out of reach.

Like all young adults on Geminus, Stev and Tarik learned about *zusha*, but they'd never seen a woman in the throes of it. The bond-heat was an intimacy shared only between bonded males and their female. Only they could give her relief.

And apparently, unexpectedly, impossibly, Hope was mate to their bond.

Far from Geminus, far from the seclusion of a mating bower and all the little luxuries she deserved, far even from so much as a bed and four walls, Stev and Tarik had found their mate.

And she had no idea what was happening to her.

* * * *

Hope felt herself lifted by strong arms and pulled back against a broad male chest. She didn't protest when her legs were spread and her thighs draped over muscled legs, the wiry hairs on them tickling the thin skin on the back of her knees. Someone grasped her hand and stilled her fingers where they danced and rubbed the frustrated nub of her clit.

"No," she gasped, tossing her head in protest.

“Shhh,” someone whispered in her ear. Two broad hands caught her breasts, covering them in cool comfort when she hadn’t even realized how they burned.

She allowed her hand to be eased away and was immediately rewarded when masculine lips replaced her fingers and a hard tongue twirled around her aching clit. Her hands tangled in lightly curling hair to grasp the man’s head as he sucked and teased her, bringing her the closest she’d been to ecstasy all night. She didn’t wonder how hands could be kneading and caressing her breasts as one man pressed sucking kisses along her neck and behind her jaw, while another lay between her wantonly spread legs, his magical mouth and tongue lashing her ever closer to release, to relief.

All she could think was, *Finally*.

Her hands clenched, pulling his face closer until she felt his nose and chin against her and the hot puffs of his ragged breaths.

“Oh, God, don’t stop,” she moaned, hips twitching involuntarily. She heard harsh words muttered in an unfamiliar language, and a hand cupped her chin and urged her face to the side. Lips covered hers in a devouring kiss, and a tongue shoved roughly into her mouth. She suckled it, loving it. Without warning, fingers thrust into her cunt. Pleasure flamed her senses, washing over her like liquid fire. Hope gave a broken cry as the walls of her inner passage convulsed around the invading fingers. It seemed to go on forever, but her unseen lovers didn’t let up. Talented tongues and hands stroked her mouth and belly and mound, prolonging her pleasure until the waves slowed and ebbed.

Hope exhaled a long breath of satisfaction, loosening her panicked grip on silky hair to weakly caress a rough hewn jaw. Then, completely enervated by her long delayed release, she sank into the strong arms that hugged her close and let the darkness take her.

* * * *

Stev pressed his face into Hope's belly and fought for control.

"We won't have long," he 'pathed. "Then she'll wake up and it'll start all over again."

Tarik gently brushed Hope's sweat-tangled hair away from her face. Lost in the comfort of slumber, she looked very young. *"Are you sure? I don't think I've ever heard of a non-Geminus female going into zusha. How can we tell what will happen with Hope?"*

"What else can we do?" Stev leaned back and straightened Hope's legs to a more comfortable position, his hand lingering on her slender calf. *"If she reacts like a Geminus bondmate, at least we'll know what to expect, know how to help her."*

"We should get her back to her ranch."

Stev frowned. *"That won't do us any good tonight. Besides, what will happen then? It's not like she won't still need us. And you think her family will just accept that the only people who can help her are us?"*

Tarik looked around at the shadows concealing the rugged terrain and hardy bushes bordering their campsite. *"Not exactly the treatment a woman in zusha deserves."*

"Of course not." Stev scrubbed a tired hand over his face but couldn't bring himself to stop caressing Hope's leg with wondering fingers. He knew Tarik felt the same way, this instant connection with a woman they'd just met. It wasn't supposed to happen, but it had. *"She deserves the best we can give her. It's just our misfortune this is the best we can give her, at least right now. Do you disagree?"*

Tarik heaved a sigh. *"No."* Then, *"And the job?"*

Stev cursed softly. Putting together the pieces about the Rogan Gang's next move and tracking them to Jokers Wild had taken months of planning and thousands of man-hours. Other teams were in place, ready to do their part. Tarik and Stev only needed to definitively locate the gang's ship, disable it, and call in the hand-to-hand guys. *"You're certain we'll get some warning when we get close to the Blackjack?"*

“Well, I was certain when I thought Hope was just our guide. But now...”

“Rik?”

His bond-brother grimaced. *“I’ll check my coding in the morning, see if I can tighten it up enough to get more lead-time.”*

“All right. And if you can’t, we’ll abort and tell them to send in another team. Or something. I don’t know.” Stev dropped his chin on his chest and closed his eyes. Hope’s delicious, *zusha*-laced fragrance made his head spin. Or maybe it was the loss of blood to the greedy organ below his waist, which was rock hard and put out that it as yet remained unsatisfied. *“We’ll see in the morning.”*

Hope stirred but subsided when Tarik spoke soothingly into her ear. *“Won’t be long,”* he pathed. *“I can feel her skin heating up again already.”*

“Enough of this, then. We’d better do what we can now.”

Tarik rolled to his feet, easily juggling Hope’s lax body until she was draped in the cradle of his arms. Stev quickly zippered a couple of the sleeping bags together, leaving the third as a covering. While Tarik settled Hope on the new bedroll, he stoked up the fire and placed more logs nearby to ensure they wouldn’t have to go looking through the night.

Stev pulled off his shorts and shirt and lay down beside Hope. Tarik filled a bowl with warm water from the kettle near the fire. Handing it and a cloth to his bond-brother, Tarik stripped off the last of his own clothes and stretched out on Hope’s other side.

“Rik.” When their gazes met, Stev gave him a slow smile. *“At least we’ve found our bondmate.”*

Tarik’s answering grin was every bit as full of delighted wonder.

* * * *

Rogan ended the com before Shirrah had a chance to.

Lips twisting in irritation, she sank into an elegant sprawl on the sim-horsehair couch. The scratchy material pricked the backs of her thighs and shoulders, adding to her annoyance. Rogan was being reckless. Instead of heeding her previous warning about spotting the two marshals from Farrah's, he was determined to go ahead with the job. Shirrah was almost certain, now she knew to watch for them, that there were more agents around and about town. Added to the tournament's already formidable security, it was enough to make Shirrah want to write off the job and go for something easier. But not Rogan. As if regretting his decision to leave the two marshals alive the last time they'd met, his only response to her concerns had been to tell her to watch her ass and do her job.

A discreet knock drew Shirrah from contemplating her reservations. Sighing, she stood up and walked to the door. Turning the painted porcelain handle, she opened it wide.

The older man on the other side swallowed convulsively when he saw what she wore. Eyes roved slowly from her spike-tipped heels over the old-fashioned white stockings covering her sleek calves and thighs. Ribbons secured the stockings to the bottom of the frilly white corset that molded her waist cruelly thin and mounded her breasts over the bodice, where his gaze stopped.

"Uh," he mumbled. "Drinks, you said..."

"I thought we could have them here. Much more private, don't you think?"

He swallowed again but didn't move. Men were so easy.

Giving him a sharp toothed, predatory smile, she hooked her fingers into his lapel and pulled him into the room. "Come on in, sheriff. Let me show you to the couch."

Shirrah closed the door and sent him trundling on his way with a controlled slap on one fleshy buttock. "And by the way," she said, her voice cool. "Take off your clothes."

Chapter 5

Hope awoke to the wonderful sensation of a damp cloth trailing over her burning cheeks. The cloth left, and she heard the tinkling sound of water splashing in a dish. Then it was back, tracing a damp trail down her neck and over her collarbones. She felt warm, surrounded, and safe. Masculine fingers twined with hers and held her arm up for the attentions of the newly dampened cloth. More fingers tangled with her other hand, and her left arm was treated to the same service. Water droplets plinked, and the cloth began to minister to her breasts. Hope sucked in a surprised breath as the friction shot a tingling spray of delight over her skin, settling in her nipples.

“Hush now, Hope,” someone whispered. “Let us take care of you.”

Awareness swam to the top of her fuzzy mind. *Us?* More than one person cared for her? Was she ill?

The cloth continued its journey from her breasts and down her belly, where it swirled around her navel in soothing strokes to her hipbones on either side. Hope opened heavy eyelids and stared up at the pinpoints of stars and the fullness of the lowering moon. A body shifted on the pallet beside her. The now familiar sound of water trickling into a bowl heralded the return of the cloth. Hands holding hers, a third holding the cloth. Naked, unmistakably male, bodies bracketing hers. The distinct feel of hard ground under her back, cushioned by a sleeping bag. An alarmed glance proved her suspicions: Stev and Tarik, her clients, were tucked against her intimately close, touching her, bathing her.

Hope snapped her hands free and scrambled up, her attempt to flee hampered by a strange lethargy that forced her back to her knees. Not exactly weakness, it was unlike anything she'd ever felt before. Unable to stand, she crawled and crabbed away from the two men until she hunkered down at the bottom of the makeshift mattress and faced them.

Disturbed by the unexpected flurry of motion, the hobbled horses, dark shadows in the moonlight, shuffled uneasily. Stev and Tarik, fully aroused, watched her with glittering eyes.

Hope snatched up the sleeping bag left untidily folded beside the pallet and threw it over her shoulders like a cloak, holding it closed at her throat with whitened knuckles. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Helping you," Stev said quietly, calmly.

"Helping me?" Hope asked in disbelief. She tucked her feet under the skirt of the bag. "By stripping me naked in my sleep and...and doing something to me? Why didn't I wake up? Did you drug me?"

Apparently unbothered by their nakedness or their raging hard-ons—or the fact they were in such a state in front of each other—Stev and Tarik shared a glance.

"We didn't do anything to you on purpose," Stev said.

"Oh, so you accidentally took all my clothes off and touched me." Hope held on to her anger, knowing if she didn't, fear would take over. She was far from home and possible rescue, alone, naked, with two men who were virtual strangers. She tried to take mental stock of her body. It didn't feel like she'd had sex.

Without warning, her pussy clenched. A wave of lust seemed to roll over her before subsiding into a teasing warmth between her legs and at the crests of her breasts. The sleeping bag's lining rasped against her abruptly sensitive skin, more like steel wool than soft flannel. It was an act of pure will to resist throwing it off to expose herself to the chilly night air. Her belly twisted into a desperate knot. Hope moaned and hunched over.

In the space from one breath to the next, Stev and Tarik were beside her, hands on her elbows, supporting her.

“Hope, *shalla*. What you’re feeling is called *zusha*,” Stev said. “It’s a mating heat.”

“Mating heat?” Hope laughed shakily in disbelief. “I’m human, you moron. Humans don’t go into heat. You must have given me some kind of drug to make me feel like this. And when we get back to the ranch—”

“We didn’t give you anything,” Tarik insisted. “On Geminus, *zusha* begins when a woman meets her biological matches, the men who will be her mates. It’s triggered when a bonded pair sense their mate and start producing pheromones to attract her.”

“What—” Hope paused to wet her lips, unbearably aware of Stev and Tarik’s nudity. Lean and hard with well-defined muscles, their handsome faces stark with a blend of concern and passion, they were enough to make any woman pant. “Oh, I can’t think. What are you saying?”

“Tarik and I are bond-brothers.” Stev touched the intricate tattoo at his temple. Somehow answering her thoughts, he said, “It isn’t a tattoo. It’s a *churat*, a biological marking. It appeared during the bonding ceremony that matched us to begin our search for our mate. Our shared mate.”

“If our senses hadn’t been blocked by that pit-damned allergic reaction, we would have scented you were our mate the moment we met you,” Tarik said. “Instead, you were pushed to the point of sexual agony before we even realized what happened.”

“How can I be your mate when I don’t even know you?” Hope wailed. Part of her was stunned and shamed at the loss of control, when normally she would have faced down almost anything with confidence and grim determination. The rest of her concentrated on drawing in deep breaths so she could suck in more of the addictive aroma of aroused male. They smelled so *good*.

“We can’t wait to get to know you, to let you know us,” Stev said. “For now, you’ve got to trust us. We won’t ever hurt you. We’ll treasure you. Let us help you, *shalla*. You need us, or the *zusha* will only get worse.”

Hope eyed them uncertainly, but the unfocused need taking over her every thought was simply too powerful to resist. She closed her eyes, promising herself she would get answers about this. Later. Then she nodded and let Tarik slide the sleeping bag off her shoulders.

The cool air felt was icy against her naked flesh, wonderfully so. The banked desire that settled in her cunt and breasts flared, shooting sparks of lust to her fingertips and toes. Even her hair felt sensually charged, every strand an individual caress as it fell over her back and shoulders.

Following the men’s urging, Hope lay down. Her fingers dug restlessly into the pallet. Almost by accident, one hand stroked her hip. Liking the sensation, she brought both hands to her waist and glided unsteady fingers up her sides, tripping over each rib until she reached her breasts. A masculine groan stopped her exploration. Tarik placed her hands back on the pallet at her sides.

“*Shalla*, let us do this.”

“If you don’t, I doubt I’ll last,” Stev warned.

Gently, almost reverently, Tarik kissed her. Stev did the same, his lips trembling with barely leashed passion under the chaste caress. “If we can’t treat you with the honor that is yours by right tonight, at least allow us to pleasure you, *shalla*,” he said.

Tarik began with sipping kisses over her mouth and cheeks, along her brow and against her eyelids. Hope followed like an eager bird, hungry for more, until she found herself on her side, facing him. Tarik steadied her with a wide palm on her hip, urging her closer. Hope purred as the hard length of his cock prodded her belly. When she reached to take his heavy erection in her hand, he bit off a curse. He sank into her lips, easing his tongue beyond her teeth to play and tease.

Stev lifted the hair away from Hope's neck and began his own sensual assault. His lips glided over her nape, then moved to graze the thin skin behind her ears. Unconsciously, her hand tightened on Tarik's cock, her thumb sweeping unerringly over the flared tip, sliding in the slippery pre-cum that trickled from it. He growled and angled his hips away, but his mouth devoured hers.

Stev's mouth explored Hope's back, pausing at each bump of her spine. His hands moved in sweeping caresses, shaping her waist and hips. Hope squirmed when he kissed the soft flesh at the base of her spine. He chuckled darkly. Apparently delighted to find one of her particular erogenous zones, he lingered. His tongue traced damp patterns on her hot flesh. The cooling effect of the night air heightened the sensation as she tipped her chin back to let Tarik's lips leave her mouth and trail over her throat and the tops of her breasts.

All inhibitions gone, she did little more than startle when Stev moved even lower to cup her ass in kneading palms. He bit her buttock gently, and soothed the sting with a laving lick of his tongue. Then he did it again. Hope whimpered. How could she not have known she would so enjoy the bite of pain with the lick of pleasure?

Their caresses had an odd, calming effect on her senses. The more they touched her, the more she seemed to come back to herself. Despite the sound of a distant mental alarm that warned she was behaving wholly unlike herself, the thrall of this passion, this *zusha*, was too seductive. Hope wanted more.

Tarik sucked her nipple into the hot cavern of his mouth, silencing her alarm. With a suggestive rhythm, he sucked the stiffened flesh with deep pulls, tickling the tip with feather taps of his tongue. He released her nipple with a wet pop and moved to her other breast.

Hooking a hand under her knee, Tarik guided it over his hip. Immediately, Stev slid questing fingers over her dripping slit. Hope cried out.

"*Shalla,*" Tarik whispered against her breast, voice harsh. His hand tightened on her knee, trapping it against his waist. The position

forced his cock against her mound, and he pumped against her. Growling, he stopped and attacked her breast with new ferocity.

Stev played his fingers over and around her clit, circling the aroused nub with frustrating brevity. Helplessly, Hope pressed against him in an effort to force a harder touch. Instead, his fingers left her aching and wet.

Shock held her motionless when Stev parted the cheeks of her ass and gave her a long, slow lick. His tongue fluttered against the tight bud of her anus. She wriggled in discomfort, not from the caress, but from the strangeness of it. Torn by spiking pleasure and embarrassment, she tried to shift away, only to come up against Tarik's sweat slicked chest. There was nowhere to go.

"Hope, it's okay," Stev said as his fingers continued to play distractingly between her legs and Tarik nuzzled her neck. "Rik and I know exactly what you need. Never be shy with us, *shalla*. Nothing is forbidden between bondmates."

Lust swelled inside her, and with it a corresponding drop in her awareness and inhibitions. Hope raised her chin to lure Tarik into another soul stealing kiss. She stroked his cock, trapping it between her hand and stomach. She did no more than whimper when Stev again slid his tongue against her anus. When he gently breached the tight seal with the tip of his thumb, she tilted her hips invitingly.

Stev rewarded her with renewed strokes along her throbbing clit.

Hope was getting desperate for release.

At last, finally, Tarik let her guide him where she craved him most. She tipped his cock down until it rested between her swollen lower lips. Stev obligingly moved his hand so his bond-brother could slide his cock back and forth along her dripping channel. Hope tightened her leg around his waist. Tarik buried his face in the tangled hair along her shoulder, where the sound of his chuffing, uneven breaths drove her lust higher.

With one final caress of his tongue, Stev moved up to align his body with hers, chest to back, hips to buttocks. Carefully, he guided

his cock into the valley of her ass until its rounded head nudged her anus.

Hope moaned.

While Tarik lightly flexed his hips, driving his cock along her increasingly wet slit, Stev grasped her hip and began to press forward. Infinitesimally slow, he eased ahead, the pressure against her hidden rosebud building and building. All at once, he was inside. Stev halted, the very tip of his cock held tight in her virgin rear passage. His fingers moved on her hip and she sensed he wanted to hold her tightly but feared hurting her. The roughness of his night beard rasped against the nape of her neck.

Hope was distantly surprised by how much she wanted him to continue. Blindly, she reached back and sank her fingers into Stev's thigh and gave a demanding tug. He grunted and uttered a deep groan.

"No, *shalla*," he said, the words rumbling from deep in his chest. "It will hurt too much this first time. Please. Be patient. You'll get your relief."

Taking his cue, Tarik drove his cock into her cunt. Hope threw her head back against Stev's shoulder. Shallow at first, each plunge went a little deeper until Tarik was fully seated inside her. He stopped. All Hope could hear was the loud sound of their breathing. The men's chests rose and fell against her. She wasn't sure if the trembling was hers or theirs. Eyes closed, she sensed Stev and Tarik exchange a look.

Then, as if they'd choreographed each motion, they began to move.

Hope never imagined anything like it in her life. Her pussy tightened around Tarik's cock, greedily trying to hold on to what she desperately wanted. At the same time, Stev's gentler thrusts barely pushed more than the head of his cock inside the ring of her anus. It burned, but it felt good, too. Enjoying the sensation of the two men moving in perfect syncopation, she abruptly wondered what they felt.

Could they feel each other? Stev's leg was braced between hers as his hips rocked against her. Surely his leg also rubbed against Tarik's?

Just the thought made her pulse jump.

Orgasm rushed down on her, and Hope reached for it eagerly. Ready to surrender, she became aware that the desire whipping inside her wasn't all her own. She felt silky hair brush against her face, but knew it was her own hair brushing against Stev's face. Fingernails sank into her back, the pricking pain nothing compared to the knot of heat gathering at the base of her—Tarik's—spine.

It didn't seem at all strange when she started to hear voices in her head.

"Be careful, be careful, be careful. Oh, gods, that feels good."

A second voice. *"Hope. Beautiful, wonderful, amazing woman."*

"My shalla, my one." The first voice, and Stev's arm crept around her waist to hug her close.

Hope's breath hitched, and fierce ripples of pleasure raced through her as her pussy clamped around Tarik's thick cock. He only grunted, but his voice in her head said, *"Yes! Like that, like that, don't stop, don't stop."* His grunt turned into a choked shout, and she felt his hot seed spurt into her.

Stev buried his own shout against her neck, and the heat of his release exploded inside her.

Chapter 6

Stev woke when a chilling blast of pre-dawn air accompanied the loss of warmth along one side of his body. The sleeping bag dropped back over him, and he was left looking at Hope's long, bare legs striding away. She bent down to scoop something up off the ground, and he got an even more interesting look at her rear in the golden morning light. The first sun had begun to make its appearance for the day. Its sister spheres wouldn't be far behind.

Sadly, the long-sleeved shirt Hope dropped over her head and tugged down her torso fell several inches below her sweetly curved buttocks.

Beside him, Tarik turned over onto his back and put his forearm over his face as he unsuccessfully stifled a yawn, also managing to steal the rest of the sleeping bag from his bond-brother. Stev glared and reclaimed his share of it, but not before a shiver raised a rash of gooseflesh on his exposed skin.

The whisper of fabric drew his eyes back across the sullenly glowing coals of the fire pit in time to see Hope pull her pants over her hips and secure the zipper and button with agitated motions.

Then she rummaged briefly in her gear, pulled out her rifle, cocked it in their direction—"Whoa!" Stev rolled to his feet, while Tarik mumbled a confused, "Wha-?"—and fired.

The low-tech bullet hit dirt several feet away, far enough to let him know she had no intention of hitting either him or Tarik. Either that, or she was a piss-poor shot. Somehow, he doubted it.

"Now, Hope," he began.

She cut him off. “Yes, Stev, now. Start talking. What the hell happened last night?”

“The *zusha*—”

“Yeah, some kind of mating heat on your planet. So you said. But we aren’t on your planet, and I sure as hell am not one of your females.”

Tarik propped himself up on his elbows but did nothing more than look back and forth between them, a spectator following an interesting sport.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” Stev ’pathed.

“Nah, you got it.” Despite the seriousness of this conversation—on Geminus, men didn’t have to convince their mates they belonged together—Tarik was remarkably unconcerned. When Stev considered how Hope reacted to them last night, he couldn’t really blame his bond-brother. Surely such a strong sexual bond boded well for their future together.

Hope cleared her throat and tipped the end of her rifle at him meaningfully.

Trying to ignore the fact he was as naked as a looloo bird, and his cock, rifle or no rifle, enjoyed the sight of Hope flushed and sleep tousled far too much, Stev spread his hands. “Look, I’m no medic. I have no idea why you reacted to us, or why our bodies went into pheromone overdrive, but it happened. The bonding has already begun.”

“How do you know?”

Hope tensed when Stev walked toward her, but he kept coming. Just steps away, he halted, tipped his head and tapped his temple. “I told you last night that this is called a *churat*,” he said, indicating the intricate design. “Since we’re bond-brothers, Tarik and I have the same *churat*. It’s a symbol of our connection to each other, and it’s as distinctive as a fingerprint. But unlike a fingerprint, it can change. When bonded males meet their female, the *churat* is softened with a color marker to indicate they are mated.”

“And your *churat*...”

“Is taking on color. Blue, I think. Or maybe purple.”

“Purple,” Tarik said. “Deep, vibrant, sexy purple.” He cupped his laced fingers behind his head and grinned.

“Purple, then,” Stev said.

Expression set, Hope stared at them through narrowed eyes. She made them wait before she uncocked her rifle. Stev released a silent breath. Hope paced over to one of the discarded saddles and sat down, balancing the gun across her knees. “Okay. I’m willing to accept the possibility that I, uh, went into some kind of mating heat and you guys were only trying to help last night. So how do we stop it from happening again?”

Alarmed, Tarik abandoned his casual pose and sat up. Stev barely stopped his jaw from dropping. “Stop it?” The very idea was unfathomable. Once a pair of bond-brothers found their mate, they grabbed hold of her and counted their lucky stars. “You don’t stop the mating bond.”

“No?”

“No,” Tarik said. “Not ever. A mating bond is sacred. What person would be fool enough to give that up?”

Hope’s posture went rigid. “So now I’m a fool?”

“Of course not,” Stev said. “*Oh, brilliant, Rik,*” he ’pathed. “*Way to woo our soon-to-be beloved.*” Tarik grimaced ruefully and reached for his pants. To Hope, Stev said, “What Rik meant was that on Geminus, mated triads are respected and honored above all things. When you think about it, it isn’t easy to match two people, let alone three. So when it happens, it’s a cause for celebration. To break up a triad is unthinkable.”

Hope’s lips set in a mutinous line. “I don’t know if it’s *that* unthinkable.”

“Maybe we should come back to it later,” Stev said, trying for diplomacy. He was sure they could win Hope over. All they needed was time to prove they would be good mates to her.

She nibbled her bottom lip as she thought. Stev wouldn't mind nibbling that lip himself, and felt Tarik brush his thoughts with a sense of agreement. Finally, she nodded. "Okay, we'll talk more about it later. And we *will* talk about it."

Hope's gaze drifted down his body. Stev tried to ignore the eager leap of his cock, like he held life-changing conversations bare-assed all the time. With Hope looking at him, and Tarik's lusty thoughts conjuring up images of their mate twisting in pleasure, it wasn't easy.

Hope stood up and brushed off the seat of her pants, as if banishing her carnal thoughts with the puffs of dust. "Sun's getting up there. We'd better pack up and grab breakfast in the saddle if we want to keep to our schedule. We're behind as it is, and I want to make sure we cover everything we planned so you can hit the high points in your article."

Stev winced. "Ah, about that ..."

Hope's brows lowered. "What?"

"We don't work for a magazine."

"No?" Her voice was dangerous. "Then what are you doing here, having me show you all around the ranch?" Hope's eyes widened in sudden comprehension. "Oh, I get it. Well, you can just tell your bosses or whoever that my family has absolutely zero interest in selling the Bar-K, so forget it."

Stev looked at Tarik for help, but saw he was just as mystified. "Sorry, I'm not tracking here. Who do you think we are?"

"Developers. Land speculators. Investors. Hell, I don't know. Doesn't really matter, though, since there will always be Kennedys on Kennedy land."

"Oh." Stev rubbed his hand over the back of his head while he and Tarik had a quick mental discussion. In the end, it didn't take them long to decide where their priorities lay. While Tarik tossed the sleeping bag aside and pulled on his pants, Stev said, "We aren't interested in buying the Bar-K, so you can stop worrying about it."

“Well, that’s one thing at least,” she muttered. Then, louder, “All right, if you aren’t here to scope out the ranch for a buyer, why *are* you here?”

Tarik, unfastened pants perched loosely on his hips, came to stand beside Stev. Unspeaking, they pressed the sub-dermal triggers imbedded in their wrists and held their palms out to Hope, face up. Microscopic filaments under the skin in their palms flared, forming the luminescent outline of a symbol recognized everywhere.

Hope stared. “Marshals? You’re Galactic Marshals?”

* * * *

It took them some time to explain their mission to her. Not only were Stev and Tarik not going to write an article and provide photos for a magazine feature about the Bar-K-as-tourist-mecca, but they were on Jokers Wild to catch a gang notorious for hitting casinos and big money games of chance. Still absorbing the shift in gears, Hope let them cobble together a meal. Following her instructions, they took the horses to drink at the spring, then moved their pickets to a new patch of grass. She’d taken the last sip of liquid from her mug when heat that had nothing to do with the coffee formed in her belly.

“Oh, no. Not again,” she whispered. Hope cautiously set her cup on the ground beside the saddle she was using for a chair. Even that innocuous motion was enough to shift her shirt over her breasts and her abruptly painfully sensitive nipples. She gritted her teeth and tried not to move.

“Hope?” Tarik knelt beside her. “*Shalla*, are you all right?”

Irritably, she said, “What does that mean, anyway? *Shalla*.”

“It means,” Tarik paused as he thought, “I guess it means ‘essence,’ because you are the essence of our triad. It’s an endearment.”

Hope could feel the heat of his body as he crouched there, watching her with concerned brown eyes. His lips looked totally

kissable. Hope shuddered and closed her eyes. She knew without opening them when Stev joined them. He touched the back of her hand, and it was like he touched her everywhere. Hope sucked in a breath.

“It’s the *zusha* rising,” Stev said.

She gave the barest nod.

“I’m sorry. I know you weren’t expecting any of this. I wish we had time to court you properly, but we don’t.”

Tarik captured her other hand, thumb stroking lightly over her knuckles. “Remember how we helped you last night? We can help you again, if you’ll let us.”

Hope’s inner battle was a brief one. After all, what choice did she have? None. “Okay.”

They took her to the spring.

In short order, Stev and Tarik stripped the three of them of their boots and clothes. Stev guided her into the water until it reached the top of her thighs. Her nipples beaded with the cold, but the liquid soothed her fever hot skin.

Hope whimpered.

Stev used cupped hands to dribble water over her shoulders and chest. Tarik gathered her hair and held it out of the way. “It will be all right, Hope. As soon as you stop fighting the *zusha*, you’ll feel better.”

She closed her eyes, enjoying their hands on her body. “You’d better be right.”

“We know what we’re talking about,” Tarik said. He pulled her back against his chest and looped his arms around her waist. Without thought, Hope rested her arms over his. “Well, at least about this, anyway,” he added, a laugh in his voice.

Stev’s expression grew intent, and his caresses changed from comforting to arousing. Soon, he took her breasts and tilted them up to his face. Grazing her nipples with his teeth, he switched from one to the other before deciding which to suck into his mouth. Hope

tunneled her fingers through the waves of his dark brown hair and cradled his nape. Tarik, cheek resting on her temple, seemed content for the moment to let his bond-brother have his way with her.

Hope was amazed she didn't find it odd to let two men make love to her. She'd always been a reserved lover. Shy, almost. But not with Stev and Tarik. They carried her along with their passion until she was helpless to do anything but enjoy it. It was... freeing.

Stev straightened and searched her face. When she didn't protest, his grin was slow and suggestive.

He edged closer until his chest touched hers, the smattering of hairs on it tickling her breasts. She slid her hands from his hair to his shoulders. Dragging her nails over his pecs, she teasingly circled the flat discs that surrounded the tight points of his masculine nipples. Stev shuddered. When his eyes opened, they blazed.

His mouth covered hers, and he snatched her close. Tarik let his arms fall away from her waist so his bond-brother could mold himself to Hope, hard cock throbbing at the apex of her thighs. Tarik's erection, just as insistent, nudged her buttocks.

"Gotta have you," Stev's voice said in her head. Taking her hand, he led her out of the water onto the sparse grass covering the bank. Kicking their clothes into a rough pile, he urged her down and onto her back. Kneeling beside her, each man claimed a nipple. Where Stev was almost rough in his handling, delightfully so, Tarik's lips felt exquisitely soft.

The now familiar ball of heat spread out from her belly, leaving Hope unsurprised when it stole her breath. Her thighs clenched together, and she squirmed her ass into the mound of clothing as the *zusha* claimed her.

Stev reared back, and his nostrils flared. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply. It was like he'd never smelled anything so wonderful in his life and never wanted to forget it. Tarik nuzzled her breasts and drew his own draught of her scent.

“I’m sorry, *shalla*,” Stev said, his voice gravelly. “I can’t wait any longer.”

Holding her hips, he flipped her to her belly and urged her to her knees. She didn’t have time to feel exposed. Stev covered her back, caging her with his body, muscled thighs pushing hers wider. Planting one fist on the ground, he used his other to guide his erection to her slit. Hope pushed her ass against the cradle of his hips and arched her neck like a mare begging a stallion to take her. Stev did. He slid into her in a long, hard thrust that made her teeth snap together. He felt huge, bigger than Tarik. The glide out was exquisitely slow before he rammed back into her.

Hope lowered her head and rocked on her hands and knees as Stev’s hips powered into her. When she tossed her head to get her hair out of her face, she saw Tarik stood in front of her. He didn’t touch her, didn’t force her in any way, but she got a clear mental picture of what he wanted. Literally. Obeying, she licked the very tip of his jutting cock, letting him see the drop of cum settle on her tongue. She sensed his concentration splinter, and the mental image disappeared.

Hope caught the head of his cock in her mouth. She lightly clamped her teeth down just behind the soft ridge, watching through her lashes to gauge his reaction. Tarik stared down with shining eyes, red flags on his cheeks as he panted through parted lips. His hands caught her chin, and he pulsed his hips forward until he sank deeper into her mouth. Hope tilted her head, letting Stev’s jarring pounding do the work of moving her lips back and forth over Tarik’s cock.

She could hear both men’s voices in her head now, praising, commanding, pleading. Instead of being captured by them, she was the conqueror, their pleasure hers to give. They were at her mercy.

Hope hummed with satisfaction. Tarik groaned, and she knew her growl sent a shockwave of sensation all the way to the rock hard spheres of his balls.

Stev’s hips began thrusting wildly, his rhythm breaking as ecstasy washed over him. Hope felt his orgasm roll from him to her, then on

into Tarik, spurring his own orgasm as he shot his release into her mouth. Tarik's hands fisted her hair and he gritted out a low-voiced curse.

Stev collapsed on her back for an instant before he caught his weight on shaky arms. Pulling Hope up into his embrace, he sat back on his heels, still inside her, and settled her on his thighs. While they each struggled to catch their breath, Tarik splashed unsteadily into the spring and dunked his head. Flipping his head back in a spray of water droplets, he let out a triumphant shout that echoed off the rocks of their hidden grotto.

Chapter 7

Hope groaned and folded down over Stev's crossed arms.

"When is this supposed to stop again?"

Stev trailed an admiring palm down her spine. "I'm sure me and Rik can do better."

She rolled her eyes, though he couldn't see them. "I meant the rushka or whatever. When's it supposed to stop?"

"*Zusha*. And it should start tapering off soon. Maybe a few days."

"The longest I've ever heard it lasting is two weeks," Tarik offered from where he splashed in the water.

"Two weeks!"

"He's kidding. Right, Rik?"

"Uh, right."

"Anyway, it's always the strongest when the bonding link is first established. After that, while you'll still go into *zusha*, it won't be as..."

"Tear-off-your-clothes crazy to be fucked?" she asked sweetly.

"Compulsive," he amended. "While you will always feel desire for me and Tarik, and us for you, you won't be helpless to it."

"Hmmm." Hope felt incredibly relaxed, but she couldn't stay like this. Stev's softening cock started to slide from her body. She felt a few twinges in unexpected places. Or maybe not so unexpected. When she thought of all the things she'd let these two men do to her...Of what *she* wanted to do to *them*...Her cheeks burned.

Stev's cock stopped its retreat, and she felt the unmistakable renewal of his interest. "Anything," he whispered in her ear. "Anything you want, *shalla*."

Hope glanced over her shoulder to meet his eyes, and knew. He'd seen what she'd been thinking. So, it hadn't been her imagination. "How is this possible?"

He quirked a brow as Tarik waded out of the spring. "How is what possible?"

She didn't know whether to be afraid that he and Tarik could wander through her thoughts or outraged at the invasion of her privacy. She fought down a wild laugh. Privacy. She doubted she had any secrets left from this devastating pair of off-worlders who claimed she was theirs by, what, divine right? Genetic destiny?

Tarik shook his head like a dog shedding water, spattering Hope and Stev with a spray of droplets. Ignoring his water slick nudity, he twitched his shirt free from the pile of clothes and sat down on it. Dark hairs formed a T between his flat bronze nipples and down his belly, until the trail thickened into a nest around his cock, which now lay quiescent against the column of his thigh. His skin stretched tight over well-defined muscles, the honey brown color of it only marred by a white, star-shaped scar in the meaty part where his left arm met his torso. Tarik ran his fingers through his tousled dark curls, brown eyes sparkling under water clumped lashes, and gave Hope the smile of a man for whom all was right in the world.

Hope forced herself to get off Stev's lap, trying to ignore the dart of pleasure as his semi-hard cock glided out of her sensitized passage. Both men reached to steady her, Tarik even handing her a discarded shirt—one of theirs, though she couldn't be sure whether it was Tarik's or Stev's—when he noticed her shiver. She yanked it on over her head and dug her damp hair out from under the collar.

Pursing her lips, she looked from one man to the other. Stev and Tarik shared another of their speaking glances, and she realized why it was so fraught with meaning. They *were* speaking, telepathically.

"How is it possible you could read my thoughts just now? And earlier, when we," she hesitated, "when we made love, I heard you. In my head."

At first, neither man said anything. She narrowed her eyes. She *knew* they talked to each other again, right in front of her. “Is it a galactic secret or something?” she snapped. “Just answer the question!”

“It’s not a secret, *shalla*,” Tarik said. “It’s just we can sense how much this bothers you.” He held up a hand when she snorted. “I said sense, because that’s what I mean. Stev and I can’t read your thoughts. But we both feel how much this bothers you. On top of everything else that’s happened, you’ll have to forgive us if we don’t want to pile one shock on top of another right now.”

She looked at him, surprised he sounded so solemn. She’d come to think of Stev as the serious one of this pair, although admittedly, he was far from humorless.

“Bond-brothers can communicate mind to mind, but generally it’s more empathic than true telepathy. Rik and I have an unusually strong bond.”

“So you two can talk mind to mind? In sentences, you mean?”

They nodded.

“Which,” Tarik added, “has come in handy more than once in our line of work.”

“That’s interesting, but doesn’t explain why I could hear you. Or why Stev picked up on what I was thinking a minute ago.”

Tarik’s eyes brightened. “Oh? And what were you thinking that makes you blush like that?”

“Never mind.”

“Maybe because Rik and I are strong telepaths with each other, it makes it easier for us to ’path with you, too, since you’re our bondmate. I really have no idea. And as for me reading your mind,” he shrugged. “Well, I was focused on you, and you were really intent on what you were thinking about and it popped into my head.”

“Now I really have to know what you were thinking,” Tarik said.

Hope shot him a quelling glance. Unrepentant, he just grinned.

Bondmates. *Zusha*. Telepathy. And a gang hiding out somewhere on the ranch. It was a lot to process in a very little time. While they'd been occupied in the spring, and out of it, the second sun had risen and the third wouldn't be far behind. The day was going to be a hot one. They needed to care for the horses, pack up the campsite, and get on the trail.

Hope dug her panties out of the pile and began to wriggle into them. When Stev and Tarik made no move to follow her lead in getting dressed, she threw a shirt at one and a pair of pants at the other. With a sigh, Tarik handed Stev his jeans and began to put on the other pair.

"We should be ready to leave in about twenty minutes," Hope said, pulling on her jeans and reaching for her boots.

Stev paused in fastening his shirt. "Leave for where?"

"To find this gang you're so hot for, of course."

"You're not going anywhere except back to the Bar-K," he said, fingers getting back to work. He shoved the shirttails in his waistband and deftly buttoned and zipped.

"Excuse me?"

Tarik barely concealed a snort and shot his bond-brother a "you idiot" look.

"Did you just tell the little woman to go home?" Hope asked.

"No," Stev said. "Of course not. It's just this is a very dangerous gang, and it's our job to bring them in, not yours. You're a rancher, we're marshals. Right?"

"Oh, you've got that right. So once I head back to safety, what's your plan of action? Just curious."

"Rik has the equipment to trace the gang's ship once we get close enough to it. We've got intel that it's somewhere in the canyons we were supposed to explore today. We'll just head over there and see if we get any pings."

"Uh huh. You're going to wander around a canyon system that's several hundred miles long with countless back-switches, dead-ends,

gullies and hidden caverns and hope for a ‘ping’. Gotcha.” Under her breath, she added, “No wonder these guys keep getting away.”

Stev bristled. “What was that?”

“Nothing. I’m just curious about how you’re going to get a signal from anything in there since the rock in those canyon walls is a pretty effective signal *killer*. Oh, plus you have no idea where a ship the size of the *Blackjack* could hide, which, if you did, would give you a much better idea of where to start looking.”

Stev opened his mouth to retort, but she silenced him with a glare. “Now that I’m clear on the situation, I’ll just go back to camp and get our gear loaded.”

Hope turned on her heels. Idiot men. And she’d thought these two had shown at least *some* promise. Just went to prove even smart women like her could be distracted by a couple of mouthwatering dicks and men who knew how to use them.

* * * *

Stev watched her go. If her boots had the spurs he read about on the way to Jokers Wild, they’d be chiming ominously as she stalked out of sight full of barely restrained anger.

He caught his bond-brother’s skeptical look.

“You know I’m right,” he said, a bit defensively. “The safest place for Hope is back with her family. We’ll finish up here, then go get her. It’ll only be for a couple of days and then it’ll be over.”

“And if it isn’t? If the Rogan Gang gets away and we’re left holding our dicks again, looking like assholes while they blast off into the black? We’ll have one pissed-off bondmate to appease. Make that a pissed-off bondmate who was already kind of iffy about accepting she even belongs with us in the first place.”

“Remember what happened the last time we went up against these guys? You want Hope on the other end of Rogan’s disruptor cannon?”

“Stev, give over. You know she’s right. We’ll never find them in there in time. It’s either abort and hope the other teams can get the job done without us, or let Hope help us.”

“Then maybe we should abort.”

Tarik considered him for a long moment. “Do you think we should?” he asked quietly. “Leave our team hurting because we’re afraid we can’t protect our mate?”

Stev exhaled sharply. It wasn’t in his nature to let down people who counted on him, and that he would even suggest it to Tarik made him curl his lip in self-disgust. Sure, the plan didn’t call for them to engage the gang directly. Get in, disable the ship, call for backup, get out. Done. But no plan ever went smoothly. Tarik let him think it through without interruption.

If Hope were anyone other than their mate, he would have been the first to take advantage of her knowledge and willingness to help.

“Okay. Fine,” he said, praying he wouldn’t regret it. “She can come. But if anything happens to her, brother—”

“We’ll both be there to make sure it won’t.”

“But if it does...” Stev trailed off, unable to complete the sentence. He couldn’t think of a threat worse than the thought of something happening to their sweet, feisty mate. So he and Tarik would have to ensure nothing did happen to her. Ever.

Chapter 8

Stev discovered a new facet to their bondmate that he quite enjoyed: she didn't gloat. When he accepted her offer to continue as guide, she simply nodded and went about preparing for their departure.

They took a circuitous path down into the canyon. It was so narrow in places it almost brushed the horses' ribs. In others, one side of the stony channel had sheared away, giving the impression that they clung to the face of a cliff overlooking a tumble of boulders the size of pebbles far, far below their feet. Stev released the breath he'd been holding when they reached the safety of the canyon's floor. Normally, heights and close spaces didn't bother him. But this natural grandeur was something else. The blend of beauty and danger would bring tourists to the Bar-K in droves.

Hope kept them to a sand covered trail that muffled the sound of the horses' hooves. He estimated there was room for only ten horses to walk abreast in this section of the canyon system. Other sections were vast, judging by the maps Tarik downloaded onto his ever-present wristcomp. Here, proximity created the illusion the rock walls were even taller. A mix of reddish sand and rocks covered the floor of the canyon. Hardy shrubs and grasses eked what existence they could from the tiny stream wending a jagged course along the ancient riverbed. Smaller tributaries of stone branched off the one they traversed, some skinny passages, others true tunnels that disappeared into the rock. Every whisper seemed magnified, and Hope resorted to using hand signals to communicate with them.

The second sun had set when she signaled for them to dismount. The third sun's dimmer radiance failed to penetrate the deep shadows around them. Down to a routine now, they quietly hobbled their horses and followed Hope in the slow, arduous process of creeping closer to yet another location big enough and accessible enough from the air to hide a ship. Nimble as an Old Earth goat, Hope mounted a sharp incline.

Stev and Tarik checked the straps on the packs they wore and joined her.

Halfway up, Stev reached for a new fingerhold and grimaced as a sharp rock sliced into his palm. Blood welled sluggishly from the wound. He pressed it against his pant leg to stop the worst of the bleeding. Stoically, he ignored the pain and made sure to solidly anchor his boot in yet another barely discernable notch before moving his hand to another anchor point. Ahead, Hope limberly scaled the slope, her fingers and toes effortlessly finding even the faintest grooves and lips while he had to squint and pray. A faint scuffle behind him and a 'pathed curse told him Rik wasn't having any easier a time of it, which was at least some comfort. Hope pulled a few feet farther ahead. He wanted to call her back, tell her to wait for them, but couldn't risk the sound of his voice carrying. And while she could evidently hear Stev and Tarik 'path when they made love, she gave no sign of being able to now.

When she stopped at the crest of the ridge, eyes fastened on something he couldn't yet see, he knew their search was over. Hope looked back. Her face glowed with triumph. If he didn't already think his mate beyond lovely, that look would have convinced him.

Hope was right about the canyons' shielding power. There hadn't been so much as a peep of warning from Tarik's wristcomp.

Stev tried to hurry and forced himself to slow down when his boot slipped, sending a hail of gravel down on Tarik's head.

Finally, the three of them were positioned along the ridge.

“Yes!” Tarik ’pathed, giving their bondmate a pleased wink. “*Our girl got those bastards.*”

“*She did.*” Stev took a small mag-viewer out of a pocket in his pack and surveyed the rugged camp below. Tarik did the same. The *Blackjack* had been set down with some skill under a wide ledge. It had undergone some slight modifications, and almost certainly some not-so-obvious ones, to hide its identity. It bore different call letters, and some superficial changes to its hull would make it pass for a different ship entirely at first glance. Unless someone was looking for the *Blackjack*, that is. Stev and Tarik would recognize it anywhere.

Basic camouflage netting concealed it from surveillance satellites as well as human eyes. A portable table had been set up under one wing. Four men—Stev recognized them as identified members of the Rogan Gang—sat around it, apparently playing cards in utter silence. The entire area seemed blurred, as if seen through an opaque curtain.

He handed Hope his mag-viewer so she could have a look and ’pathed Tarik. “*Sound shield?*”

“*Best guess,*” his bond-brother agreed. “*That would cut down on any noise that might give away their position but let air through.*” Tarik lifted his wristcomp and used it to scan the ship and the immediate area. Consulting the device, he pointed to a number of barely visible brown discs set on the ground in a rough semicircle around the *Blackjack*. “*Transmitters. There are some on the overhang, too, but I can’t see them from here.*”

“*Can they hear us, do you think?*”

Tarik thought before answering. “*Not likely. The shield should work both ways. But they might have set up some other kind of detection system out here or have someone on lookout.*”

Stev looked at the nearby rocks and ledges but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Thinking Hope might be more knowledgeable about what belonged and what didn’t, he gestured for her to do the same. Her eyes paused where his hadn’t. Finally, she indicated she

didn't think any guards had been posted. She handed over his mag-viewer, and he trained it on the camp.

Just then a fifth man walked down the ramp from the ship. Stev felt his fingers tighten on the mag-viewer's plastic casing. Rogan. The gang leader sauntered to the table. Stev couldn't make out the expressions on the poker players' faces, but their body language was tense. Rogan threw his head back in a soundless laugh, slapped one of the men on the shoulder and turned away.

Stev, Tarik, and Hope immediately crouched out of sight. It was unlikely Rogan would spot them at this distance and through his own shield. With a man as ruthless as this, Stev wasn't willing to take chances. He was amused to note that both he and Rik grabbed Hope to urge her down if she needed it. He should have known they wouldn't have to. Their bondmate was no one's fool.

Cautiously, he eased forward until he could again see the camp. Rogan moved away from the others and was consulting his own wristcomp. He cast a baleful eye at the sky, as if unhappy with whatever information he received and looking for answers. He consulted his wristcomp for a few more minutes before going back inside the *Blackjack*.

Stev looked at Tarik. *"Ten credits says I'm good for eight for eight."*

Tarik's teeth flashed. *"You're on."*

Hope steadied him as he wrangled his bag around and pulled out the plas-gun he'd assembled at the campsite. Stev used a convenient notch in the ridge to balance the barrel and took aim. The tapping of Tarik's fingertips on his wristcomp was barely audible. Though the air around them cooled with the coming night, Stev felt a trickle of sweat track down his spine. Staring down the sights, he waited.

"Nanobots active," Tarik 'pathed. *"Hope you have those ten credits on you, my brother."*

"In your dreams." Stev squeezed the trigger. The gun gave a barely discernable recoil. Something flashed through the shield, the

tiny flare gone in a fraction of a second. Through the gun sight, Stev saw a small blob of gel spatter against the *Blackjack*'s hull. He waited just long enough to be sure none of the card players noticed. From experience, he knew the gel charge sounded no louder than a juicy bug hitting a windscreen, if that. Satisfied they wouldn't raise an alarm, he pulled the trigger seven more times in quick succession, adjusting his aim slightly with each shot to evenly space the gel charges along the visible hull. By the time he finished, the first blob was gone, the chemical carrier evaporated. The nanobots would have drilled a tiny hole in the hull and disappeared inside to begin infiltrating the *Blackjack*'s every system.

"So, how much do you owe me now?" he asked Tarik.

"No more than you owe me."

"Right. Let's get out of here."

Stev efficiently stowed the plas-gun and nudged Hope's shoulder, tipping his chin down to indicate she should begin her descent. In short order, they returned to their horses and led them away as fast as they dared before mounting to continue their retreat. Making noise now would be the same as never finding the *Blackjack* at all—total failure—with the added fillip of putting Hope at Rogan's mercy.

* * * *

Hope felt the *zusha* swirl in her belly when Stev and Tarik touched her shoulders to urge her down and out of view of the gang's camp. It swirled faster when Stev took aim with the plas-gun and her eyes honed in on his starkly handsome profile. It wasn't as bad as it had been. She could control it. Or so she told herself. Now, leading Stev and Tarik away as the third sun set and true darkness settled over the canyon, she realized she'd been lying to herself.

Hope pulled gently on her horse's reins. Obediently, it stopped. The men's horses continued for a few paces before Tarik noticed she wasn't with them. They guided their horses back to join her.

Stev leaned close, concern evident in his expression even in the soft glimmer of starlight. "Hope," he said, his voice a bare whisper. "What is it?"

Hope made a face, reluctant to admit her need. "I have to stop," she said, her voice as soft as his. His nostrils flared slightly, and his eyes gained a recognizable heat, telling her she didn't have to explain.

"Is there somewhere safe nearby we can stay the night?" Tarik asked.

Hope nodded. "A cave. Big enough for us and the horses."

"Okay." Stev's hand caught her chin, and he touched her lips in a soft kiss. "Please don't be upset, Hope. This isn't a sign of weakness." Tarik stroked her back, and she felt comforted.

Which was odd, considering her loss of control was all *their* fault. She couldn't quite muster true outrage, though. Nudging her horse with her knees, she got the animal moving.

Fortunately, the cave wasn't far. They reached it in less than fifteen minutes. Hope was grateful. The sublime twist in her belly moved from warning to the edge of demanding.

She dismounted and led her horse into the tunnel, clicking on her handlight once she was certain it couldn't be seen by anyone outside. The light fell on what appeared to be a dead end about twenty paces ahead. Hope continued to lead the way to the wall and turned, urging her horse into the narrow passage that was invisible from the entrance. From there, the passage opened into a yawning cavern.

The beam of Hope's handlight sparkled in a million pinpoints set in the walls and ceiling, and it seemed like they were in the midst of a vast starfield.

"What is it?" Tarik asked.

"Diamond chips," she said. "Too small to be worth mining. It looks pretty enough, though, and there are some intriguing rock formations down a side tunnel that eventually lets out into an underground river. I plan to bring tourists here for campouts." She gestured at the boxes of stacked supplies in a depression along the

wall. Hope took the reins of all three horses and secured them in another nook where packaged feed had been stored beside a water trough.

Working in silent concert, Stev and Hope took the gear off the horses, fed and watered them, and settled them in for the night. Tarik ferried their bags to the cleared area Hope indicated and arranged their sleeping bags. Hope didn't say anything when he again used all three of their sleeping bags to prepare a single pallet. How could she? It was why they were here.

Taking into consideration the enclosed space, Hope forewent a traditional fire for the portable stove. It shed both light and heat. Tarik assembled a hasty meal, but Hope couldn't eat. It was getting hard to breathe. She sat on the pallet, sipped a cup of cold water, and tried not to imagine the men naked.

They worked so seamlessly together it was easy to forget they had an edge. Where other men had to talk, to plan out loud, Stev and Tarik knew each other's thoughts. It was evident in the way they made love, each anticipating the other's moves, complementing them. Hope took another cooling sip of water.

Abruptly, Stev stood up. Eyes never leaving Hope's, his fingers went to the buttons on his shirt. He popped one through the tiny hole. The blue cotton shirt spread a fraction of an inch, revealing a slice of golden, hair dappled chest. His fingers slid down to release another button.

"By the pit, brother, I'm not going to let you have all the fun." Tarik, a glint of challenge in his eyes, stood to begin his own striptease.

Hope was mesmerized. Totally unselfconscious, they seduced her with their animal grace. Her eyes noted every ripple of muscle, the lighter hue of skin normally covered by clothes, the intimate patterns their body hair formed on their flesh. Her fingers tingled with the urge to touch, to caress.

At last, they stood naked before her, rampant cocks eager to give their mate what she needed most. Them.

Chapter 9

Stev and Tarik stood in front of Hope and waited. Unhesitatingly, she reached for them. Stev's head fell back as her hand wrapped around his throbbing length. A husky rumble rolled up from Tarik's chest as his eyes fixed on her hand fisting his cock. Hope felt the vitality pulsing through them as she stroked their shafts, noting their differences, their similarities. Both had velvety skin. Hope luxuriated in the long, slow glide of her palms on their cocks, from the thick bases she could barely get her hands around, to the dip near the bulbs at their tips. She ringed the heads of their cocks, and Stev shuddered. Noticing a glistening jewel forming on his slit, she bent her head to catch it with her tongue.

"Yes, *shalla*," he gritted out. Or maybe she only heard him in her head. She didn't care.

Not wanting Tarik to feel slighted, she dipped her head. Taking just the tip of him inside her mouth, she sucked lightly, teasingly. He moaned.

Hope shifted on the pallet. The movement reminded her she was fully clothed, while Stev and Tarik were bare and at her mercy. She let Tarik's cock slide out of her mouth and glided her tongue along the length of Stev's. Instead of stopping, she continued lower. The skin of his scrotum was even softer than that which covered his penis. Hope inhaled deeply, loving the masculine musk filling her senses. Then she softly sucked his scrotum until she captured one hard sphere in her mouth. Stev gave a little cry, and his hips flexed.

She sensed he only stopped moving by will alone. Smiling, she turned hungry eyes on Tarik's heavy balls. Before she could touch him, though, her hands were trapped, stopped.

"As much as we love what you're doing, *shalla*, have mercy," Stev said.

They knelt beside her and set about peeling her clothes away. With the two of them working together, it didn't take long. Tarik, hands on the hem of her shirt, caught her lips with his. His tongue darted into her mouth, thrusting and demanding. Hope kissed him just as eagerly.

Stev tugged on first one boot, then the other, tossing them both aside. Tarik came back to himself long enough to divest her of shirt and bra. Then he unfastened her pants and yanked down the zipper. His hands slid over her ass, moving aside pants and panties until Stev pulled them both off and away with her socks.

Impatient for his turn at her lips, Stev crawled up her body. Hope spread her legs in welcome, and he settled into the vee of her thighs, his penis a shaft of hot iron against her mound. Stev licked her lips, teasing her into following him. Impatient, she grabbed two fistfuls of his hair. Holding him exactly where she wanted him, she took his mouth. One arm scooped around her back, and his fingers sank into her ass. When he rolled to his back, she went with him.

Strong hands glided down her sides, and warmth blanketed her back. Hard thighs bracketed hers on either side of Stev's. Tarik nipped her shoulder. Hope tossed her head and pressed against him, rubbing her body along his chest and ridged stomach. The motion also rocked her along Stev's cock. Trapping her hips, he steadied her long enough to position her over his cock. Hope braced her hands on his shoulders, arched her back and took him inside in one long, slow slide. She didn't stop until her pussy met the wiry curls at the base of his sex. He urged her to ride him. As she moved, Tarik palmed her breasts, fingers plucking at her distended nipples. He freed one hand to glide it down her side and around her waist. Talented fingers

followed the cleft of her ass to the hidden rosebud. With none of the cautious hesitation either man had shown before, he pressed his thumb into her. And held it there. Hope did all the work. Plunging down on Stev's steely cock also plunged her ass over Tarik's thumb. It wasn't enough.

"Tarik," she gasped. "I need...I need ..."

"Yes?" Thumb trapped in her tight rear passage, she felt his fingers trace the stretched flesh surrounding his bond-brother's cock.

Hope gasped and pumped herself over them, Stev's cock and Tarik's thumb. Stev leaned up to suck her nipple into his mouth while Tarik's free hand continued to play with the other one.

Tarik nipped the cord of muscle in her neck. "What do you need, *shalla*?" he asked, his voice dark with promises. "Tell us, and it's yours."

"Tarik, please, I need your...your cock in my ass. Oh, God. I can't believe I just said that."

Stev pulled her down until her chest pressed tightly against his, tipping her ass into the air. "Say anything, *shalla*. Do anything. We are yours."

Tarik ran the head of his cock along the cleft of her ass. She felt the trail of moisture it left in its path. Resting the blunt head against her rosebud, he began to push forward. Hope stiffened, breath caught in her throat. He kept coming. Stev murmured words of praise she didn't hear, all her attention focused on Tarik.

This was no shallow taking like Stev's last night. This was a claiming.

Tarik stopped, pulled back. A sharp thrust drove him further inside, the flared head rubbing along her sensitive inner tissue. Backing out, he thrust again. Out, and back again. This time, his hips slapped against her ass.

"Okay?" he asked tightly.

Instead of answering, she ignored Stev's cautioning hold on her hips and drove herself down against them both. The sensation was exquisite. She had to do it again.

That was all the response they needed. Planting his hands and knees in the pallet, Tarik drove into Hope, the force of his thrust pushing her along his bond-brother's cock. Stev responded with a short jab of his hips that clenched the muscles in his abdomen and put pressure on her clit.

The three of them quickly found a rhythm that gave them all maximum pleasure. Hope writhed with abandon, knowing her mates would do nothing less than pleasure her into oblivion. She reveled as their thoughts seeped into her mind, snatches of images and impressions more than words. She was beyond caring whether *zusha* or simple lust drove her now. It didn't matter. Her whole body felt primed for release. Tarik's hips slapped against her as he pistoned his cock into her ass, each forward motion tearing a grunt from him. Stev thrust in perfect counterpoint, hands locked around her knees. He was the first to go. Pressing his head back into the pallet, he arched up and shouted her name. Hope felt his cock jerk and throb as he shot his cum deep inside her. The violence of his release triggered her own. The orgasm exploded through her, and Hope screamed. Almost instantly, Tarik's growling cry echoed in the chamber. His fingers dug into her hips as his cock pulsed in her ass. Impossibly, Hope fell into a second, longer orgasm.

Tarik went boneless. His weight crushed her against Stev, who didn't complain. He stroked her knees with trembling thumbs, obviously too drained to do more. Her ears filled with the sound of sated, gradually steadying breaths.

After long moments, Tarik roused himself to roll to the side and spoon her against him. Stev positioned himself so he could lazily lick her still stiff nipples.

Hope held the back of his head tenderly.

It was hard to believe she hadn't known these men a few days ago. And now they were her mates. Hard to believe. But no less true. Hope smiled and let sleep take her.

* * * *

Orin Rogan let out a furious roar and picked up the hapless man by a fistful of shirt.

“What do you mean, you can’t kill the virus?”

The man paled. Rogan paid him for his programming skills. Specifically, his hacking and cracking skills. And now the useless piece of space trash had the balls to tell him he couldn’t get rid of whatever worm was taking over his ship?

“Rogan,” the man said, voice constricted by the gang leader’s grip on his shirt. He grabbed the back of his seat with one flailing hand and tried to get his feet under him. Rogan lifted him higher.

“Rogan,” he tried again. “Of course I can kill it. I can kill any virus going, you know that.” He pried feebly at Rogan’s fingers. “Please.”

Rogan threw him back in his seat. Even bolted to the floor on the *Blackjack*’s bridge, the chair shuddered. The hacker began to straighten but slumped at one look from Rogan.

The gang leader pulled a concealed knife from its sheath inside his boot and pressed the tip against the man’s Adam’s apple. He swallowed, and a bead of blood welled up around the blade tip.

“Tell me, Jarowski,” Rogan said, “why I shouldn’t gut you like a Fwarkig slug.”

The hacker spoke quickly. “I can kill the virus, just not fast enough to meet our timeline for the job. I can save the ship, though,” he added hurriedly. “And I can track the nanobots to their source.”

“Nanobots?” The knife didn’t move so much as a hair.

“The 'bots that released the virus. They're short-term deploy, which means they got onto the ship sometime in the past four hours. It's possible one of the crew released—”

“No one would be that foolish.”

“Of course. Then someone else released the 'bots. Once I dig some of them out of the wiring, I should be able to revive them enough to download their source coordinates.”

“And this will lead us to whoever disabled my ship?”

Jarowski risked a nod.

Rogan held his stare for long, tense moments. Straightening, he removed the knife from the other man's throat. “Do it.”

Striding off the bridge, Rogan drew the sharp edge of his blade along the pad of his index finger. Light as his touch was, the sharp blade opened a miniscule slice that filled with blood. When he caught whoever'd fucked with his ship, slicing would be the least of their concerns.

Darkly, he thought of Shirrah's prediction that the job had gone bad. She'd just love knowing she was right.

Chapter 10

Stev's only warning was the hard boot in his ribs. He arched his back in agony but didn't get a chance to determine if anything was cracked or broken before being dragged to his feet. Hope's cry of surprise instantly cleared his head of everything except fear for her. He swung in his captors' grasp to see Tarik lunge at a grinning man who held their struggling mate. A gang member brutally smashed the butt of his weapon against the back of his bond-brother's head. Tarik crumpled. The man kicked him, unresisting, over onto his belly and jerked his hands behind his back, securing them with a twist of metal wire.

Stev fought but couldn't stop his own wrists from being trapped in another metal binding. The thin wire dug painfully into his flesh. He felt blood trickle into his palms. Someone kicked the back of his legs, and he dropped to the ground, knees smashing onto the sand covered stone. The muzzle of a weapon dug into the nape of his neck. A handful of portable lanterns flashed to life, illuminating everything in a crazy chaos of light and shadows—the soft wreckage that used to be their pallet, clothes twined through the mess; Tarik face down on the ground, hands bound at what must be a painful angle, blood trickling from his ear; Hope, pale skin gleaming in the harsh light, eyes wild as a hulking brute of a man easily trapped her arms at her sides.

Then a sixth man walked into the chamber and all eyes went to him.

Rogan surveyed the scene with an expression of supreme satisfaction, but Stev saw the animal rage lurking just beneath the surface. Besides the two men who bracketed Stev, two others stood

over Tarik's unconscious body. The man holding Hope let his weapon dangle from its bandolier style strap and reached out grubby fingers to tweak her nipple. Hope jerked away with a hissed curse and he laughed.

"I've heard about catching someone with their pants down, but this is more than I expected. Hello, Marshals," Rogan said. He slanted an eye at Tarik and amended, "Well, Marshal. We can repeat the preliminaries when your bond-brother comes around."

Stev must have looked surprised, because Rogan chuckled. "Oh, I know all about you, Stev Lan Garron. Did you think I wouldn't have dug up what I could on you two after our meeting on Farrah's?" He tapped his temple meaningfully and winked. "A *churat*, isn't that what it's called? Regardless, kind of a giveaway as far as identifying marks, if you know what to look for. Which I now do."

Stev kept his face expressionless.

"You tampered with my ship."

When Stev didn't answer immediately, one thug jabbed him in the back of the head with his gun. Stev leaned away and shot a lethal glare over his shoulder. He didn't dare try anything, though, not with Tarik out of action and the lustful stares most of the men trained on Hope. "Let us go, Rogan. You know you're in for a whole lot of hurt if you do anything to a couple of Galactic Marshals. Our team will be here anytime now. Do you really want to add kidnapping and assault of law officers to the charges you're facing? Or worse?"

"Yes, about that," Rogan said. "If your backup was going to come, it would already be here. No, I think the earliest we'll see anyone fly into these canyons is dawn, and by then we'll be long gone."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that."

"I'm willing to chance it." Rogan strolled over to look Hope up and down. A flush rose on her face, but she met the gang leader's stare without flinching. He grabbed her chin in a hard fist and tilted her head to the side. In the harsh lamplight, Stev saw the faint outline

of the *churat* that had begun to take shape just below her hairline. Rogan slanted Stev a purely evil smile. “Nice piece of bondmate you have here. I’m sure I’ll enjoy her immensely.”

Hope moved away hard and fast enough to surprise the man restraining her. He stumbled and let go of her arms. Abruptly free, she swung a fist at Rogan’s head. He ducked, but she landed a glancing blow on his cheekbone that made him grunt in surprise. Without hesitation, Rogan backhanded her. Hope staggered. Stev roared and struggled to his feet, shrugging off the men holding him. He took just two steps when what felt like a spike hammered into his head. Black crept around the edges of his vision. When it cleared, he was on the ground, the taste of sand and blood in his mouth.

The brute grabbed hold of Hope again, his hands digging into her upper arms so tightly, his knuckles whitened.

“Stev! Oh, my God, Stev! Tarik, Tarik, Tarik, wake up, please wake up, please don’t be dead...”

Stev spat out a mouthful of blood, shoving back a moan when even that small motion added a few hammer blows to the spike in the back of his skull.

“Kill him! I’ll kill that smug bastard for hurting them. Stev, get up!” A mental moan. *“So much blood on them...”*

Hard hands grabbed his elbows and hauled him back up on his knees. The ubiquitous sand ground into his shins, coated his torso and groin.

“...get my gun and kill the bastard. Come onto my planet, hide in my canyons, hurt my men...”

Blairily, Stev focused on Hope. She hung limp from her captor’s hands, head bowed. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Her tangled, tawny hair dangled over her face. A glint of pale green flashed from behind the golden strands, and he saw her eyes fix on Rogan with pure hatred.

With shock, he realized the voice he heard in his mind was Hope’s. Her thoughts were disjointed, almost incoherent in her rage

and upset, but he could hear her. “*Hope*,” he ’pathed. Her mental rant continued without pause. “*Hope!*”

It stopped. Then, a tentative, “*Stev?*”

He would have exhaled with relief but didn’t want Rogan to suspect anything. If he knew about the *churat*, he might know other things about the bond. Unmoving, Stev ’pathed, “*I’m all right. I’m fine, shalla. I can sense Rik. He’s not dead.*”

“*There’s blood, a lot of it. He’s so pale. He hasn’t moved. Then you went down.*” Her mental voice was halting. He was still impressed. That she could ’path anything at all through the new bond, much less form sentences, was nothing less than amazing. He thrilled again that he and Tarik had been fortunate enough to find this woman. Now, they just had to survive long enough to save her.

“*Trust me, shalla, our bondmate’s head is a lot harder than you’d think.*” Stev broke off when Rogan strode up to him, blocking his view of Hope. The gang leader took a fistful of Stev’s hair and delivered a couple of sharp slaps to his face. The spike of pain vibrated excruciatingly with each blow. “You awake now, Marshal? I’d hate for you to miss the best part.”

“I’m awake,” Stev said in a low voice. “Let Hope go. If you do, I’ll make sure you get off-planet without a fight from our team.”

Hope’s head shot up. “Stev, no!”

Rogan didn’t even pretend to think about it. He shook his head, and his lips curled in a way that made Stev afraid none of them would get out of this.

“Then take me and Tarik as hostages. Leave Hope here, tied up if you have to. The team will find her and set her free.”

“No.” With slow deliberation, Rogan drew a thin bladed knife from a sheath on his hip. With a terse, “Hold him,” to his men, Rogan tightened his fingers in Stev’s hair until his neck tilted painfully back. The knife hovered tauntingly over Stev’s left eye before the gang leader set the blade’s tip to the outer corner. Stev refused to react. If

Rogan was going to take his eye, he wouldn't give him the satisfaction of his fear—or terrify Hope with it.

The tightening of his lips was the only sign Rogan was annoyed by Stev's stoicism. Then he traced the blade down a spare inch and began carving. Stev tensed, his muscles bulging as he fought to stay unmoved. Blood coursed down his cheek to drip off his chin onto his chest.

The sound of a scuffle made Stev aware Hope was fighting her captor again. What would Rogan do if he lost patience with her? "Hope, don't!" As he spoke, the knife sliced deeper.

"Stev." The 'pathed voice was weak, but there. Stev flicked a glance at his bond-brother. Tarik lay motionless on the ground. "*Not unconscious,*" Tarik informed him. "*Just... scrambled.*"

"*Six of them, armed, to our three, tied up and slapped down. Not the best odds. Any ideas?*"

"*I twisted my wrists when they put the bindings on. I'm pretty sure I can get my hands free.*"

"Pretty sure?"

"You got a better plan?"

"No." Stev held his breath as the knife probed deep enough to touch bone. "*I can't get free. I'll keep them busy, though.*"

A feminine voice interrupted. "*Hey, hello? What about me?*"

"Hope?" Tarik's mental voice was startled.

Despite the pain in his face, Stev wanted to smile. "*Seems our bondmate can 'path almost as well as we can.*"

"*Give me time and I'll be better than you,*" she said. "*You want a distraction, I can give you one.*"

"There." Rogan leaned back. He gave Stev's cheek an appraising look, like an artist assessing his own work. "Not bad for a first effort. I'm sure your bond-brother's slave mark will look a lot tidier."

He casually slid two fingers along the blade's edge, squeezing Stev's blood off it. Flicking crimson drops from his fingertips, he looked at Stev's sand and sweat covered body. Clapping a hand on the

curve of one muscled shoulder, Rogan said, "Couple of strong men like you should sell on the block at McCarthy's End pretty quick. Not to worry—I'll make sure you get separate buyers, so you won't have to compete with each other for attention."

Stev suppressed an instinctive shudder. Separating bond-brothers was akin to a death sentence, except it wouldn't be mercifully quick. With Hope now forming the third of their triad, she faced the same agony if they didn't escape Rogan's custody.

The tiny comp on the gang leader's wrist beeped. He scowled at the screen, quickly reading the message. "Unfortunately, we'll have to cut this party short. Your bond-brother can get his mark when we're on our way to McCarthy's End."

He gestured at his crew, then briskly walked toward the narrow passage leading into the canyon. Stev's captors hauled him up and dragged him after their leader. He heard the men in charge of Tarik arguing about the best way to get an unconscious man to the *Blackjack*, and the coarse laughter of the one with Hope. She snarled something unintelligible but unmistakably threatening. The fool laughed again.

"*Stev!*" Hope 'pathed. "*Don't let them take you into the tunnel.*"

"*Why not?*"

"*No time to explain.*"

Rogan took one step into the passage, and Stev feigned a stumble. His captors cursed and tugged on his arms. Stev wobbled and went down. Grappling with his now deadweight, one of the men viciously kicked his already sore ribs. Rogan impatiently looked back to see what kept them.

A shrill whistle rent the air, crashing against their eardrums as it reverberated around the cavern.

The horses, ignored until now, whinnied in distress. Sidling in agitation, they easily broke free of the makeshift rope pen. Hope blew out another piercing whistle, simultaneously snatching her captor's dangling gun before he could stop her and squeezing off a shot. The

laser flashed across the cavern in a fraction of a second, hitting the wall beside the temporary pen with the force of a small explosion. Hot shards of rock pelted the horses. Squealing, Hope's horse spun on his rear hooves and thundered for the passage to escape the source of his terror, his two herd mates close on his heels. Rogan gaped as the huge animals bore down on him.

Stev, forgotten by his captors, rolled desperately toward the dubious safety of a wall. An instant later, a metal shod hoof smashed down where his head had been. The man who'd kicked him in the ribs wasn't so lucky. Hope's horse tossed him into the jagged rock wall like a rag doll.

The second guard tried to bring his gun around, fumbling in his panic. Still on the ground, Stev lashed his foot into the back of the guard's knee. He dropped. Before the fallen guard could move, Stev crunched a heel down on his nose, then slammed it against his temple. The guard went still, knocked out cold.

Stev looked around. The horses' clattering retreat echoed from the passage. Rogan was gone. One of Tarik's captors crouched on the ground, retching, as his hands covered his groin. Tarik, freed from his bonds, faced his second captor. They circled each other, obviously looking for an opening. The gang member held a knife but had lost his gun. He lunged at Tarik, who arched away and sucked in his belly. A thin red line appeared along his ribs. But the man reached too far to get the hit. Tarik grabbed the hand holding the knife and whipped him forward. Then he slammed the man's straightened elbow against his thigh. There was a meaty snap, then a scream. Tarik plucked the knife out of nerveless fingers.

Hope struggled on their pile of sleeping bags, body almost hidden by the brute who covered her. Bloody scratches crossed his face, and he peered from just one eye, the other noticeably swollen. Pinning her with his weight, he held one of her hands over her head and tried to grab the other one.

“*Hope!*” Stev ’pathed, awkwardly pushing to his feet with his wrists still bound behind his back. He began a stumbling jog toward her.

Hope’s free hand flailed into the pile of clothes and sleeping bags. When it came up, so did her relic of a handgun. Hope cocked it one-handed and shoved the barrel under her attacker’s chin. The man froze. “You want to get off me now,” Hope said. “Nice and slow.”

Hope held the gun on him while Tarik used a couple of socks to bind him hand and foot. A few more served to silence his protests and offers to cut a deal. Then, Hope pulled on the first shirt she could find—Tarik’s—and they went to free Stev.

“*You both okay?*” Stev ’pathed, turning so his bond-brother could reach his wrists.

Hope answered out loud. “Just bruised. It’s you and Tarik and I’m worried about.”

“I’m fine,” they said in unison.

“Rogan?” Tarik asked, his voice dangerous.

Stev winced as the wire loosened. The metal was sticky with blood, and Tarik had to peel it away from where Stev’s struggles had embedded it in his flesh. A fresh spurt of warm liquid began to flow from the wounds. “Sorry,” Tarik murmured. “Rogan?”

Stev brought his hands to where he could see them and grimaced. Hope made a small noise and softly touched his fingers. “Don’t know. Last I saw, he was scurrying down the tunnel to the outside. Probably halfway to his ship by now.”

Hope guided Stev to the wrecked remains of their pallet while Tarik efficiently checked the fallen gang members. He left two where they lay. One carried a pouch full of wire cuffs. Those he appropriated to tie up the two unconscious survivors, dragging their bodies close to where the first man lay.

He stood and headed for the main tunnel.

Hope looked up from the strip of torn shirt she was using to dribble water over the raw flesh on Stev's wrists. "Where are you going?"

"Just want to have a look around."

He was back in moments. "I hate paperwork." He answered Hope and Stev's inquiring expressions with a shrug. "Rogan was in the tunnel when the horses came through. He didn't make it out."

Hope hesitated, then continued to dab at Stev's wrists. "*Shalla*," he said softly. "You saved us."

She nodded. Tarik sat and hugged her against his side. "If you hadn't scared the horses, he would have eventually killed you and made me and Stev watch."

"I know. You're right. It was the only thing I could think to do."

"Killing is never easy," Stev said. "It shouldn't be."

He was glad to see her brave smile lose its stiffness. Pulling away from her gentle hold, he reached for his pants. "*We'd better make doubly sure these guys are tied and no trouble*," he 'pathed his bond-brother, who nodded and fished his own pants out of the pile. "*Then figure out a way to comm the team from here so they can come pick up us and the rest of the gang. Betcha ten credits the horses are long gone*."

Tarik snorted softly. He righted his gear bag and took a couple of mini-blasters out of the hidden compartment. Handing one to Stev, he said, "No bet."

* * * *

Shirrah Spencer casually went through the lobby and out onto the street. She carried no bags, no overcoat, nothing to so much as hint she wasn't stepping down the street to keep her breakfast date with the sheriff who so enjoyed handcuffs, breathless confessions, and the judicious application of a leather belt to his plump buttocks. Her things remained unpacked in her suite, reinforcing the impression she

would be back. If nothing else, she would lose her stake if she didn't return to her table in the hotel's grand ballroom for the next round in the poker tournament.

Shirrah strolled along the boardwalk, pausing to peer in shop windows or exchange greetings with the early-risers and hangers-on excited to meet one of the off-world gamblers. She was certain she could ditch the young Galactic Marshal trailing her with little effort. Him, she made the moment she saw him. The older woman with the hard eyes of a seasoned huntress would be more of a challenge.

Her first move was to enter the cavernous building a few blocks over from her hotel. The massive eating establishment specialized in serving inexpensive food to vast amounts of people in a short period of time. Breakfast diners thronged the aisles, picking over trays of exotic and domestic dishes before carrying their booty to the mess hall style dining area. In moments, Shirrah was through the crowd and in a hallway leading to both the washrooms and a rear exit. After a quick glance to ensure she was temporarily alone, Shirrah thumbed a recessed button on her bracelet. Her ears ached under the pressure of a sub-audible hum, and the fine hairs on her arms lifted as the gadget activated the light bending properties of the filaments woven into the material of her sleek pantsuit. The little trick meant the marshals would have to look extra hard to see her since the Chameleon suit both blurred her outline and helped her figure blend in with her surroundings.

Shirrah quickly overrode the lock on the emergency exit and went outside.

With the instincts of a starving alley cat, she wended her way through the streets and alleys of Terminal City. The buildings around her lost the sanitized look of the tony, tourist friendly part of the city that hosted the tournament. Instead of faux wood storefronts and quaint cafes that aggressively courted customer credits, the stores in this area took the defensive stance of weapon detector lintels and barred windows. It was also easier to go unnoticed when passersby

worked at *not* noticing the people around them. She checked the time on her wristcomp and picked up her pace.

The abandoned plant could have been one of any on dozens of worlds. The low slung structure hadn't quite succumbed to decay, but it was on the whimpering edge of it. The plas-steel windows had gone from transparent to sickly yellow opacity, yet they remained unbroken. Dodging the worst cracks in the buckled pavement, Shirrah jogged to the rusty ladder affixed partway down the side of the building. Nimbly, she jumped up and grabbed the lowest rung. Well-trained muscles and determination got her feet up, and she began scaling the rungs.

The shouted demand to stop was unwelcome, if not wholly unexpected. Shirrah sighed and glanced over her shoulder. Sure enough, it was the older Galactic Marshal.

"Come down from there nice and easy," the woman ordered, her gaze as unflinching as her voice. Shirrah glanced up at the unseen rooftop. The heat of a laser shot kissing the siding near her knee forced her attention back on the marshal, who said, "Down. Now."

The sudden roar of an engine and the heavy thumps of cannon fire sent the marshal rolling for cover in a doorway. The *Blackjack* screamed by and executed a somewhat clumsy turn to give the ground around the doorway a repeat strafing. Shirrah used the distraction to scamper up the ladder and onto the roof. Rogan's ship maneuvered around again. The passenger door irised open before the struts crunched into the ragged surface of the rooftop. Holding her hands over her ears to protect them from the noise, Shirrah ran to the ship and jumped aboard, slapping the control panel to close the portal.

"Miss Spencer," an unfamiliar voice—definitely not Rogan—called over the intercom. "Can you come to the bridge right away, please?"

Without answering, Shirrah deactivated her Chameleon suit and made her way to the bow of the ship. Rogan's hacker jumped up from

the control chair when she walked onto the bridge. Lifting an eyebrow, she asked, "Where's Rogan?"

"Uh." The man swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. "I think the marshals got him. He didn't respond to my hails when I tried to warn him a satellite had locked onto the *Blackjack*'s position."

"I see." Shirrah slid into Rogan's chair. Gliding her palms over the consoles set in the armrests, she quickly assessed their position and possible pursuers. Nothing, as yet. Quickly, she lay in a course to take the ship out of atmosphere.

"I waited as long as I could," the man fumbled on. "With the ship's systems already partially disabled by the worm, I couldn't depend on the master computer being able to conceal our position anymore. And you were waiting to be picked up—"

"Of course. I understand."

He practically sagged with relief. "Then it's okay?"

Shirrah looked around the bridge with covetous eyes. Rogan really should have listened to her. Too bad his arrogance outweighed his good sense. The key to any well-played game was knowing when to take a gamble and when to throw in the cards. "Don't worry ..."

"Jarowski."

"... Jarowski. You did exactly the right thing."

Smiling, Shirrah keyed in the co-ordinates of her first destination, an off-the-charts ship overhaul station. The *Blackjack* was too noticeable. It would take some credits, but by the time she was done, Rogan would never recognize it. She rather favored the name *Lady's Choice*.

Chapter 11

Hope got out of the ridiculously expensive cab and took the three steps up to the porch before the automated grav-car began its return journey back to Terminal City. The screen door slapped closed behind her. Seated at the table, coffee mugs clutched in their hands, her brothers turned to glare at her as one.

“Now you’ve done it,” Reid said, his usually mellow voice drowned out by a squalling wail from somewhere deeper in the house. Wearily, he got to his feet and left the kitchen.

Hope realized her mouth was hanging open and snapped it shut. Turning to Garrett, she demanded, “The baby’s here?” She felt a bubble of joy override the exhaustion and depression that had been weighing her down. “What is it, a nephew or a niece? When did Lannie go into labor? Did Mom and Dad make it home in time? Oh my God, why didn’t you call me?”

She’d started after Reid when Garrett shot one long arm out, blocking her. “Whoa, there! You think you can just pop in here without a howdy-do after that cryptic comm you sent this morning? ‘Gotta take care of something at the Galactic Marshals station. Fill you in later,’” he quoted from memory. “You don’t think the tiny little fact a couple of Galactic Marshals took down a gang of thieves within spitting distance of our ranch wouldn’t have made the newsfeeds?”

He kicked out a chair with his good leg and nodded at it with his chin. “Sit your butt down and tell me what the hell is going on.”

Hope looked into green eyes the same shade as hers and knew she wouldn't be leaving this room until he had his answers. So she told him.

When she went silent, he looked like he knew she'd left out chunks of the story, which she had—such as the fact she'd somehow got herself metaphysically hitched to not one, but *two* off-worlders.

Hope helped herself to his now-cold mug of coffee and took a big gulp. “Now can I go see my nephew? Niece? Damn, which one is it?”

“Niece,” he said grudgingly. “And why don't you let Reid bring her out when he's ready. Lannie is exhausted, and that poor baby's been up crying most of the night. You get drunk on shore leave?” he asked abruptly.

Hope stared at him blankly. He scowled and flicked a finger at her temple. “When'd you have time to get tattooed?”

Flustered, Hope touched her temples. She'd forgotten about the *churat*, though it had given her a start when she first saw the “passionate purple” designs in the mirror at the station. “Oh, ah, they're not tattoos.”

“Hope.”

Stev's voice startled her. Turning, she saw Stev and Tarik at the screen door, eyes fixed on her. The newly purple color of their *churats* was obvious even in the shadows on the porch. So was the pale film of healing synth-skin covereding the bloody design carved into Stev's cheek.

Garrett's lack of reaction proved at least one of them had heard their grav-car arrive in the yard.

Just the sight of Stev and Tarik stirred Hope's arousal. For the first time, she felt her desire rise without the spur of *zusha* ratcheting it up. And rise it did. Hope sucked in a breath and strived for calm.

“Can we speak to you, please?” Tarik asked.

Seeing them, Hope felt the uncertainty that dogged her through the questioning at the station return. Regardless, she needed to find out where she stood with these two men. “Sure.”

Getting up, Hope joined them outside. They fell into step beside her as she instinctively headed for the horse barn.

Stev broke the silence. “Why’d you leave the station without us?”

“I didn’t know how long you’d be,” she hedged.

Tarik made a disbelieving sound. “You could have ’pathed us and asked.”

“You could have let me know,” she countered. The air inside the barn was redolent with hay and horses. Several of the big animals whickered in greeting, including the three that had found their way home from the cavern, and Hope immediately felt a little better. How could she leave the ranch?

“You’re right,” Stev said. “But that’s not what’s really bothering you, is it, *shalla*?”

Hope couldn’t help it—her fragile emotions crumpled. Stev held out his arms, and she went into his embrace. Tarik placed his hands on her shoulders and laid his cheek against her hair. They opened their minds to her, and she was surrounded, both physically and mentally, as they let her see for herself how much they wanted her, needed her. Instead of feeling trapped, she felt protected, loved.

“Tell us what’s wrong, Hope,” Tarik whispered. “That’s the only way we can make it better.”

“But I don’t think you can make it better,” she said, her voice just as soft.

Patiently, they waited. Stev’s hands settled on her hips while Tarik’s fingers moved in slow circles over the tense muscles of her neck.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to move to Geminus.”

“Then we won’t,” Tarik said easily.

“We’ll need to visit our families,” Stev said. “Our parents will want to meet you, *shalla*. But *we* don’t even live on Geminus.”

Tarik shifted as Hope leaned back to look at them in surprise. “Then where do you live?”

"In the barracks at the Galactic Marshals' station in Sector Seven."

"I don't want to live there, either."

Tarik laughed. "Who does? Besides, mates aren't allowed. The barracks are strictly bachelor quarters."

Exasperated, Hope pulled away and stalked down the aisle. Turning, she glared at them from a few feet away. "Why are you making this so damn difficult? Just give me a straight answer."

"Then," Tarik said reasonably, "you have to tell us what you want."

"I don't want to leave the Bar-K!"

"Okay," they said.

"What? 'Okay,' just like that?"

"The Galactic Marshals' office on Jokers Wild is ridiculously understaffed," Stev said. "It likely wouldn't take too much effort for me and Tarik to transfer here. If we can't, we'll resign."

She goggled at them. "You'd quit your jobs?"

Tarik shrugged. "We always knew that someday we might have to once we found our bondmate."

Hope bit her lip. "You mean you really wouldn't mind living on Jokers Wild?" Tarik and Stev moved forward, slowly shaking their heads. As they advanced, Hope retreated.

"Why would we mind?" Stev said. "This is where you are."

Hope bumped into the door of an empty stall and stopped. Tarik and Stev kept coming until they caged her against the weathered wood. Tarik dipped his head and pressed a soft kiss on her temple, right over her *churat*. Hope sagged against the stall door when Stev mimicked him, kissing her other temple.

Tarik's voice floated through her mind even as his fingers began to unfasten the buttons on her shirt. "*Any more worries, shalla?*"

Stev slid his hand inside the parted fabric and traced one hardening nipple through the silk of her bra. "*Shalla?*"

"No." The word was a drawn out moan.

Tarik flipped the latch that secured the stall door and opened it. Stev backed her into the empty box, asking, “No, what?”

He tugged her shirttails out of her pants while Tarik took a spare horse blanket draped over the stall’s low wall and used it to cover the clean straw.

Hope kissed Stev, trying to push everything she felt into the simple act. Tarik was there, waiting, when she turned to kiss him with just as much love and passion.

“No,” she pathed, smiling as her bondmates lowered her to the blanket and began to prove just how willing and able they were to keep her happy and satisfied. “*No more worries.*”

THE END

www.RainaJames.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Her father's career as a pilot in the Canadian military took Raina James' family across the country while she was growing up, eventually landing her near Ottawa, the nation's capital. A love of words and writing spurred Raina to pursue a career in journalism. It's been 20 years since she first stepped into the newsroom trenches, but every day is still a thrill.

Raina writes in a wide variety of genres, from contemporary and science fiction to fantasy (urban and traditional) and paranormal. The thread that binds them all together, though, is romance. Raina just loves a happy ending, even if her characters have to leap through fire to get there. Or rather, *especially* if they have to leap through fire.

When she's not writing, Raina is generally riding herd on her four kids, two girls and two boys.

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