

Sansha IN production



BEYOND MERIDIAN
— MEN IN SPACE —
C.C. BRIDGES

Two men. One passion. No choice.

A Men in Space Story

Captain Rick Raine got more than he bargained for when he agreed to take on a brash young man as a crewmember along with contraband cargo. Karl's spirit intrigues him, but he didn't sign up for battling privateers, the United Planetary Alliance—or his traitorous body's response. Especially to a naïve kid who cheats at holo poker and knows a whole lot more than he should.

Deep in the heart of enemy space, Karl's goal, to rescue the woman who saved him from a life of sexual servitude, is finally close enough to touch. Unfortunately, so is Captain Raine, who becomes erotic poetry in motion when he pilots the ship. Raine's an honest thief, but Karl can't trust him with UPA secrets that could get them both killed.

But when Karl signed on for this mission, no one told him to hang on to his heart...

Warning: hot man-on-man sex, talking spaceships, eight-legged robots, space pirates, a potty-mouthed space cowboy, a beautiful woman in distress and a sad lack of laser sword battles.

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Beyond Meridian
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Beyond Meridian

C.C. Bridges

Dedication

To Chris for the inspiration.

To Carol for the perspiration.

Chapter One

The kid should have looked out of place in the bar. Too young for this crowd, too freshly scrubbed, narrow shoulders under a heavy jacket, with wheat blond hair that fell perfectly straight around his face instead of tangling into matted knots. Wide blue eyes regarded Raine from the other side of the table, and while they did make him look ridiculously young, something about them made Raine feel like the guy was looking right through him.

Despite the fact that he should have been a target—fresh meat on Meridian, where someone that pretty would have been stamped with a pleasure-worker tattoo and set up in one of the whorehouses that spacers came to the planet for—nobody fucking bugged this kid. He'd walked through the room and not a single spacer gave him the time of day, until he plunked down on the other side of Raine's table.

Everyone knew this was his table. You didn't fucking bother Rick Raine when he was at his table, with a tall, cool Siennan beer in the center and a deck of old-fashioned cards flipping between his fingers.

"Are you Raine?" the kid asked.

"I don't do business in the bar, kid. Save it for the spaceport."

He barely blinked at Raine's tone, ignoring the implied shove off. "Who said anything about business? Maybe I just want to have a drink."

He liked the kid's spirit. Raine snapped his fingers and drew one of the barmaids toward his table—their table now, he supposed. "Cleo, get this fine young man a drink."

She turned her exotic, dark eyes and ample chest toward the fresh meat. "What'll you have, doll?"

The kid's lips worked for a moment, and Raine hid his grin behind his mug, glad to have gotten a reaction out of him.

"Meridian brandy," he blurted, as if aware of Raine's mocking. "One for each of us."

"Whose tab, babe?" Cleo turned toward Raine.

"I got it," the kid interrupted, plunking down a nice-sized chit. Well now, maybe Raine might be swayed into doing business in the bar after all.

"Sure thing, sweets." Cleo snatched up the chit and disappeared.

Raine set the beer down. "So you came looking for Raine. Who are you, kid, and who sent you?"

He slouched down in his seat, the motion making him look smaller and even younger. "You can call me Karl," he said, making Raine wonder what he was hiding. "Nobody sent me. Your name came up when I asked around the spaceport. I'm looking for passage."

"I don't take human cargo," Raine snapped. Anyone dropping his name around the port should damn well have told Karl that.

"No, but I heard you could use some crew. I figure I could work to earn my keep."

Karl seemed to have this all planned out. "Don't need any crew right now. Besides, you don't look like you know a spanner from a light drive."

Karl winked at him. "Oh, you'd be surprised at what I know."

Raine felt a stirring at those words, which were spoken in a low, raspy tone. If the kid only knew he was playing with fire.

Cleo showed up with their drinks, two short glasses brimming with the dark violet liquid. She dropped them on the table, winking at Raine when he tugged on her skirt. He didn't miss Karl's narrowed eyes at that. This was freakin' Meridian; the kid should know he'd be more likely to see worse than that. Hell, if he'd been at the spaceport, he must've seen worse.

"I only take on crew when I need the extra help for the cargo. I'm not shipping anything right now." Raine picked up his glass and downed the brandy in one go, relishing the burning cold in his belly. Wasn't the best vintage, but this wasn't the place you went if you were picky about the brandy.

Frowning, Karl attempted to toss back his own glass and came up sputtering and coughing. He'd probably never even had Meridian brandy before. Raine didn't hide his laughter this time. "Kid, what the hell are you doing out here?"

"Not a kid," he protested. "I can pay you."

"Oh yeah, in what? UPA credit?" He took a guess, because no way was this boy for real. At the silence he nodded. "You just don't scream border rat to me."

"You don't know a damn thing about me." At that snarl Raine realized the kid had some bite to him. Well, they might be doing some kind of business after all, just not the kind Karl had in mind. Raine liked bed partners with some teeth on 'em. "I can pay you in Confed chits, if that's what you want."

"Everybody's got to go somewhere. Plenty of people take on transfers, into the Confed and the UPA both. I don't think that's what you're looking for, though."

Karl stared into his glass, swirling the remaining purple liquid. "I need a reliable cruiser and a captain who has plenty of discretion."

"And somehow you came up with my name?" Raine challenged.

"I'd heard the name Raine was the standard in private cargo transport for over thirty years." Karl looked him over, since obviously Raine wasn't that old.

"My father," he said, leaving it at that. Raine had taken over the family business when his daddy met the wrong end of a laser pistol, nearly ten years ago now. It had been him and his ship since Raine was seventeen. "You could say I'm coasting on his reputation. Where do you need to go, kid? Not that I'm committing to anything, you hear?"

Karl gave him a small, tight smile. Shame, Raine would like to see what a real smile would do to that baby face. “Mendhem. I need passage there and back, with possibly another passenger in tow.”

Mendhem. He might as well have said Tanvir, the goddamn capital of the Confederation. Mendhem was controlled by one of the most infamous warriors in the Confed military, General Purohit. Raine tended to avoid the place, which was too strictly controlled for the kind of cargo he dealt with. “You’d be lucky to find anyone to take you near there.”

Karl all but crumpled in front of him. What the hell was so important?

“Look.” Karl seemed to collect himself after a moment. “Maybe we can help each other out. If I can get you cargo to transport, would you consider taking me on?”

Raine gave him one of his best smirks. “Oh, kid, I’d take you on for free.”

Karl made a face. “You know what I mean.”

“Loosen up, man. You need to find yourself a sense of humor if you’re going to end up as part of my crew.”

“That’s a yes then?”

“That’s a yes only if you can get me cargo to transport,” Raine told him. Before he could second-guess himself, he continued. “I run a business, not a damn charity ship. When you find something, come find me in berth 52, south side of the port.”

“I will.” Karl’s words were like a promise.

Raine chased the taste of the brandy with the remains of his beer, wondering which one of them was biting off more than they could chew.

Karl left the bar with hope burning in his gut for the first time since he had landed on Meridian. Nothing had gone as planned from the moment he stepped off the military transport that had taken him from Earth to the outer edge of the United Planetary Alliance, the UPA. He’d expected civilian cruisers to be unreliable, but wasn’t prepared for the hazards of traveling into the border. One emergency landing into a battle zone due to engine failure had Karl wondering if he would live to see Meridian, never mind make it to the heart of the Confederation of Free Planets.

He shouldn’t have been so surprised. There was a war going on, and it had been raging his entire life. Karl couldn’t imagine what the universe would be like if the UPA and Confed weren’t at each other’s throats. Without the war, Sam wouldn’t be trapped on Mendhem, so deep undercover that no one could trace her. But hell, if it hadn’t been for the war, he might never have met Sam in the first place. And without Sam, he might have been trapped on this hellhole of a planet, with a pleasure-worker tattoo stamped on his lower back, making payment for the debts his mother had left at her death.

Fuck, Karl had never wanted to come back here. He wanted this place to fade away with the memory of his childhood, growing up in one of the many brothels that catered to the spacers. The place had

changed, he had thought when he had stepped out of his transport and into the city for the first time, the acrid smell of ship fuel still in his nostrils. It didn't seem as grand, as bright and shiny and large, as it had to his twelve-year-old self. Meridian was smoky, the old bronze-colored towers and bridges seemed caked with dirt and age, traffic filled the air, shuttles fighting for right of way.

Weariness dogged his steps, and Karl could not get the captain out of his mind. Raine was arrogant, too certain of his own attractiveness, and damned if the man wasn't attractive—long dark hair and nebula blue eyes, strong chin, mouth made for smiling. Karl knew better than to trust that. He'd seen too much ugliness cloaked in beauty, but Raine was his best hope of getting deep into the Confed without being tracked. He only had to figure how to get out again, with Sam in tow.

First, he needed to arrange for some cargo.

As he made his way from the shuttle stop through the streets, Karl kept his head down, blending in with the crowd, the locals who lived down here instead of the tourists looking for a good time. He headed for one of the pleasure salons, hoping he was right about the owner. He'd done his research before leaving Earth. Surely it had to be her, unique name, right age. She must have gotten enough to pay off her contract and start her own house.

Still, when he walked into the salon, a startling ray of light in the dark and dirty city, Karl wasn't quite sure. Sweet perfume hit his nose, nearly covering the scent of sex and musk. Bright, colorful pillows filled the lobby, with a variety of pleasure workers lounging on them, as much ornamentation as the crystal chandelier or the metallic mosaic on the walls. There were pretty girls in sheer dresses, tall young men in nothing more than loose pants hanging low on their hips, and still others who seemed somewhere in between genders. They turned their attention on him, and Karl had to refrain from smiling. It reminded him too much of home.

"Can we help you, sir?" an older woman asked, no less attractive than any of the younger workers splayed around the room.

"I'm not looking for company," he said first, not wanting to disappoint anyone. "I need to speak with the owner. Madam Nikala."

The woman blinked. "That isn't necessary, sir. I can help you with whatever you need."

"Please. Tell her it's Karl. Althea's Karl."

At that she nodded and disappeared through a heavy curtain that hung at the back of the room. He tucked his hands in his pockets, his duffel bag cutting into his shoulder, but he couldn't put it down, not yet. Karl tried to ignore the others watching, wondering who he was. He probably didn't look wealthy enough to afford this salon. Nikala had done well for herself.

When she walked into the room it was like going back in time ten years. Nikala had changed of course, grown older, but nothing could change the beauty of her smoky dark eyes, nor the way her black hair hung past her waist, gleaming under the lights of the salon. He remembered those hands, strong and

warm as they sheltered him from a beating, from their mistress's wrath. Most of all, he remembered that sad, gentle smile as she stroked his hair.

"It can't be." She gasped at the sight of him. "All the gods, boy, what are you doing here?"

"It's complicated," he told her. "I need a bit of help."

She took him inside the salon, past the glitter and opulent rooms to her own living quarters, making him sit in her worn but comfortable couch, and calling for a girl named Shilvi to bring them food and drink. It was a relief, after his time spent transferring from ship to ship, to just be able to sit and relax, and eat something that wasn't space rations.

Nikala sat across from him, pulling a length of hair over her shoulder and braiding it absently, as she'd so often done during his childhood.

"You have her eyes," she marveled, reaching out with her hand then letting it drop before actually touching him. Nikala looked away, as if she couldn't bear to meet his gaze.

He bowed his head for a moment, trying to picture in his mind the mother he had lost long ago. "Sometimes I barely remember her."

She shook her head. "What are you doing here? You got out, Janis got you out."

He smiled tightly. "Her name was really Sam. And yes, she got me out, took me to her own home, gave me everything I could want."

"So why have you come back?"

"Because she needs me now."

"You owe me more than that, child."

Karl let his head drop. She was right, he did, but telling her too much would put Nikala and her entire salon in danger. As long as he operated in secret, they were safe. "I'll tell you what I can," he said finally.

Nikala nodded; she expected nothing more. "Shilvi, prepare the tea, please. Something restful. I think we all could use a decent night's sleep."

Karl watched as the girl moved to the kitchenette, setting an old-fashioned teakettle to boil. He smiled. Nikala had always hated the machine-made tea they'd been forced to drink at Rachel's. She complained she needed to see the water boiling. Shilvi moved with precise grace, the long fabric of her clothing not hampering her in the slightest as she prepared the cups. She was young, too young, he thought, wondering how she'd come to this life.

Speaking of that. "How did you get to own your own place?" Karl had been curious about that since seeing Nikala's name on the roster of salon owners.

"How do things usually come to pass here? On the misfortune of others." She frowned but brightened when Shilvi placed a tray of steaming cups on the end table. Nikala took one and stared down into its depths, as if the rising steam spoke to her. "You remember Madam Rachel? Of course you do."

Karl didn't interrupt her train of thought; he merely took his own cup and sat back down, waiting to hear the end of the tale. The rich aroma tickled his nose, the flavor so much stronger than anything he'd tasted in years. It teased at his mind, bringing back memories long forgotten.

"It was almost five years after you and Janis left us. They arrested Rachel for passing information to the Confederation. When she was convicted, they dissolved her property, splitting the funds among all of her workers. I had already begun saving for my own salon, so I purchased a little hovel near the spaceport. It was surprisingly successful." Nikala sipped her tea carefully.

"I don't think there is anything surprising about it." Karl grinned at her. He sobered. "What happened to Rachel?" He didn't know the Meridian penalty for treason, and while the planet had a mostly amicable relationship with the Confederation, any show of favoritism to either side would ruin whatever bit of credible neutrality Meridian had left.

"No one knows. I've heard everything from her being executed, to her being sold as a slave."

Karl's blood ran cold at her words, and he knew it must have shown on his face from the way Nikala paused in mid-sip. He'd forgotten how easily someone could be made a slave, this close to the Confed, where they depended on slavery to survive. At least Meridian workers could eventually buy their way out of their contracts.

"What is it? You've gone pale." Nikala set her teacup down and reached out with one hand to cover his knee.

"It's Sam—Janis," he revised, in case she had forgotten. He braced himself for the half-truth he was about to tell. "She's been sold into slavery. It's why I've come, to get her free." Karl did not mention that Sam had willingly gone, let herself be sold as an agent of the UPA. He didn't know the specifics of her mission, only that she had missed her return rendezvous. The less Nikala knew, the better. At least he could offer her some explanation.

"You've set yourself an almost impossible task." Nikala shook her head. "How will you find her?"

"I found a ship," Karl said. "A spacer named Raine. He's willing to take me on if I can find him cargo."

"Cargo?" Nikala glanced over at Shilvi, who gave her a wide-eyed look in return.

"I suppose he doesn't want to lose money on transporting me." Karl frowned. "It shouldn't be hard to find someone who has something to haul."

"Not hard at all." Nikala gave him a smile. "I can help you."

"Are you sure? If anyone should find out..."

"Karl, child, Janis...Sam was my friend too. I'll do whatever I can to help."

Chapter Two

Naturally the kid showed up at the crack of the dawn with his damn cargo. Okay, maybe it wasn't dawn exactly, but still, it was way too early for Raine, who hadn't gotten much sleep last night. The lights of the space dock had his eyes watering. Raine blinked at the kid—what was his name again? Kyle? Kasper? Karl? Karl! Karl looked way too smug, standing on the catwalk while Raine leaned against the hull of his ship. He'd opened the hatch when he got the alert that someone had entered his port.

"You serious? You found something that fast?" Raine shook his head.

Karl smiled, and damn, Raine had been right in his assessment the night before. The smile lit up his whole face, made those eyes sparkle. He didn't look like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders anymore. It suited him, turned him from a pretty boy into something special. Raine couldn't help but smile back.

"I'm just that good," the kid said with a wink, and now there was a surprise.

"You picked up that sense of humor I was talking about too."

Before Karl could reply, his mouth snapped shut and the smile drained from his face. At first Raine didn't know why, but then he turned and saw Leah coming out of the ship. She was adjusting the tie on her top, knotting it at the back of her neck. It was designed to show off the blue and lavender tattoo on her lower back, leaving much of the skin bare.

"Mmm, good morning," she said as she stretched. "Thanks, Captain. I'll have Madam update your tab."

If looks could kill, Raine knew he'd be dead ten times over right now. He'd rather have the kid smiling than staring daggers. Course, the kid hadn't seen anything yet.

As if right on cue, Michael emerged from the ship, his golden hair sticking up in all directions. He gave Raine a sleepy smile. "Thanks, Captain."

"Stars," Karl muttered, crossing his arms and looking away as Raine saw the two workers off, a kiss for Leah and a nice ass squeeze for Michael.

Raine ignored the death glare for the moment. "Where's this cargo of yours, kid?"

"Getting inspected. It'll need your authorization before it can be sent to your dock."

"I hope you negotiated a damn good price." Raine walked along the gangplank toward the wall of the spaceport, where he could access his account and authorize the shipment. "Where are we taking it anyway?"

“Neo Delhi.”

Raine rolled his eyes. It wouldn't be anything fun, then. Neo Delhi was ridiculously picky about what was and was not let onto the planet.

He punched in his code and skimmed the authorization request. “And how much are we getting paid?”

“It's twelve grand for the shipment. You can keep the profit. Like I said, I just need transport to Mendhem.”

“And transport back. I didn't miss that part. Wasn't that drunk last night.” Twelve grand was more than fair.

“No, you were too busy doing other things last night.”

Raine punched in his approval for the cargo before whirling around. “What's wrong, kid, you have a problem with sex?”

He was gratified to see a pink blush rise on the kid's cheeks, pleased at embarrassing him. Karl would really need to relax if he planned on traveling with Raine.

“I have a problem with people paying for it,” Karl said through gritted teeth.

“You are really on the wrong planet, then.” Raine closed out his transaction with the terminal. The cargo would be delivered as soon as it cleared inspection. “I'm a businessman. I don't have a problem with making a business transaction. It's not like I didn't deliver on my part of the bargain. I get what I paid for and they get a little more toward clearing out their contracts.”

Karl snorted. “Right. What doesn't go to the Madam or Sir for room and board and whatever other fees they can think of. You're living in a dreamland if you think it's a fair transaction.”

“Look, kid, I don't give a shit about saving the solar system and all that. The arrangement is what it is.”

“Right.” But those eyes stayed hard, like two shards of cold blue glass.

It sounded like a damn good time to change the subject. Raine moved back toward his ship. “What the hell is the cargo, anyway?”

“The official version?”

He turned and raised an eyebrow at the kid who hadn't moved. “What's the contraband?” Because honestly, you didn't pay twelve grand to take just anything to Neo Delhi.

Karl smirked again, though this smile didn't reach his eyes. “Lingerie.”

Raine barked out a laugh. Must be some kinky shit, because they didn't let that kind of stuff in past customs on Neo Delhi. “Hidden in what?”

“Crates of clothing for sale. There are false bottoms.”

Trust the kid to find some shady deals his first time out. Raine shook his head. “Well, come on. I think it's about time I show you around my ship.”

It was worth it just to see the kid smile again.

Just when Karl thought he had Rick Raine figured out, the man went and did something else that surprised him. He'd seen the arrogant trader in the bar, the oversexed rogue on the gangplank, and now, as Raine showed off his ship, Karl saw something else, something he couldn't quite identify. There was affection in his voice, and if Raine had been talking about a person, Karl would have said it was love. He even caressed the hull, showing off strong, well-formed fingers that made Karl wonder what else those hands were good at doing.

He shook himself out of those thoughts, forcing himself to pay attention.

"She's a modified F2400 series out of Heijing. I had all her engines refitted two years ago, so she's almost brand new." Raine spoke as they entered the ship. "Standard crew for a ship of this kind is six. There are two sets of personal quarters—one for the captain and one for the first mate. Berths in the hull for the remaining crew."

"Yet you run her by yourself?" Karl followed on Raine's heels, trying to take in all the details, memorizing the way through the cargo hold and past the personal quarters, up toward the bridge.

"I have two maintenance bots," Raine explained. "They keep the engines going. Fine repairs I do myself. And as for piloting her, well, Dina all but pilots herself."

Karl opened his mouth to ask about that, but they'd stepped on the bridge at that point and the front wall sparked into life. A woman appeared on the screen, with long chestnut hair and blue eyes. She paid more than a passing resemblance to the ship's captain and Karl wondered if that wasn't intentional.

"Good morning, Captain. Unknown individual on the bridge."

"You have an AI," Karl breathed. He'd only heard about technology like this. They certainly didn't have anything like it in the UPA.

"Dina, this is Karl. He will act as first mate on our next cargo run. Karl, this is Dina."

"Um, nice to meet you." Karl waved to the image on the screen, unsure how to act toward the ship's personality.

"A pleasure to meet you as well, First Mate Karl."

He cringed. "Just Karl is fine. Thanks."

When he turned back to Raine, the man was giving him an odd look, eyebrows scrunched together as if deep in thought. Karl didn't quite know what to make of that. He looked around the rest of the bridge, noting the lack of what seemed to him to be standard bridge equipment. There was no navigator's helm, no other screens except for the large front wall. A few panels took up the places between the two seats welded into the floor, but Karl didn't see the standard controls for actually piloting. Did Dina really do all the flying herself?

"Captain, you have fifteen messages from the space port taxation authority. You owe twenty-one hundred on the dry dock."

“Fuck,” Raine muttered. “Your supplier didn’t happen to advance you any of that cash, did they?”

Still a bit caught up in his thoughts, Karl shook his head. “What? Uh. No. Payment upon receipt.”

“Course. How much you got liquid, kid? I need to pay off the port authority and resupply before we head out.”

Karl had managed to get an account for his use on this mission. It wasn’t unlimited however, and he knew he needed to reserve much of it for the rest of his journey, for getting Sam out even if he had to buy her himself. He did plan on paying Raine for the transport, just not right now. He wasn’t that naïve; he knew Raine could take the money and run. “I can front you a grand,” he said carefully, hoping that sounded reasonable.

Raine frowned. “Damn it. Well, kid, looks like we need to raise some capital before we can get the hell out of here. Luckily, the casinos are open.”

Karl blinked at him. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Gambling to earn money?” It sounded like a terrible idea to him.

“It’s the only way, kid. Unless you can magic up the twenty-one hundred in back taxes, the ship ain’t leaving dry dock. And that means you and me both are stuck here. No cargo gets delivered. No trip to Mendhem.”

“I could just find another ship,” Karl said, marveling at the cheek of this guy.

“Cargo is already on its way to my hold, kid. No spacer is gonna want to step on my toes. C’mon.”

Karl wondered when exactly he’d lost control of the situation. Ever since arriving on Meridian it seemed his steps had carried him along, caught up in what he’d set in motion, unable to stop. He couldn’t go back even if he wanted to. Squaring his shoulders, he bit out, “Fine.”

Raine gave him a lazy smile with heavy-lidded eyes. “You’ll see, kid, it’ll be all right.”

Karl wished he could believe him.

~ * ~

Now this was his element. Raine grinned as they left the tube lift that had taken them to Nirvana, one of the many casino stations that circled the planet. Crowds of people—laughing, shouting, rubbing up against each other—made up the main room, which was dimly lit with strategically placed lights. Time seemed to stand still; looking out the windows only gave a view of the planet spinning below. There was no real way to mark how long you spent here, and chronos were discouraged.

They moved past the crowds in the main hall, and Raine was aware of the kid at his side, sticking close. Their arms brushed together, and if he was feeling a bit more adventurous, Raine might move even closer so their hips touched. Karl seemed the prickly type, however, so he’d keep his hands to himself, for the moment.

“Where are we going?” the kid asked, wide-eyed, as they passed a line of people waiting at the wagering desk.

“Back to the table games. Best odds. If we’re lucky I’ll get invited to a private game. High stakes.” Raine stopped when he saw Karl staring at the line of people. “They’re placing private bets,” he explained. “You can bet on anything here. Hell, I know one bookie’s got a running tally on the Confed/UPA battles. Who’ll win, how many casualties, all that.”

“That’s pretty fucking morbid,” Karl muttered, looking away.

Raine shrugged. “It is what it is. If there wasn’t a war going on they’d just be betting about something else. I hear the odds on the UPA are 4 to 1 right now. Might want to put some money down.”

“I don’t think so.”

They shifted again, into the swirling throngs of people. Brightly lit signs pointed the way to the machine games, although Raine kept moving toward the back. Here various tables had different crowds around them, high rollers usually with a pleasure worker or two surrounding them, looking for the excess if the target won, or to console if he lost. Raine bypassed the roulette table with its flashing screen and virtual ball. You couldn’t count on anything a computer threw out at you. He liked the old-fashioned dice and cards, the way they did things when Daddy was alive.

“What’s this?” Karl asked in a low tone as they came to Raine’s final destination.

“Mahjong,” he explained. “They still play with real tiles, not that holo shit.” He took a seat and motioned to the dealer, signaling that he was in for the next game. “This might take awhile.”

He’d expected the kid to stay and watch him like a hawk. Raine was gambling with his money after all. Instead, a thoughtful look appeared on Karl’s face. “I’m going to head to the machines.”

“Just a scam, man. Those things are programmed to hit at astronomically improbable times.” Raine had learned that the hard way.

Karl just shot him a grin. “That’s the keyword, isn’t it? Programmed? I’ll comm you if I can’t find you.”

And then the kid melted into the crowd, smooth like a pleasure worker, disappearing when no longer needed. Raine shook his head and then moved to concentrate on his tiles. He had some money to win.

Karl had told Raine he knew a thing or two about working on a ship, although that wasn’t precisely true. He’d never worked on a ship a day in his life. He did have more than a passing knowledge about tech. Spending his teen years on a military base introduced him to friends he normally wouldn’t have made. Friends who taught him more than a bit about gambling. And what to do when the odds were stacked against you.

Namely, cheat.

Of course, Karl had to make sure he didn't get caught while cheating. The consequences were more than just getting punched in the face. This close to the Confed, he risked slavery or imprisonment for violating laws. And that's if they didn't find out why exactly he had returned to this region of space. No, Karl would have to be extra careful.

They scanned him when Karl stepped into the electronic gaming room, bored-looking security officers waved him through the archway, nothing coming up. He smiled and gave them a polite nod, his belly tight with anticipation. Apparently the casino tech couldn't pick up the device on his wrist, which was just another bonus for Karl.

He kept walking, trying not to be too obvious by staring. However, he couldn't help it. The room extended up several levels, with escalators carrying gamblers between them. Bright lights and startling sounds surrounded him, different machines flashing colored screens designed to entice. He could tell the popular devices—there were actual lines of people waiting along one row, a set that offered a progressive jackpot the longer you played.

If Karl had all the time in the world, he'd take the time to observe, figure out what machines were paying off the most, calculate the probability of one hitting and under what circumstances. He liked numbers; it was why he enjoyed programming so much. Numbers, unlike people who weren't Sam, never let him down.

Sam's life depended on him getting off this rock, and fast, so Karl would just have to accelerate his plans a little bit. He circulated all four levels, noting that the higher one traveled, the higher the minimum bet increased. Risking five hundred chits in one pull seemed a bit too insane for him, so he decided his target would be level two. Every so often he'd hear the ding of a jackpot siren going off, and all eyes would turn toward the glowing and pulsing machine. Karl quickly figured out that the siren went off even if the jackpot was simply returning one's chits.

"So," Karl said, coming up to a bored-looking pleasure worker, a young man with pants that hung low on his slim hips and wide kohl-rimmed eyes. He leaned against a pillar in the center of the room, eyeing the clientele. "What's the best machine to get a jackpot on?"

The guy looked over at Karl and gave him a lazy smile. "Oh, honey, you don't need a machine to win the jackpot."

Karl rolled his eyes and tossed the guy a chit. There were probably slim pickings in this area of the casino, gamblers too focused on their games to bother with acquiring company. He wondered why the guy didn't move on, but the casino might have assigned him here. "Not looking for that kind of jackpot," he clarified. "I bet you're here a lot." At the guy's nod he continued. "Just looking to make some money."

"Good luck with that." The guy smirked. "Your best bet is the holo-card machines. Everyone likes the progressive wheel." He motioned to the lines of people waiting. "But I've never seen that one hit. Every so often someone pulls a full house on the cards."

Karl nodded. "Thanks."

"Anytime, sugar. Let me know if you change your mind about that jackpot."

Karl laughed to himself as he slipped back into the crowd.

He didn't have to worry really about standing out. He saw a mix of UPA and Confed dress, young and old, families, couples and gamblers all alone. The lure of easy money attracted anyone and everyone, he guessed.

He found the card machines and went over to see how the thing worked. You didn't have to actually touch anything once you placed your bet. The machine gobbled up the chits hungrily. Karl waved his hand and was surrounded by five cards, holograms that glowed around him. He flicked the cards he wanted to keep, and then the machine dealt again. He lucked out with a pair his first try, though that only returned his money.

"Now how do you work exactly," he murmured. The card selection appeared to be random, but he knew better. Karl bet a bit more before sliding his fingers around the band on his wrist. The black leather band concealed a tiny computer, circuits as small as they made them. The general had made it clear this device was still in testing, but Karl had needed the edge. He wasn't technically military himself, even if they had granted him a spontaneous commission to rescue Sam.

To attempt to rescue Sam. Karl knew damn well the general didn't think Karl capable of it, but he'd had no choice in the matter.

Karl played carefully, purposely losing in order to detract suspicion from himself. He was just another gambler, here on holiday, wasting an hour of his time at this machine. He knew when a waitress came by to offer him drinks that he'd gotten made as a spender. Good. So it wouldn't be all that odd when he reached up to scratch his forehead and commanded his wrist computer to alter the next cards shown by the machine.

He bet the last of his remaining chits, all three hundred of them. When the jackpot siren began at the appearance of his natural royal flush, Karl remembered to laugh and act surprised. Three thousand should do them well.

Raine stared in disbelief at his tiles. He hadn't had such rotten luck in a long time. By now he'd usually be invited to a private game, where the risks of cheating were mitigated by the nonofficial nature of the game. However, the only one at the table known for running said games seemed content to take Raine's money the old-fashioned way. Hikaru Sakai—of the Sakai shipping company—had tipped his hat at Raine. Raine forced himself to smile back, despite the nerves churning in his belly.

For the first time he thought he wasn't going to be able to do this. Despite the bravado he'd shown the kid earlier, Raine worried he'd lose it all, unable to pay any of his mounting debts. Then they'd fucking take his ship, leaving him with no way off planet and even less employment prospects.

"How's it going?"

Course the kid picked now to show up, just in time to see Raine lose his last hundred. “How does it look?” he asked, pushing all of his chits in the center.

“Mmm, not very good. But then I can’t tell shit about your hand.”

Raine didn’t answer and accepted his last defeat as gracefully as he could, with a polite nod for his opponents. He pushed away from the table and stalked back toward the offices, the kid following at his heels. “How much do you have left? I can take a loan on credit here to get back into the game...”

“Like that worked so well for you.” The kid put a hand on Raine’s arm, surprising him enough to let himself be steered toward the tube back to the planet. “Don’t worry. I made three grand at the machines. It should cover the taxes and get us enough fuel to make it to Neo Delhi.”

Raine dug in his heels just before they reached the entrance. “The machines? How the hell did you manage that?”

“Must be beginner’s luck,” the kid had the balls to reply before just walking forward and leaving Raine behind. Raine took a moment to appreciate the view as Karl walked away, hips swaying, tight ass in those dark trousers.

“Right, and I’m the fucking prime minister,” he muttered, following Karl into the tube.

His instincts were screaming at him, telling him this kid wasn’t exactly the wet-behind-the-ears bumbler Raine had thought upon their first meeting. Raine hated being played, and he hated being beaten at his own game even more than that. However he wasn’t going to call the kid on it, not yet. They had cargo to deliver and Raine wasn’t about to be out twelve grand. Time was on his side. He’d use the long journey to Neo Delhi to seduce Karl into giving up all of his secrets.

Chapter Three

The first time Karl saw the thing—about as large as his head with eight multijointed metal legs—crawling on the wall just above him, he screamed. Then he pushed himself away from the wall, scrambling backwards and stumbling over his feet, only to hear Raine’s laughter echo through the ship’s corridor.

“I see you’ve met Itchy.”

Karl waited until his heart stopped pounding quite so hard before responding. “It’s one of your maintenance bots?”

Raine held out his hand and Itchy leapt onto it, crawling up Raine’s arm until it perched on his shoulder, staring at Karl with two large round eyes that actually blinked. “Yep. He’s tiny enough to get through all the ducts and pipes. Crunchy is a bit bigger. He handles the repair work outside the hull.”

“Any more surprises I should know about?” Like maybe if Crunchy also resembled a giant spider.

Raine had the audacity to wink at him. “Now they wouldn’t be surprises if I told you about ’em, huh?”

“Right.”

“You got your stuff?”

Karl hefted the duffel bag he’d let fall during his mad dash away from the spider-bot. “Yep.”

“Let’s drop it in the first mate’s cabin, then I’ll show you the engine room.” Raine led the way down the corridor, showing Karl to a tiny bedroom with little more than a bed, drawers and other storage built into the walls of the room. “Help yourself to anything that’s in here. Everyone who’s worked for me has left something behind.”

Karl plopped his bag on the bed, deciding to explore later. “Have you had a lot of first mates?”

Raine chuckled. “Not really. I’ve only filled up the berths once, and that’s when I took some irradiated iron to Kleska. Most of the time it’s just me and my girl.” He patted the wall affectionately.

Karl didn’t know if Raine’s regard for his ship was touching or creepy. Or both.

“The facilities down the hall are all yours. Captain’s quarters have their own.” Raine jerked his head. “Got a pantry closet for food. We’ll be rationing once in space, but there’s no kitchen. I tend to end up eating on the bridge.”

In most of the transports Karl had been on, he’d been nothing more than a passenger. He’d kept to his rooms, or, in one case, his very cramped berth in the hull. Raine expected a lot more from him, and he was determined to do his part. He was finally getting close to rescuing Sam. Karl couldn’t fuck it up now.

“Engine room.” Raine continued his tour. “You said you were good with machines?”

Karl’s eyes examined the core, his mind comparing it to UPA ship technology. He moved to the center, following the pipes to the fuel line. “You use LiquiGlo for fuel,” he muttered, not answering Raine’s question, too horrified at the discovery.

Raine seemed to catch on to his concern. “Well, yeah, got her refitted in the Confed. It’s standard on all Confed ships. She used to run on crystal core, but I couldn’t get the rods anywhere.”

“Do you know how this stuff is made?” Karl thought he was doing a good job of keeping his voice low and even.

“Course I know.” Raine’s voice was steel. “Me changing how I fuel my ship ain’t gonna do jack shit for all the slaves working the mines.”

Karl knew Raine was right. He had to stop trying to alienate the man. “How do you do business in the UPA, then? This stuff is illegal there.”

Raine shrugged. “Ship has a border manifest. I have a permit for dipping into the UPA. They might have a problem if I tried to trek all the way to Earth, but nobody around the border gives a shit.”

Itchy moved from Raine’s shoulder and onto the wall of the engine room, where he crawled into a tiny duct Karl hadn’t even noticed till then. He ran his fingers over the control panel, then popped the top, regarding the circuitry carefully. “To answer your question, yeah, I’m pretty good with machines. Your boards are familiar. I worked with these before. Should be able to handle maintenance.”

For a moment Raine didn’t respond and Karl looked over, wondering what he’d said now. “You’re a mystery, kid, you know that?”

Karl attempted a smile. “Right. Look who’s talking.”

“We’ve got the all clear to take off within the hour. Then there’s a six-hour trip before we reach the first Confed checkpoint. Get settled in here and I’ll let you know when we’re ready to jet.”

Checkpoint. Crap. Karl’s fingers twitched, and he refrained from touching the ID chip in his lower forearm. They’d doctored the data before he left the base, but Karl still didn’t know if it would hold up against Confed inspection. “Sounds good,” he said, playing off his worry.

So close, Sam. Hold on.

Once on the ship the kid didn’t complain, just put his head down and did whatever Raine asked him to do. Maybe he shouldn’t have sicced Itchy at him like that, but damn if Raine wasn’t still sore at Karl for winning so much at the casino when he couldn’t even win a hand of his own.

Still, the sudden compliance now put him on alert, made him wonder more than if the kid had been surly and contrary the whole take off. Raine had told Itchy to watch Karl in the engine room and send the alert if he did anything at all strange. He’d had bad crew before, and Raine usually took care of that

quickly, not willing to risk his ship. He still couldn't quite figure the kid out, but he seemed a hard worker, reading back the numbers Raine asked for over the comm.

"Ready, girl?" Raine asked, standing in the middle of the bridge.

"Initializing for take off," Dina said. "All systems charged and ready. Relaying intention to detach from scaffolding to port command."

Raine held out his arms, extending them to either side of his body as the bridge shimmered and changed. He no longer saw the panels, the screen or the chairs. Instead, he saw what the ship saw, as if he had become one with it, standing in the scaffolding that was rapidly detaching. He raised his arms slowly and began to ascend. Although his body didn't move, the scene around him changed, the ship lifting out of the dry dock and into the planet's atmosphere.

"Pressurize for space travel," he commanded. The only hint of this happening was the subtle shift in the sounds of the ship, the hum of the air vents becoming deeper.

Raine guided them off planet, his arm movements languid and precise, directing the ship around obstacles and putting them on course. "Time for window to light speed?"

"Five minutes," the ship replied.

He kept a mental count, although the time appeared in the corner of his vision, counting down as they approached their window. As soon as the timer reached zero, he thrust his hands forward, and space distorted around him, swirled and dissolved into nothingness as they accelerated beyond human understanding. The bridge faded back in around him, and Raine lowered his arms.

"That's amazing," an awed voice said behind him, and Raine whirled around, stunned to find Karl standing in the doorway. The kid should have still been in the engine room. "Holographic control?"

"You were supposed to stay at your station," Raine grumbled.

"Systems were golden." Karl shrugged. "I came to see if you needed help up here. But I've never seen anything like that, it's almost like...dance."

He could feel the flush rising in his cheeks, and Raine dragged a hand through his hair to hide the blush, turning away from Karl. "Get ready for checkpoint inspection. That cargo better meet Confed specs."

"Don't worry, it will." Raine could hear the smile in Karl's voice. Damn it, was there anything he could hide from the kid?

At the checkpoint, the ship hooked up to the Confed airlock and opened the hatch, allowing two Confed soldiers to board. Raine thought them the usual assholes he dealt with, two young soldiers too proud of their uniforms, all buckles and shiny leather. They might as well just go to the fetish clubs if they liked it like that. He kept those thoughts to himself, especially when he saw the insignia on the woman's shoulder patch—she was a former slave turned military. She had plenty to prove, and he didn't want to be the ship she proved herself on.

“Check the cargo,” she told her partner before waving the gun scanner at Raine and Karl. “Present your IDs.”

Raine held out his arm, impatient as she scanned the chip just below his elbow.

“Place of birth?” she asked as the data spooled down her scanner.

“You’re looking at it, sweetheart.” He waved his free arm to encompass the ship. “Can’t tell you quite where we were at the time. Momma and Daddy were too busy to notice.”

She was unimpressed by his humor, but didn’t comment. The info on his chip matched up, and hell, it might even be true for all Raine knew. Then she moved on to Karl, who held out his arm tentatively.

Raine held his breath while she asked the kid his place of birth.

“Meridian,” Karl answered, and Raine mouthed *really?* at him, surprised. Kid did not act like a border rat. Raine would have bet one hundred chits on the kid being from the UPA, whatever his strange mission to the Confed entailed.

“Mmmm.” The soldier stared at her scanner. “Checks out. Destination?”

“Neo Delhi to deliver contracted cargo,” Raine told her. “Flight plan is registered with the port authority.” Once they passed the checkpoint, they wouldn’t have to register again. He could fly wherever he damn well pleased, until it was time to come out again.

She nodded, biting her lip as if wanting to challenge them. Instead, she opened up her comm. “Phillips, cargo checks out?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the tinny voice replied. “On my way back up now.”

“Have a safe trip, gentlemen.” She nodded curtly before turning on her heel once her companion arrived. “Remember, you’ll need to file your return on the cargo with the proper authorities.”

To pay the appropriate taxes, of course. Raine had already downgraded the amount of pay in his flight manifest. It wouldn’t be the first time he committed tax fraud. He owed nothing to the Confed; he was a proud border rat. Screwing over the government was his specialty. He looked over at Karl, whose shoulders had sagged when the soldiers left, and wondered. The kid had been worried about passing the checkpoint, and Raine needed to know why.

What the hell were those baby blue eyes hiding?

~ * ~

Karl returned from his shift on the bridge, leaving Itchy in the engine room, and sank onto his borrowed bed for the first time. His body ached, as if he had done more than merely monitor data for the past few hours. They’d entered light speed again, and the systems all seemed to be holding up. Dina assured him she’d send an alert the moment any of the numbers changed.

He supposed it had all hit him. He’d managed to pass the Confed checkpoint and was on his way toward rescuing Sam. Instead of the worry that had dogged him all the way to Meridian, Karl felt a flash of

excitement, knowing he was getting one over on the Confed. And for once, he would be the rescuer, braving strange planets and people, finally leaving Earth, which had been his home for the past ten years.

In all his imaginings and fantasies, never once had he pictured anything like this ship. The AI technology in the UPA was not intelligent enough to pilot a ship. Too much time had been spent in weapons development, making sure each ship was defensible from a Confed attack. He wondered about the weapons on this ship. Raine hadn't mentioned any, and Karl hadn't asked.

Karl didn't quite know what to make of the captain, especially after watching him pilot the ship with that strange holographic interface. Raine had moved with a fluid grace Karl hadn't expected from the gruff-speaking man. There had been a beauty in his movements, the kind that made Karl yearn to join in. He shook his head as he sorted through his bag, debating whether or not to unpack.

A growl from his stomach startled him. Karl couldn't remember the last time he ate. Where did Raine say the larder was? In the hall? Food first, then sleep, he decided.

He found the cabinet easily enough. The contents were stocked in organized shelves, labeled and dated since they had to ration while in space. Karl took his daily share in the form of a slim box and a bottle of water. As he stepped back to close the door, he heard something that had him pausing in the hall.

Was that music?

He followed the sound, an almost fragile sequence of notes, until he was just outside Raine's door. Karl paused, listening as the tune changed, from the somber melody to something more cheerful, loud and invigorating. At first he nearly turned to go back to his room, then on impulse, he went and hit the chime next to the door.

The music stopped abruptly when the door slid open. Raine stood in the doorway, an old-fashioned guitar against his hip.

"Um, the music," he said stupidly, not certain why he'd bothered the captain.

Raine grinned. "Yeah, that was me. Sorry, was it keeping you up?"

Karl shook his head; he couldn't hear it from his room. "No, I just...they don't make those anymore, do they?" The only guitars he knew of had buttons and sensors, not strings of all things.

"You can still find 'em if you look hard enough." Raine rested a casual hand on his guitar, but Karl recognized the caress for what it was, the same kind of touch he gave the ship when he introduced her to Karl.

Karl remembered the old playing cards Raine had shuffled through while in the bar. "I guess you like old stuff."

With a laugh, Raine gestured to his room. "Love old stuff."

Karl could see enough to realize Raine's room was filled, shelves and boxes stocked with antiques. At first he thought Raine was sitting on a gold mine, old objects worth millions. However from what he could make out—stacks of old-fashioned books, long dog-eared and ripped; machines with moving metal parts

that didn't seem to do anything worthwhile; and piles of sheet music on actual paper—Karl recognized that little held actual monetary value. No, but this stuff all meant something to Raine. He didn't know where to put that in the picture of the man he had started to build in his head.

“Um. I can see.” Karl could feel his face flushing. Embarrassed that he had disturbed Raine, he turned to go.

“Wait,” Raine started, then looked surprised at his own words. “Do you want to listen? While you eat?” He gestured to the ration box Karl still held.

“Yeah, I think I'd like that.”

“And maybe I could teach your worthless ass some of the finer points of appreciating classical music.”

“How classic are we talking here?” Karl said, entering the room and clearing off a chair to sit on. “Twenty-first century? Nineteenth?”

Raine laughed, sat back on his bed and began to strum the guitar. “You'll just have to be surprised, won't you?”

Karl already was.

Chapter Four

For once things were going their way. They docked at the spaceport on Neo Delhi, Raine paid the rental fee—practically nothing compared to the tax rate on Meridian—and they met up with the buyer of their cargo. The kid seemed taken aback when they met Madam Musale, who was covered from head to toe in dark silk, only her eyes visible.

Otherwise Raine couldn't complain about his work. Karl knew some things about circuit boards that Raine didn't, and that was saying something, considering he'd grown up on his ship and very little about her surprised him. Dina seemed to like him, and Itchy had taken to following Karl around the ship, from the engine room to the bridge and back again.

"Thank you for your service," Musale was saying. The cargo would be delivered to her shop by the delivery service she had hired. All they needed was to be paid.

Raine gave her his best smile. "It was a pleasure." The easiest delivery he'd had in a long time.

She handed him a voucher, which to his surprise, listed not only the promised price, but a nice tip too. "Next time you see Madam Nikala, thank her for me as well."

Then she disappeared into the crowds at the spaceport as if some kind of ghost. Raine shook his head. She certainly didn't seem the kind of person to deal in contraband, nice respectable woman like her. Maybe that's why she hadn't been caught.

"You want to see some of the city, kid? I know a great place for lunch." Which would beat the hell out of the space rations they'd be going right back to once they returned to the ship.

Karl looked at him, his jaw twitching. He seemed torn, probably eager to get to Mendhem and get that business settled. Raine decided to make it easy on him. "We have time while we refuel and restock. I need to refill the water tanks."

"All right."

They walked through the spaceport, which looked like every other port in the galaxy—gray and boring, solid columns, crowds of people, bored-looking port workers standing at a discreet distance, but still somehow intimidating. It was only when they stepped outside that Raine heard Karl gasp. He smiled at the look on the kid's face—full of wonder and awe just as he expected.

From up here you could see the capital city—Kashir—in all her glory. Buildings and towers as far as the pink sky stretched, the bronze caps glittering in the white sunlight. Like most modern cities in the

Confed, it shone and glittered, but the crowds moved quickly through it, shuttles and ground cars coming and going so fast it felt like the city moved around you.

“C’mon.” Raine hired a shuttle, since he had the funds now, and it was better than public transport. This way he could direct the driver to give them the scenic route, hovering around the famous Lotus House, a replica of the one on Earth. He didn’t know or care if it did the original justice, but he could appreciate the delicate folds of the walls, the way the building looked like a budding flower.

He had to give it to the kid. Karl made it a point not to gawk out the window, though he had to be sitting on his hands to maintain the look of disinterest on his face. Raine was almost irritated that his little tour wasn’t being appreciated. Then their driver swung around, skimming close as they flew past the old parliament building, and Karl let out a gasp at the spiral tower.

Hah, got him there. Raine grinned.

Although the look of wonder on Karl’s face changed as they got closer to their destination. They moved past the tourist attractions, into the heart of the city, where people lived and worked. And, as this was the Confed, the open-air market—which had stands and booths of all kinds, people selling various goods and services—also had a slave market at its very center.

Raine put his hand on Karl’s knee and squeezed in warning. The last thing they needed was for him to go off on one of his crusade speeches. That was the kind of thing they put you in a collar for.

Karl’s mouth opened and he looked over at Raine with shock in his eyes. Raine realized the kid interpreted Raine’s hand on his knee as something very different. He was aware of how they were pressed against each other, thigh to thigh. Raine snatched his hand away, hoping the driver hadn’t noticed. Neo Delhi was not the place to get caught out with another man.

“We’re almost there,” he said instead, to cover himself.

The little shuttle landed in a courtyard adjacent to the street Raine wanted, but really, there was no way the shuttle would fit down the narrow alley. “Come on.” He led the way. “This is part of the old quarter, built when they first colonized the planet. The city just continued to grow around it.”

“It’s very clean,” Karl said, sounding surprised.

“Of course. It’s one of the jewels of the Confed.” Raine wondered if the kid caught his sarcasm. No trash in the tiny alley. No beggars on the streets either. No, the Confed took care of its own, a little too closely, if the amount of contraband sought was any indication. “Here.”

Karl looked at the tiny doorway, with nothing more than a simple flag hung over it. “This?”

“Trust me.” Raine pushed the door open.

Karl didn’t get to answer before Raine opened the door, and he knew he’d need the extra time to think about whether or not he trusted Rick Raine.

Despite the narrow entrance, the room they stepped into was large and bustling, with terracotta walls and dark wooden tables. Golden lights hung from the ceiling, decorated with bright beads that swung in the breeze from the open door.

A girl carrying a tray stopped in the middle of the room as they entered. She set it on the nearest table before coming over to welcome them. “Rick Raine, you son of a bitch.”

“Good to see you too, Sophy.” He squeezed her in a quick hug. “Didn’t know if you were still working here.”

“It’s better than my old job.” She winked at him. “Come, I’ll get you a table. And your friend?”

Her dark amber eyes were suddenly fixed on him. Karl tried to smile. “Karl. I’m, ah, working on Raine’s ship.”

Sophy’s eyebrows went up. “Is that so? Well, welcome to Neo Delhi. Drinks are on me tonight.”

“Sophy, you don’t have to...” Raine tried to stop her, but she just shook her head and showed them to a table, a small one in the corner, half hidden from the rest of the room. A lamp in the center flickered and threw strange shadows on the wall.

Karl sat stiffly, feeling uncomfortable and out of place. Raine seemed to have been everywhere and known everyone, and that made Karl’s ignorance about the Confed all the more apparent. That must be why the girl rubbed him the wrong way. She didn’t fit in here, too brash and assertive for this conservative place, especially if she had been one of Raine’s old lovers. Karl didn’t say anything, just frowned down at the menu scrolling on the table, the screens carefully concealed when they weren’t in use.

“Let me order.” Raine motioned over another server, one who wasn’t Sophy, and placed an order in another language, so quick that Karl couldn’t catch enough to decipher what language it was.

He’d never figure out Raine. But strangely, he felt content with that, almost as if he was looking forward to the next surprise, whatever else Raine decided to spring on him. Karl wanted that revelation, to learn something else about this man.

Although when Sophy came back with their drinks, he re-assessed that thought, realizing he could do without learning more about Raine’s past lovers.

Sophy smiled at him, setting down the cup of clear liquid, and he felt guilty. She had been nothing but kind, and he had no reason to feel so contrary toward her. No reason for the spike of anger in his gut at the sight of Raine grinning up at her.

Except. Oh no. Karl sat up straight, and the room seemed a bit too warm as his heart thumped wildly. He shouldn’t care about Raine flirting with some waitress they’d never see again, but somehow he did. He couldn’t be crushing on the mysterious spacer. Fuck, he didn’t have time for that.

“Do you like it?” Sophy was asking and Karl took a quick drink. To his surprise, it went down smooth, a rich almond flavor that woke up his taste buds.

“Yes,” he told her. “Very much.”

“Good.” One last smile and then she was gone.

Raine waited until their lunch had been served—a rich stew, spicy and thick with vegetables—before dropping his bombshell. “So,” he said, dipping the warm flatbread into his bowl. “How long did you work in the brothels?”

Karl choked on his bite, unable to appreciate the flavor as it came up again. He wiped his mouth, hoping he got it all. “Excuse me?”

Using the bread as a prop, Raine pointed at him. “Your ID says you were born on Meridian. Back at the port, you weren’t surprised by me having two people in my bed. You were more upset about the conditions of their employment.”

“So that makes me a former whore?” Karl dropped his fork, taking a long swallow of that almond drink before responding. Raine kept those dark blue eyes on him, demanding an answer without having to speak again. For some reason, Karl told him the truth. “My mother worked in a salon. I was born there. Grew up with the workers instead of kids my own age.”

“And somehow she got you out?”

Karl looked away, unable to meet Raine’s eyes as he spoke. “Something like that.” It wasn’t the spacer’s business that she had died giving birth to some client’s child. Another child destined to be a whore or sold into slavery. The Madam had refused to pay for a doctor to come, saying his mother was hardly bringing in enough for their keep, never mind another mouth. Sam had known the truth, however. Madam Rachel might just have wanted his mother incapacitated, to take the opportunity to demand Karl work for his family’s survival. But her actions had caused his mother’s death instead. She wouldn’t be the last, he thought with a deep sigh. And there was nothing he could do about it.

“And that explains your crusade.” Raine looked thoughtful, an expression Karl hadn’t seen on his face before.

“Crusade? Is that what you’re calling it now?” he said lightly.

“How long have you lived in the UPA?”

Karl sucked in a breath, resisting the urge to look around and see if anyone else had heard. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Fine, if you won’t answer that, then tell me at least what we’re going to Mendhem for.”

Karl finally had to answer that question—did he trust Raine?

“I need to help a friend,” he said, gazing down at his stew. “She was sold into slavery, and I need to get her out.” There, true enough without betraying the UPA.

Raine barked a laugh. “You’re not serious. How the fuck do you think you’re going to manage that?”

“I’ll buy her myself if I have to.”

“There’s a little problem of finding her. Do you know how many slaves go through the Confed system?”

Karl smiled. "That won't be a problem."

"What, you going to hack your way into the Confed central computer?"

"Don't need to." Karl leaned forward and lowered his voice. "She's got a tracer on her. Once we get to the planet, I should be able to home right in on the signal."

Raine shook his head. "Kid, you've got a lot of maybes and ifs in your plan."

"Then what's your big idea?"

"A better plan."

Chapter Five

Karl didn't know what Raine's idea of a better plan was, and Raine hadn't enlightened him. He had left Karl on the ship, gone off, he said, to find cargo to take to Mendhem. Perhaps that was part of it, giving them a legitimate reason to be on Mendhem without the Confed looking too closely at them. He knew planets with high deposits of memorcite often had entry restrictions, but he trusted Raine's expertise in this. After all, it was the man's job.

So Karl busied himself by running the engine checks again and making sure their supplies had been delivered and stored. Itchy followed him around the ship, and Karl chatted absently to the little guy, unexpectedly enjoying the company.

"Are you talking to the bot or to yourself?" Raine's voice broke Karl out of his concentration. Though really, there were only so many times one could review the fuel level.

"Itchy listens better," Karl said, turning with a smile.

Raine strode through the doorway, a box tucked under his arm. "I have cargo."

"Doesn't look like much."

"It isn't the size of the job that matters."

Raine's flirting had taken on a new tone with Karl, ever since his realization in the restaurant. He tried to hide his reaction—the words actually affected him now and he couldn't just shrug them off like before. "Um," he said, "anyway, our supplies arrived. Everything is good to go."

"Nice work, kid."

"You ever going to stop calling me kid?" Karl folded his arms across his chest, wondering if that's all Raine saw him as—a child who didn't know what he was doing.

"Maybe when you learn to pilot the ship."

"Like that would ever happen," Karl scoffed, knowing how sensitive Raine was about his ship. At Raine's shrug Karl's eyes widened. "Really? You'd teach me?"

"Just getting out of dry dock. Delhi's pretty easy, not tricky like Meridian. C'mon, I'll give you a lesson."

Karl followed Raine to the bridge, his heart thumping rapidly. He clenched his fists, then rubbed his sweaty palms against his shirt to conceal his nervousness. He didn't know why Raine had decided to show him how to pilot the ship. He had been pretty secretive about how the holographic controls worked up until now.

“Stand here,” Raine told him, pointing to a spot on the very center of the bridge.

Only now did Karl notice the floor panels here were colored differently, a shade darker than the rest of the ship. He moved into place and Raine slid in behind him, putting his hands on Karl’s waist and holding him in position. Karl struggled not to shiver at the touch, though his skin heated and his groin tightened. Good thing Raine was behind him.

“She’ll only let you fly her because I’ve given permission.” Raine’s words were a low whisper against Karl’s ear.

And now he couldn’t hide his shiver, the way Raine’s warm breath against his neck affected him. Karl could only hope Raine hadn’t noticed.

“Before we take her out, you need to plot the course. Dina, show map,” Raine snapped out.

The bridge disappeared around them. Karl found himself standing in the blackness of space, surrounded by tiny stars and planets spinning around their respective suns. “How do I...?” he began.

“Dina, show Mendhem,” Raine commanded. A tiny blue and purple planet began to glow. Raine plotted a course, tracing the lines with his fingers as Karl watched, amazed at the glowing tendrils that dotted across space. “We have six windows for light speed. Choose one.”

Karl didn’t know the criteria for this, so he swallowed and lifted his hand, touching one of the glowing lavender squares Dina used to represent the windows. At the touch, which felt like soft spongy material, the galaxy retreated, and the hologram shifted around them again, turning into the spaceport of Neo Delhi.

Karl swayed, a bit dizzy at the sudden change. Raine held him still. “Easy. Remember, you’re still standing on the bridge.”

“Right,” Karl said, a bit out of breath from the simple effect of Raine touching him. “Now what?”

“Now,” Raine said, the smile obvious in his voice. “We fly.”

Karl let Raine guide him, let those warm hands lift his arms and direct the flight. He didn’t learn much, too aware of how it felt to be so close to this enigma of a man. He imagined those hands on his bare skin, how it would feel if Raine stroked his body in another context, how Karl would gasp and moan under those sure touches.

“There’s less traffic to maneuver around here,” Raine was saying, though Karl barely noticed the words, caught up in the deep rumble of his voice. “It’s not a hub like Meridian. We’ll have to travel a bit farther to hit that light-speed window...”

Raine’s voice trailed off, and his fingers circled Karl’s wrists, guiding the gentle movements that had the ship rising through the planet’s atmosphere and into space. To his chagrin, Karl realized he probably wouldn’t be able to duplicate any of this, not without Raine’s touch.

He forced himself to focus on the changing hologram around them, growing dizzy once more. Karl felt like he was floating in the darkness of space, although his feet were still firmly planted on the floor. Which he couldn't see at the moment. He laughed, enjoying the sensation, as if he were truly flying.

Raine stepped away from him abruptly, and Karl nearly let his arms drop. He maintained the position at the last instant, holding his breath until they reached their window.

"Entering light speed in thirty seconds..." Dina counted down the time.

Karl could feel that odd pull in his navel that signified entry into the altered state of speed. Everything blurred around him until the bridge surrounded them once more.

"Wow," he murmured.

Raine grinned at him.

Raine had to leave the kid on the bridge, telling him to take the first shift. He needed to get out of there and hide the erection tenting his trousers. Once he got to his quarters, he made sure to lock the door before tugging open his fly and fisting his dick as he slid to his knees.

Raine closed his eyes, remembering the honey smell of Karl's hair, how his body felt beneath Raine's fingers, so warm, the muscles tight, as if hyper aware of Raine's touch. He wondered if Karl would tense like that with Raine's hands on his bare skin, or if he'd make the same soft gasps. Raine pictured Karl, his pale eyes wide with pleasure, a flush rising on his cheeks as his lips parted.

"Fuck," he gasped out, dragging his thumb over the head of his cock, gathering fluid to slick himself, to make the slide down the length easier. The things he wanted to do to that kid.

Not a kid. Raine had been fooling himself, using that to separate them, put Karl in a little box that said naive traveler. Those muscles he had felt were that of a man, and Raine wanted to test that strength, push Karl down on his bed and wrestle to see who came out on top. He could feel his orgasm approaching, and he bit down on his lip, moaning low in his throat as he finally came, pulse after pulse over his fingers.

"Damn it," he muttered, hobbling over to the toilet to clean up. Good thing the captain's suite had its own. He didn't want to run into the kid...Karl...while making his way to the hall shower.

Too bad they were still under contract, otherwise Raine would bed the other man, get this itch out of his system. But he'd learned the hard way not to fuck anyone under his command. Maybe before dropping Karl back on Meridian they'd have the chance for a quickie, but sex was simply out of the question when they still had this trip to Mendhem to take care of.

That was the only reason he was holding himself back, Raine told himself, stepping into the shower. If he bedded Karl now, he'd have to deal with those puppy eyes all the way to Mendhem and back. Raine didn't do long term, and he had a feeling Karl just might.

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The entire ship shuddered right before the red-alert alarm started blaring over the speakers. Karl had already tumbled out of his bed, grasping around for his trousers before slamming his hand on the comm. “What’s wrong?”

Raine’s voice came back, sounding sleepy himself. “Something forced us out of light speed. Get to the engine room, I have the bridge.”

Karl stomped his feet into his boots, grabbing his shirt to put on as he ran to his post. Itchy crawled on top of the console, tapping his legs frantically against the screen. Karl slid into his seat and took a look at what the little bot had pulled up. “Crunchy.” He touched the comm to contact the other bot, the one stationed in a cubicle on the outside of the ship. “I’m showing damage to the hull, can you repair it?”

An affirmative came across his screen. Karl queued up an image of the larger bot crawling across the surface of the ship, and he marveled at the sight. “Itchy, you need to get into the core, see how badly fried the light drive is.” He punched the comm again. “You have any idea what took us out of light speed? I’m showing damage, but not what caused it.”

There was silence for a moment before Raine replied. “EMP net. We’ve got a bunch of ships on our ass, kid. If we can’t get back into light speed, we’re going to have problems in about five minutes.”

“Don’t you have any weapons on this thing?” Karl asked, eyes skimming over the logs of repairs the bots were making. They would need time.

“Not enough to take out three Severn class motherships,” Raine muttered. “There’s a laser pistol in the compartment under your chair. Grab it in case we get boarded. Hold on to your seat too, going to try come creative flying.”

Karl found the pistol and shoved it in one of his pockets. Right now he had to help the bots with the repairs, let Raine do his job. “Pirates?” he asked, knowing Confed space was thick with them.

“Worse, privateers.”

Stupid to be fucking caught out like this. Raine should have been scanning for EMP nets, even though the bastards never operated this deep in Confed space. He damn well knew the pirates had to be working for the government, otherwise the Confed would have wiped them out by now.

He stood in the center of the bridge, the hologram of space surrounding him, nothing close by except for the Kipling Nebula and the three ships rapidly gaining ground. Raine twisted his hand, hoping to maneuver too quickly for a grappling beam to latch on.

“C’mon, girl,” he murmured.

“Captain, Karl has taken the light drive offline for repairs. I am operating on standard thrusters only.”

“Damage report?” Raine crouched, dropping the ship straight down, and then dove to his right, sending them into a tailspin.

“Minor damage. A pulse fried some circuits in the light drive, but they should be easily repaired.”

"But can he do it before we get caught," Raine muttered.

"Even if he does, the drive can't start up cold," Dina pointed out.

He hated when she was right, but she knew how her own engines worked. Before he could answer, the forward motion of the ship stopped, the sensation of flowing through space just halted, and Raine tumbled to his knees. "What the hell?"

"Grappling beam, Captain. One of the ships circled around."

"Fuck, Karl, what's the status on the drive?"

He waited a few moments before he finally got a reply. "I've done all I can. Now it's up to Itchy to replace the circuits I can't reach. Then the drive needs a restart."

"Get your ass up to the bridge, bring the pistol. We're caught in a grappling beam."

Karl cursed down the line. Even if they did get the drive up, Raine knew they couldn't just step into light speed. They needed mobility, to be able to create a window and then fly into it. The grappling beam had effectively crippled them. Damn it.

Raine wasn't going to go down easy.

Karl stumbled onto the bridge as they made contact with the larger ship. The hologram interface melted away. Raine could hear something being attached to the hull, probably an attempt to force the hatch open without actually cutting through the hull. "Dina," he snapped. "Code alpha 14."

"Understood, Captain."

And then she was gone, viewscreen now void of her presence. Damn it, Raine missed her already.

"What?" Karl asked.

"Keep your head up," Raine told him.

It was the last bit of advice he could give before they were boarded. Shooting in close quarters wasn't the best idea in normal circumstances. These bastards knew what they were doing, rushing the bridge in such numbers that Raine only managed to take out two before he was tackled to the ground, a heavy weight sitting on his chest.

He gasped for breath, the wind knocked out of his lungs, and it took him a good minute to get it back. Karl, he saw, held his own for a bit longer, managing to duck the first tackle and knock down a man or two. He only stopped when someone grabbed him from behind and held him in a headlock.

"Any more crew?" a man asked, probably the bastard in charge.

"Ship scans clean."

The man stepped forward, a poor excuse for a spacer, with pasty white skin and a skeletal grin. Raine wanted to shudder at the sight of those almost-glowing white teeth. "I do believe we've caught ourselves a prize. Rick Raine, isn't it?"

His blood ran cold at that. This wasn't just a simple pirate run; he had been targeted. This was personal. Raine tried to remember who he'd pissed off lately.

“Who the hell are you?” he snapped.

“You may call me Commander Dietrich. We’ve had a lucky day, Raine. I didn’t expect to catch you so quickly.”

Raine worked up saliva in his mouth, ready to spit at the bastard if they ever let him up off the damn floor. “What the fuck you want with me?”

“Not I. There’s a few creditors on Tipanney who are more than a little miffed that you managed to lose a whole cargo load of slaves.”

“Not my fault I got boarded. Apparently it happens all the time,” he choked out. Damn it, he thought he was clear of this debt. They couldn’t sue for payment when the UPA had seized his cargo. That was the arrangement he’d made, anyway.

“Oh yes. But this time...” Dietrich knelt down, pulling Raine’s face up by his hair, “...your ship will cover the lost profit nicely.”

Raine let go the spit he’d been working up, getting Dietrich right in the nose. He laughed at the bastard’s look of surprise. Dietrich pulled back his fist and slammed it into Raine’s face.

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Karl opened his eyes, which watered at the bright light stabbing into his skull. “Damn it,” he muttered, rubbing at his forehead until he could manage to review his surroundings. He’d shouted and rushed forward when that coward had punched Raine, showing no problem with hitting a man while he was down and restrained. Before Karl could go very far, something had knocked into the back of his head and he’d gone down himself.

They’d placed him in a cell, a cold-looking brig made up of sterile gray walls. A bunk hung from the wall with a toilet in the corner. Karl pushed himself up from the floor, looking around to see Raine unconscious about five steps away from him. But when he moved toward the other man, Karl knocked into an invisible wall. Force field, damn it.

“Raine,” he called, but he didn’t know if sound carried through the force field. Karl explored the walls, all solid, not even a hint of a panel he could tear open. “Damn it.”

Warmth on his wrist had him looking down to see a large gash across the computer bracelet, his one hope of getting out of here. It must have gotten shredded in the fight. He touched the leather, wincing at the smell of fried circuits. There went that idea.

Karl dropped back onto the floor, sitting cross-legged as he watched Raine. The other man’s chest rose and fell slowly, and it was a relief to see he was alive. What the hell were they going to do now?

It seemed like hours passed before Raine stirred. He groaned and rolled, moving into a sitting position. “That bastard coldcocked me,” he grumbled, touching his nose.

That answered the question about sound through the field. “To be fair, you did spit on him.” Karl gave a tight smile when Raine looked over at him. “Force field,” he pointed, just so the other man wouldn’t make the same mistake he did. Raine probably didn’t need another bruise or two on his forehead.

“Fuck.” Raine pushed himself to his feet and wandered over to the corner, where a tiny sink stuck out from the wall. He bent and splashed water on his face, clearing the blood from under his nose and on his forehead.

“Who are these people? Bounty hunters? What did you do?” Karl remembered very clearly that Dietrich had accused Raine of losing slave cargo. Raine had told him he never took human cargo. What was the truth?

Raine’s gaze moved to the ceiling of their cell, and belatedly Karl realized he was looking for cameras. Then he let out a heavy sigh and dropped onto his bunk. “A few years back someone contacted me, looking for my old man. They needed help in getting some slaves out of the Confed.”

“The UPA?” Karl asked. Who else could it be?

“I didn’t ask. I didn’t want to know. I only helped ’em ’cause my daddy had in the past. Felt I owed them since they didn’t know he was dead. The whole thing—getting caught in a raid, losing the cargo—they staged it all. I filled out the insurance right, figured all was forgiven.”

“Obviously not.” Karl shook his head.

Raine leaned back, kicking his legs out. Karl had to turn away, flushing at the sight of those long legs, Raine’s trousers riding up on his thighs, his muscles taut and tight. “No. Officially it’s off the books. These bastards make their living by rounding up ships and selling them to the Confed for a profit. The government turns a blind eye because they make out on the arrangement.”

“And they just happened to target you?” Karl didn’t believe that.

“It’s the first time I had to file a flight plan in the Confed for a while. They probably had a hit the moment we crossed the border. Fuck.”

Karl licked his lips, wincing at the taste of blood. He should follow Raine’s example and wash up. “So what happens to us? They’re just going to set us down on the closest planet?”

Raine snorted. “If we’re lucky we’ll be turned over with the ship, given the standard choice—military or slavery.”

“That’s not a fucking choice at all,” Karl burst out. Raine didn’t reply, just gave him a knowing look.

“Sorry, kid, you really got a winner when you picked me out of all the spacers on Meridian.”

He sounded genuine, and Karl actually believed him. But they didn’t have time to waste on self-recrimination and apologies. “So what are we going to do? We’re not just going to let them hand us over, right?”

At Raine's smirk, Karl knew something was up. But when the other man lay back on his bunk, using his arms as a pillow, Karl didn't know what to think. "Right now, kid, I could use some shuteye. And so could you."

He had to be planning something. But what?

Raine counted time in his head. He merely had to wait for the right signal, but it would take a while. The bastards were probably ransacking his girl right now, trying to find the cargo he'd picked up from Neo Delhi—luckily he'd placed that little box in the shielded hold. They wouldn't even be able to find it on their scanners. Once they finished stripping the ship and cataloging her worth, then they'd pitch the sale to the Confed.

He hoped to be long gone by then. They only needed a bit of a diversion to get away.

It turned out he didn't have that long to wait.

The lights dimmed and a deep male voice came over the intercom. "Attention, all hands to stations. All hands to your stations. Unknown power buildup on deck seven."

Raine slid to his feet and gestured to Karl. "Showtime, kid."

"What?" Karl gave him a confused look.

Before he could respond, the force field became visible, blurring as a sizzling noise filled the cells. The force field dropped and the wall slid open, revealing an empty corridor. "Thank you, sweetheart." Raine laughed and led the way out. "Keep up, kid!" he called back, but Karl was already on his heels.

They hadn't gone far when a panel slid open along the wall. Raine stopped and followed the signal, realizing the open panel led to a maintenance shaft. "In here." He crouched and climbed inside. They'd avoid running into any trouble in the main hallways if they kept to the tunnels. He needed direction on where to go now.

"How do you know where you're going?" Karl whispered from behind him, as if echoing Raine's thoughts.

There were lights in these shafts, tiny pinpricks that enabled workers to find what they needed. The lights all darkened, except for a line of white straight ahead. "Follow the lights, kid." Raine crawled quickly.

"How are you doing this?"

Damn it, couldn't the kid quell his curiosity for five damn minutes? "I'm not. Dina is."

Karl let out a low whistle. "That's one hell of a ship you've got there."

"She's more than just a ship," he said, but didn't elaborate. They had to keep moving. Alerts continued to come from the main ship's intercom, though they sounded muffled and distant from in here.

Eventually the lights led them to a closed panel, and Raine held up a hand, guessing they would meet ship personnel on the other side. "Can you fight?"

"I can hold my own," Karl told him.

"We're going to try to get to the ship without being seen, but if we are, we have to take them down hard and fast, got it?"

"Aye aye, sir," Karl said.

Raine shook his head. "Let's go." He pried the panel open with his fingers and gave a quick look around before climbing out of the hatch. They were in the shuttle bay of the ship, where the bastards must have housed his girl. He could see a line of similar-class cruisers, all spoils of piracy. Damn them.

As they rounded the corner, so close they could see Dina's hull peeking out from behind another ship, they nearly stumbled right onto a technician working, his hands deep in the guts of another ship. "Hey! What are you doing in here?"

"Fuck," Karl muttered, but damn, the kid could move. He ran past Raine and clocked the tech, sending the other man's head snapping back. Before the other techs with the guy could react, Raine reached the fight and took out a guy of his own, with a knee to his belly and a hard right cross. Karl took out the third guy, flipping him over when the tech rushed him.

"Hurry." Raine didn't know how long the men would stay down or what would happen if their next report time went unheeded. He ran up the gangplank of the ship, Karl following. "Engine room, give me a status report."

Raine didn't stop to make sure Karl obeyed, he just ran for the bridge. "Dina, is the ship clear?"

"All enemy personnel left when the alert was called." Dina's familiar face appeared back on the screen, a balm to his eyes. Luckily she'd acted before anyone had gone tearing out any essential systems.

"Karl, report," Raine called.

The intercom crackled. "Itchy's down." Karl's voice sounded raw. "But the light drive is stable and ready to go. Starting it up now. We are low on fuel."

"Look under the panel to the right of the core," Raine told him. "I keep emergency fuel there. Keep an eye on the engines, we're getting out of here."

"Don't you think they'll notice us leaving?"

Raine grinned at Dina. "Nope. Do it, girl."

The holographic controls flickered into place, revealing the hold of the ship. "Prepare for pressurization."

Raine hoped the ship had standard protocol, that a force shield would go up between them and the rest of the bay. Otherwise, he'd left three men to die when the bay opened to space. Fuck 'em. He wasn't going to feel guilty about their deaths, not for a bunch of thieves and slavers.

No guilt at all.

Dina managed to get the bay doors open and Raine enabled the low thrusters, hovering the ship slowly toward the entrance. "Just give me the signal, girl."

And just before they plunged into open space, the ship they had been prisoners on fired onto one of its companions. They slipped out of the hold, free to duck between the three larger ships, now trading firepower between them. Typical pirates, looking to believe the worst of their comrades.

“We have light speed yet?” Raine shouted.

“Just finished cycling,” Karl called back over the comm. “Punch it.”

“Dina, I need a window,” he commanded, waiting for the map to register. As soon as one popped up, Raine took it, the ship making a jerky transition into light speed. He winced. Something still wasn’t right. “Scan for EMP nets,” he ordered. It drained the ship faster, especially to keep scanning while they were in transit, but Raine wasn’t going to get caught again. They’d stop for fuel if they needed to.

He hoped they’d left the privateers far behind.

Chapter Six

Karl sat on the floor of the engine room, tongue poking out of his mouth while he concentrated. He focused on the tiny welding pen sealing the final crack on Itchy's casing. The poor little bot had been stepped on by one of the bastards who'd searched the ship and had his casing cracked. Luckily his memory circuits were all intact and all Karl needed to repair were two of his legs and replace the outer shell.

After a moment, he pulled away. That was as good as he was going to get without a robotics lab. Karl touched the reset button and flipped the case closed. Itchy's eye cameras blinked, making a whirring noise, before turning and regarding Karl. The little bot chirped and clapped his two new legs together happily.

"C'mon, let's show you to Raine." Karl pushed himself up and headed toward Raine's quarters. He made one quick check of the engine panel before he left, frowning at the numbers. They would probably need to stop for repairs sooner rather than later, although Karl didn't know if they could while in the Confed or if the privateers would catch up with them.

So much for his rescue of Sam. He closed his eyes, swallowing down the sudden pain that thought brought. All wasn't lost yet, he reminded himself. Raine wouldn't want to stay any longer in the Confed than he had to.

Raine's door was closed when Karl reached it. He debated not bothering the man, but he did want to make a report on the status of the ship. He hit the chime, figuring Raine would tell him to fuck off if he were sleeping.

It took Raine some time to respond. "What?"

Karl swallowed. "I fixed Itchy," he called through the closed door. It slid open, and Karl's jaw dropped in horror.

Raine sat on his bed, his guitar draped across his lap. However, he wasn't playing it this time. All the strings had been torn off, hanging from the end in coiled knots. The rest of his room had been trashed. His antiques, once carefully displayed, now lay smashed and jumbled on the floor.

"Oh, Raine." Karl entered the room, careful not to step on anything. Itchy followed, chirping as he crawled up on the bed next to Raine. "I'm sorry. We'll fix it, whatever we can."

"It shouldn't matter," Raine said, not looking up, one thumb caressing the finish on the guitar. "I got the ship back. She's more valuable than anything else."

Yes, but this was Raine's home, his sanctuary. Karl considered himself lucky to have seen it at all. He sat next to Raine, lifting the broken guitar and setting it off to the side carefully. He put his hand on Raine's shoulder, offering what little comfort he could.

He didn't expect for Raine to turn and kiss him, fitting his lips to Karl's with urgent intent.

Karl lifted his hand, maybe to push Raine away. Instead he caught it in Raine's long hair, drawing him closer so he could devour his mouth. Raine tasted wild, like some exotic spice he'd sampled on Neo Delhi. Karl had to get more, find out if Raine tasted like this everywhere.

He pulled away, gasping for breath, the intensity of the kiss stealing his air. "You—"

"No questions," Raine interrupted, pushing Karl back down on the bed. Itchy scrambled off the covers, smart enough to avoid being squashed. Karl lost track of the bot after that, especially as Raine said, "Just want you..."

And Karl wanted Raine too, wanted to give in to that thrum of desire lurking under his skin, the arousal that had begun almost from the instant he had seen the other man, looking dangerous and determined at that bar back on Meridian. His cock pressed against his pants and Karl wished nothing more than to be free of his clothes, to lie back and let Raine map his skin.

"Yeah," he agreed, reaching for the edges of Raine's shirt, fitting his hands to warm skin.

Raine pulled away long enough to shuck the shirt. Karl removed his, and then got his hands on the other man, sliding them along the muscles of his abs, dipping down into that divot at his hipbones. Karl gave in to the impulse to put his mouth on Raine, starting with his chest, nipping at the skin, inhaling Raine's scent.

"Fuck you," Raine gasped, pushing Karl away to tackle the fasteners on his pants, fumbling in his eagerness to get them off.

Karl helped. They were skin to skin, Raine pressing him against the bed, his thigh between Karl's legs, keeping them spread and open.

This time they were too impatient, wanting and needing so badly that as soon as Raine cupped their erections, initiating the smooth slide of cock on cock, Karl couldn't hold back. He came with a surprised shout, rutting up against Raine's body. Raine shuddered and gasped, thrusting against Karl, using his body as he too came, warm liquid pooling on Karl's belly.

Karl closed his eyes and attempted to catch his breath. Raine was like a whirlwind of a storm and Karl had been caught within.

So, the kid wasn't really much of a kid after all. Raine smiled to himself, his faced buried in Karl's hair, the strands tickling his nose pleasantly as they dozed, his nostrils filled with nothing but sex and Karl. He had his arm thrown over Karl's waist, one leg tucked comfortably between Karl's. They'd had that one round to take the edge off, but Raine found he wasn't tired of the other man just yet.

He moved his hand, sliding down to cup Karl's dick in his palm, teasing the smooth skin until it began to harden under his fingers again.

Karl moaned. "Don't tell me you're up for round two already?"

Raine grinned. "Kid, you ain't seen anything yet."

"You'd think maybe now you could stop with the kid...oh!" Karl's words turned into a breathless moan.

"Maybe I like it when you complain," Raine teased, shifting his hand back to play with the opening to Karl's body. "You ain't a virgin, are you, kid?"

Karl shuddered, pushing back against Raine's hand. "I was born on Meridian..." he choked out.

"That ain't an answer..."

The kid looked over his shoulder, pale blue eyes wide with lust and desire. Raine felt that gaze like a punch to his gut, his cock standing up to take notice. "Trust me," Karl said. "I've had my share of experience. None of it bad."

So it probably wasn't on Meridian then. Raine didn't voice the thought, just kept playing with the sensitive skin, teasing Karl until he begged for it.

"Are you going to?"

"What, kid? What do you want?"

"Fuck me." The words were a low, whispered groan.

Raine couldn't let that go. "What was that?"

"Damn it," Karl growled. Kitten had claws. "Fuck me!"

Raine hadn't known this raw sensuality was hidden under that crusty shell, but he'd hoped. Karl wasn't just beautiful. There was something powerful restrained under his skin. "There's a bottle in the top drawer there," he directed. Karl was closer anyway. "Get it and give it to me."

Karl shivered at the orders, but obeyed, grabbing the bottle of oil and handing it back quickly.

Raine always liked using the good stuff, the smooth oil the best pleasure houses offered on Meridian. It made his fingers slick and warm, but not slippery, smelling rich and smoky, but not cloying. When he slid his fingers inside Karl, the other man let out a moan, his body rocking in delight against the sensations. Raine wanted to see him writhe, watch as Karl fucked himself on Raine's fingers, sunk deep inside that warm channel.

Karl didn't disappoint. He moaned as his hips pumped against Raine's hand, looking for more, more, more. "Come on," he groaned.

"Maybe I like taking my time," he drawled, sliding in a third finger while he had the chance.

"Raine," Karl protested.

He rubbed his free hand against the curve of Karl's ass. "When we're like this...call me Rick."

Karl swallowed, meeting his gaze with heavy-lidded eyes. "Rick. Come on and fuck me."

Raine pulled himself free. "You only had to ask, kid."

Karl rolled onto his belly, propping himself on his knees as he spread his thighs, giving Raine access to everything. He couldn't help but run his fingers all over that smooth skin, the powerful muscles corded in Karl's back, and then along his flank and hips. With each touch, Karl moaned or shivered, just so responsive.

When he finally sheathed himself inside that tight body, Raine closed his eyes, his senses overwhelmed. Fuck, he had to hold himself back, make this good. He had a reputation to uphold, after all. With that thought and a lazy smile, Raine rolled his hips slowly, too slowly he knew, for either of them to get off. This would last far longer than their urgent first coupling.

Karl started to push back, urging him harder and faster, and Raine obliged, unable to help himself any longer. They moved together, finding a rhythm that would bring them both to the building climax. When he couldn't hold back any longer, Raine got one hand around the kid's waist, catching his slippery cock and stroking it hard. Karl came with a shout, and Raine followed, spilling himself deep inside.

They fell to the bed, and Raine pulled out, but he didn't have the energy to do much more. They were going to be stuck together if he didn't move, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He rode the wave of postcoital euphoria, too blissed out to notice Karl's agitation until the other man spoke.

"So, what now? We just heading back for the border?" Karl asked, his voice raw.

Raine pushed himself up on one elbow, blinking to stay awake. He was never one for coherent conversation after sex. "What? Kid, I seem to remember a woman waiting for us on Mendhem. And I never disappoint a lady."

"But the privateers..."

"Won't be a problem once I doctor the ship's manifest and reprogram my ID chip. Give me a little credit here, kid, I've been a spacer a little bit longer than you."

Finally Karl smiled, his lashes covering those pretty blue eyes of his. "I thought you weren't about this whole saving-the-galaxy thing."

He thought back to his one-time slave cargo, the people chained together like animals, looking at him with wide-eyed fear. "No, but I don't have anything against saving one person. One thing at a time, kid."

"Right," Karl agreed. "One thing at a time."

~ * ~

Karl nearly jumped when Raine came up from behind and nuzzled at his neck. He flushed, not used to such random acts of affection, not when he was busy working, trying to unload the tracer program into Dina's computer. Part of him still felt guilty for sleeping with the spacer. He wondered if Raine's insistence on finishing Karl's mission was solely as repayment for the sex. Raine seemed like the type of guy to keep tally of things like that.

He didn't let that enter his voice as he said, "Again? You're insatiable."

"Mmm, I know a good thing when I see it," Raine replied. "Any luck?"

He frowned. "I'm not sure, since you still haven't explained exactly how Dina works." Or how the ship's computer had been able to free them from their prison cells on the privateer ship.

Raine let out a long-suffering sigh. "My daddy programmed her."

Karl did some math. He remembered Raine saying his father had been dead for over ten years. It didn't make sense for Dina to be that sophisticated if she'd been built that long ago. None of the modern AIs Karl knew of had such a clear-cut personality either. "And?" he prompted. "I've never seen an AI like this."

"Well, my daddy wasn't like anyone else." Raine huffed and pulled away. Karl found himself missing the physical contact. "He made it so she could grow and adapt. She adds new programming to herself all the time. Whenever I add new components to the ship, she absorbs them, makes them her own."

"She learns," Karl breathed. That was simply amazing. "She's incredible."

"Thank you, Karl." Dina's voice broke into their conversation. Karl started, forgetting for a moment that she was always listening. "I've reviewed the code you sent me, and I believe I can successfully scan Mendhem for the tracer once we are in range."

"Thank you," he told her.

"Dina, any signs of pursuit?" Raine asked.

"No, Captain. I've changed the ship's manifest and beacon. They should not be able to find us."

"Good." Raine nodded. He turned to Karl. "Itchy can work on repairing the ship during the flight. Any parts we need we can pick up on Mendhem. But now is when we need that plan. What happened to your friend?"

Karl couldn't tell him everything, couldn't tell him Sam had been sent here for a mission. Hell, he didn't even know the purpose behind her mission. "She was sold to a Lord Albright. I did some digging and he's a wealthy merchant, one of the upper crust of Confed society. However, that was eight months ago. I don't know if she's still with him, hell I hope she's still on the planet, otherwise we won't be able to track her."

Not for the first time he felt that cold fear in his belly, worried that he was too late to rescue Sam, that she was long gone and so deep into the Confed slave system that he would never be able to find her. Karl shook his head. He had to hope, he'd come this far after all. It wouldn't do to worry before they'd even reached their destination.

"Hmm." Raine frowned. "If she's still with Albright, that might work in our favor. Big shot like him probably doesn't even know every slave he owns by name. He might be bored enough with her now to sell her."

Karl thought of the account he'd been given. The funds he could draw on were UPA authorized. He'd taken a voucher once they'd left the border, but if they needed more, there was no way he could get it. UPA banks didn't exactly talk to Confed systems. "How much do slaves normally cost?"

Raine gave him a sideways look, one Karl couldn't identify. "Depends on how much Albright values her. Might be willing to let her go for a song. Like I said, that's if he still owns her."

"Captain," Dina said. "I should be able to access slave transactions once we reach Mendhem. I can scan for any reference to Karl's friend if he gives me a description."

Karl had taken a holo of Sam with him in case they'd needed to show her image around. However, it had gotten fried with his wristlet. "I'll do my best, Dina." He pictured Sam in his mind, tall, vibrant beautiful Sam, with her too-wide smile and knowing eyes. Had she kept her long blonde hair for this mission or had she changed it to meet whatever Albright wanted in a slave?

"Work on that," Raine said. "We'll be in orbit in six hours. We need to figure out what we're doing before we dock."

Karl hoped he'd have a clue by then.

Raine sat on the bridge as they came out of light speed, entering orbit around Mendhem. He needed to pick a port to dock at, hopefully one that wouldn't look too closely at their manifest. Dina did good work and he trusted her completely, but Raine worried that one day they'd meet a smarter AI.

The last thing he needed was to screw this job up too.

The kid had looked at Raine like he was some kind of hero when he insisted on finishing the job instead of turning tail and running back to the border. Raine knew better, he wasn't any kind of hero. But something in him liked it when Karl looked at him like that. He wanted to be whatever it was that Karl saw in him once he'd heard about the slaves Raine had helped free.

He'd been paid well for that, damn it. Raine didn't want hero worship. But he did want Karl in his bed, remembering the way the other man had responded to his touches. Karl hadn't held back his moans, so open with his desire. It had been a long time since Raine had slept with someone so clueless of their own charms. He itched for that connection, could not stop touching the kid, no matter how much Karl blushed and pulled away. Raine had to have that again. The desire burned in his gut and could not be quelled.

Part of him hoped they'd find Karl's friend quickly and then get out of the Confed. But the other part knew that meant losing Karl, that the kid would go back to wherever in the UPA he had been hiding. Raine would lose him just when he'd found him, and he didn't know how to feel about that.

"Captain," Dina interrupted. "I've sorted through the slave rolls. I have several candidates who could be Sam."

Sam. That was her name then. Raine felt irked that Karl had told his ship but not Raine himself. "Let me see, Dina."

She put the results on the viewscreen by his chair, and he skimmed them, a frown forming on his face. None of the options were good, but what did he expect. This was the Confed and they weren't kind to their labor force. He flicked on the comm. "Kid, come to the bridge. We've got news."

He didn't have to wait long before Karl arrived, his hair awry like he had been sticking his hands in it. Karl held up a tablet with a flickering screen. "I can't tell if the tracer program is working, all I'm getting on the grid is an uninhabited area."

That didn't sound right. "Can you put it on screen, Dina?"

"Yes, Captain."

The main viewer changed, taking Karl's coordinates and focusing on the planet's surface. When Raine saw the mountains come into view, his heart dropped. He swallowed hard before turning to Karl to give him the bad news. "It's not uninhabited, you just can't see the camp because it's all underground."

Karl's eyes widened, Raine's words sinking in. "What?"

"It's a memorcite mine." Raine tapped his viewer. "Dina ran the slave rolls. In the past six months Albright sold ten slaves to the mines. One of them fits the profile of your friend." This wasn't the news he wanted to give Karl. He'd hoped for a simple land and grab, maybe posing as wealthy merchants themselves, in the market for a slave. No merchant would go looking in the mem mines, not if they wanted a sane slave.

Karl cleared his throat and looked away. He didn't say anything for a moment, before squaring his shoulders and facing Raine again. "All right. Now we know where she is, how do we get her out?"

Raine blinked in surprise. The kid was stubborn and tenacious, qualities he could appreciate. "You sure about this, kid? It ain't gonna be easy."

"Nothing worth it ever is."

Chapter Seven

“I don’t understand why Dina can’t just get into the control system of the mine. She can shut it down and we can sneak in and grab Sam.” Karl leaned against the bulkhead of the bridge, watching as Raine poured over schematics projected on holograms all around him.

“It doesn’t work like that, Karl,” Dina answered in her low, melodious tone. “I need to be connected to the computer in question so I can overtake it. On the privateer ship they hooked up to my systems directly, and I was able to take advantage of that.”

Karl frowned, parsing that in his mind as he watched Itchy climb the wall to reach a vent that had been knocked askew in the privateer raid. The little bot transformed one of his legs into a torch and soldered the metal back into place.

He sat up abruptly and stalked over to the wall. “What about Itchy?”

Raine looked over from the captain’s chair. “What about Itchy?”

“If we could get him into the mine, would that be enough? Could Dina take over the control system then?”

A wicked-looking smile curved its way on Raine’s face. “Don’t know, kid, but we sure could try.”

They docked at a local spaceport, Raine giving their names as Miles Davis and Luthor Pandron, making a personal delivery. He still had that mysterious box from Neo Delhi and could back up that claim. Karl didn’t ask what was in it; at this point he didn’t want to know, he simply followed Raine’s lead. They checked into a hotel for tourists. Raine wanted a trail laid for them so they would have an alibi ready.

Raine booked them on a tour of the capital city and surrounding areas on a shuttle bus that flew past the mem mine as one of the many attractions. When the shuttle hovered over the mountain pass, the guide giving some speech about the mineral rich soil on Mendhem, Karl let Itchy go through the open window—open only because Raine had talked another tourist into complaining about not having fresh air.

Then they waited, hoping Itchy would make it to the interior of the mine without being caught. Raine bartered for a hover bike in the slums of the city to take back to the mines. Officially, they had settled in to their hotel for the evening. There should be plenty of camera footage showing them chatting with the concierge as they said good night.

Damn the Confed and their cameras everywhere.

Karl had been lucky when he’d found Raine. Without him, Karl knew he wouldn’t have gotten this far, unable to navigate the bureaucracies of the Confed on his own. He simply didn’t have the knowledge or

experience Raine had. They were so close to finding Sam now. He closed his eyes, concentrating on keeping his breath slow and even.

“Dina,” Raine breathed into the comm he’d strapped to his wrist. “Are we good to go?”

They waited precious seconds for a response.

“I can’t take over the entire system,” Dina cautioned. “It would be noticed. But I can cause small outages that should enable you to get in.”

Raine looked over at Karl. “Is the tracer program ready?”

Karl held up the miniature tablet. A grid showed on the screen, a tiny red dot blinking. “Once we get underground, I should be able to pinpoint her location, especially if Dina can give me a map of the mine.”

“Done,” Dina said. “In exactly five minutes there will be a minor outage at the west gate. The guards will be in the middle of a shift change. It’ll be up to you to get past them.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Raine flipped the comm off. “Ready, kid?”

Karl nodded. He hoped he was.

“Here.” Raine handed him a laser pistol. “You know how to use it, right?”

Karl took it, checked the power supply cartridge and safety switch. “Emmet class pistol, 3000 series. Yeah, I’ve used one of these before.”

Raine frowned at him, but didn’t say anything. Karl felt himself blushing. Could he sound any more ridiculous? Using a gun in the range at the base was totally different from using it on a person. He didn’t want to let Sam down, but Karl honestly wasn’t sure he could kill someone.

“Time’s up, let’s move.” Raine led the way down the natural trail toward the gate.

Two guards stood around the guardhouse, chatting and generally looking bored. A camera bot hovered above them, but Karl saw the red light go out, though the bot still appeared to be recording. The lights in the guardhouse flickered, drawing the guards’ attention. They both went inside and Raine made his move. Karl followed, and they slipped past the guards unnoticed. The gate rolled open, just enough for one person to squeeze through, not the full width which could fit a cargo transport of substantial size. Once they got in, it rolled back to close behind them.

He took a minute to let his vision adjust to the dim lighting inside. The gate had been a service entrance, letting them into a large room with cargo transports and silver crates. Karl guessed the drivers must be free. They wouldn’t let the slaves drive out of the mountain with the precious mem stones, and consequently the place was deserted this late at night.

“Which way?” Raine whispered, startling Karl into action. Right, they couldn’t stand around here all evening.

He checked the map Dina had loaded onto his tablet. A green flickering light symbolized the tracer that had been injected into Sam as part of her mission. If he read this right, she was in the female slave quarters, twelve levels down. They’d need to find a lift without being seen or caught.

“Dina,” he whispered. “We need a secure lift to take us to sublevel 012.”

The route began blinking on his map. Karl nodded to Raine and they took off, following Dina’s directions.

He hated thinking of Sam here. Working the mines was every Confed slave’s worst fear, and where most of them ended up sooner or later. The mem rocks only emitted their precious energy when harvested by human hands. At first scientists had thought it was the natural body heat that did it, but no bot could be programmed to do the work. If the dark and damp conditions weren’t horrific enough, the slaves had to worry about developing a reaction to the memrocite, one that would slowly poison them, mutating their bodies and tainting their very blood. The UPA had abandoned the energy source years ago, unwilling to employ people in the conditions necessary to extract the glowing rock.

The Confed had no such scruples.

Just another reason to hate them. The growth of their empire was more important than basic human life. They twisted everything, giving slaves hope of freedom if they worked hard enough, giving them the opportunity to leave the mines if they joined the Confed military, a choice that was no choice at all.

“Stop it,” Raine murmured once they stepped onto the lift platform.

Karl looked over. “What?”

“Brooding. She’ll be fine.”

He hadn’t thought he was that obvious. But Raine had shown a knack for reading Karl, especially since they’d slept together. Hell, the man had seemed to know exactly what Karl would like, running his hands down Karl’s body like he owned it, never too much, but always where and how he needed it. He flushed, not wanting to think about Raine’s sure hands on him right now. They had a job to do and Karl needed to put all that out of his mind, leave it back on the ship where it could stay.

“Don’t mention we’re taking Sam out of here to the other slaves,” Raine said suddenly, just as the lift halted. “We’ll have a mad rush and we can’t take anyone else.”

Karl knew he was right, though the thought of leaving the other slaves behind made his stomach churn. He ignored Raine’s words. “Why isn’t the lift door opening?”

“There are two guards patrolling this corridor.” Dina’s voice came from Raine’s wrist comm. “In two minutes they will be at the other end of the hall. When the door opens, move quickly to the right. Do not stop or they will see you.”

Raine rolled his shoulders and readied his pistol. “Time for action, kid, don’t get left behind.”

“I won’t,” Karl told him, determined. Getting Sam out was his job.

Raine moved into the corridor, his breath misting in the air. They kept it cold down here, though he wasn’t sure if that was an effect of the mem or to keep the slaves moving. While upstairs had the look of industry, all carefully designed metal walls and beams, down here the walls were the solid rock of the

mines, veins of glowing green following Karl and Raine as they walked. He shivered, and not at the cold. Raine couldn't imagine an existence locked down here, never able to see the sky or the stars again.

He'd shoot himself first.

Two camera bots hovered around the entrance to the female slaves' quarters, but they were dull and lifeless. Dina must have cut the feed at their approach. He smiled in pride; his girl knew her stuff. "Ready?" Raine murmured.

"She's inside, tracer's glowing like crazy. Let's go," the kid responded.

Raine pushed down the large lever across the center of the door, unlocked once again thanks to Dina. He cringed at the sound it made before forcing it in and stepping inside, his gun held loosely at his waist. Sooner than his eyes could adjust to the dimmer lighting in here, a fist came out of nowhere with a shot to his nose. He stumbled, his arm was twisted around his back and his face shoved against the hard wall, bright green glowing before his eyes.

"Sam, Sam! Stop, it's me!"

"Karl?" The voice came from right behind Raine. "What the hell are you doing here?"

She released him abruptly and Raine pushed himself away from the wall—he did not like being that close to the memorcite—to see a tall woman with a halo of short blonde curls. Karl gathered her into a hug, closing his eyes and holding on tight.

"Care to introduce us?" Raine said stiffly, prodding at his nose. It didn't seem broken.

Karl pulled away, a flush rising in his cheeks. "Sam, this is Raine. He's a spacer I picked up on Meridian..."

Raine rolled his eyes. "You're making it sound seedier than it was, kid."

The woman laughed, a deep chuckle. He wondered if she had had much time for laughter down here. "Nice to meet you. Now close the door before the guards notice."

With a start, Karl turned and did as she asked, the door rolling shut with a hard click. Raine took the opportunity to look around quickly, at the rows and rows of bunks that stretched as far as his eye could see. The slaves were awake, staring at him and Karl from their places, though a few sat up and watched openly. He saw a range of women, all ages and shapes, dressed in the tan jumpsuits of miners, each wearing a metal collar with a slowly blinking red light.

"You greet everyone who opens the door like that?" he asked, following on a hunch.

Sam's face darkened, though it had already looked drained and weary to begin with. "We're having problems with guards trying to sneak in here at night."

Damn it. Bastards, taking advantage of slaves who couldn't fight back.

"Oh, Sam," Karl murmured.

Raine looked over to see that the kid had taken one of Sam's hands in his. The tips of her fingers were stained green. How long had she been here to get the beginnings of mem poisoning?

Sam pulled her hand away. "It doesn't matter. What are you doing here, Karl? How did you find me?"

"Your tracer." Karl held up his tablet.

Sam's gray eyes glanced over to Raine before looking back at Karl. "You're working...officially?"

Karl shrugged. "Not quite. We're here to get you out."

"Damn it, Karl." She dropped her head in her hands. "You should have left it in the hands of..."

She didn't finish, probably about to say something Raine wasn't meant to hear. He'd known something was off about the kid. He fought too well for the naive greenhorn he was, and he knew too much and yet too little about the Confed. Sam seemed more than just a friend, though despite the hair color, she didn't look like a relative. Raine wanted answers, even if he was willing to wait until they got out of this starsforsaken mine.

"Look, we don't have time to chat," he burst in. "We've got to get you out of here."

"And leave the rest of the slaves behind? I don't think so," she said, her voice as cold as the bitter air.

"Well I sure as hell don't have room on the ship for all of them," Raine snapped back. Never mind how he was going to get Sam off planet and out of the Confed.

Before she could respond, they heard the sharp click of the latch unlocking. Damn it, he should have told Dina to lock the door behind them. He went for his gun, only to realize he didn't have it anymore. He must have dropped it when Sam clocked him.

A guard entered, surprise etched on his face. Before he could shout or get his weapon up, a shot hit him and he crumpled to the ground. Raine whirled. Sam stood behind him, looking determined with Raine's pistol in her hand.

"Is he dead?" Karl asked. Whispers started from the bunks behind them.

Raine went to check. She'd shot a hole clear through his chest, a crispy crater that smoked. He picked up the guy's rifle, wincing at the smell of burned flesh. "Dead as they come."

The whispers turned to shouts. Sam moved back to the slaves to calm them down—he hoped. The last thing they needed was a full-scale slave rebellion on their hands. Shit. Raine lifted his wrist comm to his lips. "Dina, lock this door, don't let anyone through till I say so."

"Raine," Karl said. "This might work to our advantage."

"How the fuck do you figure that?"

"We take Sam out of here, they'd notice the first time they did a headcount. We help the slaves get a little of their own back..."

"And we have a cover," Raine agreed.

"Can Dina do that? Blow all the doors wide open, take down the cameras, everything?"

"She can do whatever you need," Raine told him. "As long as you don't care about sneaking around anymore." The guards wouldn't have any problems shooting back.

Sam came up to him, still looking determined. “You’ve infiltrated the computer system?” At Raine’s slow nod she continued. “Can you disable the collars? All I ask is that you give them a fighting chance.”

Karl had a look on his face, like he expected Raine to live up to that whole hero thing he had going on in his mind. “Thought I told you about that whole saving-the-galaxy thing.”

“Solar system,” Karl corrected with a smile. “What’s a couple hundred slaves when you measure it against that?”

“Fine, but we’re going to play this smart. And that means my way.”

Karl ran through the tunnels of the mine, following Sam as she led the way to the male slave quarters. Raine had gone to unlock the weapons cache so the slaves could arm themselves against the guards. His blood thrummed in his veins, pulsing with the excitement of helping in a slave revolt. For once he wasn’t left behind while Sam went on one of her missions. He was right beside her.

He’d actually found her, well, he and Raine. Karl had made it across the galaxy to find the woman he owed his life. Now he just had to get them all out of here safely.

“Karl.” Sam had stopped, the rifle she’d exchanged for Raine’s pistol cocked and ready.

He paused, waiting for instruction, worried about running into a patrol. Instead, Sam drew back until they were shoulder to shoulder.

“Where did you find this Raine?”

Karl blinked, not expecting the question. “I hired him on Meridian. Nikala didn’t seem to have a problem with him.”

“Nikala? That’s a name I haven’t heard in...” Sam shook her head, “...forever.”

“She owns her own salon now.” They didn’t have time to take a flight down memory lane. “He has a good rep for transporting cargo, except for the shipment of slaves he managed to lose in UPA space.” Karl flushed, thinking what else Raine had a good reputation for, something Karl had gotten to experience firsthand. “I trust him.”

“Karl, you didn’t.” She touched his cheek. Sam had always been able to see right through him. “You didn’t have to sleep with him to rescue me.”

He drew back, angry. “I didn’t, that’s not why.” Everything had gotten turned around and Karl couldn’t explain it all to her, the mutual attraction that had grown as they got closer to finding Sam, the way Raine loved his ship, his antiques, the way he made Karl feel in bed.

She frowned at him. “We’ll talk about this later. Come on. As long as your guy does what he said he would.”

“He will,” Karl swore.

They continued on, Karl still hot with anger and embarrassment. He steadied his grip on the pistol, not wanting his sweaty palm to cause a misfire. These things were lethal.

The door to the men's quarters matched the one on the other side of the mine. Sam turned the lever and let the door roll back. Lights flickered on in the dark room beyond, revealing the rows of bunks here. Karl stayed on her heels as she stepped inside. "Listen up." Her voice echoed in the chamber. Slaves groaned and stumbled awake. A few got off their bunks and approached.

"What the hell are you doing wandering in here?" one of the slaves questioned, voice thick with sleep.

"She's got a rifle, Josep," someone hissed at him.

"That's right. I'm making a break for it." Sam knew how to make herself heard. The murmurings stopped and all attention focused on her. "We're disabling the cameras and the locks. You can go to level seven and arm yourselves. The armory will be unlocked. What you do then is up to you." She looked into the darkness. "You may even stay if you wish."

Karl couldn't imagine anyone choosing to stay, but if he were woken up in the middle of the night, he wasn't sure he'd believe a madwoman with a laser rifle.

"You're forgetting one thing." The very large slave at the front of the pack pointed at his collar, which was still blinking a steady red.

"No," Sam said. "I didn't."

As if she had timed it, and of course, she'd timed it, they'd arranged with Raine and Dina exactly when the systems should start to fail, the collars all stopped blinking. Sam tugged at her own collar and it came off in her hands. She dropped it and crushed it beneath her boot. "Take the weapons, take the transport shuttles. Get out of here."

She turned and ran back down the corridor, Karl following at her heels. They had to rendezvous with Raine at the west gate and they didn't have much time.

Raine stuttered to a stop just outside the last hallway before the gate. Guards were spilling out, shouting about escaped slaves. He knew their comms weren't working. Dina had cut off all communication so they were operating blind. They had no idea their slaves were coming right for them, now armed themselves. Raine only wished they weren't in his way.

A sensation on his shoulder had him looking over at Itchy, who must have just dropped from the ceiling. "Good job, Itchy. Almost home now."

If he could make it through this hallway. Any moment now his cover would be broken; someone would run down this side passage. Well, Raine wouldn't make it easy for them.

He waited until most of the guards had run past, till the footsteps faded into nothing. Then Raine ducked into the main corridor and ran for the gate.

"Hey, who are you? Stop!"

He barreled into the guard questioning him, slamming the guy into the ground. Raine clocked him with the handle of his pistol and stood to keep going. A scattering of laser shots along the wall behind him had him weaving and ducking. A straggler must have heard his friend call out.

Raine returned fire, squeezing out a few shots blindly before heading right. His lungs burned as he ran, not used to this kind of physical activity in this fucked-up air.

“Raine!”

He ran toward Karl’s voice, aware of someone coming up behind him.

“Drop,” Sam called with a snap of command.

He listened, rolling to the ground as a series of rounds made their way over his body. Raine looked around to see the bodies of five guards littering the hallway. “Damn! You are a good shot, woman.” He pushed himself to his feet and toward them.

Sam wasn’t the only one holding a smoking rifle. Karl had traded up, and his weapon had been fired as well. Raine’s heart clenched, and he knew he was in for it. Who the hell were these people? Sam was obviously more than just a friend of Karl’s. And nobody right out of the UPA knew how to shoot like that. And he’d slept with the kid.

That shouldn’t have bothered him so much. Raine had slept with people without even knowing their first name. He and the kid had been through a lot. He expected better than to be snookered into something like this.

“Thanks,” he decided on. He wasn’t going to ignore that they’d saved his ass. Now it was his turn. “Let’s go.”

There was just enough room for the three of them on the hover bike. Normally Raine didn’t mind the close quarters, but as Karl’s arms slid around his waist, he gritted his teeth. He couldn’t control the sudden heat of arousal at that, his body still thrumming with adrenalin from racing through the mine.

Damn it, kid. How the hell did you get under my skin?

Chapter Eight

“We can’t leave until the morning.”

Sam didn’t look happy at Raine’s pronouncement, and honestly Karl didn’t blame her. They’d dumped the bike in the worst part of the city and slipped back into their hotel the same way they’d slipped out—the slave stairway. Nobody expected free citizens to use the dark and squalid stairs, so it wasn’t watched. Raine apparently had chosen the hotel merely for that antiquated feature which had gone out of style in new construction. Slaves had their own set of lifts now.

“He’s right.” Karl sat on one of the small beds in the room, playing with the laces of his boots. “If we leave now, when the news of the slave escape gets out, they’ll be right on it. Nobody checks out of a hotel in the middle of the night. Well, nobody respectable,” he amended. And their cover here was that of respectable tourists, after all.

“The longer we stay here, the better the chance of getting caught.” Sam let out a frustrated breath. “But you’re right. We need to get some sleep anyway.”

“Of course I’m right.” Raine gave her a smug smile.

Karl just rolled his eyes at them both. “Sam needs clothes. We can’t take her to the spaceport like that.”

“Already on it, kid.” Raine took a bundle from the mostly empty luggage they’d used when checking in. “As long as you don’t mind fashion that’s just a little out of date.”

Sam shook out the simple blue dress. “I’ll manage somehow.”

For a moment Karl wondered if Sam and Raine weren’t a bit too much alike. Stars, he thought, dropping back on the bed, not even taking off his boots. Wasn’t that a messed up thought? Sam was almost like his mother. No, he revised the thought, she’d been so much more to him—friend and teacher as well as parent. Raine, well, Raine was something else. Karl squirmed, not wanting to look at that too closely.

It hardly seemed like any time had passed before a firm hand shook Karl awake. He sat up and blinked at Raine, Sam standing behind him in her new clothing. She’d tied a swatch of tan fabric around her hair to disguise it and had a coat draped over her arms. The way she held it would hide the green stains on her hands.

Raine tossed him a ration bar. “Eat up. You need your strength.”

It was time to go. Sam met them in the street, once again moving through the slave passages. They couldn’t risk her being caught on the hotel’s main cameras. News about the slave uprising was all over the

news feeds. Every flickering holographic screen in the city had video from the mines, though it appeared that a good number of slaves had disappeared without a trace. Karl smiled at the broadcasts, but he knew better than to comment on them, at least until they reached the ship.

“Move, kid.” Raine prodded him away from the main streets, toward the shuttle that would take them to their dock.

“Just trying to fit in,” Karl protested. Most of the tourists were staring up at the news feeds in horror.

“And that’s why we’re leaving,” Sam whispered. “Can’t stay on this planet with all these escaped slaves running around.”

They couldn’t have planned it better if they had tried.

No one stopped them at the port. Just when it seemed as if they were going to make it off planet without a hitch, it all came crashing down.

Raine couldn’t get permission to disembark. “Come on,” he complained to the traffic controller through the comm. “I’ve got places to be.”

“I’m sorry, Captain, but all ships need to be inspected and ID chips verified. We can’t take the risk of escaped slaves stowing away.”

Karl and Sam stood in the back of the bridge, watching as Raine drummed his fingers impatiently on the arm of his chair. Karl wondered if it was too late for Dina to doctor the registry, make it say they’d already been through inspection. But she couldn’t do anything about people, and they’d been noticed by the traffic controller.

Raine pushed himself out of his chair. “Wait here,” he told them, stomping to the back of the ship.

“Karl,” Sam said warningly under her breath.

“I trust him,” Karl hissed back.

They listened as Raine’s loud footsteps went down the gangplank. What the hell was he up to?

“What happened, Sam?” Karl had wanted to ask since the mine, but he couldn’t, not in front of Raine, not when they had to focus on escape. “How’d you end up in the mines?”

Sam’s shoulders slumped. She looked even more tired than before they had snatched the few hours of sleep. “I missed my rendezvous.”

“That’s not like you.” It wasn’t. He’d never known Sam to be late for anything. Even held as a slave, she would have found a way to slip away, especially as a member of Lord Albright’s pampered flock.

“It’s hard to run when you’re nearly bleeding to death.” Sam pulled the fabric covering her hair off her head. “Albright’s a bastard. Decided I needed punishing at exactly the wrong time. And afterwards...well, he didn’t want a scarred-up slave.”

“Sam,” Karl breathed, reaching out with one hand to touch her shoulder.

She covered her hand with his. “It’s fine. They’ll fix me up once we get back to the UPA. I’ll be good as new.”

Right. The Confed wouldn't want to waste that kind of technology on a slave. Karl looked over at the gangplank. What the hell was Raine doing?

Raine nearly expected to be greeted with rifles drawn and cocked. He'd been getting those kinds of vibes from Sam since last night, when he'd crawled in next to Karl on the narrow bed to sleep. Hell, he was even being a gentleman, making sure the lady got her own bed.

Though from the way Sam glared at him, Raine just knew she didn't like him.

So he merely walked back to his welcoming committee, who were standing in the hallway with their arms crossed. As if Raine had ever given explanations to anyone who wasn't his daddy. He sat in his captain's chair, requested permission to take-off and grinned as the controller told him to go ahead.

"How the hell?" Sam gasped.

"Bribed her." Raine shrugged, preparing their course and pointedly not looking back at his passengers.

"With what?" Karl snapped. Kid knew exactly how lacking Raine's finances were.

"Well let's just say I won't be heading to Neo Delhi any time soon." Not until he could make enough to repay the loss of the cargo he'd agreed to take, the pristine-cut diamonds meant to be used in mining equipment. Or for jewelry if the person you were bribing wasn't picky.

Karl put a hand on his shoulder and Raine looked up at him, a warm sensation rising through his body at the expression on the kid's face. Karl's eyes had gone all soft, like he was about to cry, but that wasn't quite right. "Thank you."

"No problem, kid." Raine shrugged him off. "Now get your ass in the engine room, we have a ship to run."

"Aye, Captain," Karl said with a laugh and disappeared, Itchy clacking down the hall after him.

It was only after they'd taken off from Mendhem, cleared the planet's atmosphere and made their light-speed window that Raine realized Sam had never left the bridge. Huh, he'd have thought she'd have followed Karl straight out. He let his arms drop and the holographic control faded, the screen showing their plotted course. "Not impressed?"

"I've seen holo controls before."

She walked past him and dropped into the second chair, eyes flickering over the control panel. "Not saying that you don't have quite a ship here, Captain Raine."

The way she said Captain made it sound like an insult. Raine took his own chair and glared at her. He didn't want to call her on her lack of gratitude, not at the moment anyway. "Why, thank you," he said in his sweetest voice.

"I just don't understand," she began, still not looking at him, "why a man in your position would go to all this trouble to help me."

“Didn’t do it for you,” he answered before he thought about it. Then he quickly revised his words. “Karl promised me I’d be well-paid.”

“Hmm.” Sam finally looked over at him. “Not nearly what you would have been paid for that cargo. Or for turning me in for that matter.”

“Just another escaped slave.” Raine tried to brush it off.

She leaned back in the chair, stretching her arms overhead. “Is that what he told you? I was just another slave?”

A shiver of cold ran down Raine’s spine. “You obviously have something to say.”

“I’m a spy for the UPA, Captain.” She gave Raine a look, those gray eyes hard as stone.

“A spy who accidentally got sold into slavery?”

She gifted him with a wry smile. “A spy who was sold into slavery to keep an eye on Lord Albright. There are more of us than you can imagine infiltrating the Confed. We specialize in the seedier side of life. They call it the Eros Corps, but that doesn’t describe what we do at all.”

Now it was Raine’s turn to smile. “You think I didn’t have a clue? The way you and the kid used those rifles? Hell, the way he fights. I’m not an idiot, ma’am.”

“Karl isn’t involved,” she snapped. “And I want to keep it that way. He shouldn’t be in Confed space at all.”

Raine stood. “That kid sacrificed a hell of a lot for you. I think you might want to try appreciating it. Dina, fly the damn ship.”

He didn’t look back as he stalked toward his quarters.

It wasn’t till he got inside, the door shut behind him, that he let himself react. Raine picked up a paperweight from his desk—smooth river stone he had found on Sienna—and threw it against the wall with all of his strength. The hull could take it.

Raine wasn’t sure he could. Fuck, UPA spies. He could be executed for helping them. Karl hadn’t thought to tell him that before starting out on this little trip. He dropped onto the bed, wishing they had managed to find time to replace the strings on his guitar. Raine wanted to run his fingers along the taut strands, lose himself in the miracle of music, let the world become nothing but him and his instrument.

Part of him knew that if Karl had told him, Raine would have gone ahead anyway. The kid had wormed his way in that far. Raine didn’t let people get under his skin. He had Dina and Itchy, and Crunchy out there on the hull. When he wanted to fuck, there was always Meridian where someone could be had for a chit. After Daddy died, he learned fast that he could only rely on himself.

Except the kid wasn’t like that. He’d traveled across the galaxy for someone he cared about. Raine had never encountered that kind of loyalty.

He just wished it had been directed at him. He wished Karl had told him the truth.

Damn the kid.

~ * ~

Karl fought back a yawn. It had been a long day and an even longer night. He'd given Sam his cabin, she deserved the rest, but he didn't really want to sleep in one of the crew bunks. Granted, he'd hoped Raine would offer to share his, but Karl didn't want to just assume. Since they got off Mendhem, he could let himself think about Raine again, how it had felt to be in his bed. Desire stirred in his belly, and Karl let himself revel in it, feeling himself swell with the thought of what he would do to Raine once he got inside the captain's quarters.

He pushed the chime on the door, pleased when it slid open. Karl entered, not surprised to find Raine sorting through his antiques, carefully slotting the old-fashioned books back on the shelves where they belonged. He admired the way the muscles in Raine's back and shoulders rippled as he lifted yet another heavy crate. Karl swallowed.

"Raine..." He let the name fall, wondering if it would ever be appropriate to call this man by his first name.

Raine turned from his work, and Karl was surprised to see the anger in his hard eyes and tightly clenched jaw. "You know, I would have appreciated knowing that our little rescue mission could have gotten me executed."

Karl stilled, half in the motion of walking toward the other man. He held out his hand, then clenched it into a fist and drew it back to his side. "You knew it was dangerous."

"Yeah, but I might have done things a bit differently if I'd known Sam was a spy."

"It wasn't my secret to tell," Karl protested. He couldn't have risked telling Raine, not before he knew he could trust him. And what Raine didn't know kept others safe. "Sam told you?"

Raine shrugged. He fiddled with one of the ruined books, sliding his fingers down the cracked spine. Karl nearly shivered, remembering the feel of those talented fingers on his body. "I think she told me to warn me away from you."

Damn it, Sam. He wasn't a child anymore. She'd protected him since he was twelve, but now Karl needed to stand on his own two feet, make his own choices. And if he wanted to choose Raine, well, she would just have to accept that.

"Did it work?"

"Kid," Raine said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I hardly know a thing about you. I thought I did, thought I'd had you all figured out. Greenhorn UPA wannabe spacer. I've seen the type before. And then you go kicking ass in that mine, holding that rifle like you were born to it."

"I went from growing up in a whorehouse to living on a military base with Sam. I had something to prove." It wasn't easy being a kid around the recruits. Karl had made lifelong friends there, learned how to be a soldier without ever going through basic training himself.

Raine dropped onto his bed, staring at his hands. “What do you want from me, kid? You got what you wanted, you found Sam. I half want to drop you both off in the border, forget I ever met you.”

Karl crouched down, forcing Raine to look at him as he placed one hand on the other man’s knee. “I can’t forget you.”

“Stop trying to sweet-talk me.” Raine snorted, a hint of a smile playing around his lips. “You want to be out there...” he waved his hand out toward space presumably, “...making a difference, rescuing slaves, being some kind of hero. I ain’t a hero, kid.”

“But you could be.” Karl took Raine’s face in his hands, drew him down so he could kiss those lips before Raine could protest.

Raine dug his fingers in Karl’s hair and held him still while he took his mouth. Their lips battled before Karl gave in, opened to Raine, let his lower lip be sucked and bitten. When Raine finally pulled back, Karl looked up from under his eyelashes, slightly out of breath.

“I wanted to hear it from you,” Raine rasped, his voice raw with desire and something else.

“What?” Karl sputtered, still caught up in that kiss, wanting to nibble at Raine’s jaw, lick at the touch of stubble there.

Raine gave him a half smile. “Your secret. Wanted you to tell me. Didn’t want to get it from Sam.”

“Oh.” Karl licked his lips, noting how Raine’s eyes darkened at the motion. “I’m sorry.”

A gentle tug on his hair had Karl up and crawling on to the bed, straddling Raine’s waist. “Just don’t do it again,” Raine said, his fingers working on the fastenings on Karl’s pants.

His heart fluttered at those words. Raine wanted him again, wanted him enough to ask for a promise for the future. “I won’t,” Karl said, pulling at the other man’s shirt. They were both wearing far too many clothes. He nearly giggled at the thought of instituting a new uniform, one that consisted of very little fabric.

Karl scraped his nails down Raine’s bare sides, loving how he writhed beneath him. Raine arched up, ground his erection against Karl’s. He had to moan at that, feeling Raine’s desire for him, hardness against hardness, though still caught in thick fabric. Lifting up, Karl unfastened Raine’s pants and tugged.

It might have been slightly uncoordinated—he really should have taken off his boots first—but somehow they pulled apart long enough to discard every stitch of clothing, coming back together on the bed like two magnets. Karl caught Raine by the wrists, pressing his arms against the bed as he moved to mouth along his collarbone, nuzzling down his chest, leaving tiny bites along the way.

Raine moaned at the touch, squirming beneath Karl’s weight. He liked how it felt to be on top. This time he was the one in control, the one who pressed his cock against Raine’s, felt the heat as they moved together. Karl let Raine’s arms go, trailing his fingers along his skin, up his arms.

“Have you ever let anyone inside you?” Karl whispered in Raine’s ear. He breathed in deep, memorizing Raine’s unique scent, wild and warm.

Raine caught his hair again, massaging Karl's scalp and causing him to shiver at the sensation. Karl felt that touch right down to his toes. "Not for a while," Raine rasped, kissing Karl deeply once more.

Have you ever loved anyone like you love your ship? Karl wouldn't let the words leave his lips. He was afraid of the answer, of destroying this thing that was growing ever so slowly between them. "Let me?" he asked instead.

Raine pulled back, his fingers still stroking the strands of Karl's hair. He met Karl's gaze, as if searching out some truth in his eyes. When he nodded, the relief flooded Karl's chest. This, this meant more than the simple act of sex.

Karl scrambled to get the jar of oil, afraid that if he took too long Raine might change his mind. When he nearly spilled the entire thing on the bed, Raine caught his hands, taking the jar away. "Not in a hurry," he told him. They weren't, it would take several days for the ship to reach the Confed border. "Take your time."

Raine gave him the bottle before lying back on the pillows, spreading his legs and canting his hips up. He was an invitation to sin, and Karl wanted to accept.

He remembered slow, taking his time coating his fingers and preparing Raine, all the while watching his face, making sure none of his actions caused any pain. Raine held his gaze, his eyes growing more and more heavy-lidded as Karl delved deeper, finding that pleasure center on each stroke.

"Now, kid." Raine caught his leg around Karl's waist and pulled him forward.

Well, there was a time for slow and there was a time to get on with it. He wasn't trembling, Karl told himself, he was just excited.

"Breathe," Raine whispered, holding on to Karl's face, brushing his long hair out of the way.

Karl had to smile at him. "I'll try."

He pushed inside, surrounded completely by nothing but warm, tight heat.

For a moment he did forget to breathe, so caught up in how Raine felt around him. With a sigh he began to roll his hips, wanting to make it good for the other man. Raine clutched at his back, leaving marks behind as Karl rode him. He wanted to touch too, so Karl gripped Raine's waist, lifting him higher so he could fuck him harder, deeper. Raine's scent—something like a storm and warm spice—began to overpower his senses, making it so he could only breathe Raine, touch Raine, see only Raine.

With a shout, Raine came, spilling over them both to Karl's surprise. He started to lose the rhythm, needing to find completion so desperately himself. "Oh," Karl moaned, finally, letting himself go, holding Raine tight.

He panted as he pulled out, rolling off to the side in some attempt to catch his breath. Raine smacked him across the chest. "Good job, kid."

Karl laughed at the praise. "You're not so bad yourself."

“Course,” Raine muttered, reaching for his discarded shirt. He used it to wipe them both off before tossing it to the side.

He didn’t want to disturb the silence, but Karl had to ask. “This…” he gestured between them, “...this is something, right?”

Raine opened one eye; he must have been halfway to sleep. “You gonna define something?”

Karl stared at the ceiling, the smooth crisp lines of the metal hull. “Not nothing.”

“Kid,” Raine snorted. “You’re so far under my skin I’d need surgery to get you out.”

At this point, he’d take it. After everything they’d been through together, Karl figured this was the closest he’d get to a declaration of love from Raine. He found he didn’t mind.

~ * ~

Raine never thought he would be so glad to see Meridian floating beneath them. Shortly before the Confed checkpoint he’d had to scramble to come up with a Confed ID chip for Sam. Slaves weren’t chipped. They didn’t really have identities as far as the Confed Regulation Committee was concerned, using collars to track them instead. Luckily Karl and Dina got along so well; between the two of them they’d managed to come up with something. It wasn’t like Raine kept spare chips lying around.

He might have to look into that. Especially with his sudden change in career direction.

At least it came with a steady paycheck.

“Are you sure about this?” Sam said to Karl, looking between him and Raine. He wanted to laugh at the daggers she shot his way, but he knew better. It wasn’t the best time to antagonize the woman who was like a mom to his lover.

He couldn’t help the smile at that thought. His lover. Rick Raine settling down with one person, who’d have thought it? As a matter of fact, he would be disappointing several lovely pleasure workers down on Meridian. His smile faded as he wondered if any of them had put odds on him in the casino.

“This is what I want to do,” Karl told her. “You guys need someone like me, waiting on the sidelines to swoop in and rescue you when things go bad.”

She touched his cheek and Raine felt like he was witnessing something he shouldn’t. Her eyes turned his way and he straightened, hoping he suddenly looked reliable and respectable. “This isn’t what I wanted for you.”

“Well, I didn’t want this for you, either. But if you weren’t on Meridian, you couldn’t have saved me, Sam. Think of all those people we’ve saved on Mendhem. All the good we’ve done.”

Raine needed to rein in that idealism a bit because otherwise he knew Karl would grow bitterly disappointed. They couldn’t save the entire galaxy. They were really only small players in the much larger war. But, as he watched Karl beam at Sam, Raine could see the appeal in saving one life at a time.

“And you.” Sam came over to him. She jabbed him as she spoke. “You are now an employee of the UPA military. That means if you even step the wrong way, I’ll make sure you pay for it.”

He met her eyes, reading the fear in them that she had worked so hard to keep out of her voice. “Don’t worry,” he said in a low tone. “I’ll take care of your boy.”

Sam flushed and turned away.

“Sam?” Karl got their attention. “Your ticket is confirmed. You’re on the commercial shuttle flying out of District Six.”

She flexed her fingers, the green stain covered by the tan gloves Raine had found in the market. He hoped she was right when she promised the UPA could take care of the poisoning. Otherwise her worry for Karl had whole different connotations. “Thank you. I’ll send you a message when I’m back in UPA space.”

Before she could say anything more Karl wrapped his arms around her and held her close. “You’d better,” he whispered.

“Be good,” she told him, patting his back gently.

They watched her travel down the gangplank to the catwalk on the space dock. She turned and gave a little wave before heading away into the crowds where she wouldn’t be noticed.

It seemed so wrong somehow, that Karl should come all this way looking for Sam, and now he was sending her back home. Raine placed a hand on the small of Karl’s back, causing the other man to turn his way.

“Regretting staying already?” Raine tried to put his usual bite into his words, but found he couldn’t.

“Don’t be stupid,” Karl told him, pulling Raine close for a kiss. “You think I’d leave Itchy alone with you?”

And Raine laughed.

About the Author

CC Bridges would like to say that her writing is influenced by a variety of wild and exotic sexual experiences. It turns out she just has a really good imagination. She writes surrounded by books, spare computing equipment, a very fluffy dog, too many video game systems, plenty of yarn, and a long-suffering husband, all in the tiny state of New Jersey.

You can find her on the web at cc-bridges.livejournal.com or on twitter at www.twitter.com/ccbridgeswriter.

Submission isn't an option—it's a full-time job.

Crimson

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A Men in Space Story

Humiliated by the betrayal of his former Master, Lieutenant Benjamin Kraft will do anything to bring the drug czar Tazu to justice—anything but kneel again. Forget passion too. He'd rather risk daily grow-op raids. Then, just when Tazu is finally within reach, an ambush wipes out Ben's entire squad and threatens the life of his partner—a partner he never realized he cared about, much less loved.

As a member of a former slave race known as starlings, Adam's speed and strength make him a valuable asset to the police force even as his blue skin inspires prejudice and derision from the other officers. Ben's always been able to look past that, so what's changed? Suddenly his partner is rude at every turn. Ben may try to get rid of him, but too bad; Adam won't be scared off. He has his own reasons for wanting to bring Tazu in, and he'll do it even if it means putting Ben in his place.

Even if it means acting as Ben's Master on their next mission: an investigation on a planet where sex is everywhere, and where whips and chains are the norm...

Warning: This title may prove addictive. It contains explicit m/m sex, leather chaps, latex shorts, and slippery goodness.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Crimson:

The heat birthed a storm. Beyond the balcony doors, the sky darkened moment by moment, rain-heavy clouds rushing in from the west. Adam shivered as he watched. Two bands of leather hung from his shoulders, just wide enough to cover his pectorals. The Granati might call it a vest, but he called it decoration, and barely that. Worse yet, neither of his wrists bore gauntlets. Even with latex shorts on, he'd rarely felt so naked.

"I'd give anything for a weapon," he said, just loud enough to be heard.

Ben looked over from the birdcage. Tight silk riding pants clung to his legs like a second skin, a perfect match for the riding crop hung from his low-slung, studded belt. Besides boots and a pair of biceps-high, black leather gloves, he wore nothing else. "We can't give our identities away."

Adam met his gaze but didn't reply.

"I said I was sorry," Ben apologized. His eyes lingered on Adam's outfit, on his spiked plumage. Color rose slowly in his face.

"Do you like me this way?" Adam asked. Suddenly being naked didn't seem so vulnerable after all. He leaned back against the balcony door, one hip cocked, and tensed all the muscles in his legs. They rippled all the way down to his combat boots.

Ben's eyebrow quirked in mock annoyance. "Are you *strutting*?"

"Not yet. Are you staring?"

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to answer a question with another question?"

Adam laughed. "Should I get you the leash?"

Ben opened his mouth for a quick retort, but nothing came. An instant later he laughed too, shaking his head. "Only if I'm the one on it."

Neither of them had a snappy comeback for that.

As awkward as strangers, they made their way to the shuttle waiting on the roof. By the time they touched down at the club, rain spattered against the skiff's viewscreen. Ben left its shelter first, guiding Adam through the bluster with an arm wrapped around his waist. Fingers brushed Adam's ribs, and the cold of the storm passed. Heat unfurling in his belly, he could barely stop himself from pushing Ben back against the wall. Ben *would* answer him whether he liked it or not, and soon.

Candelabras stood throughout the main room. Their flames guttered, casting the same shadow over and over again on the red walls. The benches, the stocks—all of them had been cleared away. A single metal cross dominated the floor, its iron arms forming a massive X. Wrist and ankle straps lay slack against its limbs.

Tau emerged from the darkness, Lexa at his side. Others sat in the shadows. Adam could hear them, a subtle shift of weight on leather couches. An eye glinted here and there, fixed on the scene about to begin.

Ben nodded in greeting. "A pleasure, Tau, as always. Is there some special occasion?"

"Only your pleasure," Tau intoned. "You cannot imagine how I have enjoyed watching you grow."

Lexa stepped forward and reached for Ben's belt buckle with ringed fingers.

Adam seized her wrist. He released it an instant later, faking shame, eyes downcast. "Please, Master. Let me prove that I am the one who should be on the cross, not you."

Ben glanced at Tau, seeking permission, and at once a different sort of fire burned in Adam's gut. The thought that Ben would let himself be ordered around by that son of a bitch! Adam choked back his anger. *The mission*, he reminded himself. *Until Ben tells me otherwise, I have to believe it's all for the mission.*

Tau's smile grew frosty. He beckoned, and a servant appeared, handing Tau the crystal decanter. The scarlet within shone like fresh blood in the candlelight.

Tau turned back to Adam, holding the bottle aloft. "Undress."

"Adam," Ben began warily, "*you don't have to do this—*"

Adam slammed his shields shut before he could hear a word more. He slipped free of his clothing and handed the pieces to Ben. Then, naked, he walked to the cross and turned his back on the crowd. Even its cool surface couldn't snuff the furious blaze beneath his skin. Lexa's soft hands trailed down his spine. She pushed his legs farther apart, a finger ghosting between his ass cheeks, and knelt to bind his ankles. His wrists followed, the leather straps cinched tight.

“May I start in with my crop?” Ben asked.

Tau tut-tutted. “So impatient. We must whet his appetite.”

Another set of hands, coarser and wider, smeared wetness from the nape of Adam’s neck to his heels. Within a heartbeat, the heat of his anger seemed glacial. True fire raged along the length of his body, first across his flesh and then beneath it. His bones became live coals.

Tau’s voice grated in his ear. “How does it feel?”

Adam cried out mutely, jerking against his restraints. How much had Tau used? Two, three times what he had used on Ben?

Tau seized his plumage. “Is that how you answer your betters?”

“It feels good.”

Tau spanked him once, hard, and Adam’s hips knocked against the cross. Despite the flare of pain, he longed to rock them. “Say it properly,” Tau snarled.

The room spun. The cross undulated beneath Adam as a lover would.

Tau’s fists slammed into his shoulder blades. As if from a distance, Adam heard himself scream, the sound familiar somehow.

“*Call him sir,*” Ben urged desperately.

Just like on the slave ship.

“Sir,” Adam mumbled. “It feels good, *sir*.” The word tasted of blood. Already his mouth had begun to swell from where it had connected with the cross.

Tau stepped away and in the next moment Ben was there, a silent presence at his back. Adam moaned aloud, straining towards him. Candle flames leapt. When he squeezed shut his eyes, their light continued to dance behind his lids. It grew brighter, sparks whirling.

Sparks. They rained down about Ben, falling from the gauntlet held aloft on Adam’s own wrist. Ben crouched on his hands and knees at Adam’s feet, legs wide, ass turned up for another blow.

“Oh fuck,” Adam muttered, even as the vision claimed him. His symbiot thrashed.

“*I’ll try not to hurt you,*” Ben whispered in his thoughts, but both the sentence and the instrument changing hands behind his back were meaningless compared to his fantasy. As if they had nothing to do with him, Adam felt the sudden rush of air over his skin, heard the low whistle. The whip cracked across his shoulders and his body screamed loud and long.

Diatribes of longing and lust echoed in the chamber. He had not known that he had such words for Ben. He knew only that no matter how hard he hit, Ben remained stubbornly silent, refusing to tell Adam how much he wanted this.

The lash snapped across his skin a second time. Adam arched into it, arms knotted beneath his shackles. The pain paled in comparison to the electricity sizzling in his fist.

Red bloomed across Ben’s back, mocking him. “Tell me, tell me, call my name—”

The whip licked over his spine, and Adam pulled wildly on his bindings.

“Wonderful,” Tau said, so far away. “Absolutely wonderful.”

“Isn’t he?” Ben asked. In Adam’s ears, Ben’s voice was amused. In Adam’s mind, Ben was ice against fire, as immobile and cold as a glacier.

No. Ben had to burn.

Adam’s eyes rolled back in his head as the world exploded in a crimson supernova.

Again the lash. At Adam’s ankle a strap came free, then at his wrist. “Mas...” Adam began, brokenly, but that wasn’t right.

The whip sliced deeper still, and blood poured down his back. “Mas...” he tried again, but still the word would not come. He couldn’t say it again, not now, not ever. He was only meant to hear it.

With a sudden wrench the last of the bindings gave. Adam whirled.

Ben stumbled back, eyes wide, and the whip fell from his fingers.

Adam leapt.

Ben was the one who would beg to be mastered now.

In space, no one will hear them moan.

Moonlust

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A Men in Space Story

The job was supposed to be an easy one for Captain Kar and his two-man crew: land the *Danaus* on the deserted moon, appropriate a few boxes of precious chromore, and jump out of the system before the Guardians could get to them. Even Will and Jay's inability to keep their hands off each other for any length of time should not have been too much of a problem.

They discover too late it's the laineards' mating season. The resulting sexual pheromones begin to affect them as soon as they step off the ship. With Will and Jay losing their minds to lust, and Kar himself blinded by visions of the two men he has wanted for months, things suddenly get much *harder* than expected.

Their only hope for not ending up in jail is to get out of there before the Guardians find them. Except an open loading dock contaminated the air inside the *Danaus*. And Kar will have to resort to drastic measures to keep Jay and Will apart long enough to escape...

Warning: The Lodge does not endorse or otherwise approve of this sexually charged M/M/M rendition of one of its elite members cavorting with the crew of a thieving spaceship while under the influence of pheromones-induced, overwhelming and all-consuming lust.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Moonlust:

With an enraged gesture, Jay lowered the sound of the comm so he wouldn't hear the small gasps and moans rising from the cargo bay anymore.

"Damn you, Kar. You'll pay for this."

Pay for what, Jay didn't really know at that moment. For locking him in the cockpit alone or for taking Will as his own? He couldn't have said which was worse. Frustration burned through his veins like acid, but how much of it was simply denied lust, and how much was pure jealousy?

The sound was gone, but Jay's mind continued to churn out images of what they might be doing. He didn't want to know, not really, and he certainly didn't want to see, and still he heard himself mutter, "Mid quadrant one. Display cargo bay."

The screen directly in front of him blinked to life. Part of him hoped they'd left the bay already and found their way to the living quarters. Or maybe, if he was lucky, they'd be hidden from view by a stack of boxes or—

Jay groaned. No such luck. As chance had it, Kar and Will were in front of the surveillance camera, slightly off-center but close enough Jay could see the tension in Kar's fingers as they cupped the back of

Will's head. They were kissing. Jay licked his lips and leaned forward in his seat. With Will's back to him, he couldn't really see much more than the constantly changing angle of their tilted heads. Kar's eyes were closed, and he looked younger. He held Will to him with both hands, the fingers of the right one threaded in his hair while the left rested chastely at the small of his back. Jay could just guess where Will's hands were: one curled around Kar's neck, strong yet gentle, and the other on his chest, probably, his thumb running back and forth over one nipple, then the other.

A painful jolt radiated from his cock, and he pressed his hand tightly against it. He'd been hard for too long. He craved relief. But not by his own hand, not like this, not alone while—

"Pursuing ships have jumped on our vector."

Jay growled at the computer's announcement, both because he had hoped he had shaken the Guardians and because at that instant, Kar's voice was the very last thing he wanted to hear. Why had it seemed like such a good idea to program the synchro this way?

"Lower quadrant four. Display radar."

The bottom right screen shifted from a view of the sun the Danaus was orbiting as closely as its shields allowed, to the rotating representation of the ship and its immediate vicinity. There were only two other ships on the radar, still at some distance. Jay searched for the third one, but after a few seconds he nodded in satisfaction. He'd lost one of the three ships that had been chasing them. Only two left before he could find a way to open the cockpit door and go kick Kar's ass.

He glanced at the other screen at the thought and winced, immediately realizing his mistake. His hand moved toward the controls that would turn off that camera, but he forgot what he was doing when he watched Kar tug Will's shirt out of his pants and over his head. Kar's hands returned to Will's back at once, sliding over skin that was perfectly smooth, Jay knew, descending lower and under the waistband of Will's pants.

He tore his gaze away and breathed in deeply. The air in the cockpit had to be clean by now. He was not a slave to his dick anymore. Nothing forced him to keep watching them. His hand hesitated toward the shut-off command, but it retreated without erasing the image on the screen.

"Mid quadrant four. Display map of the closest solar systems."

He found what he needed in seconds. It wasn't the closest system, but it would work fine. Keeping his eyes resolutely downcast, he started calculating his next move. Jumping this close to a sun had scared a Guardian. He'd try doing it again and take things from there.

One of the Guardians was accelerating, no doubt to get in front of the Danaus once more and force it to slow down. The second one was approaching on the nexus side for another attempt at grasping the Danaus. If they managed to capture the nexus, there would be no more jumping, and the game would be over.

Jay started a new evasive maneuver, this time rolling down and to the right when the last time he had angled the ship to the left.

He glanced at the cargo bay image even as the familiar warning fell from his lips. “Jump in—” His mouth was dry suddenly, and he didn’t know what he had been about to say anymore.

Will and Kar were on the floor now, both of them bare-chested, Kar propped on his forearm over Will. They lay sideways toward the camera so that Jay could see everything. He could see their tongues dueling as they kissed. He could see Kar’s hand, wrapped over both their cocks, holding them together as he bucked against Will, as Will arched into him. They hadn’t done more than free their cocks, hadn’t even shoved their pants down, and Will’s hands, hidden beneath the fabric, were kneading Kar’s ass and pulling him closer.

Jay took in a shaky breath and muttered, not caring anymore if they heard him, “Jump now.” He pressed the jump control and forced himself to keep his eyes on the computer screen in front of him. Two more jumps would take them to another sun, smaller than the last but with a warmer surface temperature. The Danaus had better heat shields than the Guardians’ ships. Those were made for speed, while the Danaus was a transport and exploration class. As long as they didn’t stay there too long...

His calculations made, he looked at the time. A few more moments before he could coax another jump from the Danaus. His eyes drifted to the cargo chamber view even as two dots appeared on the radar.

“Pursuing ships have—” the computer started, but Jay interrupted it abruptly.

“Acknowledged.”

Jay had to be imagining it, but the computer’s last word sounded reproachful. He knew quite well that tone of voice coming from Kar. He usually didn’t mind it. But right then, he didn’t want to hear it. He didn’t want to hear Kar at all, didn’t want to know what words his lips were forming, so close to Will’s own.

His fingers crept toward the comm controls, and he increased the sound gradually.

“Are you close?”

Will made a little grunting noise.

“Talk to me, Will. Is this—” He bucked harder against Will. Jay groaned. “—good?”

“Yes,” Will moaned, even as Jay hissed the same word.

This was what his first time with Will had been like—messy kisses, frottage, him trying to pull more than grunts from Will’s reluctant lips. They had been against a wall rather than the floor, and still fully clothed, but he remembered the desire on Will’s face, recognized the way he kept scrunching his eyes and opening them again as though afraid Kar would disappear if he stopped looking.

They kissed again, their mouths meeting harshly enough to bruise. Jay forced himself to look at the computer display. It was time to jump. He pressed the control without bothering to give a warning. He doubted they’d hear him if he did.

Two men on trajectory for an explosive collision.

Star Flyer

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Still mourning the loss of his lover to invading forces, Marr Hingo operates his farm under a dictatorship while keeping his mind—and feet—planted firmly on the ground. Spring arrives right on schedule, bringing with it something completely unexpected—an unconscious pilot from a downed star jet. Unable to bring himself to give up the handsome aviator to searching troops, Marr hides him in the barn's cellar.

The last thing Davan Siedel remembers before ejecting is getting in a couple of good blasts against a Galactic Forces F150. He wakes to find his vague memory of being carried by an angel wasn't far off the mark. A tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed farmer has brought him to safety and is tending his injured leg.

The attraction between solid, earthy Marr and clever, quicksilver Davan catches them off guard—and their sexual union is as sweet as it is powerful. Yet the longer Davan lingers, the tighter the enemy's web grows, threatening their love, their freedom...and their lives.

Warning: Contains hot male/male loving, sweet sexual healing, a down-to-earth farmer who knows how to wield a...plow, a smart-mouthed pilot with fast...jets.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Star Flyer:

Marr descended the narrow steps, tripped and caught himself with a stumbling leap to the ground. He cursed his clumsiness as he held up the glow stick and peered into the darkness. The rumpled pile of sacking was empty. His guest was nowhere in sight. "Are you all right?"

"Still here." Davan's voice floated quietly through the still air. He crawled out from behind one of the wooden vegetable bins, dragging his injured leg. He had a mag-blaster in his hand and a quizzical expression on his face. "I heard a lot of activity up there. What happened?"

"Tandus soldiers searching the area. I sent them into the forest in the opposite direction from where you came down. Had to wait for them to leave before I could come back."

Davan holstered his weapon and blew a long breath. "Thought I was going to have to shoot my way out." His frown returned as he cursed in Antian. "Ob-coms! They've probably got the place bugged."

"I checked and didn't find any."

"I've got a scanner in my flight suit if you want to sweep the area." Davan reached into the bin behind him and pulled out the folded suit. He handed Marr a small device and showed him how to turn on the beam.

For a moment their hands touched and Marr was shocked by the effect the brief touch had on him. His cock grew rigid as if it imagined what the other man's hand would feel like touching it. Marr had stripped

Davan practically naked and wrapped his leg from thigh to heel without feeling a jolt of lust like this. He pushed the feeling away and turned to climb back up the stairs.

“I’ll be back with some dinner,” he promised.

After sweeping the barn from rafters to floor and finding it clean, he hurried to the house and did the same. The sun had set by the time he emerged from the house and crossed the yard.

He moved awkwardly down the steps to the cellar with his arms full of the box of supplies. The glow stick illuminated the cellar, the empty vegetable bins, the dirt floor and Davan. The pilot’s skin was so white he practically glowed, creating illumination of his own. Marr wondered if he was pale from trauma or if it was his natural color.

“I’ve brought more medication for you if you’re in pain.” He set down the box and unpacked it, tossing the water bottle to Davan, who caught it in one hand. “I have clothes, blankets, pillows and a camp bed. I didn’t have time to make dinner, but there’s leftover stew. If you don’t like the stew, I can make something else.”

Marr realized he hadn’t strung that many words together in weeks. Solitude had become such a part of his life without Sasch that he remained quiet even when he was with people. But now it was as if a dam had burst. He wanted to talk. He wanted to find out everything about the young pilot and to tell him things about himself.

Davan accepted the T-shirt he offered and slipped it over his head. It was big for him and the long-sleeved shirt he added on top of it was even bigger. Marr thought it was a shame to cover such a beautiful body. The man’s muscles were taut and toned, making him look like a white marble statue. He imagined sliding his hands over that smooth, perfect skin, warm and alive—not like marble or glass at all. But the young flier also looked really good in Marr’s old clothes. There was something erotic about having a shirt he’d worn against his own body so many times now intimately touching Davan’s.

“I can help you into the pants,” Marr offered, then remembered the splint on Davan’s leg. “Or maybe just cover you with blankets for now.”

“That would be good. I’m a little cold.” From the way his jaw clenched to keep his teeth from chattering, he was more than a little cold. Perhaps he was in shock from the trauma of his injury.

Marr quickly inflated the insta-mattress with a flick of the switch, glad he hadn’t gotten rid of it along with the rest of Sasch’s stuff. He’d never expected to go camping again and certainly didn’t want to be reminded of the times they’d used it together, but instead of giving it to charity he’d left it up in the attic.

After spreading a blanket over it, he helped Davan to lie on top, gently positioning his hurt leg. The younger man suppressed a groan.

“Sorry.”

“No problem. I owe you my life. All I can do is keep thanking you for taking such a risk.” He placed his mag-gun close at hand on the floor beside the mattress.

Marr covered him with one of the blankets and propped a pillow behind his head. He added a quick-dissolving pain tablet to his water bottle and handed it back. Davan took a long drink while Marr pulled the container of leftover stew from the box and apologized for not having warmed it.

“I don’t care. I’ll eat the stew and the container, too. I’m starving.”

It was a pleasure to watch him enjoy the food Marr had made, reminding him of how many solitary meals he’d had in the past two years. His appetite had dulled after Sasch left and he’d lost weight. Neighbors and friends kept inviting him over for dinner as if he might not eat if they didn’t feed him. Maybe he wouldn’t have.

Davan didn’t speak until the bowl was empty then he belched, sighed and handed Marr the empty bowl. “Best stew I ever tasted. You’re a good cook.”

“Or you’re really hungry. It’s nothing special.”

Davan raised an eyebrow. “Not used to compliments, are you? You’re supposed to say, ‘thanks’.” His gaze traveled around the cellar then back to Marr. “Do you live here alone or is there someone else I’m putting in danger?”

“Just me. No family or anything.” He paused, but felt compelled to explain. “There was someone, my partner, Sasch, but he’s gone now.”

Sky blue turned to silver as Davan turned his head and the light reflected from a different facet of his diamond eyes. “Gone where?”

Marr hesitated again. He hadn’t spoken about Sasch to anyone and didn’t know why he felt compelled to tell this stranger. “When Theon was invaded, Sasch went to fight the Tandus. I didn’t want him to go, but he felt he had to. And I stayed behind.”

He shrugged, unable to express the guilt he felt for not going with his lover and trying to keep him safe. But he was no freedom fighter. He was a farmer and someone needed to grow the crops and feed the people no matter what else was going on in the world. He couldn’t persuade Sasch to stay and Sasch would never have asked him to go.

“The resistance was crushed in a few months. He was killed.” The words fell like pebbles from his mouth and Marr realized it was the first time he’d ever said them aloud.

“I’m sorry.” Davan’s silver eyes shifted back to a soft blue. Marr couldn’t take his sympathy and didn’t want to talk about Sasch anymore. He began unpacking the last of the items from his box.

“You’ll need this.” He handed Davan the empty jar he’d brought for him to piss in and set a palm reader on the ground. “Do you like Gindre adventures?”

“I don’t need to read ’em. I live ’em.” Davan winked and a cocky grin twisted his lips. But the shadows under his eyes and sheen of sweat on his brow belied his teasing manner. He looked like he was in pain.

Marr leaned forward and rested a hand on his forehead, a little hot, but not too feverish. He stroked Davan's hair back from his face. It was an absurd gesture of comfort to offer a man he barely knew, but he couldn't resist touching that shiny, white-blond hair. It slid like silk between his fingers and the color shifted from white to burnished gold to a kind of toffee-brown depending on how the light reflected from the fine strands.

Davan didn't pull away. Instead, he closed his eyes and his grin softened to a faint smile.



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