



**BREAKING
CHANCE**
KIM KNOX

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What a girl wants and what a girl needs are sometimes two different things...

For Melissa “Lucky” Chance, another stretch in Ganymede’s ice prison is nothing new. The flash-freeze that’s supposed to destroy her will only leaves her with an insatiable desire for the first hot body she lays eyes on. Except this time, she faces a death sentence. Her only hope of escape lies with the man known as The Butcher.

John Ramius understands the logic behind his conviction as a criminally insane mass murderer. No man should have been able to slaughter over fifty men in as many minutes, but no one sees the underlying curse that compels him to sense—and fulfill—someone’s deepest need. Chance’s skill will free him to kill the Sun-King; he will find no rest until he does.

As they run from the forces of the Jovian colonies, Ramius finds himself temporarily sidetracked, not only by Chance’s relentless desire, but by her underlying, unspoken need. Ignoring it—or his own compulsion to do every wicked thing imaginable to her—is not an option.

Only after all their defenses are stripped away do they discover that their meeting wasn’t by chance. Someone is manipulating them both, and the only way out is the path to their

Warning: This book contains explicit sex, thieves, murderers, a sentient ship and a hero who will give you *exactly* what you need. Not responsible for reader’s sudden compulsion to jump significant other’s bones.

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Breaking Chance

Kim Knox

Dedication

For Jessica, who chased the sun with us.

Chapter One

The metal edge of the cuffs rubbed raw against her wrists. Chance winced and rolled her shoulders, wanting to ease its bite as the bonds pinned her arms tight behind her back. She could flick the cuffs open, of course...but that would probably look bad. What with her being a prisoner about to be sentenced and all.

She slowed her breathing and focused her attention on the proceedings. People packed the courtroom, bodies crushing onto benches and balconies. The stink of too many humans crowded into a small metal chamber filled her senses and the air burned in her lungs. The court had refused to pump in more oxygen or push the scrubbers to maximum.

Yes, that supposedly restricted information flashed through one of the lower sublevels on the data stream. Someone would get a kicking for not securing that data behind more walls. Her gaze roamed over the hot, sweating faces of the colonists. Couldn't have them realising that they meant as little to the authorities as she did.

The stream fizzed through the air. The information network was almost a living thing, alive in every wall, every structure, offering support, knowledge...but it was also a beast that could wrap around the tech in a colonist's head. The state buried the synthetic crystal in every newborn, and all Jovians were at the whim of the outer governor. No one had a choice. They had to obey.

Except for the rare and lucky few. Chance almost laughed at that thought. The *so* lucky—and criminal—few like her.

Those who couldn't physically attend wired their implanted chips into the stream and experienced the courtroom vicariously through the smells, the sounds, the throb of excitement. Screens reflected the prisoners' images in the curve of the ceiling, the rush of tech rubbing as hard against her skin as her metal cuffs.

Chance stared up, finding the image of herself tucked at the front of the railed dock, a small, slender woman with short white-blonde hair and features that just slid out of a person's memory. Well, that had been her main asset. She winced, hating the fact that so many people could see her face now that her image fed into the brains of nearly every Jovian colonist. As a thief, her success relied on her anonymity. Though, of course, they weren't crowding the court to see her. Luck just had her in the wrong place at the wrong time. Again.

No, people hung off the support structures for a glimpse of the Butcher.

He stood no more than a metre from her in the fortified dock. Security shrouded him, by flesh in the form of two burly court officials, and by tech, the gleam of which stung her eyes. John Ramius, former security consultant for the illegal drilling and trading base on Sinope, one of Jupiter's small outer moons. He'd slaughtered the Jovian troops sent in to take back the base for the old outer governor.

News feeds had it that there would be a minute-by-minute breakdown of his fifty-three kills—Chance stopped herself from snorting—hence the crowd. And his looks probably had them feeding in too. Was a mass murderer supposed to be so sinfully attractive? Tall, lean, smooth-featured with a hardness to him that promised he would be a damn fine fuck—

Chance crushed her eyes against that insane thought. Yes, only she would think about screwing the murdering psychopath. But then a pretty face had her standing in the dock in the first place as he—Ben? Bob? Her betrayer's name escaped her—had traded her in for a meagre fifty credit reward. Chance couldn't resist shinies—whether they were trinkets or a handsome face with a hard body.

Other defendants shuffled behind her, pushing her forward as they tried to put as much distance as they could between themselves and Ramius. Twelve stood in the wide dock, set high above the court floor and level with the man who would decide their fate. The chancellor had certainly taken his sweet time getting to the detention base to pass judgement on them all. The new outer governor, Ishaan West, the self-styled Sun King, seemed more interested in plastering every government station with his face in a radiating sun disk than actually running the colonies. Chance almost rolled her eyes. She'd never spent so long in detention.

She flexed her shoulders again, easing the tightness caused by the cuffs. She'd been locked in a metal box on the base for two months, the others standing with her serving a much longer time in remand, and yet more prisoners waited in the court's holding cells. The chancellor had a lot to get through this day.

Usually they liked to ship her off to the ice-prisons on Ganymede within days, dropping her into a pod and reconditioning her. It never worked. They couldn't fix her and whatever she'd done to her implant. They thawed her and the overwhelming urge to screw the nearest hard, pretty body pushed her on the slippery slope to inevitable recapture. Chance tried not to look at Ramius again. And failed. He'd be...wicked.

Her fingers stretched, and the fresh bite of the metal against her wrist broke her thoughts. She shifted her gaze from Ramius to the wizened old man hunched in his red leather chair. West's ubiquitous sun symbol gilded the back of the chair, forming a false, gleaming halo. The chancellor's black robes of office shone with wear, and his flowing, ceremonial wig hung heavy against his narrow shoulders. Dark eyes fixed on the prisoners, and Chance held down a shiver. As well as having a forgettable face and being savvy with tech, she could also read people. Chancellor Joash Connor might look frail, but a demon lived in the man. Her stomach turned over. Her judgement would not go well.

“John Ramius.” The chancellor’s voice boomed over the crowded court, and instant silence fell. Sitting forward, the old man narrowed his eyes, and his withered lips pursed. “You look human enough. From the rumours, I expected at least a fine pair of horns and a forked tail.”

A brief ripple of nervous laughter ran around the long chamber, dropping to silence on the orders of court officials.

Prisoners shuffled and Chance found herself pushed against the backside of one of Ramius’ guards. He turned to glare at her, muttering as he had to twist his head over his shoulder to see her. Chance twitched a smile and gave him a loose shrug, which caused his heavy face to frown.

“I am here today to pass fair judgement on your actions,” the chancellor continued, his voice magnified against the smooth metal walls of the chamber. “You are charged with fifty-three counts of unlawful killing—”

“Not unlawful. Justified.”

Ramius growled the words under his breath. The hatred burning through his voice shot a shiver down Chance’s spine. One of his guards dug an elbow hard into his ribs, and the Butcher grunted. Ramius lifted his chin and focused on the chancellor. A muscle jumped in his jaw. Tension screamed off him, and she ached to be farther away, her body now only inches from his, the hot scald of the securing tech wrapped around him tearing at her skin.

“—and with my first judgement of the day, I pass the sentence of death.” A dissatisfied murmur ran over the crowd and it took several calls to order before they grew quiet again. The chancellor banged his gavel through the unrest. “I am not here to entertain you. I am here as the will of the new outer governor.” The old man’s voice stretched thin with his anger. “This man is a murderer, a butcher—”

“List my crimes!” Ramius’ voice echoed over the walls. “You can’t. Because what I did *wasn’t* a crime. I would kill every man over again. Every single one. What they did—”

He doubled over at the hard fist to his gut, staggering, falling back against Chance. Instinct braced her, and she held him up with her shoulder. Ramius shot a glance at her, and surprise flickered there before a dark shadow dropped over his green eyes. He straightened.

“Your outburst only confirms my words. If the colonies of Jupiter are to have order, then you and others like you must feel the full force of the law.”

He paused and straightened in his chair. The leather squeaked. Chance’s stomach turned. No Ganymede ice-pod for her. The chancellor was out to make an example of them all. The other prisoners stilled behind her. Yes, they’d realised every one of them would face the airlock that day. Shit.

“John Ramius, you will be taken from this chamber to the main external airlock. From there, you will be spaced whilst conscious.” That pulled a sharp breath from the crowd. Spacing him and not drugging him into unconsciousness first? The new outer governor wanted Ramius to suffer. “That is the final judgement of the chancellor of this court.”

The ring of his gavel echoed around the metal chamber.

Ramius, held in the meaty hands of his guards, shuffled down the gangway to the prisoner exit cut into the wall. The screens followed his departure and, as the metal of the doors closed behind him, the wild rush of tech faded from the chamber. The outsiders had seen the man they wanted. Chance blew out a slow breath, the tech-wrought needles under her skin pulling back as they left.

“Next prisoner. Melissa Chance, also known as Lucky Chance.” The official’s voice rose over the shuffle of people as they stood up, left their cramped benches and headed for the exit.

The chancellor’s gavel thudded into its sound block. “Order! Officers of the court, bar the doors. You gathered for a trial, so you will sit it through it all.” Mutterings eased into silence, and Chance found the old man’s eyes fixed on her. All ease vanished. “Lucky Chance.” He sneered and sat back in his creaking chair. “From your long record, that has to be a misnomer.”

“Irony is a wonderful thing, Your Honour.”

Snickers rippled over the crowd and the chancellor’s mouth thinned. “You think this funny?” He held up a clear sheet and his eyes narrowed on it. Her criminal record made for interesting reading. Young as she was—twenty-eight—she’d had a long and varied career. “Your record is astonishing.” His dark eyes fixed on her. “Theft and lascivious acts lay thick on your soul.”

Lascivious acts? That was a new one. Too many times, she’d been caught by the authorities half-naked up against a wall. It was her weakness: the promise of a hard, fast fuck with a man who was easy on the eye. “My flesh is weak, Your Honour.”

A frown formed a hard line between his eyes. “You have plagued the Jovian colonies for thirteen years.” His head tilted, his wig shifting. Chance bit down on a smile. She shouldn’t find the situation funny, but the little black crow with the demon eyes and loose hair made her desperate to laugh. Nerves. It had to be nerves, because she knew what was coming.

“As John Ramius’ fate was a sign that we will not tolerate the massacre of our troops, yours, Melissa Chance, will show that social order is just as important to the new outer governor.” He lifted his thin shoulders and his demon eyes gleamed. He enjoyed his power. “Therefore Lucky Chance, I pass the sentence of death upon you. You will be taken from this chamber to the main external airlock. From there, you will be spaced whilst conscious.”

A hard smile pulled at his mouth as the crowd gave a collective gasp. Chance’s chest tightened. As predicted, they were all going to die horrible deaths that day. Ishaan West was out to make an example of them all and remove them from the law-abiding population. After all, the only way to disable a dysfunctional implant was to kill the owner.

The chancellor sank back into his chair, the gold from the sun-disc curving around his shoulders and head. His mouth twitched. “That is the final judgement of the chancellor of this court. Prisoner, leave the dock.”

The doors opened at the far end of the gangway, and Chance shuffled forward. Her tight prison suit would sting her into action at any delay, and she'd had burning needles lancing into her skin one too many times before to want it again.

"Next prisoner. Martine Callis."

The metal clunked shut behind her. Hard hands closed around her arms, and she found herself almost lifted onto a transport. Security film flashed over her, pinning her head to toe in her bucket seat. The door dropped over the frame of the transport and sank her into sudden gloom. The interior stank of cheap fabric, sweat and fear...but undercutting those scents was another. Chance pulled it into her lungs. A rich scent, laced with spice. Her gaze slid to her right in the dark cabin and found John Ramius staring back at her. Shallow, overhead light cut across his smooth features.

She gave him a sharp smile, hiding her nerves. "Chancellor Joash Connor. No one escapes a spacing." With a quick twist, Chance freed her hands from the cuffs. What was the point of her sitting with her hands trussed behind her back? She wasn't going anywhere now. She eased them over her hips and settled her hands between her thighs. There was enough room under the film for her to rub at the soreness of her wrists.

Ramius fixed his gaze on her fingers. "Get handcuffed a lot?"

"Occupational hazard." She couldn't stop the curve of another smile, her sense of humour easing the tight knot of terror cramping her gut. "And of course, I do it for fun too."

Ramius snorted. His breathing deepened before he spoke, his voice quiet but bitter. "He'll space everyone."

She shrugged and winced as the film stung the edge of her shoulders. "He's out to make an example today. Even of a lowly thief like me."

"The feeds must be immense, all wanting to see me go down. The new outer governor needs to show everyone who's in charge."

"Ishaan West has a captive audience. You're infamous."

"And you don't seem to be concerned by that."

Something in his voice edged under her skin, almost as sharp as the spikes in her prison suit. She sat next to a man who had butchered fifty-three men in almost as many minutes. Soon hard vacuum would tear her apart, and she would die in agony. Her fear of him was pointless. "We're both going to die horrible deaths *very* soon."

"I may want a final kill to satisfy my blood lust."

Chance held his darkened gaze while her heart thudded. The edge to his voice dried her mouth, and she swallowed. "You're trapped under security film."

A smile curved his mouth, and the predatory gleam in his eyes had her terrified and so wet she had to squeeze her thighs together. Hard. That didn't help. The pulse of sudden, unexpected arousal lay thick and hot in her belly. She was insane, she really was.

"I'll do you a deal, Chance. You bring down this security film and I'll get us out of here. Get us off the detention base and I'll pay you."

"Pay me?"

"Do you want the assurance that I wouldn't kill you?" His smile was hard. "You have that too."

"I don't—"

"You're a colony thief. More than anything, you have to be tech savvy. Rupture the film. If we get another prisoner in here, the odds of our escaping drop." His gaze narrowed on her. "Do you *want* to die a horrible death?"

"At whose hands?"

"Chance..."

He growled her name, and her flesh clenched. Yes, only she could want sex right then. "Fine." She closed her eyes. Every citizen of the Jupiter colonies had an implanted chip. On some, like her and—obviously—Ramius, the restrictor didn't take, and, with a little ingenuity, they were practically free to do whatever they liked. Until they were caught. And they were always caught. She'd turned her talent to controlling her environment. And she was bloody good at it. With a faint hum, the security film powered down.

Ramius tested his confinement, grinning when he found none. "Strip," he ordered.

Chance blinked and the fire licking under her skin flared. He couldn't mean...

"Your prison suit. You won't get five metres before it cripples you."

"Right," she muttered, focusing her thoughts on breaking the bond to the tight fabric. She tugged it from her skin, shrugging out of it to expose the overly modest underwear the detention centre insisted upon. She turned her thoughts to his suit, feeling the connection snaking in thin wires over his body. Chance crushed her eyes shut, wishing her tracing thoughts didn't feel as if fingertips ran over his lithe body. With a snap, she broke the connections and let out a slow breath. She held his gaze. "Your turn to strip."

He let out a soft laugh as he yanked at the front of his suit. "Best offer I've had in a while."

Chance tried not to wet her lips and failed. The weak light washed over his chest and taut abdomen. Ramius had kept himself in shape during his long incarceration. She also tried not to follow the enticing trail of dark hair down and to stop herself from staring at the tight, white shorts he wore...and what they covered—

"You really don't seem to have a problem with me being a convicted murderer."

Chance tore her gaze away from his lickable skin. "I'm shallow. I see a body I want." She ran a hand through her short hair, wanting to hate that she really was so superficial...but when presented with a very edible man, that emotion became impossible. "Life is too short not to take what you need."

He pushed out a slow breath, and she felt the sudden rise in tension. "Move to my seat."

She complied, sliding over to the next bucket chair. She hissed as her bare legs brushed his, a brief flare of sharp awareness shooting under her skin. Ramius frowned and dropped into her vacated seat without a word.

Chance held back a sigh. So sex wasn't on the agenda, now and, from the tight line of his jaw, probably not in the foreseeable future. She pushed down her disappointment and stamped sensible thoughts over it. He'd said it himself. He was a convicted murderer.

"Too long without a man. Far too long." The thought burned in her brain. Yes, her choice had been limited. There'd only been her guards or a brief respite from solitary when she mixed with the other prisoners in the exercise chamber. No one had caught her eye...and she'd screw herself before she fucked a guard. She would *never* be that desperate.

"Get ready." His firm, quiet voice broke through her preoccupation with sex. "Martine Callis has a record that the chancellor would want to dwell on...but there are a lot of prisoners to get through today."

Chance stared at him. "How do you know this?"

"Information used to be my job." His shoulders dropped and his fingers flexed against his thighs. "I'll take care of the guards. We strip them and head for the docking clamps. You use your skill to get us onto a ship." His gaze slid over her body, hard, assessing, and Chance suddenly felt exposed and nervous. Men looked at her for sex, nothing more, nothing deeper, and she preferred it that way. She resisted the need to move her arms to cover her near-nakedness. "You're on the small side for a guard, but that can't be helped." He frowned. "Is all that understood?"

She gave him a brief nod.

"Good. Ready?"

Chapter Two

The wing doors of the transport hissed and swung out. Ramius was a blur of movement, leaping from the transport to kick, punch the guards to the floor. She couldn't focus on him...and neither could the practically defenceless guards. Chance winced at the crunch of bone and cartilage, the cut-off grunts. Blood splattered him, the floors, the wall in fine arcs. The four men twitched, lying contorted on the metal floor of the holding pen.

Chance scrambled out of the seat and set about stripping the smaller of the four men. "You're augmented." She grunted as she rolled the heavy man over and pulled his short black jacket and shirt from his back and down his arms. "I thought that was illegal tech."

Ramius shrugged into the shirt he'd stripped and quick fingers pressed the tabs into place. "Under Jovian law, yes." He swung on the jacket and unbuckled the unconscious guard's holster belt. The boots and trousers followed.

Chance concentrated on yanking the boots off her guard. She gagged at the ripe stench of his hot feet, and it took her mind off of what Ramius had just revealed. There was only one planet where augments were legal. That meant he wasn't a grubby colonist. He was elite. From Earth. The holster, belt and trousers followed and then she stamped into unpleasantly damp boots, strapping them tight to her calves. Ramius had already heaved the first guard into his bucket seat. He grabbed the second and rolled him into her chair. Stripping the third and fourth of their weapons, Ramius heaved first one, then the other into the back of the transport and secured them.

"Reactivate the security film."

Chance focused and reconnected the device. A silver sheen shot over the naked men and the other secured guards. Ramius shut the doors to the craft and jammed the helmet onto his head. She did the same, fastening the chinstrap.

Ramius' fingers slid over the butt of the weapon strapped to his thigh. "Ready? Work your magic on the doors."

Chance jerked a nod and followed him to the doors. She tripped the familiar circuits and the narrow panels folded back to reveal the curve of the main outer corridor of the detention base. The doors slid back behind them, and Chance fused the mechanism. Tech was easy to manipulate, and if that were all it took to get off the base, then she would've escaped the afternoon they shipped her in. No, she needed Ramius' brawn as much as he needed her tech savvy.

She tried to match his stride and hoped she didn't look as idiotic as she felt. Nerves twisted into a tight knot in her stomach. Tech streamed around her, pulsed against the exposed skin of her hands, her neck. The visor on her helmet masked the glare of the lights running along the floor and curved ceiling. Too much raw energy swept around her, a side effect of her opening herself to it.

"You have access to the schematic of the base?" Ramius voice was hard, just rising above a mutter.

Her gaze slid to him, shielded by the visor. He knew the schedule of the court...but he didn't have a map out? "You don't?"

"I have the layout. Not the live stream that's beating through your head right now." His voice continued in the same low, controlled tone. "Stay alert." He paused. "Have they found the guards yet?"

"No. Martine is still in the dock. As you predicted, the chancellor is enjoying the chance to harangue her over her record."

Ramius nodded, his hand itching over the butt of his gun. The unfamiliar weight of hers dragged at her leg and every stride made her aware of it. She hated guns. Hated them. Chance focused and the schematic flowed over her brain. More information streamed as she broke into the restricted levels. "The public bays have too much security. Do they think someone wants to break you out?" She couldn't help the grin that curved her lips, and it deepened as the security details for the smaller docking clamps hit her brain. "How do you feel about jacking the chancellor's private transport?"

Ramius glanced at her, his eyes hidden behind the blankness of his visor...but a bleak smile cut his mouth. "It's fast?"

"The good chancellor likes his machines sleek and hot. It's a Maro Vitesse." She gave a slow whistle, and her skin burned. Chance dreamed of a transport with the quality and incredible shiny-factor of a Vitesse. Only the richest could afford its beauty. And the chancellor's had an extra, heart-pounding attraction. "From the log details, he's upgraded to the latest model. Dark energy propulsion." A laugh escaped her. No, she wasn't reading that wrong. "I thought that was a myth."

"Dark energy is no myth," Ramius muttered. "So the new outer governor treats his cronies well." Bitterness coated his words. Ramius and the outer governor had history...and Chance didn't want to know. That was their business. "You can hook up?"

"Are you kidding me?" She knew he glared at her, but that was something else she didn't care about. Her fingers itched, the first sign of her need to put her skills to work. "And I'll take it as payment."

"Really?" He followed her sharp turn down a side corridor. Security doors flashed open, and the dark convex of the docking bay curved away from them. "You need to prove yourself for that payment."

Chance stopped at the first intersection, her hand pressing briefly against Ramius' sleeve. He stilled, the muscles in his arm steel under her light touch. "Something's..." The doors slammed behind them, a second, non-network shield crashing down, sealing them into the convex. The lighting dropped to auxiliary, and the repetitive high-pitched burst of the alarm system beat through her blood. "They know we're out."

“So it would seem.” He gripped his weapons and primed them, the sharp whine setting Chance’s teeth on edge. “Which way?”

Chance focused, her thoughts reaching out for the stream...but she found it thinning, until, with a final splutter, the rush of information surging through her brain died. She cursed and fought to retain what knowledge had flowed through her. “They’ve locked everything down.” Sweat edged her brow, sticking her hair to her skin, and she ached to yank off the bloody helmet. “Our advantage is gone.” She pointed to the left, the narrow corridor curving into darkness. “Connor’s ship is that way.”

“You’re sure?”

Her fingers itched, and not in the good “I’m going to steal something” way. Not having the certainty of the information made her heart thud, but she would lie to and cheat her own grandmother—if she’d ever had one—for her chance to own a dark energy Vitesse. “I’m sure.”

Ramius’ weapons flashed beams of stark white light that cut through the heavy shadow ahead of them. The corridor led into a network of frames and docking clamps. Chance tugged at her memory. They’d docked the chancellor in the first bay, and the logs had a gaggle of his personal guard assigned. Personal guards tended to be all bluster and far too quick to show their clients that they were worth their exorbitant fee.

The two sharp beams of light cut over a turn in the corridor. Data should have streamed over the smooth walls, but the light showed only the gilded image of the radiating sun. Shit, the new outer governor really had plastered himself *everywhere*.

Chance yanked off her helmet and ran her fingers through her damp hair. She pulled in her first clean breath, the air cold and sharp in her lungs. “Connor’s personal guard are...were...stationed outside the Vitesse.”

Ramius fingers flexed around his guns and his shoulders lifted. “How many?”

“From the log, eight.”

Chance tugged at her shirt button, and the chilled air ran goose bumps over her throat and exposed collarbone. The guards would be jumpy and far too ready to cut Ramius down. A Vitesse needed two to fly it, a pilot and a commander. She was about to ensure that they both got onto the transport.

Chance pushed open more buttons on her shirt and tried not to think about what she was about to do. The manic beat of her heart and the sweat coating her spine were obvious signs she was being more than reckless. She’d pushed over into insanity.

He let out a low curse. “All right. Stay...” His quiet words trailed away, and he stared at her. “What the hell are you doing?”

Chance put the helmet on the floor, pushing it to the shadowed wall with her foot. She unstrapped the weapon and handed it to Ramius. “You blaze around that corner and I don’t care what your reputation is, they will cut you down. I need *you* to get off this detention centre.” Her fingers undid her trousers and she

kicked off the damp boots with relief. “I round that corner, wearing practically skin...” The guard’s uniform dropped over the helmet, and she gripped the loose cotton slip in tight fingers and tugged. The thin fabric ripped, exposing her left breast. “And I provide the few necessary seconds of distraction.” She made a wry smile pull at her mouth and denied the fear in her gut. She was bargaining with the Butcher. Her life was insane. “Then you can do your thing.”

He frowned and she had to wonder whether he was staring at her cold-peaked nipple. Bloody visor. “You just plan to saunter around the corner—”

“Saunter, no.” Chance pulled in a tight breath and her itching fingers curled into her palms. She should feel cold, but the adrenalin rush had her skin hot. The thrill of theft could be as addictive as sex, but this wasn’t theft. “Whatever I say, I’m not giving you up.”

“I know how this works, Chance.”

“Good. Right. Glad you do.” She willed herself to walk down the dimly light corridor, the red gleam of the auxiliary lighting staining her skin like blood. “Not a good omen,” she muttered under her breath. Her bare feet were silent on the smooth, metal floor, years of habit making her slink through the shadows.

Brighter light splashed across the floor from a side corridor, and Chance stopped. She ran fingers through her damp hair and pulled at her thin strap, dropping it over her shoulder. Flicking a glance behind her...she found only silence and darkness. Ramius had melted away, making himself ready.

Her heart hammered. It was this, or she died in the vacuum of space. And that made her decision for her. Chance wasn’t ready to die.

She broke into a run, forcing out hard, loud breaths. “Help me!” Skidding into the light, Chance found eight Etais-90s clacking into life. She stared at their wide barrels pointed unerringly at her head and heart. A single Etais-90 would cut her in two. Eight would obliterate her. She didn’t have to act her terror.

Chance’s arms shot up into the air, and she was fully aware of how her exposed breast jiggled. Two of the guards shifted, their fingers flexing around the wide barrels.

“Please...” Her voice quavered and she swallowed. She curled her fingers into fists, knuckles straining white. “I got away from him. Please don’t shoot me.”

A guard with gold epaulettes straightened and eased his weapon down. “Got away?” He waved at his men to lower their guns. The irritating whine faded to silence. The senior guard’s brow furrowed, and he couldn’t keep the scepticism from his hard voice. “From John Ramius?”

She gave a quick shrug and three guards had eyes fixed on her chest. “He’s been in solitary for a year.”

“You took on Ramius?” The senior guard stepped forward, his Etais primed as he swept the corridor she stood in. He found nothing, the sharp beam of light slicing through emptiness. His gaze turned to her again, and disbelief narrowed his eyes. “*You* dropped him?”

Chance snorted. “Even a mass murderer is going to drop when you bite his dick.” A muscle jumped in the guard’s cheek, and the other men winced. “Look, I reckon my helping you capture John Ramius has to be worth something to that old crow Connor. At least enough to stop me getting spaced.” Her gaze flitted over their smart, black uniforms, more ceremonial than the utilitarian and tough uniforms of the detention guards. She played on that difference. “You’re elite. Not the grunts who man this base. Whoever you’re contracted to will have the favour of the outer governor. I win, you win, they win.” She swallowed, but still the senior guard’s stark face formed a hard mask. “Just saying...”

“Where did you leave him?”

“By the security doors. They crashed down, distracted him, and I grabbed my chance.” She pointed into the darkness, stepping back as the senior guard moved towards her. Her arms dropped and she wrung her hands together, rubbing warmth into her chilled fingers. “I didn’t hear him come after me.”

“You three.” He jabbed fingers at three of the men. “Guard the transport. The rest with me.” He grabbed Chance’s arm. “You too.”

She tried to pull away, but his gloved fingers formed steel bands around her upper arm. “Can’t I stay here? He’s the Butcher...”

“You’re my distraction.”

“I heard the rumours about what he did to those soldiers.” She stumbled after him, but the senior guard released her and pushed a hard hand into her back. Bastard was more than happy to use her as a human shield. She staggered and caught herself before she fell. “How’s he going to feel about a woman who bit him?”

The guard laughed. “He’s insane. He probably liked it.”

Behind her, the dull thump of boots echoed over the smooth walls, the rustle of their clothes and the whine of weapons mixing with it. Hell, she could even smell their sharp cologne on the still, cold air. Ramius was sure to hear them...unless of course he’d taken his chance to escape another way.

Her stomach cramped. If he’d run, they’d shoot her. Yes, her life was insane.

Chapter Three

The sharp white light from the Etius-90s crisscrossed the air and floor in front of her. Chance's heart thudded loud in her ears and she felt the pull of cold air into her body with each shallow breath. Damn it, what the hell was he waiting for? She had five of them in tow.

A hard hand grabbed her ankle and dragged her down. She hit the wall. Her scream of terror lost itself in the rapid blasts arcing over her head, fierce blisters of light searing her eyes. Chance curled into a tight ball and wrapped her hands and arms around her head. Men screamed, and the stink of seared flesh shrank her in on herself. Not this. Not again. Terror racked her and she fought down the rising bile.

How shit was her life? Seriously. How the hell had she fallen into it? Her nails dug into her scalp. Oh yeah, her chip didn't work, and her family—no she blocked that thought—*she* could never resist temptation—

A hand dragged at her arm and she shrieked.

"Let's get moving."

Ramius yanked off his visored helmet and let it drop to the floor. He frowned at her, his face thick with shadow and sweat. She let out a breath and willed her panicked heart to slow. Did she really need proof that her life was crazy? She was relieved that the murdering psychopath had survived. Proof enough.

"Here." He shrugged out of his jacket and dropped it over her shoulders. Chance slid her arms into the warmed, thick material, the rough nap itching over her cold skin. Ramius took her hand, hot fingers sending a shiver up her arm. "Come on. The way's clear."

"Clear." Her gut tightened and she tried not to stumble over the twisted limbs of the dead guards. Guilt tugged at her. She'd never killed anyone, never put anyone in a position to *be* killed before. She winced. Not like that. And now she was responsible for the deaths of the men crashed out across the corridor floor, missing faces, limbs, their skin seared from the flash-burn of Ramius' weapons. Memories from her past burst up, of sprawled bodies and how she'd curled into a tiny, terrified ball and pretended to be as dead as those around her...

She bit at her lip and willed away the tightness of her throat. A tear slipped free. Chance scrubbed at her wet cheek. What little she could remember of her past she'd shoved down, kept it locked away...but the raw, sharp stink of burnt flesh ripped it back into the forefront of her mind.

"I killed them, not you," Ramius muttered, dragging her into the splash of light and the wide bay beyond. "Remember, it was them or us."

The three guards assigned to the transport were dead on the floor, flesh bubbled and raw over their chests and faces. Ramius' pulled her in front of him, pushed the holster strap of the Etius-90 over his shoulder and gripped her upper arms. "You need to get us in there."

The hard reality of his hands, rather than his words, broke through her spiralling thoughts. She stared at the clear wall ahead of her, the distorted sleekness of the chancellor's Maro Vitesse locked into the securing clamps. All right, something she could focus on: a lock. And she would have to break it the old fashioned way. "The senior guard would have a—"

"This?" Ramius' fingers lifted from her arm and a second later he held a bloodstained data chip in front of her eyes. "His implanted data core."

She could do this. If she didn't, they, *she*, was dead. *Hard vacuum, boiling saliva, her last air ripping from her throat into the void just before she froze and thankfully lost consciousness.* The hideous death repeated through her brain. No, she wanted to live.

Chance willed her heart to slow and took the data core, wiping it on her jacket. Small and diamond-shaped, it gave off a soft pulsing glow, a glow that faded even as she looked at it. Shit. Its residual energy had only seconds. Then it would shut down and shatter at the death of its owner. She stared at it, focused and the warmth, power of her own chip flowed over the stuttering device and linked with it.

The wall shimmered, thinned and already Ramius was moving, shoving her ahead of him and through the now gelatinous substance.

On the other side, breath exploded from her body. She staggered and fought to stay upright. Chance turned on him. "I had time!"

"Did you?" He wiped the grey dust from her fingers, the last remains of the guard's data core drifting into the cold air. "Now you have to get us on the ship."

She glared at him, but he weathered it with an uplifted eyebrow, and the dark, hard shine to his eyes flushed her skin with fear and arousal. Her exposed breast and peaked nipple rubbed up against the rough fabric of her jacket, and something in his face, the way his gaze trailed down her body, said he knew it.

Heat pooled in her belly and Chance took one step closer to him. The urgency and horror of escape faded away. She wanted nothing more than to fist her fingers in his damp hair, pull his head down and cover his mouth with her own. Her lips burned with the need, her blood pounding. The insanity of what she wanted to do with *John Ramius*, of all men, beat at her temples, but she couldn't deny it.

She pressed a hand against his chest, feeling his heart thud. His hand closed over hers, his fingers tight and still, and something in his eyes, a quick, dark need, had her moving closer. The contact, the touch of his skin against hers, seared through her...but Ramius eased her palm away. She held down a shiver as he released her. Yes, she'd forgotten. Ramius wasn't interested. Not really.

"The ship, Chance," he murmured, the sudden flare of desire gone. She began to doubt she'd ever seen it. "We need to get away fast."

She turned on her heel so that he didn't see her wince. Well, he was a murdering psychopath... That had to be the reason he rejected her. Her wince turned into a reluctant, wry smile. Yes, such an obvious solution.

The hull of the Vitesse swept above her in sleek, dark curves, the sinuous design making her heart miss a beat. "Too beautiful," she murmured and stretched out a hand to tease light fingers over the gleaming hull.

A shiver ran along her arm. "O-h-h." The soft sound left her lips without her consent. "You're an upgrade and a half, aren't you?"

"What is it?"

Chance snapped her head back to look at him. "Quiet," she muttered. "You'll frighten him."

Ramius frowned. "It's a transport."

"With serious neural modifications. Dark energy and this? The outer governor obviously thinks *very* highly of Chancellor Connor." Chance pressed her palm to the warm hull and closed her eyes. She pulled in a soft breath and rolled her neck, willing her body to relax. The ship quivered, and she didn't want to build up any more fear in the terrified vessel.

Her thoughts stretched out, her chip flowing over the smooth hull, caressing it, soothing its skittish thoughts. "*My name is Melissa.*"

"*You shouldn't be here.*"

Chance bit back a smile. She couldn't let the Vitesse feel her satisfaction at breaking through his first line of defence. He sounded young, uncertain, untried. Her thoughts streamed over his, picking at his logs, and she almost winced. Connor had taken a new ship barely out of its mould and thrown him into a long haul. Bastard. He should've treated such a beauty with a lot more respect. "*Are you all right? I know this is your first journey. It can be frightening...*"

"*I wasn't frightened.*"

Chance's heart squeezed. Bravado wrapped around his thoughts, but she could feel past memories, the uncontrolled terror as he ripped through the endless second of a dark energy sphere, the chancellor's pilot thrashing the untried ship. She hoped the bloody pilot lay dead and mutilated in the corridor behind her. "*Of course you weren't.*" She let her smile filter over his consciousness. "*Well, I know the chancellor is due back soon. I should go—*"

"*Go?*"

His panic washed over her, racing through her blood as the ship tried to hold onto her. "*Would you like us to stay?*"

The hull shimmered and a soft burst of air whooshed around her legs. He had opened the ship to them.

"About time..." Ramius muttered.

Chance glared at him and stroked her hand over the Vitesse. "*Thank you...*"

"Drew."

"And this is John."

The artificial mind at the core of the ship paused for a long moment. *"I can't connect with his mind. He's not implanted."*

"No...but he won't harm you." She eased her fingers free and the intimate contact with the Vitesse faded away. She hadn't lied. Ramius was a serious threat only to other humans. "We're in." She jogged up the ramp and stepped into the primary airlock. The decontamination film swept over her skin, little burning pricks of light and energy that made her shudder.

Ramius stood behind her, obviously bearing the same pain with greater ease. Well, hell, he was an elite, augmented human from Earth. Who knew what he could withstand? The opening in the hull melted over, sealing them inside before a new hatchway eased away in front of them. Soft lighting lit a short corridor and, taking a deep breath, Chance followed it.

"We need to move, Chance." Ramius' hard mutter ran her skin with goose bumps. "The detention centre is locked down. They'll find Connor's men...and then it's all over."

"Drew," she waved her hand at the soft, arching curve of the gangway, "this ship, is newly moulded. He should have stayed in dock for another month, at least. Connor and his bastard pilot thrashed him."

Ramius scrubbed his hand over his jaw, his hand rasping against his bristled skin. "He's traumatised."

She sighed. Chance was very aware that they had to run, but demanding it of a scared transport wouldn't get them far at all. At least Ramius seemed to understand her problem now. "He's a very young ship."

"Then do what you have to do."

And he was letting her get on with it. Good.

The gangway ended in a the wide curve of arching transparent shielding, the organic struts growing from the floor in widening ivory to form the solid sheet above their heads. A control panel curved around the hull, instrumentation glistening in the dimness. The air was cool, fresh and still held the sharp hint of the Vitesse's recent moulding.

"Ramius, the command chair." She pointed to the heavily padded seat set back against the bulkhead.

He gave her a brief, almost-mocking salute, and she glared at him, watching as he settled into the chair. Ramius set the Etius-90 on the narrow platform running alongside the chair. His fingers tapped over the smooth surface, and a white sheen glowed briefly over the weapon. She blinked. He'd flown a Vitesse before...which made her mind turn. Who the hell had he been before he became the Butcher?

Chance dropped into the low pilot's chair, the soft foam moulding to her, warm tendrils snaking over her hands, throat, thighs, waist. She twisted against the strange sensation, but then willed herself to stillness. The transport needed bodily contact with her. It was the only way she could fly the thing. "Well, Drew, shall we leave this place?"

“I don’t think...” His soft voice echoed around the command centre, too loud, and Chance could feel his embarrassment through the connecting web of vines slick against her skin. “I’m Chancellor Connor’s ship. I must have errored in allowing you on board in the first place.”

She caught the tendril that slicked back over her hand, gripping it lightly, her thumb rubbing soothing circles into the synthetic gel. “You can make the decision, Drew. John made certain that your pilot stayed on the detention centre. You’re free.”

“I still belong—”

“You don’t belong to anyone.” Ramius’ smooth, reassuring voice eased through Drew’s uncertainty. It forced an unexpected shiver in Chance, and she couldn’t explain why to herself. “No one owns you. They never will. The choice is yours. You’re a Maro Vitesse.”

Something like the first stirrings of pride rippled through the ship’s consciousness, and her connections to its mind thickened. He would take guidance from her, she felt it. “Should we go exploring, Drew?” She couldn’t keep the smile from her voice. The itch in her fingers burned. Chance knew how to fly, but she’d wrapped herself up in junk heaps one journey ahead of the scrapper. The sleek beauty, the power, the sheer joy at the prospect of flying a Vitesse had her stomach tight.

The ship accepted, blending his thoughts with hers. Chance closed her eyes and let out a slow breath as the gleaming hull became her own skin. “All right,” she murmured. Information flowed through her in a delicious stream. Damn, expensive tech felt nice. “They’ve secured the clamps...but that should be an easy bypass for us both.” Her confidence echoed in the thoughts of the ship. “Ready for coordinates, John.”

Chapter Four

Damn it, she had to stop using his first name. Reason told him Chance was trying to keep the ship calm, not to spook it, but still it stabbed at him. The tight ache in his chest made breathing hard and he couldn't focus. No one had used his first name. Not since Chloe... Ramius clamped down any thoughts of her. He didn't need that madness overtaking his brain.

"A small, irregular moon, Erinome." The ship would plot the course. He had faith that Chance would get them out of the detention centre. He'd been waiting for someone like her for a long time. She was a talented thief, but she was an unproven pilot, and that *did* have him worried.

"Understood." Chance's voice coalesced with the transports, and Ramius held down a wince. His shields had thinned and her thoughts, the ship's, leeches into his brain. One of the supposed benefits of being elite: received organic telepathy. And he was one of the really lucky ones. He'd had the curse since birth.

Ramius let out a heavy sigh and sank back into the command chair. Hell, it had been an age since he'd felt the comfort, the ease of luxury. Before the drilling platform, it had been his life. He closed his eyes and forced all thought from his brain. The past was a place he didn't visit anymore.

He would get them to Erinome, the bolt-hole hollowed out of the innocuous Jovian moon. Then he'd begin...and end it.

He refocused on his pilot...and it didn't help that his chair positioned him for the perfect view of her long, bare legs. There was that beat in his blood again and the unwanted stir of his cock. Chance didn't care what he was, that the Jovian government had convicted him of mass murder. Ramius scrubbed at his jaw and willed down the memory of her stripping, of her exposing herself to draw out Connor's personal guard. It would be so easy to push her up against the nearest wall and sink into her soft flesh—

"We're free of the clamps."

Strain threaded through Chance's voice and brought back Ramius' wandering thoughts. Yes, thinking about fucking her was not one of his better ideas. And he'd had more than his share of bad ones.

"Good work." He straightened in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair, focusing on the wide transparency of the shields. "Are your systems fully initialised, Drew?"

There was a pause and Ramius felt a stone drop in his stomach. He was relying on complete novices. Not the greatest plan he'd ever had, but it was all he had right then. "Drew?"

"I'm ready, John."

His mouth thinned, but he stopped himself from ordering the ship to use the correct title. As Chance said, the ship was young...and they *were* stealing him. He could hardly be pedantic. “Then we’re ready. Pilot, take us out.”

The Vitesse plummeted. Engines screamed around them, the hull shuddering and the exterior of the detention centre streaked past. Gas erupted from the console, rolling white and curled across the smooth floor. “What the fu—” Ramius grabbed at the arms of the chair as the down force lifted his body. “Chance!”

“Sorry, I’m not used to this ship.” The words came out of gritted teeth, and she twisted under the close, connecting vines. “If you can do any better...”

“I don’t have an implant. At this minute, I’m thinking about *getting* one.”

Callisto’s pocked, brown surface burst over the transparent shields. The bright, flickering glow of interconnecting StarCluster habitats clawed to the moon’s surface shot past. Warning sirens blared, an automatic system as they crashed through designated space lanes—

“No proximity claxon.” Ramius cursed and fought to strap himself into his command chair. “They know we’re out here. They’ve cleared surrounding traffic.”

“I’m detecting—” Drew’s nervous voice rose above the teeth-jarring whine of the warning sirens...just as the whole ship rocked. Internal systems flickered and consoles flamed red. Ramius tried to contain the worst of the breaches with rapid manual instructions, his fingers flying over the pad of the command chair. But the pilot had the most control. Shit. Connor had wanted to space them alive. Seemed he would get his wish.

“Chance, kill the sirens and throw up his shields.”

“I’m trying—”

“Try *harder*.”

Her cursing burst against the sudden silence. “There,” she muttered. “Siren’s killed.” A white flare flashed over the outer surface of the ship. “And shields. I think I’m getting the hang of this—”

The quick, high-pitched blip of the proximity alarm cut through her words. Ramius’ heart clenched. There, dropping out of the docking convex of the detention centre, burst a fast stream of small craft. Magnified on the sweep of the shield, they displayed as curved fighters. “Is he equipped with weapons?”

“No.” Chance had more control, veering away and finding increasing speed. Nothing could outrun a Maro Vitesse, nothing—an energy charge impacted the shield reducing it by a fifth—except weapons’ fire. “We can outrun them. Drew, come on!”

“Charge the dark energy.”

Chance craned her head back and Ramius met her glare. “I will not take him into that space—”

Another impact, followed by three more in rapid, sickening succession. Ramius pulled in a tight breath. “Drew, your shields are about to fail. It’s your decision. Use dark energy to get us out of here.”

“I...”

Fear radiated from the ship. Ramius knew Chance was right. The pilot and Connor were complete bastards for taking out so young a ship...but he could be, and had been, just as ruthless. “Freedom means making hard choices. It’s your time to acknowledge that.”

“Ramius...”

He ignored Chance’s warning growl. It almost had a smile tugging at his lips. She knew what he was, what he’d been found guilty of doing, witnessed it as he took out Connor’s personal guard...but still she defied him. “Drew?”

The lights dimmed, all power sucked into the outer shield as it formed a hard shell around the Vitesse. The ship had taken the bait. A deep thrum vibrated through Ramius’ body, and he expelled a sharp breath, shutting his eyes. His heart thudded, and the rush of adrenalin forced him to grip the arms of the command chair until his fingers ached.

He hated dark energy. Loathed it.

Chance bit down on a scream, but the false rush of her cries echoed around her, through her, in an endless surge of sound in the twisted reality of a dark energy sphere. Hot needles pushed hard under her skin. The connecting vines of the ship seared her flesh, burning, freezing. This was wrong. She couldn’t contain the agony. Her panicked mind sought the comfort of the ship, a connection in the maelstrom of pain and darkness tearing around her thoughts. “Drew...”

“Almost. Chance, stay calm. Not long now.”

She grabbed at the voice, its strength, and held onto it through the endless, ripping pain—

“Chance.”

It broke like a nightmare, her eyes shooting open onto the calm, quiet command deck of the Vitesse. Chance sucked in a deep, shaking breath, and the pounding of her heart still had her thoughts dizzying. The deep black of space surrounded them, the distant wash of stars forming intricate patterns. Air escaped her. They’d lost them. “It’s done?”

“It is.” Ramius sounded calm, unconcerned, and she hated him. “Drew, where and when are we?”

“We’re approaching the Trojan Asteroids, Lagrangian point L5. Thirty-four standard hours have passed.” A new confidence underlined his voice, and Chance felt his surety. Giving the ship the freedom of choice had eased his terror over using dark energy. Not something she would have done. Ramius had to be very used to enhanced Vitesse. “I recommend landing on the binary Patroclus. I need to regenerate as weapons’ fire has caused severe damage.”

Data streamed over the shields, contracting, zeroing into an image of the dirty ice ball and its companion. A large void sat black against the spattered dirt covering the ice. “Agreed. Take us in there,” Ramius said.

The weak vibration of the engines rumbled through the low pilot's chair, and Chance let her thoughts flow over Drew's, their strengthened consciousness guiding the damaged ship into the space at the heart of the caught comet.

A final dull thunk shook the frame, proof that the ship had set down inside the void. The tendrils slicked back from her skin and Chance wiped at her forehead, her hand coming away damp with sweat. Her body sank into the soft padding of the pilot's chair.

"Move." Ramius held out his hand. His gaze narrowed on her when she didn't immediately take it. "The ship will have to shut down most of his systems. Including maintaining life support. We need to hole up in the auxiliary command."

"How do you know so much?" She ignored his offered hand and pushed herself out of the low seat. Touching him? Far too tempting. "Oh yes, your specialty is information." She stretched out kinks in her spine and shoulders, ignoring Ramius' impatient glare. He still needed her. He'd said it himself: he didn't have an implant. "So when did you fly a Vitesse?"

He took her arm, fingers bunching the tough fabric, and tugged her towards the open doorway. "I'm paying you to fly this ship, not to ask dangerous questions."

"You're paying me *with* this ship."

The smile he turned on her was sharp, wicked, and that flare of arousal chased through her blood. The run of the rough jacket against her exposed skin sharpened the sudden pulse of need. Damn, he really was too pretty.

"Drew has to want you."

Chance gave him an equally sharp smile. "He'll want me. I'm cute."

His mouth thinned and his fingers flexed around her arm. He pulled her through the open doorway and into the narrow corridor beyond. "No, you're not."

"I saw *you* looking."

Colour flushed under his cheeks—a strange reaction for a psychopath—but then his darkened eyes fixed on her. The intent in them dried her mouth. She had to have imagined the embarrassed burn under his skin. "You want men to look." A door rolled open in the smooth wall, and he pushed her forward. Soft light chased around the curve of the ceiling and illuminated a basic console room, instrumentation glowing, its hum working under skin. The door slid back, a series of clunks and a long hiss securing it. He released her arm. "You're offended when I *don't* look."

Chance smirked at him and toyed with the fastening on the long jacket. Her head tilted. They had hours until the ship regenerated, after all. "I'm offended that you *only* look."

"Believe me, you don't want to take it further." Ramius turned towards another door, the dull metal drawing back as he approached. The lights in the room beyond eased over the ceiling and walls, revealing bunks, a table with chairs and the metal curve of a food processing unit.

Chance couldn't help herself. Her gaze trailed the length of his lean body. She would regret not stripping Ramius out of his stolen uniform and discovering the promised perfection of his body. "Why wouldn't I?"

He sank onto one of the lower bunks and placed the Etuis on the smooth blanket beside him. He worked the collar of his shirt loose, sliding fingers under the thick fabric to rub at his collarbone. "What do you get from sex?"

A laugh escaped her. "Have you been chatting with my psychs?" Her palm ran over the metal counter of the food unit and it flared into life, the ordering column and service hatch humming. Her thoughts streamed over it and a mug appeared. She breathed in the sharp tang of fresh tea. "They often asked me that. Jovian morality at work." She smirked at him over the rim of her cup before taking a sip and almost sighing. "It annoyed them that I enjoyed it."

His eyes narrowed and Chance had the uncomfortable feeling that he could see the thoughts in her head. She shut her implant, withdrawing all connections from the surrounding equipment. No one could hack a closed chip...though, of course, he wasn't implanted. Chance relaxed her shoulders. She was safe.

"They caught you more than once because of a man."

Chance shrugged. "They were there, I was there. I don't waste opportunities." She waved her mug at him. "Which brings me very nicely back to you."

He unstrapped the first of the guards' guns from his thigh, strong, quick fingers working the buckles free. He didn't look up. "That would be a bad idea."

She leaned back against the counter. The overhead bunk blocked the soft light and drew heavy shadows over his face. She couldn't read him...and that unnerved her. John Ramius was an enigma. Her head tilted. "You've been in solitary for a year and you're turning me down. That makes no sense."

He glanced up and a ghost of a smile touched his mouth. "I *am* registered as criminally insane."

Chance grinned around the rim of her cup. He'd changed the subject. "You're not interested in women?"

"Oh, I *like* women," he murmured, and the undercurrent, the carnal promise in his voice, had her pulling in a short breath and her nipples aching. "But as I said..."

"You have a kink?"

Ramius snorted and his fingers paused as they unfastened the second gun. "Yes, you could say I have a kink."

"All right, *now* I'm curious."

He met her gaze, and the warmth of humour left her. The cold face of a killer held her, all sense—possibly pretence—of banter gone. Her heart thudded in the endless, silent seconds and, damn it, his dark side tugged at her. A light shone in his eyes, and Chance recognised the quick surge of lust, felt it echoed in her own flesh. His change was palpable. Had her curiosity sparked something in him?

“Don’t be.”

“Why?”

Ramius pushed himself up and her heart gave an excited jump. She was crazy, she was, to continue to push him. He was the Butcher and she’d seen the grisly evidence of his work...but... He was closing the distance between them with predatory grace. Blood pounded in her temples and her body ached. Sex made her feel alive, and every part of her burned right then.

Ramius took the mug from her lax fingers and put it behind her. His body blocked her and he gripped the edge of the counter, trapping her. Chance held his shadowed gaze, finding the familiar curl of lust and something else she couldn’t name. He leaned in, his mouth almost, *almost*, brushing her lips, and she drew in a sharp breath. “I don’t play games, Chance. I can’t.” His mouth moved and his whisper stirred the shell of her ear. She swallowed. “I’ve thought about fucking you, hard, fast, up against the nearest wall.” He paused, and in the short silence there was only the pounding of blood in her ears. “*I know* that’s the way you want it.” Ramius leaned in closer. “But I won’t ever do that.”

Her fingers curled into her palms, nails digging sharp into her skin, and she held her hands tight to her breastbone. If she pushed her hands against the hardness of his chest, felt the thud of his heart, the warmth of his skin...she would *have* to nip at his tempting earlobe.

His scent, spiced, seductive, wrapped around her. He was so tempting... Chance teased with the tip of her tongue, tasting his skin. She moaned. John Ramius tasted even better than he looked.

“Chance...” The soft growl forced her fingers to clutch at his shirt. “Stop now, and I won’t take this further.”

His words sounded reasonable, but she didn’t miss the need thickening his voice. A need that also spun through her blood. She nipped at his earlobe and his hiss burned her skin. “I think you will.”

Ramius glared at her, his green eyes darkened. The slight parting of his mouth teased her. She moved before she realised, her lips covering his, tasting his bottom lip before she pressed harder and their tongues touched. The contact surged through her and, with a soft groan, Chance deepened the kiss.

He didn’t resist...but he wasn’t playing either. Frustration pulled her back. She glared at him. “Damn it, Ramius.”

He gave her a wicked grin, and the need to shove him back against the nearest wall rushed her. Her hands fisted the front of his shirt. Ramius glanced down before finding her gaze again. “You need to control how I react to you. But that’s not going to happen.” The shine to his eyes had her wanting to kiss him again. Hard. “No. You’re going to give your control to me.”

Chapter Five

“I thought you didn’t play games?”

Ramius ignored her. “Take off your jacket.”

Her skin burned and nervous fear sank into the pit of her stomach. No man had ever had charge of her. She decided who and when and how. She always had. She always would. The sudden surge of anger formed a fist that tightened in her chest. “No.”

Ramius tilted his head, loosened her hands from his shirt and stepped back from her. “And that’s your final decision?” He watched her as his fingers slid down his shirt, as the material dropped over his shoulders. “No?”

Chance’s throat ached from the words she held back. What the hell was he doing? Minutes before he’d glared at her and said sex was a very bad idea...but now he was *stripping*? She couldn’t help the stray glance she stole down the smooth perfection of his chest, but she lifted her chin. He *was* insane. “So your kink is control?”

“Maybe.” He dropped the shirt over the nearby chair. “But you don’t want to give it to me.”

“What’s changed your mind?” Her eyes narrowed on him, and she tried not to think about where his fingers were, how they unbuttoned the front of his trousers. “Wasn’t this supposed to be bad?”

The heat in his gaze gripped her. “It’s too late.”

Chance blinked. “Too late?”

A wry smile pulled at his mouth. “I have to give you what you need.” The smile faded and something in his face spiked her heartbeat: determination. “And I will.”

“All right, now you’re freakish.” Chance ran her fingers through her tangled hair and eased away from the counter. “How long did the ship say it would take to regenerate?”

“Long enough.”

His gaze speared her as his body turned. It almost seemed involuntary...but then he moved towards her and her breath caught. Ramius planted his hands on either side of her, trapping her against the smooth wall. The need for him fired in her blood, and her own fingers skimmed the front of her jacket. She pulled apart the tabs, and cool air brushed her skin. What was she doing?

“You don’t want me to stop.”

“No.” Chance sucked in a quick breath and tried to stop her fingers from opening the jacket all the way. But they wouldn’t obey. She shrugged and the heavy fabric dropped from her shoulders, causing a shiver to run over her exposed skin.

Ramius’ finger traced over her bare shoulder, a slow, deliberate slide. His eyes held her...and something else. Something she didn’t know how to describe, but Chance couldn’t look away from him and she wanted everything promised in his darkened gaze.

“Do you give control to me?”

Fear ran hot through her veins. “Couldn’t we just...”

“No.” His firm, quiet denial tightened her chest. He moved closer, his bared torso temptingly close to hers, so close the heat of his skin warmed her. With each shallow breath, she pulled in his rousing scent and her will to deny him faded. “You need me to do this.”

“How could you even think...?”

He traced the line of her strap as it dropped over her collarbone. “Take off your slip.”

Chance followed the path of his finger and eased the thin fabric free of her shoulder. The other strap followed. She pushed the coarse material down, exposing her breasts, belly, hips to Ramius’ hungry gaze. Uncertainty had her fingers curling hard into her palms. She felt so much more than simply naked before him. “What now?”

Ramius stepped away from her and the cooler air prickled her skin. “That bunk, there.” He pointed expectantly towards another low bed and Chance padded across the small room.

What was she doing? She’d already had more conversation with Ramius than she’d had with most of the men in her life. Especially the ones she had sex with. Chance pinched at the bridge of her nose, still not quite believing that she was agreeing to his control. The word cramped her stomach. How could he think she needed this? For a man to take everything away from her; for her to surrender—

“Lie down.”

Chance stopped at the edge of the bed. Ramius dropped heavy hands on her shoulders, their heat bleeding into her cold skin. He leaned in and his lips brushed her ear. She sucked in a breath and shivered.

“Your mind must stay quiet and still,” he murmured. “And that’s another order.”

She blinked—she had to be wrong—and the spark in her mind brought with it a sudden rush of adrenaline. But...what the fuck? “You’re *telepathic*.”

His sharp smile curved against the shell of her ear. “Maybe. Now stop thinking.”

Chance couldn’t leave it. “But organic telepathy is a myth—”

Ramius growled, low, deep, and her chest hitched. “Since you can’t be quiet...” He turned her and, before she could protest, his mouth covered hers.

All thinking stopped. Completely. He was ruthless, thorough, his fingers tight in her hair and a hand snaking down her body to grip her backside. Breathing became incidental. He pressed her hard to him, her

hands, arms, trapped against his chest. There was only his tongue, lips, teeth, the heat of his skin. Ramius wrapped around her thoughts, senses, and she lost herself in him.

His satisfied moan flowed through her and the kiss melted into something terrifyingly soft and seductive. Ramius' hold eased and her fingers and palms slid down over his chest, exploring the smooth, hot muscles, her fingertips light, teasing. Her heart thudded. Sex was fast, wild, a brilliant moment of blazing release. She didn't do this, this...tenderness.

Her breasts pressed against his chest and the slow, liquid fire chasing through her veins made her shift her hips against his. The rough fabric of his trousers scratched her sensitised skin and she moaned into his mouth, wanting more, wanting to find the usual rush.

Ramius' lips brushed her jaw, her cheek, insane little kisses until he found the shell of her ear. "I control this," he murmured, his breath hot against her skin, the soft growl searing her. "The pace, what happens. Everything. It's what you want me to do."

"Why?" Her forehead fell against his arch of his throat and her lips tasted his skin. Chance closed her eyes at the need to lick, kiss and bite him that powered through her...but he wanted to go slow. She did *not* need this. It was killing her. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Solitary confinement does strange things to a man."

"You're telling me."

"No, I'm showing you." He lifted her chin and his darkened eyes held her. "Now get on the bunk."

"Ramius..."

A deep line formed on his forehead and the intensity of his gaze drained her words away. He eased his hands from her body, folded his arms across his chest and waited.

Chance bit at her lip to keep her silence. She glanced down and didn't miss his erection straining the black fabric of his trousers. He wanted her. Wanted her as much as she wanted him...but he didn't move. Chance let out a slow sigh and sank onto the bunk. She looked up at him expectantly. Ramius lifted an eyebrow and she stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Right, he wanted her to lie down.

Feeling too self-conscious, Chance stretched out on the hard mattress. Her hands rested against her flat belly, then slipped to her sides and teased the smooth blanket. This was insane. She didn't know what the hell to do with her hands. Nerves ate at her stomach and heat burned in her face. Panic stirred at the edge of her thoughts. "I'm not having fun," she muttered.

"This isn't about fun." His trousers dropped and he stepped out of them and the solid military boots, kicking the bundle of cloth and leather to one side. His thumbs hooked into his white shorts. "This is about what you need."

She wanted to snort at his statement, but his shorts had joined the pile of discarded clothes. She'd finally gotten Ramius naked and his lithe perfection, the glow of the lights over his honey-brown skin, eased away some of the panic. Her gaze followed the line of dark hair to his hard cock. "Yes."

Ramius laughed and ran his palm along the length of his cock. “You get this only if you’re good.”

“You’ve got to be kidding—”

He pushed open her thighs and knelt on the bed between her legs. Ramius filled the cramped space of the bunk, shadow lying thick across his body. His silence, regular breathing, the heat of him so near and yet not touching her, not the way she wanted, twisted through her. Curses rose, vile ones, burning her tongue. His fingers teased over her calves, playing, exploring, and the riot of unexpected sensation forced a gasp. “You deny your sensitivity,” he murmured.

“Very deep—”

“I didn’t say you could talk.” His thumb chased down the length of her inner thigh and she squirmed under his feather-light touch. “Now, for the final time, be quiet or I’ll stop and I *will* get dressed.”

Her teeth shut with an audible snap, bravado to disguise her returning nerves. Everything showed that Ramius planned to tease and play with her. His tongue found the sensitive skin at the back of her knee and Chance jerked her hips off the bed.

“Still.”

His growl swept warm air over licked skin and the raw sensation shot to her pussy. Chance closed her eyes and tried to deny it. She failed. He would lick her, eat her, and that thought had a hot tension curling tight in her belly. She’d never allowed a man that intimacy. Never.

Ramius’ tongue licked a wet line down her thigh as he settled onto the mattress, edging closer until his breath brushed over her mons. Chance fisted the smooth blankets, her nerves in riot. She felt too vulnerable, too open, and the urge to kick out, to protect herself—

“You need me here.” His lips brushed the pale curls on her mons, his tongue-tip teasing the crease of her thigh. Chance almost squealed. Ramius gripped her thighs, pinning her to the mattress. “If you didn’t, then I wouldn’t be compelled to eat you till you screamed.”

The first long lick of his hot tongue drew a whimper from her. The heavy, hard grip of his hands on her thighs, holding her, controlling her, tightened the first threads of orgasm low in her belly. It made no sense, she didn’t want it, but the clever flicks, licks...and then his insane, soft little hums ripped a low groan from her mouth.

Her body shook and Ramius’ fingers bit into the firm muscles of her thighs as her hips pushed involuntarily against his hungry mouth. Fire seared under her hot skin. She couldn’t fight the power of it any longer. Her own short breaths dizzied her thoughts, and the quick, satisfied laps of Ramius’ tongue broke her. Out of nowhere, orgasm exploded over her in a wild, shocking surge, arching her spine, blinding her.

She cried out, hardly recognising her own voice, before her body, damp, sated, sank back to the hard mattress. Chance caught her fingers in her tangled hair, shivering as Ramius dropped wet kisses against her

inner thigh. “That was...” Words failed her. She couldn’t remember coming so hard in her life before. Ever.

Ramius kissed her belly, sliding hot hands over her hips and waist as his mouth explored its way up her body. He teased the underside of her breast and Chance sucked in a surprised breath at the riot of fresh need surging through her flesh. He smiled against her skin. The intimate, affectionate gesture tightened her heart.

Chance wanted to push him away, the old panic surging. He was too much. No one got close to her and she didn’t get close to them—

“Sh-h-h.” Ramius pulled her close to his chest, wrapping his arms around her. The solid thud of his heartbeat under her ear and the security of his hold made breathing too hard. Chance shut her eyes and willed air to find its way into her lungs. “Relax, Chance.” His fingers stroked along her spine, and he pressed a kiss into her hair. “I want what you want.”

“What sick game is this?” She hated the weakness in her voice, the hesitation.

“No game,” Ramius murmured, teasing his fingers over the curve of her hip. “Your subconscious was screaming. I couldn’t ignore it.” His warm fingers brushed light over her backside and his voice softened. Ramius held her to him, and the hardness of his cock pressed into her belly. “Didn’t want to. It’s been a while since anyone wanted—”

He stopped and, for a brief second, Chance almost felt more words before they faded back and became elusive, unreal. “What?”

“Tenderness.”

The word broke her. She buried her face against the soft down of his chest and hoped the tears didn’t leak onto his skin. Cautious, nervous, Chance slid her arm over his waist and pulled him into an ever-tightening hug. “I don’t get close to people. They die.” She admitted it on a heavy sigh and closed her eyes, breathing in his spiced scent, mixed with sweat and her. “Happy?”

Ramius ran fingers over her skin until he lifted her chin. Shadow carved his unreadable face. “It’s my curse.” His thumb traced over her lower lip. “I have to give what you need.” He leaned in to kiss her, his lips cool and tasting of her. “Taking control, being gentle with you.” He deepened the kiss before he murmured, “I’ll have to pay for this luxury.”

“I’m a luxury?” Nerves cramped her stomach. She was in new territory. Men were for having sex with, or using in a myriad of ways. Not for talking to, not for having the ability to slide under her skin and make her want more than a quick fuck.

Ramius buried his face in her neck, and his chest expanded as he breathed her in. “Yes, you are.”

Chance ran her fingers over his smooth, hot skin, feeling him shift and sigh under her light touch. John Ramius made no sense. He didn’t deny killing the men on the trading base. Hell, he’d taken out

Connor's personal guard in a matter of minutes...but with her, he'd been gentle, considerate. Because, even unconsciously, that was what she needed from him? "Who wanted you to kill, Ramius?"

He laughed, the warmth brushing against her skin and making her shiver. "You're sharp." His lips chased along her shoulder, little nips and licks flicking sensation to her tightened belly. "Sharper than the psychs." He grinned against her collarbone. "They couldn't even work out I was telepathic."

"So who..." Butterfly kisses covered her breast, and she arched into his clever mouth, her question broken. Damn him. "Ramius?"

His tongue curled over her nipple and he met her gaze before his eyes dropped away...but pain lurked there. "Chloe Van Der Zee." He let out a heavy breath, and a shiver rippled over her skin. "The administrator of the Sinope base."

Something lurked in his voice—regret, longing—and Chance's gut twisted. She wanted to laugh at herself. And there was the reason she didn't get close to anyone: stupid emotions. The first twists of jealousy rose through her chest, but she crushed them and ran her fingers through the wildness of his dark hair. "You were her security consultant."

His tongue teased under her breast, and she moaned. Damn, that raw sensation was still a surprise. "I was more than that."

Chance's fingers fisted in his hair. Shit, she had to get a grip...and not just of his hair. She willed her fingers loose and stroked strands back, the slow, sure glide calming her. But still, unease pushed through her and the alien need to offer comfort came with it. She winced and made herself say it. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

Ramius smiled against her breast and pressed a soft kiss. "No more talk of Chloe," he said, and she felt the pain and steel under his words. He looked up and the dark promise in his eyes hitched her breath. "Time to give you what you need."

His mouth took hers in a ruthless kiss. He pulled her tight to him, holding her, wrapping his strength around her. The heat of his tongue, the intoxicating mix of his taste and hers, rioted through her flesh. Her hands slid over his hips, his buttocks, and she shifted her body under him. Chance wanted him inside of her, but in a long, slow, delicious tease until she arched under him and screamed his name.

"Now you're getting it." He growled the words against her mouth. His hand brushed between them and she gasped as his knuckles brushed over her pussy, the sudden contact electric. He gripped his cock and the torment of the blunt head sliding slowly over her slick flesh made her cling to him...but she didn't protest.

Ramius was in control and, even in so short a time, she'd learned how much pleasure that could bring.

"Yes, a very quick learner."

He eased into her body and his groan mixed with hers. His mouth found hers again, his kiss thorough, melting as he sank deep. Chance wrapped her arms around him, shifting her hips, her thighs, to settle him

hot against her flesh. The stroke of his tongue against hers, clever and intoxicating, had fresh coils of need tightening in her belly. Damn, the man could kiss.

The easy thrust of his hips scattered her thoughts. There was only her, him, his incredible, *incredible* mouth and the slow slide of him into her body. Already the first flutters of orgasm pushed her hips harder against his, her hands grabbing at the smooth muscles in his back. She wanted him, harder, faster, but Ramius didn't increase his rhythm.

He was inexorable, in complete control of her and of himself, and that knowledge arched her spine, forced her hard against his slick skin. Chance clung to him as the flutters strengthened, as the slow, slow waves of her release pushed up from her belly to surge through her flesh. She mewled and Ramius swallowed her increasing cries, driving the intensity, the power of the orgasm. Then it hit, smashing over her thoughts in a rush of heat and light. She screamed into Ramius' mouth, her fingers curling into shaking fists, her thighs gripping him.

He ripped his mouth from hers and came with a low, strangled groan, pulling her into the tightest hug. Burying his face in the curve of her shoulder, he released a long, slow sigh. "Thank you," he murmured, rolling onto his side and taking her with him. He tugged at the loosened blankets and covered them both.

He stroked a slow hand down her damp spine, and Chance, she hated to admit it, needed to snuggle into the softened down of his chest. His heartbeat, slowing into a solid, even rhythm, soothed her. She closed her eyes and breathed in his scent as the events of the day hit her tired and sated body.

A weary smile tugged at her mouth. She wanted the ship to take a little longer to repair itself. She pressed a kiss just above his nipple and worked herself back into an alien closeness with him. He kissed her tangled hair and her heart skipped.

Waking up to John Ramius? That could prove to be dangerously addictive.

Chapter Six

Ramius brushed Chance's white-blond hair from her face. Asleep, all of her attitude fell away and her youth shone through. Her loneliness, her craving for affection, had screamed at him and he should've resisted, but what she wanted tugged at his own needs. He sighed and she shifted in his arms, murmuring softly before kissing his collarbone and settling back into sleep.

His chest tightened and for the first time in a long time, he felt like a complete and utter shit. An ancient pain lurked in her past, he could feel it, shrouded by layers of protective time. That drove her, drove everything about her...and he'd let his mind connect with it, push him into becoming what she needed, what *he* needed to be after the horror—

Ramius shut his mind to his own past. Chance moved restlessly against his tense body, and he focused on finding peace and letting himself relax. He kissed her forehead, lingering over the taste of her skin, the soapy scent of her hair, before he willed himself to pull back. He eased free of her body, and the suddenly chill air forced a shiver.

Chance curled around a pillow and muttered something before dropping into a deeper sleep. A smile pulled at his mouth, but then it faded. He couldn't drag Chance into his fucked-up life; well, anymore than he had already. Ramius turned to the small shower room, needing to wash away the scent of the detention cells, the dead guards—and, reluctantly, the sleeping woman—from his skin.

He lifted his face to the showerhead, the cool water needling his cheeks, forehead, chin, and for a few seconds he let himself enjoy the luxury of a real-water shower. "Enough," he muttered and snapped off the flow of water. He grabbed a towel and dried his skin. He hadn't escaped and killed those guards to enjoy Chance and a shower. Ishaan West still lived. And from the second West had caught Chloe and made an "example" of her, Ramius had sworn to kill him.

He blew out a slow breath, feeling the old surge of hatred and the need to kill rising through him. The imperative to kill West still held him over all others. His palm swiped over the communicator on the wall set beside the metal sink. "How long until your repairs are complete, Drew?"

"I will be in full operation within the hour, John."

He didn't miss the hint of need in its synthesised voice. "Good work," he said. "Let me know when we're ready to go."

"Yes, John."

A bitter smile curved his mouth. He really should've stopped that familiarity, but the ship was young, inexperienced. He'd let it slide a while longer.

He stared into the wide mirror fixed over the sink. Spots of sharp white light bleached his skin, and he wasn't imagining the weariness in his own gaze. A year since they'd all died, men and women he'd called good friends butchered, all for the insane idea that their actions could change the fact that the Jovian outer governors enslaved their workers. He'd followed Chloe, believing more in her than in her cause. He scrubbed at his still-smooth jaw and the old pain formed a tight fist in his gut. And in the end, he'd failed her, seen her die at West's hands.

Ramius straightened as old memories threatened to swamp him. He ran his fingers through his damp hair and smoothed it into place. Time to get dressed and break the news to Chance that he'd have to change their bargain. He winced. She would not take it well.

"Chance, time to get up."

Light fingers brushed over her hair, and she bolted upright, her thoughts stabbing outward. Find the offender's implant and slap it. Hard. Nobody touched her without her permission—

"Always wake up that way?"

John Ramius. The previous few hours rushed through her brain. Escaped death on a now broken Maro Vitesse...and she was naked...because she'd had sex with him. Her cheeks burned and strange modesty gripped her. She pulled the smooth blanket over her breasts. She could tell herself it was due to the cool air, but then she would be lying. Ramius made her feel...gauche.

Pulling in a tight breath, she swung her legs down to the metal floor. It pressed cool against her bare soles. "Yes, I do," she muttered. She scratched at her scalp and squinted at him as he leaned against the counter, a mug in his hand. Damn it, he was dressed. Though the crisp, black uniform of one of the chancellor's guards did look almost edible on his long, lean body. She crossed her legs under the blanket and ignored the increased ache low in her belly. "How long was I asleep?"

"Just over an hour."

She gave him a smirk; she couldn't help herself. "Had to wake me, did you?"

Ramius' eyes narrowed and for a brief moment, desire darkened his green eyes...but then it faded. He drained his mug and put it on the counter. "The ship has almost finished repairs." He lifted his chin and Chance's gut tightened. The hard, uncompromising Ramius had reared his head. "And I need it. Our deal is off."

Chance rose slowly to her feet, her fists holding the blanket tight to her breast and hip. Her head tilted. "Off?" The quiet tone belied her increasing anger. He'd used her. Did he seriously think one fuck would make her roll over and play nice?

"I escaped for a reason. I have unfinished business with the outer governor."

"This is my ship now." She held his gaze, finding no emotion in the man, no regret, no concern, nothing. "And you need a pilot."

"I can find a pilot." He straightened and pointed to the open doorway. "Shower." A sharp smile tugged at his mouth, and he patted the chair in front of him, piled with clothes. "Connor has some things small enough to fit you."

"Funny." She glared at him. "I am not giving up this ship."

"I plan to discuss my problems with Ishaan West. In person. With knives." He let out a slow breath and his fingers drummed against the butt of the weapon strapped to his thigh. "I'm giving you an out, Chance."

Her gaze dropped to the gun and fear ran hot through her body. "So you're going back on that deal too?"

"What are you talking about?"

She tugged the blanket tight around her body. Her knuckles ached and her fist pressed hard into her breastbone. She willed strength into her voice, because he would not see her weak. "The promise not to kill me."

Ramius' fingers stopped drumming and he stared at her. "I'm not going to kill you."

"Yeah? How am I different?"

He ran his fingers through his damp hair. "This is what I have to do." A muscle jumped in his jaw. "You understood that."

Chloe Van Der Zee. The dead woman's name was almost a curse in her mind and Chance hated that Ramius had twisted her into thinking petty thoughts. "You're still, what, *beholden* to her?" She stopped herself from biting her lip. Fuck, now she even sounded needy, clinging. Chance lifted her chin. "This is my ship. Payment for getting you off that detention base. I'm not giving him up."

"This is not open to discussion. Shower, dress, and then we'll stop at a base. You disappear. Then when my business is complete, the ship will find you."

"And you expect me to believe you?"

"You have my word." With that, he left the room, the door to the auxiliary command sliding shut behind him.

"So that's just fine, then?" Chance shook her head. Now she was talking to thin air. Damn, the man had her normally practical and cynical brain in a complete mess.

She glanced at the open door to the shower room. It made sense to wash and dress. Then she'd have another round with Ramius.

Chance stepped into the shower cubicle, and the clear door wrapped around behind her. Water splashed over her body, and she sucked in a quick breath at the sudden hot rush against her body. She

rubbed a hand over her wet belly, and the suds foamed under her palm to slide down her thighs. She let out a long breath. Oh, this would be very pleasant when the ship was hers, a real water shower every day.

Her fingers formed a fist against her skin.

Ramius was insane—she snorted—hell, of course he was. He had the documentation to prove it. How did he think he could get to the outer governor? He was one man, even if he did have the reputation of being the Butcher.

For a long moment, Chance let the water cascade over her hair, and she scrubbed at her scalp, foaming lather. She found it hard to reconcile his reputation with the man who had shown her so much tenderness. Was it all about his telepathic ability? He became whoever the particular woman needed him to be?

She let the water run and it eased away the suds from her hair and body. “And doesn’t that make me feel special. I’m an emotionally stunted woman with a craving for dominance.” Chance snapped off the quick flow of water and grabbed a towel. She scrubbed her skin dry and padded back to find the clothes Ramius had hunted out.

She held up loose, black trousers, the fabric smooth and soft under the rough edges of her fingers. Chance pulled them on and shook out the long, black tunic. She pressed her nose into the embroidered cloth and inhaled. It smelled of grass and open air, and not a bit like she imagined the little demon chancellor to smell. Putting it on, she then cinched it around her waist and worked the cool fabric against her bare skin. Its softness, after months of wearing the needle-sharp prison uniform, was a ripple of bliss.

Ramius had also found a pair of leather slippers that wrapped around her bare feet like a second skin.

Running her fingers through the strands of damp hair, she headed for the command room...and found it empty. “Drew? Is the command deck available now?”

“Yes, John is running though a systems check. So far, my repairs are perfect.”

Chance grinned at the lurking pride in his voice. The intelligence learned fast. “Good job, Drew.”

“Thank you, Melissa.”

Chance followed the short corridor back to the open command room. A soft glow shrouded the room, dropping the high arch of the transparent ceiling into deep shadow. The icy void they sat in shone white from the exterior lighting, revealing craggy outcrops and deep hollows. Ramius sat in the command chair, his face stern as he tapped out a series of orders. Data streamed in a thin, shining band in front of his chair, and he focused on it.

“Is he flight-ready?”

Ramius glanced up her. His gaze skirted over her clothes, but no response showed in his expression. “Practically. There are some anomalies—”

“John, Melissa. Something has appeared on tracking. I think it’s a transport.”

The central curving shield flowed with data and fixed on an area of space beyond the Trojans. Stars rippled and shifted—

“Shit, shit, shit.” Chance bit at her bottom lip. There, moving in a slow slide against the deep black of space, was the curved bulk of a Jovian patrol cruiser. Drew delineated the edges of the vast ship and a fist closed tight in her chest. “That’s not good.”

“*I have more patrol cruisers on tracking.*” Soft blips echoed and a glowing silhouette formed around two—no, three—more transports.

Ramius glanced at her before turning his attention back to the visual. Drew’s soft blips and the marking out of yet more transports had her nerves straining. “Can you hack into their information streams at this distance?”

Chance blinked. “No.” She paused. “I mean they’re patrol cruisers.” She focused on the largest of the slow-moving bulk cruisers and, to her surprise, her implant skirted the smooth hull. Ice burned against her flesh and she sucked in a quick, sharp breath. Shit, it hurt. She pushed, fighting the tough shielding, but it seared her nerves and she couldn’t penetrate— “Fuck,” she muttered and pinched at the bridge of her nose. “And that means no, I can’t fight through to the streams. They’re wrapped in granite. With granite icing.”

“Worth a try.” Ramius gave her a bleak smile. “They’ve had thirty-four hours to search—and I *am* assuming they’re hunting us.”

“You.”

“*Us.* Drew, show her the wire.”

Chapter Seven

Chance stared at him, hating his calm control. “Shouldn’t we be, I don’t know, *running*, rather than getting me to watch the news?”

“Watch the feed. You need to understand that you have to hide and hide well.”

“You’re still not seriously going after West?” A short bark of a laugh escaped her. Ramius’ expression didn’t change as he concentrated on the information stream flowing over his command chair in a rush of glittering silver bands. “You are? Even with every ship he has out hunting you—”

“Us,” he said.

Chance dragged her hand over her face. “You’re crazy.”

His mouth twitched. “You knew that already.”

“Yes, yes, I did.” Her stomach twisted into tight knots and her well-honed instincts screamed at her to run, to get the hell away from the circling ships. But it was pointless arguing with him about her right to the ship. It needed to be space-ready—she watched Ramius’ quick fingers darting over the smooth panels—and he obviously knew what he was doing, so she should, for the moment, leave him to it. “Drew. What do I have to see?”

“*May I, Melissa?*”

The ship’s tentative brush against her implant brought a smile to her face and eased the anxiety twisting her insides. His politeness was engaging. “Thank you for asking. Go ahead.”

The sudden surge of information hitched her chest, and she fought to breathe. Her fingers curled into fists, nails digging hard at her palms...until she could control the fast current of data pouring into her brain.

The familiar jingle of the central Jovian news service filled her thoughts, the plastic beauty of its cyber-generated newsreader itching against her implant as it stood before a gleaming sun disc. She’d always hated his smug tranquillity. The priority banner flashed around him in glaring red, and she felt the attempt to grab her implant, to force her chip to respond to the emergency. But as always, it slicked away, and Chance snorted. Yes, she was so lucky to be one of the few immune to the chip’s programming tech.

Ramius’ image flashed on the screen. “*John Ramius, the Butcher, murderer of fifty-three loyal Jovian officers, today escaped the Callisto detention base with the help of this woman.*” Chance’s face slid over the stream to sit beside Ramius’ image. She winced. It was her detention mug shot, all wild hair, anger, and her shirt ripped and blood-stained from trying to beat the crap out of the Ben-Bob-whoever, the man who had sold her to the authorities for fifty credits.

“That is *not* a good picture.”

“I know,” Ramius muttered, and a touch of humour slid into his voice. “Were you having a good time, Chance?”

She ignored him.

The synthetic newsreader’s smooth voice rolled on. “*Melissa Chance, thief, vandal, prostitute and Ramius’ long-time accomplice, is as dangerous as the Butcher himself. Do not approach either of these individuals, as they are both armed and deadly. Already twelve loyal Jovians have died at their hands.*”

The newsreader paused, his smoothly plastic face solemn. “*Governor West is offering a large reward for their immediate capture.*” A new stream opened, but Chance didn’t follow it. Instead, she shut down her implant to the ship and opened her eyes.

Rising anger roiled in her stomach. *Prostitute?* But the other accusation stabbed harder. “I’m your long-time accomplice?”

Ramius was frowning at the data stream, a deep line forming in his smooth brow, but he answered her question. “West creates his own reality. Did you notice there are now twelve men dead? The guards I locked in the detention transport. He had them killed.” He swore softly and blew out a heavy breath. “We have a problem.”

A weight dropped into her stomach. “They’ve found us.”

“No.” Ramius sat back in the command chair and pushed his palm over his hair. “The shielding on this Vitesse? We could go face-to-face and they wouldn’t see us.” He looked away from the stream to her. “No, Chancellor Connor was eager to show off his prize and took this ship out far too early.”

“And...? I’m not in the mood for cryptic, Ramius.”

“They didn’t shear the umbilical, so Drew isn’t fully moulded, isn’t fully independent.” He frowned. “He’s in a test cycle and needs finalising. The next jump will take us back to the ship yards.”

“Shit.” She cursed Connor and his obvious pride and caught her fingers in her hair, pressing her nails against her scalp. “Then...we sit here until they’ve scanned and moved on. After that we can—”

“You don’t get it.” Ramius broke into her fast words. “No matter what we try, Drew will lay in a course for the ship yards.”

“Fuck.”

“Precisely.”

“Then... What?”

Ramius laughed. “We let him.”

Chance blinked and the feeling that he really was insane crept over her again. “You’re happy to appear above the skies of Europa?” She waved her hand at him. “Of course you are, the shipyards are in the same hemisphere as the governor’s residence. You want to introduce yourself, with knives, to Ishaan West.”

“Yes, I do.” His mouth thinned. “I would have preferred you on a station, safe, hidden...but that’s not an option now.”

“You know it’s suicide.”

“I made a promise. I won’t go back on it. I can’t.”

“Your stupid telepathic imperative.” Chance straightened her shoulders. They had no escape from the transports and if they had to go to Europa, she was far safer sticking with Ramius and following him into the governor’s residence than going it alone. She winced. As crazy as that sounded. “Fine.”

“Fine?”

Ramius’ disbelief followed her as she dropped into the pilot’s low chair. Connectors slid warm and smooth over her body as Drew sought contact with her, giving guidance to his flight systems.

“What do you mean, fine?”

Chance twisted, letting the vines snake under her tunic and find her bare skin. She really didn’t understand his loyalty to a dead woman. Chloe Van Der Zee wouldn’t appreciate him killing and dying for her...but it was what he had to do. “We have no choice. And I’m more likely to stay alive with you than without. For however short a time that’ll be. So...let’s fire up the ship and get it over with.”

“And I’m the certified one,” Ramius muttered.

She craned her neck to stare back at him. “I don’t let the past bind me.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw and shadows flickered in his gaze. They cleared and a wry smile tugged at his mouth. “The past binds us all, even you.” His smile faded. Chance’s skin prickled at the sudden intensity in his green eyes. “Especially you.”

“Get out of my head!”

“I’m not in your head. I’m a receiver...but your past is streaming from you.”

“Then shut it out.” She ripped her gaze from him and focused hard on the glare of the cruisers on the shield curving over her. He wouldn’t rifle through her past. Chance had locked it away...and it would stay locked. “Drew. Are you ready?”

“I won’t have command of my systems once I enter the range of the Europa shipyards.”

His thoughts touched hers, brief, nervous. He knew what awaited him. The techs would want to know how he’d broken his commands, ran and cooperated with thieves. They would take him apart to do it. Chance stroked warm, soothing words over Drew’s consciousness. *“You are an incredible ship. I’m proud to know you.”* She willed strength and honesty into her next words. *“And when John has done what he needs to, we’re coming to get you. Remember that, hold on to that thought. I promise. We won’t leave you behind.”*

“Promise?”

His youth tugged at her heart. *“I swear, Drew.”*

He was silent for a short moment, emotions swirling. Chance allowed him the time he needed. Ramius had let him make his choices. So would she.

"I'm ready. Are you?" Engines vibrated through the soft fabric of the pilot's seat, and Chance opened her implant to the full touch of the ship and melted into the frame of the Vitesse, taking it on as her own body. *"Dark energy propulsion is a bitch."*

Chance smirked. *"You've been spending too much time with me. I'm a bad influence."*

The ship's soft chuckle warmed through her, deepening her grin. *"Yes, you are, Melissa."*

"Confirm shields." Ramius' tight voice broke over their exchange. "Are we ready to engage the dark energy?"

"Ready," Chance said, settling back into the heavy padding of the pilot's chair and closing her eyes.

The cold of space brushed in a promising whisper against her skin, and she felt the sudden claustrophobia of the ice and dirt-thick cavern. The need for open space, the freedom of vast emptiness after the tightness of the tiny asteroid, filled her. Chance wasn't certain whose feeling it was; she suspected most of it belonged to Drew. He was a thoroughbred, designed for wild speed.

The dark energy shielding thickened around her. Chance's heart bounded. *"Ready, Drew?"*

"Will I ever get used to this?"

Her own nerves echoed in him and she forced them down, needing to project a calm authority. The ship relied on her for guidance, learned from her. A smile curved her mouth. She never expected to be a role model. *"We both will."*

She thickened the dark energy shield and there was a brief pause, almost as if the ship sucked in a breath before he engaged the engines.

Everything she knew vanished, lost in blackness and pain. Needles burned under her skin, but she breathed past them...just as she had for her prison suit. Calm, she was calm in the endless second that ripped through her.

She tried to reach out for the ship, wanting to reassure him, but real space ripped around her in a screaming rush. Sweating, her body still in riot, she dragged air into her lungs. Damn, that was insane. "What—?" Ramius tugged at her arm, pulled her free of the slippery connectors and dragged her from the primary command.

"Automatic guidance has taken him over. We've lost him."

Chance's stomach dropped. She didn't want to admit how much the ship had literally sunk under her skin. She twisted to stare out of the clear shields instead. Jupiter hung heavy in the pitted blackness, and the StarClusters of the Europa shipyards gleamed on the cracked surface of the moon. Thick lines of cruisers, governmental traffic and private transports streamed around them in the space lanes, and the Vitesse followed them down. "How do we get off?"

Ramius dragged her into the short corridor and through another door into a wider space. He palmed a door and pushed her in first. The panel gave a soft hiss and closed over on the small, spartan washroom. A single light emitted a soft glow from the ceiling and spread over the metal toilet and washbasin. Another light flickered on around the narrow mirror. Chance backed into the cramped space between the toilet bowl and the basin, her spine hitting the metal wall, and stared at Ramius. “Why are we hiding in the toilet?”

“The techs will board the ship, then we simply mingle our way off.”

“Simply?”

Ramius dropped to the floor and settled himself against the smooth metal wall. “I suggest you sit.”

Chance rolled her eyes at him and slid down the wall, thankful that her small frame could squeeze into the tight space. She shifted her arse against the hard floor and winced. “You really think we can wander off here?”

“Off the ship, yes.” His eyes sparkled with amusement, and Chance wanted to thump him. “That’s the easy part.”

“What did I get myself into,” Chance muttered. Ramius didn’t reply, and so Chance closed her eyes and shut down her implant. Her ability to control her chip meant she could sneak in almost anywhere, sensors blinded to her bio-signs. But that left Ramius. “Does your lack of chip make you invisible?”

“Some equipment is blind.” His green eyes fixed on her and it was as if a warm breeze stirred her skin, lifting hairs and forcing a shiver. Something in that moment seemed...odd...about him and it was suddenly hard to focus on him; the sink, the wall, *anything* was simply more interesting...

“But I can do that.”

Ramius’ voice burst over her, and Chance gasped. “What the hell...?”

He gave her a short smile. “I can disappear.”

Chance scrubbed at her face to try to stop the rush of unease. His ability was freakish. “That explains a lot,” she muttered.

The floor vibrated under her, and Chance braced herself against the shuddering metal walls. Was that deliberate on Drew’s part? Europa’s thin oxygen atmosphere shouldn’t have posed any problem to his heavy-duty shielding. She resisted the need to open herself to Europa’s stream. They would be hunting, searching for any evidence of their whereabouts...and she was not about to give them away.

“We’re about three minutes from docking,” Ramius said as if reading her mind—she winced—which of course he was.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Sitting in a washroom?”

“Deliberately obtuse. Very helpful.” The ship dropped and Chance yelped, slamming her hands against the walls to brace herself. “We get the idea, Drew,” she muttered. Chance refocused and refused to let the shaking of the ship distract her. “You have the ability to get away. Hell, you’re from Earth. Any

crimes committed out here wouldn't matter. You go home and the Jovians would have no chance of extraditing you."

"I have to give you what you need. I told you, it's my curse."

"I don't want you to do this."

He stared at the floor. "But Chloe did. She wanted them all dead, wanted West gutted." He closed his eyes and a brief flare of pain creased his forehead. "I made her that promise."

"Ramius—"

His head snapped up and the hard killer lurked in his green eyes. Chloe's imperative gripped him. "I want it. He cut her throat and laughed, licked her blood from his fingers as he let her drop to the floor. My only regret is that the bastard can die only once."

Chance ignored the tightness in her chest, the fear of him that had nervous sweat clinging the smooth fabric to her skin. "And who will you be after?"

Ramius stilled then he blinked. "After?"

He'd obviously cared deeply for this Chloe, and she had used his skill against him. The band around her chest squeezed. Shit, full-blown jealousy and anger towards a dead woman was breaking out. "When her revenge is complete?" She heard the waspishness in her own voice, but she couldn't stop it. "Did she *want* you just as a killing machine?"

Ramius' mouth thinned. "You didn't know her."

The words slid cold, hard, under her skin, and with them the violent shaking of the ship stopped. Dull thumps echoed, evidence of the clamps securing the Vitesse.

His stern gaze dropped and he let out a slow breath. "We've landed. They'll board in a few minutes." He pushed himself back up the wall and Chance did the same, bracing herself against the metal sink. His gaze found hers again. The hardness had faded, but the professional mask he wore cut more. "Follow me. Stay close. And don't try to open yourself to the streams on this base. They'll find you in a heartbeat."

"Understood," she murmured.

Ramius unstrapped the holster from his left thigh and handed it to her. Her fingers closed around its warmed smoothness and she made a point of not touching him, though the temptation to ease her fingertips over his was strong. He'd given her what she needed. Now he belonged to another woman.

She cinched the belt tight around her waist and settled the heavy weapon against her thigh. "I'm not good with guns."

"It's a last resort." He primed the Etuis before he glanced at her. The slow whine filled the silence, and she wanted to believe something flickered in his eyes. Wanted to believe it was concern. "Protect yourself, Chance."

She had to wonder who he was when he wasn't driven by the desires of others...and surprised herself by wanting to know that man. "I promised Drew we'd come back for him."

A smile twitched across his mouth. "Something for after."

Her heart squeezed and the insane hope rose within her that he'd been listening to her thoughts rather than her words. She held down a wince. This was why she'd never done the relationship thing. They were distracting and irritating as hell.

"They've breached the outer door," Ramius muttered. "Remember, don't rush, don't—"

"Don't tell a thief how to do her job."

Humour lightened his features. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Seconds ticked by with Chance uncomfortably aware of how close she stood to Ramius. His scent threaded through the cool air and twisted her thoughts back to the warm press of his skin against hers, his mouth, his fingers—

"Chance..." The soft murmur of his voice prickled her skin and she shivered. "Focus, please."

"Distracting you, Ramius?"

His darkened gaze slid to her and the heat there curled her fingers into her palms. Her nails dug into soft flesh. It stopped her from stroking her fingers over the smoothness of his jaw, pushing herself up on her tiptoes and sinking her teeth into his perfectly luscious lower lip. Deepening the kiss would inevitably follow. She'd pin him to the wall, strip his uniform and lick her way down his delicious body, until her mouth—

"Chance!" Her name was almost strangled, and he blew out a tight breath. His shoulders straightened. "Taunting a telepath can have consequences."

She grinned at him. "Promise?"

He glared at her and flexed his fingers around the stock and barrel of his Etuis. "They're on the command deck." He frowned. "The scans are saying the ship is empty...and they're trusting that."

"But that's good, right? It means Jovian troops won't storm the ship and search every hiding place."

"It doesn't make sense..."

"Be thankful for some luck. I know I am."

Ramius gave a soft, bitter laugh, then paused. He frowned. "Get ready. They're heading this way."

Chapter Eight

Chance stilled her mind. Playing was over. She had to let Ramius do his thing and concentrate on getting herself off the ship in one piece. She sucked in a settling breath and brushed her thoughts over her implant to make certain she'd locked it down. The tips of her fingers itched again. Moments like these made her feel wired, alive...and hell, her only other option was a spacing. Every second she was alive was a bonus.

Ramius lifted his hand. "Ready?"

She gave him a tight nod. "Ready."

He palmed the door open and stepped out into the gangway.

A gaggle of sharp-featured techs strode past, the air charged with the streams of information surging into their implants. It itched against her skin even with her implant cut off from the surrounding tech. Chance lifted her chin, straightened her shoulders and began the bluff to get herself off the Vitesse.

Ramius strode ahead of her by half a pace. She flicked a glance at him and the familiar push for her to look anywhere else overtook her. It was a gift she envied, and it offered her some protection as it drove attention from both of them. From the front, at least.

Techs scurried past, oblivious. A single guard, wearing the green and gold Jovian uniform, stood at the end of the short corridor leading to the exit. He looked young and, from the insignia banding the sun symbol at the top of his sleeve, he was a corporal. Ramius' unease sat in her gut. They thought the Butcher had been on the ship. The scanners said the ship was empty, but no one trusted tech that much, not enough to post a single, inexperienced guard.

Ramius stopped. His fingers gripped her arm above the elbow and then he carried on. He kept her close to the smooth coolness of the wall, blocking her body with his. The young guard pinched at the bridge of his nose and pain creased his forehead. Instinct forced him to prime the weapon he held, his knuckles white around the stock. Their feet were silent. Chance held her breath as they eased past the guard. Her heart pounded and the wild rush she'd chased for too many years surged hard in her veins. Silent curses ran through her head. Sometimes she could have too much of a good thing.

The narrow exit loomed, and Ramius stopped. Their ship sat on the lowest level of the shipyard floor. The bay beyond bustled with life, clear levels curving up into Europa's thin atmosphere. Umbilicals tied new ships to their platforms, hulls still glistening from recent moulding. Information streamed, thickening

the air and jabbing at her skin, its sharp tang mixing with the heavy scent of hull synthetics. And people were everywhere. Absolutely bloody everywhere.

She bit back a curse. They were so dead.

“Relax.”

The word burst through her scattering thoughts, and a gasp escaped her. It sounded like Ramius, but wasn't that impossible? He was a receiver. Didn't that mean he couldn't broadcast his thoughts? Chance tried to fix her gaze on him...and failed. So...she was going crazy. What was new?

Ramius tugged her across the bay floor, weaving between distracted techs, administration staff and absolutely no guards. “This is wrong. This is so wrong.”

“Yes, it is.” Ramius' reply snapped her head to him and for a moment the haze broke and she caught a glimpse of his stern face, made stark by the sharp light. “West is playing with me.”

“He wants you to get to him? That's insane.”

Ramius shrugged and his obscuring filter kicked in. It was suddenly easier for Chance to look anywhere else than at the man who still gripped her arm in tight fingers. She kept up with his smooth, fast pace until they found the tube system. The clear-tubed hub sprouted connections out across Europa's arid landscape to the nearby StarCluster habitations, through the transparent, heavy shielding curving around the vast open space. The air pulsed heavy with the tube propulsion systems and the pounding of human traffic. The hub was heaving with people.

Escape? Not a chance in hell. Shit.

Ramius pulled her back into the safety of one of the disused side tunnels. Shadows shrouded them, and she let out a slow breath. “I can jack us into one of the tubes.”

“No.”

His filter broken, she glared at Ramius. He stared out over the great curve of the hub, the clear shielding stretching to cover the terminal. White-skinned tubes fired up and shot off, cutting speed-blurred trails across Europa's dry surface.

“So what are we going to do? This is the only way out of the shipyards.”

His silence and the tightness of his jaw screamed that he didn't have a better plan. People surged around every tube terminal, officials wiring them into each emptying carriage. From the frenetic activity, it appeared they'd met with a change of shift.

“All right. Jacking.” He scrubbed at his mouth, his jaw. “But not here.”

“This is the main transport hub—”

“West is playing games.” Ramius turned down the tunnel, away from the hub. Shadows thickened around them, and the silent air tasted metallic, harsh. “And if he wants me in the residence, then he'll have given me an out.”

Chance kept up with his fast pace. She hated the fact that she had no clue where they headed. The temptation to open her implant to the streams of information wired into the walls was sharp and hard to resist. She had to get her information any way she could. At the moment, Ramius was her only source. “And that would be?”

“What?”

Her mouth thinned. “The out?”

“There’s a secure hub under this StarCluster. Dignitaries use it. West knows that I know that.”

Chance caught her fingers in her hair, a knot of fear tight in her gut. “This is all a trap. We could...” Her mind scrambled for its own out. “Hide. Then wait till they’ve finalised Drew, grab him and get out of here.” She hoped her unconscious wasn’t screaming what she wanted again. Hell, she could almost feel the words forming in her mouth. *Stay with me.* She sucked in a quick breath. “I could drop you off on the base, moon or planet of your choice. How does Earth sound?”

Ramius stopped, and her fear sharpened. The dim wash of light from the widespread ceiling globes dropped heavy shadows over his perfect face. His eyes narrowed. He lifted his hand and a finger traced light over her jaw. “You don’t have to come with me.”

His touch burned against her skin, and the insane need to kiss his palm fired through her. She’d never wanted anyone else, never had a need to be with them. The desire to stay with Ramius no matter the cost scared the shit out of her. “You or hiding out from the guards. I’m looking at equal odds of staying alive.”

Ramius winced. “Chance...”

“Regretting something?” She willed a grin she didn’t feel, needing to pull out of the mire of emotions dragging at her. “Don’t let that hold you.” Her fingers teased over the back of his hand. The contact tingled, and she spread her palm against its strength, her fingers curling. A flicker of desire in Ramius’ eyes pulsed hot, liquid need though her flesh. “Let me.”

He stepped closer, forcing her back against the smooth coldness of the metal wall. “Now’s not the time.”

Her lips brushed the warmth of his palm, her tongue-tip teasing. She grinned at his sudden indrawn breath. “I never miss an opportunity.”

“I noticed.”

The gruffness of his voice sank under her skin, and she couldn’t help herself. She pressed her hips to his and found him hard. Excitement flared. “What to play?”

Ramius’ hand eased around her neck and his mouth drew too close to hers. “A promise for after?” he murmured against her lips. “I will...” His eyes gleamed, and the flare of desire hollowed her stomach. “...devote hours to you.”

“Really?”

“Hours.”

Chance shivered and she held his gaze, willing herself to believe there would be an after, an after where she would get a certain augmented man deliciously naked. “Then it’s time to get moving.”

Ramius pulled a chaste kiss from her lips, quick, teasing, and Chance let out a soft moan. He paused. “Save that for after too.” He slid his hand down her shoulder, arm, until he found her hand. “Let’s go.”

The air chilled and its metallic taste sharpened. Ahead, the dim light turned into a wall of blackness. Ramius primed his weapon, the soft whine echoing over the metal walls, and led the way. The thickened shadows disguised a narrow staircase. “Arm yourself,” he muttered, waiting while she pulled her gun free of its holster.

Chance flexed her fingers around the barrel. She hated guns. Already her palm had a slick of sweat coating it. “Ready.”

“Have you fired a gun before?”

His voice came out of the darkness, but she knew he was frowning. “No,” she said.

Ramius was silent. “Stay close to me.”

Which was easier said than done as she negotiated the thick shadows obscuring the twisting stairs leading down below ground. The thin soles of her leather slippers let her toes curl and grip the metal edge of each tread. Her fingers skirted the wall, tips tracing over the cold metal. The urge to open her implant, have the walls splash with information that delineated her path, gnawed at her. She was blind, only a hint of grey light marking out the slow, sure movement of Ramius’ body.

She bit down the need to ask questions. A low thrum stirred the air, breaking over the soft sound of their breathing. Her heart thudded. She hated not knowing what she was walking into. It was a situation she’d never faced.

Ramius stopped and in the dim, grey light, he held up his fist. Chance stilled.

“*Stay.*”

She wasn’t imagining it this time. That was Ramius’ voice in her head. All right, she knew nothing about telepathy at all. She also obeyed him, watching as he followed the curve of the stairwell and disappeared. Her heart thudded, her fingers burning with their familiar itch and making her too aware of the gun in her hand.

Chance listened to each breath, letting it calm her, forcing her to find focus. She tried not to think about what Ramius was doing when he scouted ahead. Still...her ears strained to hear something over the dull thrum of distant generators. Ramius would clear a path, becoming the efficient killing machine because that was what Chloe wanted from him. Her stomach knotted and she winced. Ramius belonged to a dead woman and would until the outer governor died.

Silent obscenities ran through her head. Was his attraction to *her* simply a part of his curse? She winced and fought to crush her sudden unease. Jealousy, insecurity, really were bloody annoying.

“Chance.”

She jerked up her gun, her finger slick over the trigger...until her brain processed Ramius' voice. Letting out a shaky breath, she eased the weapon down. "Sorry."

"Nice reflex." She heard the humour in his voice. "The way's clear."

Chance, her hand guiding her as it traced over the curving wall, followed him down. The shadows eased back to reveal a machine-carved cavern. Two enormous tubes stretched its length and disappeared into the far rock wall. A single white-skinned carriage sat in the nearest clear tube. Chance's gaze darted around the open space. There was no sign of blood splatter, no scent of it in the air, no scuffmarks disturbing the dusty floor. If Ramius had removed any personnel, he'd done it well. "Was it guarded?"

"No." Ramius ran a hand over his dark hair, smoothing it into place. "But there's a problem."

She padded towards the tube and stretched out her hand to almost touch the smooth, transparent surface, skimming over the governmental crest with West's carved face at the centre of a radiating sun. Bloody man was everywhere. The live tech sparked out to her palm, ripe, strong. Her thoughts brushed over her closed implant, making ready to open it and jack the tube.

She glanced back at Ramius and frowned. "What? This is easy."

"And that's the problem."

Chapter Nine

Ramius' fingers closed tight around her wrist and stopped her from pressing her palm against the clear wall curving over the tube carriage. "He wants to be certain you're with me." He let out a slow breath. "And I can't do that."

"So how...?" He lifted his Etius-90 as he pulled her back. The rising whine of its charge filled the cold air. Chance stared at him, her heartbeat ramping. He'd been a security consultant. Didn't he know how the tube system protected itself? "That is *not* going to work. It'll reflect the force right back at you."

Ramius frowned and lowered his weapon. He let out a hard curse. "Fine. You jack it. But when we get to the governor's residence, you're to stay in the tube, understand?"

Chance's stomach knotted. She wasn't a child or an idiot. She pulled her wrist free of his grip. "I have managed to look after myself for a while now," she muttered. Pressing her hand against the curve of the shielding, she opened her implant. The first rush of the stream surged over her senses and forced a gasp. Everything glowed, offered possibility... She clamped her will on the need to explore a myriad of avenues. It was addictive.

The clear surface of the tube ran thick with information, and her senses stroked over it, subtle twists unlocking its security systems.

With a soft sigh, the hard surface under her palm softened and disappeared. The white skin of the carriage rippled and thin lines framed a doorway which, after a series of low thunks, swung inward. Scents of fresh grass and just the hint of apple took the hard, metallic edge from the air.

Chance sucked in a deep breath as Ramius pushed her into the carriage. "Close your implant," he muttered, palming a panel beside the open door. It groaned and eased seamlessly back into place. "Done?"

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him as he stalked the pale leather-lined walls, searching every shadow and behind every partition. Chance let the anger boil. Nerves and fear pushed her reaction against his over-protectiveness, she knew that, but still the knot in her gut grew tight. "Done," she said. She'd disconnected her chip the second the doors had groaned open. "So who drives this thing?"

Chance waved a hand around the smooth curve of the interior. There were no obvious controls in the plush arrangement of white seating curving around one wall. A rounded wall in the far corner marked it out as the washroom, and there was a food unit tucked opposite the seating. Nothing jumped out at her with her implant shut... She groaned.

Ramius dropped his Etuis onto an immaculate chair. "What?"

“It needs a pilot.”

“This just gets better,” he muttered. “You’re sure?”

Chance gave him a sharp smile. “No. But it makes sense. Especially if West wanted to guarantee me turning up with you. For whatever reason.” He ignored the hint for more information. Chance flopped onto a deep seat, the material moulding perfectly to her body. A sigh escaped her. She wanted to point out that, really, they should think about getting the hell off Europa and not follow this suicidally stupid path. But she didn’t, and the reason twisted her insides tight.

She wanted Ramius. And if she were to stand any chance of a—she shied away from the word relationship, it just weirded her out—a chance with him, then he had to purge what was left of Chloe Van Der Zee from his brain.

Yes, she was probably as insane as him.

“So,” she stretched and flexed her fingers, “shall we go?”

Ramius cursed. It had all seemed so simple in his detention cell. Find a petty criminal—the Jovian colonies swarmed with them—and use their tech savvy to get him to the outer governor. He had *not* bargained on Melissa Chance. She’d slid under his skin and hell, he *wanted* to be the man she needed. He could live with that man, not the monster Chloe had created. He bit back further curses. Fuck, his focus, his loyalties, were shot.

Chance still stared up at him, waiting for the go-ahead. Her clear, dark gaze held him, expectant, unafraid. He shoved his hands in his pockets to resist the temptation to stroke her cheek, to let his thumb run over her bottom lip. Her taste, her need for him, tugged hard...but he shoved it back. Chance was a luxury he couldn’t have.

He had no choice but to put her in danger, and it stabbed a spike in his gut. “Do it,” he said.

The broad, flat curve of the lights over his head surged, the light dazzling. The low thrum of the activating tech flowed around him, brushing against his senses, but not strong enough for him to grip and manipulate himself.

He sank down next to Chance, keeping a distance between them. The gentle stream easing against his thoughts told him they were moving. Nothing else did. He sank back into the moulding comfort of the seat and tried not to remember how such luxury had once been his life. He glanced at Chance, finding her with her eyes shut, her chest rising and falling with slow, deep breaths. Sometimes she looked too young...

“Have you finished ogling?”

Ramius held down a groan. She was in complete control of the ship, and that meant the internal feed. He should be glad she misinterpreted his staring at her, mistaking it for lust, not regret. “Maybe,” he murmured.

One eye opened and peered at him. She smirked. “Then I should return the favour.”

“How much concentration does piloting this tube need?”

Her smirk deepened. “Why, did you have something else in mind?”

“Chance...”

“You know I like you naked.”

Ramius bit back a smile. “Yes, I’d noticed.” His eyes narrowed. “You think of it often.”

Her gaze slid slowly down his body then back up, always with that speculative smile curving her lips.

“What am I thinking right now?”

Ramius sucked in a quick breath. He could almost feel her mouth, her tongue against his chest, the wet heat of it slipping over his abdomen. He winced as his dick throbbed, straining against the thick material of his trousers. Damn, she could get him hard fast. He willed shields to thicken against her—even as he wanted to sink back into the couch and let her mind-fuck him—and pinched at the bridge of his nose.

“Something inappropriate?”

Chance laughed. “You think?”

“I *know*.”

“Just making certain...”

She wanted to make a claim on him as hers, he knew that. Then there was her underlying need for someone to hold her, to love her unconditionally, and it slipped fast, sharp through his protected thoughts. He resisted the lure of it. Chloe had never wanted anything from him, only his complete loyalty. He’d been a fool to devote himself to her. He knew that...but he couldn’t help it. Her strength of will had caught and bound him. Ramius held down a wince. She *still* held him.

He turned his attention back to Chance. “So it’s obvious you don’t need to devote much of your brain to piloting this thing.”

“It’s very smooth, easy to manipulate.” A thoughtful smile curved her mouth. “I don’t usually get much of a chance to interact with quality tech. It’s...nice.”

“How long—” The sun-symbol screen covering the end wall flared into life, marking the route, speed and time of arrival at the governor’s residence. Ten minutes. His chest tightened, and the familiar surge of Chloe’s imperative covered his thoughts. He breathed, needing to loosen the tension. It had never been so constrictive. He glanced at the woman next to him, flopped on the body-hugging couch, her eyes shut and that small, happy smile still lifting her lips. *After this was over*. The promise eased him. Soon his old life would be over in a way he’d never anticipated.

Chance’s slow groan broke into his thoughts, bringing him back from fantasy to the hard reality of the present. The smile faded from her mouth. She sat up and scratched her fingers through the short tangle of hair. “They’re waiting for us in the terminal.”

“We knew that.”

She paused. “I suppose.” Chance pushed herself to her feet and brushed down the front of the silk shirt. She sucked in a deep breath, moving away from the couch. Nerves ate at her...and that made him uneasy. “You should make yourself ready. Weapons and,” she waved a finger vaguely at her skull, “your invisibility thing.”

His instincts flared. There was something she wasn’t telling him. “Chance, what’s waiting for me in the residence?”

She laughed. Nothing blatant jumped out at him, but he still couldn’t shake off the feeling that she was hiding information. “What you expected. A shitload of men armed to the teeth.”

“And...?”

She stared back at him and her brow furrowed. “And nothing. I hole up in here and you glide in a vague and mysterious way between the guards.” She glanced to the Etuis beside him. “I’m not kidding. Get ready. We’re pulling into the terminal. Right now.”

Chance rubbed her hands together, wanting to ignore the itch in her fingertips. She’d lied to Ramius...and he’d sensed it. Her stomach cramped. She couldn’t tell him the truth. The information washed over her thoughts, thickened as the carriage tube slowed to a stop. They were waiting for him, a whole fucking battalion of men, with shield-piercing heavy artillery targeted on the tube.

She had a plan. Not much of one, and she told herself it was a selfish one. Her gut twisted tighter. Somehow, she couldn’t make herself believe it. Damn it, she hated this...this...connection she wanted with Ramius. It screwed with her ordered reality.

The mechanism buried in the frame of the tube groaned, and Chance sucked in a quick breath. She closed down her implant and glanced back to Ramius, finding her gaze sliding away. Good. He was ready. The door eased back and the scent of metal and men rolled into the carriage.

All right. Time to be selfish.

Chance strode towards the door, her hands lifting. Her heart beat hard and a trickle of sweat stuck her shirt to her spine. Seemed like she was really going to do this—

Ramius grabbed her arm, yanking her back to the curve of the leather-lined wall. “What the *hell* are you doing?”

“I’m giving myself a chance.” She tugged her arm free and glared at him. Time to not exactly lie. Again. “They’re going to obliterate this carriage. The option of me hiding out in here is nonexistent.”

Ramius’ mouth thinned. “I should have known...”

He cupped her jaw and Chance jerked back against the cool leather of the wall. He couldn’t possibly be about to— His mouth dipped to hers. The soft brush of his lips flowed a warm heat down to her toes, and Chance sighed, opening her mouth to him. He deepened the kiss, melting it into something that made her clutch at the thick material of his uniform. His fingers slid into her hair and he crushed her to him. He

tasted...she couldn't help the soft little moan that escaped her...he tasted hot and sweet and just everything, *everything* she wanted.

With a groan, she willed herself to pull away, licking her lips to find his lingering taste. She hated that she had to deny one final time with him...and from the heat in his gaze and his unsteady breathing, he would've done something he vowed never to do. Taken her fast and hard up against a wall.

She sucked in a quick breath, wanting to purge that image and the hot rise of need in her flesh. She backed away from him one agonising step at a time. "Time to go. Good luck, Ramius."

"I can obscure you—"

"No, you can't." She knew she was the distraction that would give Ramius his opportunity to get to West and end Chloe's hold over him. Only then would she have any chance of an "after" with him. Well, she could call that selfish. In a way. Chance worked a smile across her mouth. "I'm cute. They don't shoot cute."

Ramius gave a soft laugh. "No, they don't." His fingers stroked over her cheek before he wrapped his hands around his weapon and primed it. The soft whine filled the carriage. "See you soon."

Her eyes narrowed on him and she ignored the thud of her heart. She wagged a finger at him. "You'd better."

Chapter Ten

She turned to the open door and lifted her hands again, ignoring the mortifying need she had to hug him. Time to see if her distraction worked...and didn't get her shot. "I'm coming out!" She stepped onto the smooth marble of the platform and couldn't help the wince, or the need to hunch her shoulders.

Primed weapons swung towards her in a sound wave of metal and creaking leather uniforms. Chance stared at too many wide barrels aimed at her head. She swallowed, her throat dry. "Hello?" She forced a grin over her mouth and it felt like a grimace. The terminal arched high above her, lined with expensive and gleaming white marble. Governmental banners glittered gold. And there were soldiers, soldiers everywhere. "I'm surrendering."

"Where's John Ramius?" A captain edged out of the crowd of his men, his Etius-90 fixed on her chest. Like all of the Jovian troops, he was tall, muscled and grim. Just the sort of man the psychs knew she loved to fuck. With her implant shut to the stream, she couldn't be certain, but it was almost certain they were monitoring her. So she had to perform. A line creased his forehead at her delay. "Is he in the tube?"

Chance gave him a quick smile, hoping it didn't look as forced as it felt. "First can I say how happy I am to see you all?" Her smile grew and she tilted her head. She softened her voice. "*Really* glad."

"Ramius."

The captain strode toward her, and she bit her lip, willing excited heat into her cheeks. She had to be the woman they thought she was. He leaned over her, and Chance lifted her chin, her gaze focusing on the thin line of his mouth. He stank of hot leather and gun oil and then he pressed the hard, cold tip of the gun barrel under her chin.

"Where is he?" The tip dug into her flesh, and she held down a wince. A nasty smirk cut across his lips. "Did he get tired of fucking you and throw you out to us?"

"Hey, as far as I know he's still in the shipyards. Got me to jack the tube." She shrugged and hated the way the weapons followed the slight shift of her shoulders. "If I were him, I'd be long gone."

The captain gave her a cold smile. "You're not him, sweetheart." He pointed to two men, who surged forward and took her arms in tight, gloved hands. Chance didn't resist. "Take her to Governor West."

So...not shot straight away. Her slippered feet slid over the cool marble, barely touching the floor as the men hauled her past the assembled troops. She resisted the need to crane her head back, to see if she could catch Ramius leaving the tube. Her lie said he'd never entered the carriage...and she had to maintain

that façade. Instead, she glanced up at her captors. Hard muscle defined them, straining under their tight leather uniforms to bunch on their clenched jaws. Their helmets masked the rest of their faces.

She should try to be the irritating flirt with the men arresting her. But her normal obsession with sex seemed to have slid into the background...and it was staying there. Even the attempt to flirt with the captain had fallen flat. Hell, she was an expert at playing men. It had kept her alive in the past and that meant she had *real* skill.

Chance told herself it had everything to do with fear of meeting West. His reputation ran before him. He was insane. Her lack of interest in the men dragging her away had nothing to do with her fear for Ramius. Nothing at all.

“Lucky Chance.” Ishaan West pushed himself out of his heavy chair, the thick leather creaking. He let out a slow breath and his dark gaze travelled over her, narrowing as it reached her face. “Feeling lucky now?”

Artificial light from the slanted wall of thick glass washed over the wide room. On the wall behind his desk, a vast tapestry of the sun caught the light, gold and silver threads gleaming. Yes, the damn image had shrouded her since her escape from the detention base. The rest of the room was empty of any other furniture and Chance, her implant still closed, wondered whether there were other exits besides the double doors behind her. But she was not opening her chip. Not to this man.

“Ah, you’ve locked your implant.” A smile lifted his mouth and the shadows cut from the light sharpened his face. He was classically handsome, but still something about him, about his too-smooth voice, prickled her skin. “I have no interest in hacking your brain. Where would be the fun in that? No.” His gaze slipped over her body again and a shiver coursed through her. “I prefer to experience my pleasures in the flesh.”

Chance’s gut squeezed. All right, not what she wanted to hear right then.

The governor strode towards her, his boots silent in the ornately-patterned rug. Images of him had ridden across her implant for over a year. The self-glorified Sun King. Slick, concerned...but the rumours persisted and, well, people often simply...vanished. She’d never wanted to meet him in person. Ever.

West nodded to the soldiers, who broke their meaty grip on her arms, and Chance stumbled, catching herself before she hit the thick carpeting. She straightened, smoothing her hands over her rumpled shirt and not wanting to notice that they shook. “That’s nice for you.”

She jumped as the doors shut behind her. The guards had vanished too.

“You think John Ramius is going to save you from me?”

Chance held his gaze, willing her heart into an even rhythm. Sweat stuck her shirt to her back; still, she had to cling to her sense of bravado. “You or the Butcher? I really do live up to the irony of my name.”

“Yes, you do.” West stopped in front of her. He stroked his hand over her hair, teasing locks through his fingers. “And really, you’re nothing compared to Chloe Van Der Zee.”

“Who?”

West smiled, something smooth, knowing. “As if he didn’t talk about her.” A finger traced along her jaw and dread settled in her stomach. Rumours also ran through the lower streams about the outer governor’s...appetites. Chance clamped down hard against those memories. “It’s his compulsion. He followed the woman around like an adoring puppy. His adoration of her turned him into a psychopathic killer.” His smile deepened as his hand slipped to cover her throat, long fingers lightly squeezing. Chance sucked in a quick breath, she couldn’t help it, and her face flushed. “That was until I cut her throat and drank her blood.” His soft laughter surrounded her. “I enjoyed it so much, I think I’ll have to do it again. Just to see the look on his face.”

“Ramius isn’t here—”

“He’s here.” His fingers eased their grip. “I set this up, for him to meet you. Someone who could get him to me.”

“Me?” The word was little more than a squeak. What was he talking about?

“Melissa Chance.” His free hand swept over empty air and the familiar cyber-generated newsreader filled the shape of a sun.

“Battalion Commander West returned to Europa today victorious from leading the raid on Amalthea, where a small band of thief families had holed up.” A stream of him striding down the ramp of a wide transport and handing his weapon to a waiting sergeant filled the sun-shape. Blood still splattered his battle gear, coated his face and matted his dark hair. *“West requested and received from Outer Governor Lamont the authorised use of lethal force. This is the first use of this new legislation. Outer Governor Lamont has declared a war on those who seek to corrupt the use of their implants...”*

Amalthea. Chance’s stomach turned over and she almost gagged, West’s fingers still tight around her throat. The tiny moon on which she’d been born. She stared as a soldier marched a small, white-blond girl down the ramp in West’s wake. She wore a thin slip and blood covered her arms and legs. Her heart pounded. That couldn’t be...

“Melissa Chance, aged nine, will benefit from psychological reconditioning.”

It was. It was *her*. Captured. But she had no memory of escaping the horror of their dome. She remembered only the terror of being curled in a ball, as her family lay butchered around her. She blocked it, blocked everything from her mind. She remembered breaking out of a juvenile base at thirteen. Her life before that was a blur.

West had brought her to Europa. *West* had murdered her family.

She ripped her gaze away from the transmission, glaring at the man, hating him, her veins filled with fire. It took everything in her not to dig her fingers in his smug face. Ramius would kill him, and she, she

would smile. Yes, that thought tamped down on her wild surge of emotions. The game-face of a thief settled across her features.

“That doesn’t explain why me.”

“You hate me for what I did.” West waved his hand and the gleam of the transmission faded and died until there was only empty air again. “I had to have someone who would reinforce Ramius’ need to kill me.”

Satisfaction gave her a bitter warmth. “I didn’t know.”

West’s dark eyes narrowed on her and his fingers tightened. Heat swelled in her cheeks and her heart hammered. Pain lanced, her lungs struggling for air against a blocked windpipe. “What?”

“They obviously...” She swallowed and dragged in a brief burst of air. “Reconditioned it out of my head.”

His mouth thinned and his hand dropped away from her throat. “My killing your family was icing.” A gleam lit his dark eyes, as if daring her to strike out at him, but Chance pushed down her growing need to dig her nails into his cheeks. “Your tech skills and your...appetite, obviously worked well enough.”

Chance pressed her hands to her throat, wanting to ease the raw pain. “My appetite?”

“You’ve kept him busy. My soldiers were starting to enjoy the show in the tube. Shame Ramius didn’t get to fuck you a final time.” His hard grin deepened. “Did he promise to save you? He promised that to Chloe too.”

He meant to stab at her, but she twitched a returning smile and shrugged. “He was a very pleasant fuck. For a psychopath.”

West laughed, gripped her arm, pressing hard against the bruises the guards had left. She sucked in a breath and let herself be tugged across the room. He changed the subject. “Earth blocked my interrogations, demanded a trial. But if he escaped and came after me, a senior colonial official...” His words trailed away. “Then they have no jurisdiction.”

“You want to kill him? Your chancellor already ordered that.” Chance held down a wince. Shit. She wasn’t supposed to care one way or the other about Ramius. Her words stank of involved emotion.

“Spacing Ramius? Ten seconds of watching him boil before he loses consciousness? Where would be the fun in that? Honestly.” The grey wall rippled and an arch formed into another room. “No, I have plans for John Ramius.”

“And me?”

Soft light flared around the small, square room and its uncomfortably red walls lined with heavy swathes of fabric. Deep couches faced each other in the centre of the room. West pushed her towards one of the couches, and she flopped into the enveloping cushion. “You’re my bait.” He moved to a gold-trimmed unit, and a glass slid forward onto the curved lip, filled close to the brim with a deep amber liquid. Lifting the glass, he inhaled and let out a slow sigh. “Ramius can’t resist a woman in distress.”

Chance eased herself back onto the couch, her gaze darting around the room. Again nothing, except the couches and the food unit and far too much fabric. The urge to open her implant tugged at her...but despite his saying he had no interest in hacking her brain, she didn't believe him. The knowledge that he'd murdered her family burst back over her and she fought the wild surge of adrenalin. Her fingers clawed into her palm and she deliberately placed them on her lap. Her chin lifted. "He won't come for me."

West sipped at his drink and his head tilted. An eyebrow lifted. "You underestimate how much Chloe is a part of his soul."

"Why do you want him dead?"

His eyes narrowed on her. "A nosy thief."

Chance shrugged and her gut tightened. The hard gleam in the governor's eyes had even her nerve failing. She pushed down the fear. It wasn't any use right then. "Story of my life."

"Dark energy is the future." West emptied his glass, expelled a quick breath and slid it back onto the lip of the food unit. Then he moved, easing out of her eye-line, and Chance willed her body to stay loose, ready. His boots crushed into the deep carpet, and the sound of his even breaths said he moved behind her and stopped.

"Chloe, against the orders of Earth, brought dark energy to the Jovian colonies, wanted to use it to stop our exploitation of our workers."

His hands fell heavy on her shoulders, fingertips digging hard into her collarbones. Chance willed her eyes open, fixing them on the arch leading into the main room. For an insane second, she wanted to imagine Ramius, could almost see him there. But Ramius wouldn't wait. He would remove West's head with a single Etuis-90 blast.

"Ms. Van Der Zee considered herself above the law." West yanked her up, and she bit back a pained yelp as she scrambled to find balance. He gripped her in hard hands, his mouth close to her ear. "She considered everyone else inferior, simply thought she could set up a fair trade outpost and the Jovian outer governor would capitulate." Chance sucked in a sharp breath at the press of a cold blade against her throat. "That he'd fall before her charm, beauty and wisdom—"

"No. Instead he sent you."

Ramius. Chance stiffened and the serrated metal dug into her skin. Blood leaked hot against her neck. Her lips parted, but his name didn't break from her mouth.

John Ramius stood in the archway, his weapon aimed at her.

Chapter Eleven

“John, how good to see you again.”

West’s smooth, smug voice stabbed into his gut. He still had that thin cut of a smile, the one that made Ramius want to stick a knife in his belly and twist it ever so slowly to watch the smile dissolve second by second into screams. Ramius’ fingers flexed around his weapon, its soft thrum vibrating into his shoulder. No, he couldn’t jump ahead of himself.

His gaze flicked over Chance, tense, half-perched on the straight back of the couch. His jaw tightened as he caught the rivulet of blood staining her neck and shirt. Shit. This was not happening again. Not again. “Let her go, West.”

The slice of a smile widened into a sharp grin. “Déjà vu, John? You demanded that last time. Wanted me to release Chloe.” His arm pulled Chance hard against him, the dagger’s sharp edge digging deeper into her throat. For a brief second, she closed her eyes, and Ramius saw the ripple of pain tightening her face. “This one wriggles less.” West lifted an eyebrow and the flicker of satisfaction in his gaze fired through Ramius’ blood. “Is that what you like about her?” He laughed. “Chloe kicked, struggled, threatened me with language I never knew an elite from Earth would know...”

Ramius let West ramble, fought to push his mind out of old memories...but the blade at Chance’s throat was the same one. Even down to the nick in the bone handle. Thoughts of the past crushed his chest, made breathing hard. He saw Chloe wrestling in West’s grip, the knife tip digging hard into her jaw. Blood ran, but that didn’t dim the fury in her blue eyes, nor the rage churning out from her mind—

The imperative slammed into his skull. Fire flared under his skin, through his thoughts. Ishaan West was his. The man grinned at him, and Ramius centred his sights on that hated smile. The full power of the weapon in his hands would obliterate it, take out his face, his upper torso and—he blinked, his hands suddenly shaking—take Chance out too.

“You can’t do it, can you?” West’s smug voice cut through his haze and brought his mind into the present. The outer governor still grinned at him, hadn’t moved. “It’s too similar to *her* death.”

Ramius pushed back the need to obliterate West. He needed to focus. Chance wouldn’t die because he lost control. “Why are you doing this?”

“Earth wouldn’t let me kill you. Now I get to use your...reputation...for myself.”

Ramius edged closer, and West's knuckles around his dagger, the blade cutting deeper. Chance stiffened, but stayed silent, still. Her dark eyes held him. Fear mixed with something else, a quiet, bitter defiance. All right, something else was going on. Two words stood out in her mind: *Taunt him.*

"No. Keep back. I will end this. Kill her."

Ramius had to ignore the blood leaking down her throat, how the sight of it had his gut tight and the need to throttle the outer governor with his bare hands flexing his fingers. He'd trusted Chance before and she hadn't failed him.

"And then what will you have to bargain with?" A hard smile tugged at his mouth and he took another step forward. "You said it yourself. She isn't Chloe."

West's gaze flickered, and a stinging sensation ran along Ramius' spine. His knees buckled and he thudded into the carpet. "Tiny implants grown into your nervous system." West gave a soft laugh. "Did you think we tortured you just for the fun of it?"

Fuck, his thighs had locked, he couldn't twist or move his body. His arms dropped and stiffened at his sides. His weapon thudded onto the carpet. He refused to look at Chance. Whatever she had planned, his incapacity hadn't changed it as the same sharp defiance ebbed from her. "What do you want? What the hell is this all about?"

"Should have wired it into your mouth too," the governor muttered. "I've consolidated my position with the Jovian colonies. Now it's time to move on."

Parts clicked together in his head. Earth had demanded a trial, fought for him to be kept alive. Now he was in the governor's residence and had just pointed a gun to his head. "I'm a spy. I've been sent to kill you and now you're viewing it as a convenient act of aggression." He paused and another piece fell into place. The shipyards' insane activity... "You've constructed a fleet of dark energy ships for a pre-emptive strike."

"And you've just admitted what your role is in this conspiracy against my rule." West grinned. "Thank you."

"So what now?" A short, hard laugh escaped him. "I'd shrug, but that's not possible right now."

The governor tilted his head, and Ramius kept his face as immobile as the rest of his body. His grip on Chance had eased. Just a fraction, but the jagged blade now lay flat against her throat rather than cutting it. Ramius' gut tightened. Her blood coated the metal, her skin, her shirt.

"Now?"

The governor yanked Chance off the couch, manhandling her until she stood upright before Ramius. She let him, not fighting his rough hand as it tugged and pulled her. Still, that dark determination flowed from her, strong and bitter on his tongue. Ramius couldn't dig deeper into her thoughts, but something lurked in her gaze, and it had his spine tingling. Literally. He wriggled his toes.

"I cut Lucky Chance's throat, and we'll share her blood."

Ramius had to buy time. “You really think you can take on Earth? The Terran fleet will obliterate your ships.” A wry smile twisted his mouth. “Then they’ll come after you for real. You think I can become a killer? Wait till a *trained* soldier gets his hands on you.”

West snorted and he wagged the blade at Ramius. “If you think—”

Chance rammed a fist into his balls. West cried out, his hold loosening, and she dropped to the floor. Ramius was already moving, surging to his feet. He grabbed at the man’s wrist, fingers biting into his tendons. His other hand squeezed his throat, choking him as Ramius barrelled him back. The knife fell away from his fingers, dropping to the deep carpet. Ramius pinned him to the wall, ignoring the wild scrabbles of West’s left hand.

Ramius grinned, hard, satisfied. “Let me give you what *I* need.”

“How...?”

The single word choked out of his mouth before, with grim strength, Ramius crushed his larynx. West slid into unconsciousness, his body a dead weight. The searing image of the sun, stitched in silver and gold, cut across his thoughts in a brilliant flare. Trust West to grab at the supposed glory of his Sun King icon. Ramius took a tighter grip and yanked. Bones cracked. He let the body slump to the floor and purged West’s last thought.

Ramius pushed out a slow breath and shut his eyes, willing the wild speed of his heart to slow. It was over, *over*...but his pulse spiked. “Chance?” He turned, scanning the empty room. Heat surged through his body, powering him forward. “Chance!”

“Here.”

Her voice was little more than a whisper and came from...behind one of the couches. Ramius found her, her knees tight to her chest, her blood-covered fingers digging into her neck. She looked pale and her eyes had dulled. Shit. She was losing a lot of blood. He knelt beside her and touched her cheek with trembling fingers. “Stay calm, all right?”

She twitched a smile. Her gaze slid to her right, and Ramius followed. West’s slumped body crumpled against the heavy fabric of the wall. His head had fallen forward and he looked simply unconscious. “Is he dead?”

“He’s dead. Trust me.” He climbed to his feet and scratching at his forehead, he strode to the food unit. “Healing packs,” he muttered, gripping the curved lip of the machine. It whirred softly. It was an executive unit and supplied all requests. Ramius couldn’t help it; he looked down at Ishaan West, the Sun King, and felt...nothing. No fury, no remorse. He was free.

The pack slid out onto the lip and he grabbed it, striding back to Chance, all other thoughts forgotten. He tore open the outer packaging to reveal a sterile white pad. “This will bond the wound.” Chance twitched as he eased her fingers free of her neck. He didn’t wince at the run of jagged flesh, though the urge to kill West again did grip him for a long, hard second. He pressed the pad to her throat and

information scrolled over the synthetic material. Ramius closed his eyes and let the relief wash through him. West hadn't cut deep enough. Her stillness had saved her from serious injury. "Hold it there. It'll cleanse and heal the wound."

"I know what a healing pack is." Even with a voice weak and rising just above a whisper, her sarcasm shone through. She closed her eyes and her shoulders slumped.

Panic made him grab at her shoulder. "Chance—"

"I'm not dead." She flexed her fingers against the healing pad. "We have to get out of here." Chance flicked another glance to the dead governor as dull, rhythmic thumps filled the air. Pain tightened her face. "His implant dissolved and the network is going berserk. It sealed us in here. And troops are on their way."

Chapter Twelve

“Stay there.” Ramius straightened and disappeared into West’s office.

“Didn’t plan on going anywhere.” Chance wanted to shut her implant to the riot streaming through her brain as it mixed with and heightened the screaming pain in her neck. Her fingers eased their tight grip on the pad, and she expelled a heavy breath. Who would’ve thought being slashed across the throat and neck would hurt *quite so bloody much*. “I’ll stay right here.”

She closed her eyes and focused on the rush of information. The office had sealed itself, trapping them. Pushing at the constraints didn’t work and only made her head pound in time to the internal alarms. Chance eased back from the living stream, letting her thoughts disengage. The troops were already amassing and, once the order was given, they’d storm the governor’s office and slaughter them. They were so screwed. Ishaan West was dead and they wouldn’t be far behind him. Her “after” was looking decidedly short-lived.

“I need you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Promises, promises.”

His soft laughter warmed her and made breathing easier. “West had an external feed. I need you to jack it.”

Chance opened her eyes to find Ramius staring down at her. She met his smile and willed her body to move...but he stopped her. He bent, his arms sliding under her knees and around her back. She wrapped her free arm around his neck, her fingers digging into the hard muscle of his shoulder. His body heat warmed her, and she rested her forehead against his cheek. The familiar scent of his skin slid into her lungs, and she almost sighed. He still smelled...incredible. “I could’ve walked.”

Ramius dropped an unexpected kiss on her forehead, his lips lingering for a long moment, and her heart squeezed. His breath brushed her skin. “Yes, you could. But you’re not.”

His hands tightened their grip and he strode from the small room into the office. He’d yanked the tapestry free from the wall and revealed a panel that gleamed in the artificial light still shining in from the frames of the windows. A black shutter sealed them from Europa’s bleak landscape, yet more proof of their completely fucked status.

Ramius kicked the heavy leather chair around and eased her into it. He glanced up at the solid clunk that vibrated through the thick carpet. The troops were breaking in. Shit.

He held her gaze, calm, serious, and she grabbed at his composure, wanting it for herself. “Think you can activate that, Governor Chance?”

“Funny,” she muttered. Another clunk, louder. Her stomach cramped. All right, she could work under pressure.

She focused on the silver shimmer of the large rectangle, delving below the upper streams of information. Ramius was right. West had taken the panel out of the network. More than that. A slew of disbelieving curses escaped her. He had a direct tap into one of Earth’s outer beacons. “He’s connected to a beacon. How did you know about this?”

“West wanted to attack Earth. He had to have intel to co-ordinate his attack.” A bitter laugh escaped him. “And I caught the image of the tapestry before his brain shut down.”

A blaze of light shot over her implant, and she bit back a groan. It burned through her flesh, searing needles into her brain. She grabbed at the arm of the chair and dug her nails into the soft, padded leather. Fuck, it hurt. “I’m holding it open. Say what you have to. Be quick.”

“Chance...?”

“Ramius.” She gritted her teeth, the faster vibrations of the invaders jolting the chair, her body. Chance pushed down her panic. It wasn’t just the door now. The vast shutter shook, clattering against the square window frames. She sucked in a breath. “Be quick. Because this hurts. A lot.”

He winced. “All right.” He straightened his shoulders and his chin lifted. Chance focused on him, on his voice as it rose above the increasing noise. “Ramius, John, Security Consultant for the Sinope Base. Open a wire. Augment tag.” He closed his eyes and she felt something as light and soft as a breeze brush over her searing connection to the beacon. It cooled her, eased away some of the pain, and unexpectedly she let out a slow, relieved sigh.

“What the hell is holding open this connection?”

The male voice surged over her and ripped away all the soothing cool of Ramius’ thoughts. She groaned and her free hand rubbed at her scalp. It didn’t help. “I am.”

Ramius frowned. “Chance—”

“Ramius? What the hell? Our reports said you were executed yesterday for treason—”

“Nairen. I haven’t got much time. Ishaan West is dead. His troops are about to storm his office and we have no out.”

“We?” The panel flickered, but no image filled the shimmering screen. *“It’s illegal for a Jovian colonist to—”*

“Fuck this,” Ramius muttered. “Cut the connection.”

Chance yanked her thoughts free of the beacon, and the absence of pain was a brief moment of bliss. But the battering of the protective shields clenched a fist in her gut. They were so dead. She looked up at

Ramius, her heart in her throat. So many things she wanted to tell him. Words burned on her tongue...but all that came out of her mouth was, "What now?"

The door crashed to the floor and soldiers surged into the long office, weapons primed and aimed. More men broke through the shield, shattering the glass wall. Too many of them barked rapid orders, the voices ripping over her as senior officers tried, and failed, to secure her implant.

Ramius twitched a smile and turned her chair to face the horde. Her heartbeat ramped. The whine of primed weapons filled the sudden silence, the men statues of muscle and black armour. She stared at too many guns.

Shit. They were so very, *very* dead.

"Your loyal Jovian troops, Governor Chance."

She risked a glance at Ramius. He looked serious. What the hell was he talking about? But she didn't voice that question. Instead, she let her years of training settle her face into a relaxed mask. She'd always been a good liar. They wouldn't believe his audacity, but if it kept them breathing for a few more minutes, then she'd play the game. "Interesting inauguration ceremony."

A battalion commander, from the insignia on his dark green uniform, strode forward. His name gleamed: *J-C Armand*. West's most senior soldier. He pulled his helmet free and revealed the usual grim face. Chance had to wonder if they were all related...and that thought eased a part of the tension gripping her.

Her head tilted and a sharp little smile pulled at her mouth. "Battalion Commander Armand, I don't believe I've had the pleasure?" Her chair creaked as Ramius' fingers tightened in the soft leather. Was that a hint of annoyance? Her smile deepened. "I'm your new outer governor, Melissa Chance."

A muscle jumped in the commander's lean cheek, his fingers tightening around the helmet held at his hip. He regained his composure. "Where is Outer Governor West? Produce him and you might come out of this alive."

"West is dead. Killed by her."

What the hell was Ramius doing? Saying *she'd* killed the governor? Yes, and there was the ripple of movement that had men sharpening their aim on *her*, waiting for the order to fire. Ramius ignored them. Good for him. Shitty for her.

"And Ms. Chance here is therefore his successor." Ramius paused, his voice calm and reasonable while her heart pounded and sweat stuck her shirt to her spine. "There is precedent. Set by Ishaan West himself, I believe."

The commander snorted and shook his head. "She's a convicted thief."

Chance took a hard grip of her fear. "Perfect qualifications."

Armand frowned. For endless seconds, he stared at her and she held his dark gaze, hoping her terror wasn't bright in her eyes. She kept her breathing even, the now dull edge of pain in her neck giving her a rhythm. And then Armand straightened his shoulders, expelling a slow breath. A fist closed around Chance's heart and she tried not to let the panic swamp her. He was going to give the order to fire.

She lifted her chin. She'd found the strength to remain still when West wanted to cut her throat. Now, she would find that strength again...but not before she looked at Ramius. Chance held his gaze, wanting to say that she'd regret not getting the time they'd promised each other, the opportunity to— Fuck it, no. She was going to die. Time to stop being afraid of, of... She couldn't say it, couldn't admit it. Fear choked her. The words burned, desperate, on her tongue, in her mind, but it had always been too dangerous.

His green eyes narrowed. Her chest tightened, but his voice didn't slide into her mind and whisper the words she ached for, the ones she would never, could never say.

Her chest tight, Chance turned her attention back to the battalion commander. Anger lined her voice. "What are you waiting for?"

Armand nodded, something quick, efficient, and Chance sucked in a breath, readying herself...until she realised he hadn't moved. If he gave the order to fire, he'd cut himself in half. A wry smile lifted his lips and his shrewd dark eyes fixed on her. "I am awaiting your orders." He saluted, snapping his booted heels to attention. "Outer Governor Chance."

Her jaw wanted to fall and let her gape like an idiot. He'd just ratified her position in charge of the Jovian colonies. What the fuck—?

"A private meeting with you and your senior officers." Ramius' smooth voice broke through her disbelief. "In the meantime, have trusted officers visit department heads to *reassure* them of a smooth transfer of authority."

Armand saluted again. His eyes glazed briefly as his implant transmitted Ramius' orders. The grating whine of the surrounding men's weapons eased down to silence and as one they stood to attention.

Chance swallowed the nervous need to giggle. The whole situation had slid from the terrifying to the completely bizarre. Had Ramius known? Had he sensed something from Armand? A willingness to support her rule? She almost laughed out loud then. Ramius had made her the Jovian outer governor. What the hell was he thinking? Had the psych reports about him been right all along and he really *was* insane?

"Anything else?" Armand focused on her as his troops turned and marched over the wreck of the double doors and into the reception area beyond.

All right, it was really happening...and she was in a shirt splattered and sticky with her own blood. "An escort to my apartments. I need to wash and change." Chance pushed herself to her feet and found Ramius' hand under her elbow. "Oh, and get rid of all those bloody suns."

"Of course." He waited for her as she walked towards him, her spine straight and Ramius' strength under her arm. Armand waved his hand. "This way, please, Governor."

Her eyes narrowed on him. “Why are you doing this, Armand? You could have shot us and taken the power for yourself.”

A brief smile pulled at his lips. “A governor not afraid to speak her mind. Refreshing.” He led them into the circular reception area, lined in gleaming white marble. Soldiers already stripped the walls of West’s reign, and it was a weight from her chest. Stopping at a perfectly smooth piece of stone, Armand focused and the veined marble shimmered and folded back on itself. The tech was impressive, and already her thief’s fingers were itching. Armand stepped through into a metal-lined lift.

The door unfolded, sealing them in. Chance knew they were moving from the activity flowing over the metal, but her body couldn’t feel it. She *could* feel Ramius’ fingers warm and strong at her elbow. Sinking back against his chest, having his arms enfold her...the thought was bliss, and impossible. They had a charade to play.

“West was a monster.”

Her gaze snapped to the commander. “That’s a given.”

“You expect us to be a transitional power.” Ramius rested his hand on her shoulder, bleeding heat through the thin material of her shirt. His thumb traced small, slow circles against her shoulder blade and she almost gave in to a little sigh. “For how long?”

“Long enough.”

“And then I go into a long retirement? With that ship I flew in on—stop the ‘repairs’ on him right now, by the way—and a very healthy pension?”

Armand gave a soft laugh. “I think that can be arranged.” The lift stopped and the doors opened out onto a glass-roofed atrium lined with marble and yet more of West’s ambitious suns. Armand waved them out. “All locks have been recoded for your signatures.” He gave a smart salute and his dark eyes glittered with a wry humour. “You would like attendants to begin to strip here too?”

“Yes, please.”

Ramius urged her forward. “Arrange for a broadcast in one hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

The lift doors folded back and Chance let out a heavy breath. She stared back and found the lift doors melted into the stone. It was insane. Crazy. They were not dead. Her head swam, the bright sun tapestries falling to grey and her ears buzzing. Her fingers dropped away from the pad pressed against her neck. It fluttered free, but she didn’t try to catch it. How the *fuck* were they not dead?

“Chance?” Ramius’ voice sounded far away, hollow, and his fingers bit into her arm. “Chance?”

Chapter Thirteen

Her world tipped as he swung her up into his arms. The buzzing increased and the dizziness thickened. She fought it, fisting her fingers in Ramius' jacket as he strode towards opening doors. She gritted her teeth. "I am *not* going to faint."

Ramius grinned at her. "The excitement of your new position?"

She willed herself to stick her tongue out at him. He laid her on a soft, padded surface, throwing cushions away behind him. He stroked back her hair, his warm, dry hand welcome against her clammy skin, and she let herself breathe. The spotty greyness faded and the intense white noise eased. Chance closed her eyes and the world didn't drop away. "That was embarrassing."

"Maybe." He pressed a kiss to her forehead and her eyes shot open. "And now you need to shower."

Her gaze slid to him and she couldn't help the little smirk that lifted her lips. "Are you offering me what I need, Ramius?"

He blinked, paused, and then a slow heat darkened his green eyes. "Maybe." He stood waiting for her to sit up. He offered his hand, and her fingers slid into his. Her heart tightened as he pressed gently. He didn't say anything else as he led her across the pale carpet of the circular room, artificial lights in the wall of glass mixing with the lights from the arms of the StarCluster far below.

The pale wall rippled back to reveal a bathroom lined in creamy-veined marble. A large, round bath sat in the middle of the room framed by a rich, smooth wood. The fresh hint of herbal soaps slid into her lungs. It was safe now. West was gone. *She* was the governor...and so she opened her implant, letting the tech of the room flow over her. Quality, the delicate streams easing into her brain almost had her sighing. With no effort, she requested a full bath. The decadence of it prickled her skin.

Ramius ran his fingers over the tabs of her shirt. "I gave you what you needed."

"Gave?" Her mind still floated in the luxury of the room, the soothing sense of it easing through her mind. The fast flow of hot water lulled her, the scent of steam with a hint of apple drifting over the room. She smirked at him as he pushed the shirt from her shoulders. "So this is...?"

"You needed West dead as much as I did."

The ease broke and a knot thickened in Chance's stomach. "I don't remember."

Ramius' eyes narrowed and the spark held there shortened her breath. Her shirt dropped to the floor in a puddle of stained cloth. "I will always give you what you need." He stepped closer and the thick serge of his uniform brushed against her bare skin. Liquid heat sank into her belly. Ramius' gaze fixed on her mouth

and she resisted the aching need to wet her lips. He glanced up. "Though it may not always be what you want."

She wanted him. Hell, she...cared...for him, but she didn't need this, to rake over ancient history. "The past should be left alone."

He traced a finger along her shoulder, light, sure. "You're not listening to me..."

"Ramius." She ground out his name. They had the future now. The past, that horror was no longer a problem for him or for her. "Let it go."

"It wasn't your fault."

Chance blinked, and the sudden, unexpected pain in her chest had tears burning her eyes. She stared at him and her hands clenched into fists. "Of course it wasn't. I was a child, I couldn't—"

"Words you don't believe," he murmured. His hand cupped her shoulder before sliding hot and slow over her shoulder blade. "Your skill, the control you have over your implant, is incredible, and your family used you." His head tilted and he seemed to look through her, beyond her into her past. He frowned and anger lit his eyes. "Put you in too many dangerous situations for their own benefit."

Chance reacted on instinct, shoving him from her. She wrapped her arms around her bared breasts. She didn't need this. Her family had loved her. She'd been the one to show them how clever she was, how she could slip and slide over and through any system. They'd loved her. And...and that got them killed.

"No." Ramius gripped her, his fingers tight on her upper arms. "You were a child. They were adults."

Chance gritted her teeth and shut her eyes against his words. It was buried history. She was *very* happy to leave it that way. She didn't need to hear this. She didn't.

"Yes, you do."

"Get the fuck out of my head!"

"Haven't you learned what I have to do?" His voice, hard, strong, broke through even as she ached to cover her ears. "I *have* to give you what you need."

"So you keep bloody telling me. But I don't need this!" She glared at him, anger charging hot and wild through her veins. "I *need* to get you naked. I *need* to fuck you." She shrugged free of him again, stepping back until her heels hit the curve of the marbled wall and she winced. "*Those* are my needs. Not raking over a very dead past."

Ramius tugged at his jacket and he dropped it to the floor. His boots rang dull against the marble tiles, coming closer, slow, inexorable, and her heart thudded. "You need more than that."

She scrubbed at her face. "Are you always this bloody annoying?"

"Do I have to say it?"

Chance groaned. "What?"

"You need me to act this way."

She cursed, long and fluid, and a wry smile pulled at his mouth. Chance glared at him. “And *you* like acting this way.”

“Oh, yes.”

He planted his hands either side of her shoulders. Heat burned in his green eyes and she wanted nothing more to find his mouth and lose herself in him. Let him have the control she had given him on the Vitesse. What he wanted now... Her mind shied away from it. The past, burned under layers, a hot molten mass that would consume her. She couldn't touch it. Couldn't...

“So you want sex.” Ramius grinned at her, a predatory gleam in his eyes that peaked her nipples and pooled a sweet ache low in her belly. “I can do that. Fuck your mouth, your pussy, your arse. Eat you. Make you scream.”

Chance sucked in a quick breath. Yes, she wanted that. She did. And she ignored the other ache, the sour one, the one that screamed that there was more to them than sex.

His head dipped and his lips brushed her ear. “Is that all you want?”

Chance shivered and tried to force out the word burning on her tongue. Instead, she said, “Yes.”

“Then turn around.”

His low growl tightened her belly. “I thought...”

“That it would be like it was on the Vitesse?”

Ramius pulled back and light washed over his face, creating stark shadows. Her heart beat hard and the urge to take his mouth fought with the growing belief that it was sour, wrong. That they deserved more...

His wicked smile made breathing difficult. “I don't think so.” He narrowed his eyes. “Now, turn around.”

Chance closed her eyes and turned, bracing her hands on the cool marble. Ramius tugged at her trousers, yanking them down over her hips to pool at her ankles. She stepped out of them. Warm, damp air brushed against her exposed skin and she shivered. “I need to wash...”

“No.”

The soft brush of material mixed with her tight breaths and the pounding of her heart. She wanted him, wanted him buried in her, needed him to make her come. She needed that more than anything. With sex, she didn't have to think. Chance glanced down, finding Ramius' shirt and then trousers kicked to one side. Her fingers curled in, her knuckles pressing hard against the unforgiving marble.

His heavy hands dropped to her hips and she jumped, her body rioting with goose bumps. He covered her back, his skin hot, his cock teasing between the cheeks of her arse. Chance groaned and shifted against him.

"I'll fuck you." His lips brushed the shell of her ear, his low voice knotting her gut. "Fuck you hard up against a wall, take you." He pushed his hand over her belly and up to her breast. He pinched her nipple and she gasped. "Take you like *all* the others."

Pain lanced at his words. He wasn't like the others. Damn him. "No."

His knuckles brushed over her cleft, easing his cock against her wet flesh. "It's what you want. What you always want. A pretty face, a hard body and...this." His hips bucked and he buried himself, Chance gasping at the sudden, unexpected fullness. His fingers dug hard against her hip, pressed her breast. He nipped at her shoulder, the pleasure-pain scorching through her. "This is all you want, Chance. A body, a mouth, a dick." He pulled back and pushed forward. Hard. His growl burned hot against her shoulder, and the surge of desire forced her to meet the increasing thrusts of his hips. Fire flickered under her damp skin, and she grabbed at the first pulse of her release, wanting it, desperate for it to take her, burn through her mind and wipe away all thought.

Ramius pressed his mouth to her ear, his breath hot, ragged. "I'm fucking you. Come for me. And I'll bury my dick in your arse. You want that too." The words seared over her skin and the ache, the teetering of her shaking, damp body on the edge of orgasm, made her desperate to find her release.

His hand teased over her mons before he slipped a hard finger against her clitoris.

Chance groaned, driving back against him, wanting him harder, deeper. The agony of her flesh gripped her, her thoughts wild, molten. "Damn it, Ramius!"

"What do you need?"

He was inexorable, unrelenting, and his question seared over her skin. But she would say anything. "I need you."

"Why?"

"To make me come."

"Wrong answer." And he pinched her clitoris.

Chance cried out at the raw rush of pleasure tearing up through her flesh and she grabbed it, frantic to end the insanity gripping her, the need to come that had her shaking, pleading with him...but his control was absolute.

"We were about to die." The words burned against her ear and she shut her eyes against them. "About to *die* and you couldn't think it." His choked voice stabbed at her. "Why?"

No. Her head dropped and she willed her mind to think only of the fierce thrust of his hips, his fingers, the press of his hot skin against hers, hard, fast. She would find her release, she would—

"I'll say it."

Panic gripped her. She wanted to break free of him, but he held her, stroked into her body with increasing force and speed. And she couldn't deny how her screaming body responded to him, wanted him. The fierce slap of his slick flesh against hers, his power, yes, he was hers, utterly— "No."

His ragged breaths ran hot against her ear, his lips pressed to the lobe. He was close to coming, his thrusts as uneven as his breathing. He would say it; she could almost feel the words in his mind. And if he said them, then she would lose him. Lose him as she'd lost her family. "Ramius, no, please." But need tore though her. To hear him say—

"I love you."

Orgasm rioted through her body, surging over her thoughts in a blazing white rush that made her cry out in wild ecstasy. Somewhere in the maelstrom, Ramius followed her, his long groan rippling fresh shivers under her skin. Her arms dropped and only Ramius' strength held her up. Shaking fingers wiped the sweat and tears from her face. "Bastard," she muttered, her voice thick, her throat raw. "You bastard."

He turned her in his arms and made her look at him. His thumb wiped the wetness from her cheek. "I love you. And you can love me. Nothing bad will happen."

Chance bit her lip wanting to hate him. She closed her eyes, unable to hold his darkened gaze, the affection, the *love* that warmed it. Something in her felt broken...and it hurt. Ramius wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in his chest, clinging to him, willing the pain in her chest to ease. She pulled in his scent with every breath, familiar, working deep into her body, reminding her that she was safe with him, that he had protected her. "I don't do this." She tasted his skin and it burned hot against her lips. "I wanted it. Wanted you."

She swallowed and forced herself to look at him. "Anyone I get close to dies."

Ramius let out a slow sigh. "Am I dead?"

"No." The word crawled out.

"But you can't believe it." A smile lifted his mouth and he eased back. "You need a bath."

Chance blinked, thrown by his sudden change in subject. He could do that, make it impossible for her to know what he'd do next. She could read anyone...but him. "Ramius..."

He waved to the round bath and waited for her to climb in before he followed her. Gloriously hot water washed up over her legs, belly, breasts, and she let out a slow sigh of satisfaction. A bath. She'd never had a bath. Water had always been too precious a commodity to waste on washing when air-scrubbers did a quicker, less decadent job. She watched her fingers create eddies in the clear water, the hint of apple rising with the steam easing her tight chest.

"Turn around." Her head snapped up, her heart beating hard, and she found Ramius twitching a smile at her. "I want to wash you."

"I didn't want to—"

He took her arm in wet fingers and a shiver ran through her. With too little effort, he slid her around until she sat between his legs, her back to his chest. Hell, she hadn't fought him. She wanted him, wanted him surrounding her, touching her. She wanted everything he offered, and the thought had terror hot and

tight in the pit of her stomach. Her faith in their promised “after” hadn’t been something she *truly* believed. It was more probable they’d die than live. Now her doubt, her fear, was back to bite her.

Ramius ran slick hands over her shoulders, smoothing over her shoulder blades. His touch was delicious, as decadent as the bath itself. He pressed a kiss to her neck and she shivered. “I should say thank you,” he murmured.

“For what?”

His hands pushed down under the water, shaping her back, his thumbs running lightly down her spine. Chance arched into him. She couldn’t help it. “West paralysed me…”

“Oh, that.” She stared down at her hands, not wanting to dwell on breaking the network of organic implants grown into his nervous system. She could so easily have paralysed him for life. Yes, too much about her interaction with Ramius caused her fear. Her life had always consisted of looking out for herself. “I needed you to keep me alive.”

“Still resisting.” His breath brushed hot against her wet shoulder, raising goose bumps. He sat close, his chest wet against her spine. “And you don’t want to.” He trailed open mouth kisses to the curve of her upper arm, and the warmth of his touch sank deep into her flesh. “Admit it. Face it.”

Chance closed her eyes. She did...but was any of it even *real*? “Do you really want me, Ramius? Or am I just another part of your curse. A woman you latched onto—”

His laughter broke through her rising voice. “Switching excuses. You’re getting desperate.” He paused and rested his chin against her shoulder. His hands slipped around her hips to stroke over her thighs and she felt him pull in a slow breath, his chest pushing against her spine. “I want to be the man I am with you, the man you need me to be. That isn’t a curse, Chance. It’s freedom.”

“I need you to be this annoying?”

His chin shifted over her skin and she knew he was grinning. She glanced at him and his grin widened. “You demand it.”

Chance gave a reluctant laugh. “I’m crazy.”

“True.” He grunted as she dug her elbow into his ribs, but it didn’t dislodge him from her shoulder, nor slow the caress of his hands over her thighs. “Just try the word. Once. I can feel it burning in your mind.”

“Ramius...” The knot of unease, of fear, tightened. And he was right, bloody telepath. It lurked under her thoughts, under the layer of time and ancient guilt that made her want to say it was just sex. She pulled in a tight breath and closed her eyes tight. The pressure on her chest, the panicked rush to her blood had sweat beading her forehead. *People who loved her died*. It had been the core of who she was for too long. Yes, too long.

“I...” She bit at her lip and the brief glimpses of her mother, her father, her brothers, fragments of her past she’d clung to in the emptiness of her early memories, burned tears in her eyes. A wet hand wiped at

her wet cheek and the futility of the gesture had a smile tugging at her mouth. Ramius' hands stilled on her thighs and she knew he held his breath. "I love you."

The three words were little more than a mutter and shit, they *still* terrified her.

Ramius exhaled, warm air breezing over her shoulder. He rested his forehead against her. "Thank you," he murmured.

She'd admitted it, yet the fear still lurked. But it had lessened and really, Ramius was worth living with it. She loved him. A grin grew on her mouth. "I still need you for sex, though." She paused. "I'm governor. I could make it a law."

Ramius snorted, laughter breaking out. It wrapped warm around her and she echoed it. "You're going to make me into a law-abiding citizen?"

She turned, splashing and awkward in the hot water, until she knelt between his legs. Her hands cupped his face, her wet thumb teasing over his bottom lip. She couldn't resist the need to taste him, a brief kiss that forced a moan from the man. "I think you should give being a *good* citizen serious thought."

Ramius' eyes narrowed, but heat darkened them. "I will always give you what you need."

Chance's heart missed a beat. For a moment, the responsibility of loving and being loved by him panicked her...but she fought it, pushed down the old terror. The tips of her fingers itched, a sure sign of fun to come, and she smiled at him. "And what do you need...John?"

Something shifted in his gaze, a moment of disbelief before his hands slipped over her waist to cup her arse. "You...Governor."

Her hands dropped to his shoulders. She loved him, and each time she thought it, let it sink warm into flesh, it became easier, felt *right*. "I'll make a good boy of you yet." And Chance smirked at him.

About the Author

To learn more about Kim Knox, please visit www.kim-knox.co.uk. Send an email to kim@kim-knox.co.uk or go to her blog to join in the fun with other readers as well as Kim Knox! www.darknessandromance.wordpress.com

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Emergence

A prehensile tail has its advantages...

Satin Spar

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Scar's marbled skin and stunted tail aren't all that make her stand out. Her Caraniae DNA has a strange effect on the male of the species, which makes her career as a pilot perfect. The less interaction she has with people—with men—the better. She won't risk her wayward pheromones bonding her forever to one man.

Then there's her boss's new bodyguard, Anthony Tyler. The pure-human is tight-lipped about his sketchy past. He also seems determined to work her prehensile tail off.

Once imprisoned and drummed out of the Corps for conduct unbecoming, Tyler is intrigued with his ship's unheard-of, human-Caraniae hybrid. He spent his career fighting her kind, but when a message from home throws Scar into a tailspin, he finds himself drawn to help her in any way he can. Even if it means risking life and limb to help her sweat out her anger.

Their sparring session turns into something else. Something wildly sexual. Something so wrong as to be suicidal—if Scar's father discovers she's bonded with anyone other than the husband he's forcing her to marry...

Warning: This book contains violence, nekkid wrestling and hot, alien-human naughtiness.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Satin Spar:

"What do you want me to do?"

She smiled that wicked Caraniae smile. Her strong thighs gripped him and before he knew exactly how, he was on his back. Surprise had worked his grip free and now she pinned *his* arms to the cool sand. "You disobeyed orders. How?"

"That's not what I thought you'd ask."

She smirked. "Satisfy my curiosity first."

Time for the sanitised truth, the woman was half-Caraniae after all. "There was a suspected nest. We went in." The Corps had ordered an atrocity at Vistern Ridge. With the end of the war, they'd buried that order and his career. Tyler pushed back the memories; they were a part of his old life. "I refused to authorise the clean up."

"And that's a euphemism for...?"

The muscles in his jaw tightened. "It's not open for discussion."

Scar leaned forward, pressing deliciously along his erection. Her mouth hovered over his, her lips almost touching. Just a simple tilt of his head would— "Want to discuss it now?"

"Why are you pressing this?"

“What? This?” And she shifted her hips in a slow slide that had him involuntarily thrusting up to meet her. “So...why are you here, Tyler?”

She was still asking him questions. Why the hell was she still asking him questions? “Scar...?”

“Rochester told you who my stepfather is, didn’t he?”

Tyler held down a curse. Sparring with her would’ve seemed natural. Throwing her on her back and offering her whatever she wanted...yes, didn’t he look obvious now? “He mentioned it in passing.”

Scar’s expression was unreadable as she sat up. The friction made him wince. His erection mocked him. “And you just thought you’d drop by, say hello, curry favour?” She wiggled and he sucked in a breath. “Offer me this?”

“That wasn’t planned.”

Her mouth twisted and there was a hardness to her eyes, hiding...what? He wanted to label it nerves, but that would be crazy.

“An unexpected bonus?”

“Scar...”

She leapt up with an unnatural agility and offered her hand. “Let me try not to kill you.”

Tyler grabbed her hand and she pulled him effortlessly to his feet. “Suddenly this is not a good idea.”

“Really?”

Tyler shucked off his jacket and threw it beyond the edge of the arena. His fingers moved to his shirt and stopped. What was he doing? A fight felt more real, more immediate to him when air brushed his skin. But now, that would be so *very* wrong. He kicked off his boots and pulled at his socks instead. His toes curled into the warming sand.

“Finished?” Scar lifted an eyebrow. “Can we fight now?”

“Impatient for me to beat you?”

She burst forward, but he stopped her attempt to grab him, blocking her with a palm-strike. Dropping, she tried to strike him. Another block. She swung around and struck out again. She was quick, fast and strong. It was fun to play with her—

“You’re grinning. Think this is funny?” She growled and his balls tightened.

He staggered at the kick to his shin. She leapt, crashing him to the sand, and ripped at his shirt. She nipped at his neck with her teeth and Tyler’s vision blurred. Blood raced south. Her scent burned through him and he tugged at her undershirt, the thin cotton tearing across her back.

“Ah, so that’s what you want to play.” Her lips brushed against his throat, searing the words into his skin.

His hands slid down her spine and found her tail curling tight around his right wrist. It squeezed hard. “Scar...” He couldn’t help the low, warning snarl. “This is not playing fair.”

She lifted her head and grinned at him. “I want to fight, not fuck, Tyler.”

She whipped free of him, standing back, her body loose and ready to attack him again. Tyler rolled to his feet and tried to keep his eyes off her small, firm and now very *exposed* breasts. Fire flickered under his skin and the only thought that consumed him was his need to get her shorts off. Some insane voice in the back of his head screamed that she had to be naked. And so should he.

“Shall we make this interesting?”

Her green eyes narrowed as she edged around him, matching his movements. “Interesting, how?”

“You take a fall, you lose clothing.”

Scar stared down at her body. She looked back up at him from under her lashes, her eyebrow lifting. “I only have these. You have trousers *and* underwear. What say we make it even first?”

Tyler paused, to give the illusion that he was reluctant. But that small voice wanted his fingers to fly. His mouth pursed. “Fine.” And his trousers pooled at his feet. He threw them and both of their shredded shirts out of the arena. “Happy?”

Her smile was wicked. “When you’re on your back, I will be.”

His cock twitched. Her scent drifted above the sterile odour of the filtered air and the dryness of the sand, something sweet and intoxicating. His chest tightened. He wanted her—

Scar’s foot connected with his knee and he grunted. Muscle instinct took over and he grabbed her arm, yanking her forward and kicking out her legs. She thumped into the sand, face down. Tyler straddled her thighs. “One for me, I think,” he murmured. His fingers slid down her spine, easing over her ribs until he reached her hips. He hooked a finger into her shorts and twanged them.

“Okay, you got this one,” she muttered and he was certain there was a curse mixed in under her breath. “But after I get you...” her head turned and bright green eyes speared him, “...and I will, then the one who beats the other into submission is the winner. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Tyler murmured. “Now I take my reward.”

Love can bloom where nothing else survives.

Strange New World

© 2009 Jennifer Colgan

Wildlife photographer Chase Calder is no stranger to wandering in wilderness areas like the stark Nevada desert. Then a freak electrical storm leaves him strangely disoriented, and he awakens in dangerous territory—as a prisoner in a high-security Air Force base under the scrutiny of a seductive microbiologist.

Undercover Special Ops agent Martina Sanchez finally has the proof she needs to expose the Acheron beam for the danger it is. Not a harmless bio-decontaminate, but a potentially deadly super weapon. She's also discovered exposure to the beam has more than one unexpected side effect—on her. Chase's sizzling touch melts her cool, professional resolve.

It also melts steel walls.

Martina risks everything to free Chase before he becomes the next casualty of unauthorized scientific testing. Together they flee to safety, but *safe* becomes a relative term when their growing passion finally ignites...

Warning: This title contains explicit sex, molten metal and a clingy, wet nightgown.

Enjoy the following excerpt from Strange New World:

"Oh, my..." Martina lifted her finger to trace the perfect indentations of Chase's hands. Ripples buckled the steel between the two impressions as if they'd been cast in wet resin rather than cold metal.

The ridges between the fingers radiated heat.

"I didn't—" He stared at his unblemished hands.

"You melted the wall."

"Yeah...uh. Put it on my bill?" That familiar smirk tilted the corner of his mouth again. Martina's heart lurched.

"You think this is funny?"

He shrugged and held up his hands. "Hey, I know the government cuts corners. I didn't think they made holding cells out of Silly Putty."

"That's six-inch thick steel." She rapped on the wall, producing a dull, metallic thud. There was no way to hide the impressions. If someone else saw them... "We have to get you out of here."

"I agree, but how?"

"I'll think of something." She paced the floor, and Calder backed out of her way. "Can you fix them? Smooth them out?"

"Fix them? I don't even know how I made them."

"Just try." She put her hands on his back and pushed him toward the wall. "Put your hands up there."

He obeyed, but cast a curious glance over his shoulder at her. “Now what?”

“Now think about whatever you were thinking about a few minutes ago. You were angry.”

“I wasn’t angry.”

“What then? Frustrated? Agitated?”

“Horny.”

Martina gulped cool air and resisted the urge to fan herself. Good God, had he been as hot as she was when he’d pushed her body against the wall?

She’d convinced herself that she imagined feeling his erection pressing into her thigh. “Horny?”

“Yeah.” Calder leaned his weight into the wall and looked up at the indentations that fit his big hands like steel gloves. “I was thinking how I’d like to photograph you. I don’t normally do portraits, but God, you’d look good nude, lying on a bed of red sand to contrast your skin tone. With your hair flowing over your shoulders, your lips parted and one hand covering your breasts...”

Martina sank to the cot. She should have been offended. How dare this man she’d just met imagine her naked, spread before him, her body on display? Why did the image excite her? Her mind raced to a dangerous place. What would it feel like with the sun beating down on her, the hot desert air stealing the moisture that formed between her legs? She pictured Calder looming over her, urging her to lick her lips for him and arch her back while he snapped shot after shot. His lens would travel up her body, pausing to capture the flare of her hips, the gentle valley of her navel...he’d touch her, pose her—

“We have to get out of here, now. Come on.”

Chase watched her with a mixture of shock and fascination as she slid her ID badge through the security lock inside the cell.

“Whoa, wait a minute. We’re just going to walk out of here?” He nodded toward the windowless door that led out of the observation area.

Martina stopped, one delicate, slippered foot in the airlock. “We’re going to have to hide for a little while. We need to get off the base by sunrise.”

Chase swallowed the cold lump of doubt lodged in his throat. Besides being locked in a windowless cell for God knows how long, the last thing he wanted was to get caught trying to escape from the most secure air force base in the lower forty-eight. There was no question in his mind that anyone who saw them would shoot first and worry about red tape and paperwork later.

He touched her arm, and the look she gave him made his heart race. “How are you going to do this?”

“I have a plan, but I need you to trust me.”

At that moment, looking into her bottomless brown eyes, he’d have followed her anywhere.

She ducked through the airlock, and Chase followed her. A second later they emerged into the observation room where the air was warmer, not as crisp and certainly not as sterile as his cell. The place smelled like stale coffee and military sweat.

Martina hushed him with a gesture. “We’re going to go two doors down this hallway to the left and into the supply closet. I’m going to leave you there and go around to a work room on the other side. We’ll work our way toward the mess hall. That’s the least secure area.”

Chase nodded as if the plan made a rat’s ass worth of sense to him. Cold steel seemed more comforting at this point than hot lead. Somewhere on this base was a bullet with his name on it, and he had a bad feeling he was going to meet it all too soon.

The inner corridor was empty, stark white and way too bright. Martina felt completely exposed as they slithered along the wall, trying to stay in the blind spot of the security camera that swept the corridor every two minutes.

Ten nerve wracking steps brought them to the supply closet. They ducked inside, and when the heavy door shut behind Calder, blackness closed around them like a shroud.

His breath heated the back of her neck, and his body was warm and solid behind her. She wanted to press against him and absorb his strength, but there wasn’t time. She thrust her arms out in front of her and felt around for the handle of the opposite door. Something rattled behind her, and his swift movement startled her. “Shh!”

“Sorry. Broom.”

“Stand still.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me that. I’m sick of everyone calling me ‘ma’am’. It makes me feel a hundred years old.”

“What about ‘babe’?”

She heard the smirk this time and clucked her tongue. “Mr. Calder.”

“Sorry, Doc. You realize you’re going to get us both killed, right?”

Martina stiffened as her hand closed over the door knob in the dark. “Do you want to go back? They’ll keep you in that cell until you die, which could be pretty soon if Dobbs has his way. Then they’ll probably move you to a medical testing facility and take you apart cell by cell until they find out why you survived.”

Again, his breath heated the nape of her neck. The fine hairs there prickled, and her body sparked with desire when his lips brushed her ear. “If we get out of here in one piece, Doc, you’re going to tell me every gory detail of what’s going on here.”

“I will. I promise.” She twisted the door knob, and a sliver of light illuminated the closet. “Just stay here until I come for you.”

“Why can’t we go together?”

“I have to sign out of the containment area. If I don’t, they’ll start to wonder why I’m taking so long.”

“All right.”

She slipped by him, sucking in her breath to avoid brushing against his chest in the tight space. “I won’t be long,” she said, not daring to glance at him in the dim light. She wanted to add a hundred different things. Sit tight. Be careful. Don’t move. Everything that came to mind seemed so lame. Ultimately she left the storage area without another word, took a deep breath and marched down the corridor, rehearsing the casual lie she’d tell the check point guard on her way out of containment.



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