

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman has long, wavy reddish-brown hair, and the man has short, curly brown hair. They are set against a dark, starry space background. A bright, glowing planet with blue and white clouds is visible in the lower-left corner. The overall mood is intimate and celestial.

Love Me Again

Christopher Golliday

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by Christopher Golliday

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Love Me Again
by Christopher Golliday

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Love Me Again

By Christopher and Melissa Golliday

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Chapter One

October 12, 2310

American University Hospital—Human Genetics Division
Baltimore, MD, USA, Earth

Where the hell am I? Blurred vision and loud voices enveloped her senses. Blinking hard from the bright lights assaulting her eyes, she tried to focus on just one thing to clear her groggy mind. Slowly, a holo-poster on the wall with smiley faces took shape in perfect clarity. Moving on to the other previously hazy objects, she noted the medical machinery. Her gaze traveled to the bed in which she lay, and then finally, to her own self. *Oh God!* It was an ugly cotton gown with light blue flowers. She was pretty sure she wouldn't have purchased anything like this. The gown was absolutely hideous!

The voices in the room grew louder and drew her away from her own thoughts. Two men were standing near the foot of the hospital bed, one in doctor's scrubs and the other in a loose camouflage suit, and it seemed their conversation was becoming increasingly heated, if their gestures were to be any indication.

"Look, Mr. Sorenson, your wife has *no* previous memories besides what we've implanted through our embedded electro-neural processes. Both of you will need extensive relationship therapy and counseling if you're to..."

"Don't you think I know that already?" The other man interrupted. He was a tall, handsome man with brilliant blue

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eyes and lightly bronzed skin. Running his hands through his short russet hair, he let out an exasperated breath. "Look, if there was time I would. But I made an agreement. In return for this, I would work off the debt. And in order to do that, I have approximately three hours to be at the rendezvous point."

Frowning, she tried to place him. She wondered who he was and why he was in this room arguing with a doctor.

Listening in to the strangers' conversation she felt like a voyeur—strangely connected yet completely separate.

"I understand your need to be with your wife, I do. But you have to remember her delicate state. She needs to be slowly acclimated to her environment and allowed time to fall in love with you again."

Glued to the confusing conversation, she tried to move closer. Shifting position, she found her body greatly protesting the movement. A groan of pain escaped her lips at the stiffness in her joints. Immediately, the conversation ceased and the handsome man rushed to her side. As he adjusted a pillow beneath her to cushion her back, she tried to speak. Only a croak pushed past her vocal chords. Confused, she touched her neck and mouth. No tubes were there to impede her speech. *Why can't I talk? What's going on?* She felt panic begin to swell within her as the man held a glass of water to her lips. "It's okay Karen. I'm here baby. Just take a little drink."

Karen? Who the hell was Karen? My name isn't Karen. It's... what is my name? Why don't I know my own name? Struggling against the sheets in an attempt to get up, she

was stalled as the doctor placed a gentle but firm hand on her shoulder, stilling her anxious movements.

"It's okay Mrs. Sorenson. We know how confused you are right now." The doctor gave the handsome man a poignant look. "Your husband and I are here to help you adjust to your new state."

This made no sense. My husband? I don't have a husband, do I? He is awfully attractive. Her mind felt like a house being tossed about in the midst of a hurricane. Too many questions were swirling through her brain at once. She distinctly recalled them talking about a body —his wife's body to be precise, and memories. Yet this doctor, at least he looked like one, was telling her she had a husband. *This would mean that I'm Mrs. Sorenson. But they'd said body which meant dead, right? And now a strange beeping sound is driving me crazy!*

Pulling the IV from her arm, she made a second attempt at getting up. *Something is still beeping. Where the hell is it coming from?*

"Karen, I'm so sorry you have to go through this. I'll do whatever it takes to make it right. I promise." She watched as the man's eyes misted up as he spoke. "... I couldn't lose you."

Couldn't lose me? Lose me how? Why does he keep calling me Karen? Damn it! This makes no sense. Why can't I remember anything? An intense, sharp pain shot through her head from the base of her neck to just below her eyes. Grabbing her head, she bent over to shield her body from the unseen blow. The mysterious beeping suddenly became a roar, overshadowed only by loud piercing screams. Slowly she

realized *she* was the person screaming. Shutting her mouth, she silenced her voice and carefully leaned back against the pillow as the pain in her head ebbed away to a dull throb.

"Mr. Sorenson, why don't you step out a moment so I can have a chat with your lovely wife?"

Karen found her gaze shifting to this Mr. Sorenson, a man she wasn't sure she was ready to call her husband. She didn't know him...and more importantly didn't know herself.

"No, I know she's pissed. I can see it. We've always had a policy of never leaving one another until we worked out our disagreements." He gripped the rail that ran alongside her bed so hard she could see his knuckles turning white under the pressure.

"This isn't exactly an argument now is it? If you intend to remain in this room, keep silent."

"Major Sorenson, the captain has ordered all hands to be on deck in two hours." A feminine voice interrupted through the comm. link. Quickly covering the link, he stammered a terse apology. "Sorry, I forgot it was connected."

Moving away from the bed, he spoke into the link. "I was told that I would have three hours to settle my affairs."

Karen watched as he silenced the link and listened intently. After a few brief moments, his brows furrowed as his teeth clenched.

"Alright...we'll be there." His eyes met hers. "I'm sorry but there are a few more things that I have to see to before we leave. I'll be back as soon as possible."

After her earlier attempt at talking, Karen opted for a nod in response. Watching Mr. Sorenson reluctantly leave her

side, she found her eyes following his trim but muscular frame as he walked away.

"Doctor, do not upset my wife any further than she already is. You have a little over an hour and then I'll be back." Once the other man—the one they called her husband—was gone from the room, the doctor began to speak again.

"Mrs. Sorenson, Karen, since we have even less time than earlier anticipated, we need to hurry things along." The short, balding doctor lowered the side rail on her bed. "Let's start by helping you use those leg muscles, shall we?"

Grunting as he helped her stand, he started talking again. "Dane has been a bit of a pain in the ass where you're concerned. He insisted on being here with you the entire time. Okay, let's try out your legs...right...then left... right again...good. The electro-neural processes seem to have taken well. Let's sit you over here in this chair and we'll continue."

Once seated, the doctor brought over a blue pad.

"Karen, I'm going to place this electron-heating pad on your neck to loosen your vocal chords. They haven't been used much, except for the scream, so you'll need to warm them and make small sounds at first in order to ensure no lasting damage or strain. While this works, we'll just have a little chat."

Pulling a second chair next to hers, the doctor sat down and took a deep breath.

"Your name is Karen Marie Sorenson and you were originally born in Arlington, Virginia as Karen Marie Flynn. You were married at the age of twenty-two and have been

married for almost five years. Unfortunately, last year you were a victim of space pirates and the memories, the essence that makes you...well *you*...did not survive the attack."

At the shocked look on her face the doctor placed a hand upon hers. "I understand this doesn't sound right but you can't remember anything. You see your memory synapses were so damaged in the gamma explosion that we were able to extract DNA only. No memories were transferred. I'm afraid that means you have no history or memory of your childhood, marriage or husband. The advanced cloning can create an exact replica in everything but memories. Those must be extracted from the original host as they are molded through our experiences and decisions. We were however, able to utilize an experimental new technology that seems to be working so far. With it, you will have basic skills, facts and language. You will be released as soon as you pass the short physical and mental exam."

Karen stopped to let the idea of her existence sink in. She wasn't herself, but she was. *How can one person be themselves without really being the person they are? What do I do with a husband I don't know? More importantly, what do I do with anything? Where do I belong?* Her thoughts were interrupted by the doctor's continued explanation.

"You have a different set of rights now Karen. I am required by law to explain to you the thirteenth amendment to the Confederate Constitution. In it, you are required to remain Karen Sorenson for a year's time. After that, you can become a new identity free from all the confines of your previous life, if you choose. There is a packet the nurses will

bring to you that outlines the individual rights in the amendment. Be sure to look them over and know what you are entitled to." With a pat on her knee, he removed the electron-heating pad. "Now, let's try out that voice. I want you to hum softly and we'll add sounds from there."

Keying in his access code to pay for the new aero-cab, Dane mentally calculated what was left of their funds. Clearly it was going to be a tight two weeks until he was paid again. Luckily, room and board on the Ragnorak was part of the deal he had worked out with Dean Erland, CEO of Erland Industries. A deal he would make a thousand times over for Karen to be with him once again. This moment, reuniting with Karen, only proved to him just how right he'd been. Friends and family had discouraged him at every step stating various reasons. At thirty-three, they'd said he should find someone new and not spend his life chasing a dead woman.

A year ago, he had come home from his latest deployment to discover that his wife had been killed by space pirates led by Craven Shaddoc, operating in the Andromeda Galaxy. Selling everything he had, Dane tried raising the funds to get his wife cloned. With nothing left and still short twenty-eight thousand credits, he had started contemplating eating a plasma round. Karen was everything to him. If he couldn't live his life with her then there was no reason to live at all. Just when his life had been the worst, Erland approached him. The man's son and daughter-in-law had also been killed by the pirates in the same attack; and while Erland had plans to clone them as well, primarily he wanted revenge. His idea

was to create a team of mercs who would eradicate the pirates, especially Shaddoc, which was where Dane came in.

Dane, as commander of a force recon unit, had the training and skills necessary to help lead the mercenaries for this unorthodox mission. The good news was that Erland wasn't sparing any expense on this crew. Every last one of them were vets like himself, so he felt confident he would make it out of this alive—otherwise all of this would be for nothing. He wanted the time with Karen that had been stolen from them.

Waiting the full second for her hospital room doors to open, Dane walked in and found his cock hardening instantly at the sight of her ass peeking out from the back of the hospital gown. A sight he hadn't seen in a year. His heart tightened with strong emotions. The woman he couldn't forget would be his once again. This time he would have that lifetime they'd been denied.

As she turned around with a much surer step, Dane knew instantly the moment she spotted him. He watched the deep pink steal across her cheeks as her gaze dropped and her hands flew to cover the open edges of the garment. The urge to sweep her into his arms and carry her to a private place had to be restrained. He knew that it would embarrass her, possibly even frighten her. Now that he'd experienced life without her, he would do anything to ensure he didn't jeopardize this second chance.

"Everything seems to be in working order Karen. You've done a great job." Dr. Smyth spoke as he looked up from his computer pad.

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Chapter Two

The hum of the Ragnorak's hyperspace engines died down as the ship reached cruising speed. Releasing the safety harness, Dane signaled to his men that it was safe to move about the ship. Now that they'd left Earth's orbit, the ship's onboard stabilizers would be kicking in, making it possible for everyone on board to walk and breathe normally. His second in command, Lieutenant Bryce Curvier, stood and patiently waited.

The Lieutenant had been a Seal with the space navy prior to his employment with Erland. From what Dane could see, he was an extremely capable officer. Dane couldn't have asked for a better XO on this mission. "Curvier, set up a watch schedule for the ship's secure sectors. We'll need to begin patrols by 0630."

"Aye Aye, Sir." Bryce turned to the closest man. "Mason, we'll need a full muster list in here in thirty minutes..."

Dane took up a nervous pace, with Karen on his mind. Only half listening to his second in command, he thought about their ride to the Ragnorak. It had been uncomfortable as they rode in silence. Gritting his teeth in frustration, he found himself railing at the unfairness. *It wasn't supposed to be like this. She wasn't supposed to be like this.*

"Sir, would you like me to send the captain our status report?"

Turning to face a young man who had just finished his tour in the Space Marines, Dane nodded, "Yes Jameson, carry on."

I can't afford to be distracted like this. The lives of these men depended on him having a clear head. Once they discovered where the pirates in the Andromeda Galaxy were hiding out, Dane would lead the ground assault while the Ragnorak blasted any ships trying to escape. Dean Erland wanted to eradicate the pirate activity in this sector before moving on to some of the nastier areas where space pirates plied a lucrative trade. Erland did not want to stop until he was positive Craven Shaddoc, the pirate responsible for killing his children, was destroyed.

Dane thought about Karen's death. In the fifty years since it had become possible to clone a fully grown person, rights had been granted to those individuals cloned that allowed them complete autonomy of their identity. He was terrified that at the end of this year with her; she would choose to leave him. He didn't know what he would do if that happened. Lord knew that he had been quite suicidal before, even if no one else had known how close he had come to ending it all.

"Are you alright sir?"

"I'm fine Lieutenant." His XO continued to stand there while the men started unloading the combat gear and setting it up for use within the large bay area. *If he's expecting me to bare my soul then he'll be waiting an eternity.* Only one person—one woman—had ever heard all his dreams, wishes, woes, and thoughts. And she was in their cabin waiting for the captain to give the all clear call for the handful of civilian passengers.

"Forgive the insolence, Sir, but you don't look fine."

"A wiser man, Lieutenant, would realize that whatever my current state, the statement alone was an unequivocal message to back the hell off." Stepping away from Bryce, Dane figured that if he looked busy then he might move on without him planting a fist in his face. "Sergeant Major, at 0530 hours all men not on watch will meet on the deck's gym deck for PT." Turning to face the Lieutenant, he added "Curvier, you'll take command of the watch tonight. I'll also need you to create a circulating watch schedule among all officers—myself included."

"Can I speak to you privately Sir?"

Did this man never give up? He clearly isn't going to let it go and in the process will need to have my foot surgically removed from his ass. Jerking his thumb towards the command office, Dane barked out, "Very well Lieutenant." Clearly his second in command wasn't nearly as bright as he had first thought. "Sergeant Major, as soon as the men finish unloading our gear dismiss them for a little R&R. God knows we soon won't have the time to do so."

Walking past numerous cargo boxes full of food, toiletries, weapons, and other supplies, Dane made his way to the walled off office. He waited as the Lieutenant entered behind him and closed the office door. Pale green walls met the untreated titanium floor to create a stark appearance. Two desks, two chairs, and several storage compartments completed the entire room.

Taking the seat behind the desk he signaled for the other man to take one as well. Before he could get comfortable, or at least as comfortable as one could get in the utilitarian

chairs, Curvier spoke. "Sir, I don't mean to pry, that is not my intention, but I think you need to take your mind off of her for a while. She'll learn who she is in time; you just need to give it to her."

"What are you talking about Curvier?" Dane clenched and unclenched his fist in his lap. *Dammit, if he's isn't close to getting knocked out.*

Bryce took a deep breath and continued. "Sir, I understand what you and your wife are going through right now. I, myself, have gone through the same situation just not with the same set of circumstances. What I am trying to say, Sir, is that I was—am, also a clone." Ending his declaration, Curvier waited for the Major's response.

Dane hadn't known that about the other man's status and had not even suspected that was the case. *I'll have a nice little chat with the boss when I see him next.* There could only be one reason for his XO revealing his birth status to him—Erland had told the man about Karen's cloning. "I was not aware of that, Lieutenant."

"Sir, when Mr. Erland first approached me, he explained the main reason I was being asked to join the team was to help you and your wife transition through the cloning re-acclimation process."

It took every ounce of Dane's self restraint not to fling the empty coffee mug sitting on the desk at the other man's head. *I don't need anyone to help me re-acclimate anything!* Karen was his wife and while he'd give her the space she needed, ultimately it was he who knew her best. Reminding himself that Curvier was only there to help at Erland's

request, he stood up. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding Lieutenant, but as I stated earlier, I'm fine and so is my wife. We won't be needing your services."

A crease formed between Curvier's brows as the doubt plainly showed on his face. "Are you sure Sir? I could just talk with her and see if she has any questions if you like."

If Dane was honest with himself he wasn't sure. The image of Karen hiding behind her dark blond locks as they rode in silence to the ship reminded him that he was completely out of his zone. This wasn't like the first time he had met her. The problem was he had never felt comfortable sharing himself with anyone—with one notable exception: the woman who was his soul mate. Unclenching his fist, Dane grudgingly admitted, "No, I'm not. I guess it wouldn't hurt."

"Understandable, Sir. So much of who we are is shaped by our experiences. From what Dean Erland told me, Karen has no previous memories. If this is the case, then each step you take now will affect her decisions later."

Dane found himself pacing against his will. "Look...you don't understand the kind of connection my wife and I have." Karen always knew when Dane needed her to listen—an instinctive measure that had been greatly appreciated. Often, Dane had come home from a mission exhausted and cranky. Karen had given him his space but done little things to let him know she was happy he was home. She seemed to know what he was thinking before he even said it.

A sigh escaped his XO's lips, "She no longer knows that connection you're talking about even exists and I can

guarantee you that until she rediscovers herself, she won't even realize that there is a connection between you."

"Well then, what do you suggest I do?" Dane would try anything if it meant re-claiming his wife. At that moment, he realized how profoundly worrying that cab ride had been for him.

"Don't try telling her who she is. Support her as she discovers it for herself. And more importantly...don't force her into a mold you've created from the memories of your wife."

"Thanks, I'll try my best."

"You're welcome...I'll meet with your wife tomorrow morning at 0800 at the ship's cafeteria. Can you please arrange that? She'll need my help as well."

Hearing the all-clear announcement over the comm., Karen unbuckled herself, stood and stretched her legs. Dane had strapped her into the harness and then headed out with his men before the ship lifted off from Earth. Now she stood, staring at the suite that was to be her home. It was open and spacious with slick furniture spread out to give a rough impression of earth-bound living and dining areas. The sleep pod was in a separate walled off room on the far side of the suite. She had noticed right away there was only one double pod in the room. Realizing she would be expected to share the pod with Dane had her cheeks heating in a fierce blush. Emotions whirled through her mind. He was a fiercely compelling man, her husband, to everyone who knew him. But to her—he was a stranger! Someone who cared a great deal about her, but a stranger nonetheless.

Walking around the suite, Karen decided to make herself useful. There was no way to talk to Dane until he came back and she wasn't sure she was ready for that anyway. Really, she had no idea what to do. Seeing the luggage compartment by the suite door, she pulled the bags out and began to unpack. Finally she managed to empty out their suitcases. After quickly putting Dane's items in the shelving unit she stared at the rest. Each garment was a fine quality fabric, neatly folded and stacked. To her knowledge, she had never worn any of the clothing but since it had been packed from the closet at Dane's Baltimore house she assumed that his wife, Karen, had.

It was hard to think of herself as the same Karen that had been Dane's wife. She knew the DNA was the same but she had no recollection of that person. As she pondered her new life, she thought back to the aero-cab ride earlier. Tension had been high as she'd kept to her side of the vehicle. She didn't know the man who said he was her husband at all yet she understood that he had intense feelings for her. He certainly had cared enough to barter and beg for her cloning. She had felt some curious sensations in her body at the thought of making love to him. But those feelings did not automatically mean she loved him. Overall she decided she felt sorry for Dane. She didn't understand who she really was and Dane thought he knew. He had wanted his wife desperately, but could she be that woman?

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Chapter Three

Dane stared at the patterned ceiling of the suite as he waited for sleep to come. *It was damn elusive tonight! Counting ceiling tiles doesn't help any either. Too bad I'm not a drinking man.* The almost inaudible rustling of the sheets from the other room had his mind rushing straight back to Karen. *There was an enigma!* Honestly, he'd assumed it would be awkward at first not having her around after a year but this stranger was not who he had expected. This woman had all the right curves and the sexy bedroom voice like his Karen but had no memory of him, or their life together.

Longing for that connection once more, he opened the box of holo-disks he'd packed from their home. Scrolling down the movie list, his fingers came to rest on Karen's last story. Entering the disk, he watched his wife come alive. She'd had that sparkle in her toffee colored eyes from their last loving that had lasted the entire weekend. Once or twice she'd pushed her hair behind her ears as she glanced at her digipad where she'd written her notes. *God she was beautiful.* She was just detailing the charity work of Dean Erland when his phone rang. Stealing a second to check the time crystal above the unit he noted it was almost 2300 hours. *Who the hell would call at this time?* Clicking on the connection, Bryce's face popped into view.

"What do you want Curvier? It'd better be good."

"Thanks Major. Nice to see you as well. We've got a transmission coming through from a General Mackafee? He

insists he speak with you immediately. Should I patch him through to you there?"

"Mackafee? Yeah, patch him through." Leaning in, Dane severed the connection with his lieutenant and waited.

Within moments his old Marine comrade's image appeared on his phone. "General, to what do I owe this late night call?"

"Dane. It's been too long and I know how you love these chats. But, listen, I've come across a holo-disk that I knew would be of interest to you the moment I saw it. I've got to tell you it's not pretty. It was recovered from the Homerli astroliner Karen was on when she died. I can send the file over if you have your comm. with you. Just clip the comm. into the holo player and you can access the file. You won't be able to save it without the drive but I can send it with the next transport or to your employee box if you want."

Inserting his comm. into the phone link Dane watched the file progression quickly zip onto the device. "Thank you. I'd appreciate a copy as well. Sending it with the next transport is fine."

"Good night Sorenson. Next time we speak I hope it's under nicer circumstances." With that said, the connection broke, leaving Dane to wonder what he had just downloaded. Placing the comm. into the holo player had him immediately regretting the action. His heart seized and his jaw dropped as he watched what appeared to be a security reel from The Homerli astroliner.

As the frame came into focus, Karen could be seen in the right hand lower portion of the screen. The camera panned the area as a shaggy bearded man walked into view. Dane

immediately recognized him as Craven Shaddoc, the pirate they were currently tracking down. While no words could be heard, the man shifted to reveal a plasma rifle at his side. Cursing the camera and its odd angles, Dane watched fatalistically as Shaddoc lifted his rifle towards his wife. Steely determination crossed her features as she faced the pirate unarmed. Suddenly, the plasma rifle fired twice, and Karen hit the ground hard.

Dane had to cover his mouth to keep from screaming at the sight of the atrocity. The camera panned back to show her lifeless body as Shaddoc pulled a projection device out of her pocket and a map flickered into view. Quickly snapping it shut, he placed it in his pants pocket and walked away. The screen went blank as Dane's eyes filled with tears. He knew from the later reports that parts of the ship had blown up a few moments later leaving hardly any of his wife's remains intact.

Rage unlike any he'd ever felt filled Dane's every pore, his fists clenched with the need to kill Craven Shaddoc. Unable to hold back his fury, he unleashed his wrath on the nearest wall. He punched it over and over again until he couldn't swing anymore. Collapsing onto the couch, his eyes welled with tears that spilled down his cheeks unnoticed. Angry sobs wracked his body with the injustice of it all.

A soft touch from Karen's hand had him leaning in to her embrace. A quiet question broke the silence.

"What if I can never be that Karen? What do we do then? Will you still love *me*?"

Karen walked into the ship's cafeteria and took a look around. The decor was a retro look from near 2010 with straight lined, sleek furniture. Quickly stealing a glance at the time crystal on the opposite wall she saw she was six minutes early for her appointment with the man named Bryce. She decided to sit at a table near the corner where she had a clear view of the entrance and the food preparation area. Hopefully, he would see her where she was seated.

Running her fingers over the geometric design in the tabletop, her mind wouldn't let go of the image of Dane broken and bleeding. She'd been unable to sleep with everything that had happened last night. The sound of voices drew her out of the pod to investigate. Seeing the image of herself in front of a large building, smiling and happy, had been surreal. She had stood there silently as the video played through. When the phone rang she'd been too shocked to move, too embarrassed to be eavesdropping on her husband to call attention to her presence. Then the second video had played. Watching the images of her former self crumble to the floor in death had been too much. She had started out into the living area to beg Dane to turn the comm. file off. Then Dane had begun to take out his anger and agony on the wall. She couldn't stop herself from comforting him as he'd sat on the couch bloodied and shaking. Just as she couldn't help herself from wondering if she could ever be the wife he had lost. If she wanted to be the other woman?

In the morning, she had made a quick mug of coffee and then Dane headed out for a meeting of his own. Barely seven

words had passed between them: 'Pass the sugar' and 'I have to go.'

"Looks like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. Do you mind if I have a seat?"

Startled out of her thoughts, Karen peered up into the face of a blond man standing by the opposite seat. While handsome in his own right, he didn't cause the same stomach flutters that Dane elicited from her. "Do I know you?"

"I'm sorry. I got ahead of myself. I'm Bryce Curvier, Dane's lieutenant." Sitting down on the opposite chair, he continued. "Do you mind if I ask what you were thinking about a few moments ago? It looked serious."

Karen realized she did mind. She wasn't sure if she could really talk to this stranger about her inner most fears. "I'm not... well... I think I'm a private person. What I mean to say is that, I'm not comfortable telling someone I don't know about what I'm thinking."

"Believe it or not, I completely understand. Why don't we start this first session with my own story?"

"I guess so." Karen found her eyes searching the cafeteria for Dane. She had thought he was supposed to be here too according to their conversation last night. "Where's Dane?"

"He'll be here in a little bit. We'll be docking at a space station in a few weeks so he needed to get the inventory and supply list ready as well as register some last minute weapon purchases. The good news is that the captain is setting aside some time for us to get a little R&R before moving on."

"Bryce, what if I can't be the woman he wants?"

Bryce looked thoughtful for a moment. Taking a deep breath, he spoke. "Honestly, you can only be the person you want to be. Don't try to force yourself to fit Dane's mold of his dead wife. You are a different person regardless of whose DNA you carry. You don't have the same life experiences or the shared memories. I don't know if Dane told you or not, but I was chosen for this mission because I was a clone myself. I was brought along not only to be Dane's second but to also be a counselor for you and Dane. As a clone, Erland knew I would have a unique empathy for your situation."

"Oh. So, how do I find out who I really am?"

Smiling, he shook his head. "You know, if I had all the answers, I'd get paid a lot more than I do. No one can tell you how to find yourself. Only you can determine who you really are. Look, I know it sounds like a bunch of psychobabble but it's true. There were a lot of things going on with me that didn't make sense in the beginning, but my case was a little different."

Karen wasn't sure what to think as Bryce detailed his life as a clone. He wasn't cloned because of a great love as she had been. His wife had wanted the younger version of the same man. It seemed that after his year was over he had chosen to start a completely new life—a life without his wife. So far, he had said, it was going well. Is that what she wanted? Honestly, she didn't know.

"Bryce? What if I just decide to stay Karen? I mean I'm not sure exactly who she was, but what happens if I just want to stay and figure it out?"

A slow smile spread across his handsome face. "Honestly, you just stay Karen. You are free to live your life just as any other person would. The relationship you forge with Dane is totally up to you..."

"I do hope you aren't saying anything negative about me. That would be a shame, Lieutenant."

Hearing the deep baritone of his voice, Karen glanced up to see a smile on Dane's face. She watched as he pulled up a chair and sat next to her facing Bryce. He truly was a sight to behold. His piercing blue eyes and short russet hair gave the illusion that he was a pretty boy, but Karen already knew he was anything but. He was a take charge, no holds barred kind of man who had a determined look in his eye. A shiver of appreciation ran through her at the sight of this man, her man technically. Just looking at him made her want to be whomever he wanted, whenever he wanted. Shaking the irrational thought from her head, she smiled back.

"Actually, he has been very polite and has not defamed your character in the least, thank you very much," Karen snapped back playfully.

"Well that's good to hear I suppose. What have I missed so far?"

At this point Bryce broke in. "I've been telling Karen all about my history before I became Bryce. Nothing exciting really. I do have an assignment for you two though. I want you to take some time and do something fun together. In fact, why don't you find an activity to get involved with this evening? Get to know each other as more than just a couple." Turning to look at Karen specifically, he continued. "I want

you to learn what you like and what you don't. Just because you have the same DNA as Karen Sorenson does not mean you are the *same* Karen Sorenson. Understood? I'll find some time to catch up with you tomorrow after my shift."

Bryce stood, pushed in his chair and walked away leaving Dane and Karen to stare as he silently moved towards and went through the exit on the opposite side of the cafeteria. The instant Bryce disappeared through the cafeteria door, Dane and Karen turned to look at one another. Laughter erupted as Karen realized just how lost they both looked.

"Am I the only one who thinks we're pretty pathetic?" Karen said, ending her sentence with another burst of giggles.

"You know, I think you're right. We are, aren't we? Can you handle being with poor pathetic me long enough to have some fun? I promise to work on the pathetic part. Maybe by the time we're done I'll have upgraded us to just slightly boring."

"Sounds good to me. I think I can live with slightly boring. If you don't mind I'd like to explore the ship while you're at work. I'll see you back at our suite this evening." As she stood, Karen watched how Dane's smile caused tiny little lines to appear beside his mouth hinting at the enjoyment he had once had. For the first time since she came to in the hospital Karen had a glimpse of what she had lost. She'd love to know more about that, and this man who very much intrigued her.

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Chapter Four

Dane watched as the men sparred with one another. They had already worked on outer space, ship boarding, and planetary assault drills. From the corner of his eye, he saw Bryce approaching from his four o'clock and wondered if the man was going to attempt another therapy session. He was probably being a little paranoid. Besides, he should be grateful that the person trying to help them had actually experienced a similar occurrence.

"If I ask you some hard personal questions, do you promise not to bite my head off or take a swing at me?"

Crossing his arms, Dane widened his stance. *Wow, why do I have the feeling whatever Bryce is about to say I'm not gonna like it.* "I'll try not to."

"Only try? Ah hell, what am I worried about? It'll be a cold day in hell before a jarhead kicks my ass." Bryce opened his arms in an invitation and waved him on.

Dane's bark of laughter startled several men waiting their turn to practice around the large square mat set up to cushion the impact of being thrown. "I might have to introduce you to one who could someday. Now, why don't you ask your question?"

"I was wondering about something. What if Karen never becomes the wife you knew? Will you be able to accept that?"

Damn! He doesn't pull any punches. "I don't know." Had Bryce asked him this the night before he might have answered differently. All he could think about was how she

had sat next to him while he'd cried like a baby. He could still hear the pain in her own voice over the possibility of not becoming the wife he had lost. "Look, I'm not going to lie to you. I really thought I was going to get my Karen back when I had her cloned, so yes I was disappointed that the memories weren't available but...hearing her insecurities made me realize that there is more to this marriage than me. I never stopped to consider Karen's feelings. I'm going to take this one day at a time and see where it takes us."

Bryce looked thoughtful for long moments. Finally he folded his arms against his chest and sighed. "When I spoke with her this morning, she seemed willing to learn more about you and the relationship you could have together. It's not the same, but it wouldn't have been if she'd retained all of her memory. You'd still have that missing year and her death between you. She's not just going to fall into your arms and thank you for your love, you know. Take my advice and court her like you would any other woman. In fact, don't think of her as your wife, think of her as a totally different woman that you want to explore possibilities with."

"Thanks Bryce." Dane couldn't help the sarcasm dripping from his voice. *I'm not stupid. I wish that was the case, but I'm not dense enough to believe it would be that easy.* The problem was how to love a woman when she looked back at him from his dead wife's eyes. And if last night's film had done nothing else it had shown him better than anything could that his wife was dead.

And what's behind door number thirty-two? Keying in the access code from her guest card, the door slid open to reveal

yet another lounge. *How many lounges does this ship have? I've found at least four and that's just on this deck!* Karen couldn't believe just how boring the Ragnorak was turning out to be. She'd been wandering around for hours and the most exciting thing she'd found was a janitor and guest enjoying each other in a service tunnel. *That had been an eyeful!*

Unfortunately, she had found little since then. Checking the time crystal only had her sinking deeper into her self-induced boredom. She had at least two more hours before Dane would be back from work. *The next lounge I find, I'm staying put for a while. My feet hurt!*

About ten minutes later, and down two hallways, found Karen at yet another set of doors. Where this led, she'd soon find out. Using the guest access code she'd now memorized, she found a bathroom. Not immediately needing the facilities, she moved on to the next door. Opening it she found another lounge. This one had pale blue walls with a sleek off white couch flanked by two cocktail chairs. Thankfully, the room was empty. Sinking down into the softness of the couch, Karen kicked off her shoes and pulled her feet up.

Laying her head back against the cushion, she let her mind drift. Her meeting with Bryce had been a lot less painful and intrusive than she'd thought it would be. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but a nice leisurely talk hadn't been it. Unfortunately, she wasn't sure it would do them any good. Look at Bryce, his relationship hadn't worked and his wasn't nearly as problematic. Dane wanted his old life with his wife so badly that she feared that if he didn't get it he would come to resent her, the replacement.

Closing her eyes, Karen couldn't help but see again how distraught Dane had been over his wife's death. She wondered what it would be like to be loved that deeply. Getting up, Karen went to the suite they shared. She was a woman on a mission. She had to know what it was about his dead wife that had made her so special to Dane.

Heading straight for the holo-disks Dane had been watching last night, Karen opened the case and felt a pang of conscience at what was to her mind an invasion of privacy. Although, could it really be called that? Legally speaking, she *was* Karen Sorenson so she had just as much right to be looking at the movies as anyone. *Yeah, but how would Dane see it?* Would he think that she was prying? Or that she wanted to be Karen 2.0 and then get mad if she discovered that she couldn't?

Remembering him sobbing at the memory of the dead woman, Karen squelched her morals and selected their honeymoon disc. A part of her needed to see how their marriage began so she would know what it took to win a man who loved this fiercely. Putting it in before she lost her nerve, Karen sat back and watched her hopes for a future with Dane come crashing down.

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Chapter Five

Seeing Karen's sweet smile as she stood up from the table beside him after supper settled it. Dane would listen to whatever advice Bryce had to give him if the result was the same camaraderie with his new wife. The easy flowing conversation with Karen had been refreshing and sorely missed. Pushing their chairs in, Dane placed a gentle hand at the small of her back as they walked towards their suite. Just that simple touch had his body trembling with need. As they entered their temporary living quarters and locked their suite door, he wondered when she'd accept him as a husband—as a lover. Slowly he brought his hand down to hold hers. Electricity sparked as his fingertips grazed hers, arousing and invigorating him. He relaxed as she timidly entwined her fingers with his. "Do you know what you'd like to do with our free evening?"

A blush crept over her cheeks. "I'd like to try something I watched on the holo-disks earlier. Which is really silly since I doubt you can go white water rafting on a ship but it looked really fun."

"When did you watch holo-disks?"

Dane watched as Karen refused to make eye contact. Biting her lip, she was silent for a moment before quietly speaking. "I was curious to know more about the Karen you loved."

Flabbergasted at the admission, Dane struggled with how to respond. It gave him an eerie feeling to think of the

woman beside him watching movies of him and the wife he loved so deeply. But remembering Bryce's comments Dane concentrated on living in the present, learning to love his new wife. "We can go white water rafting if you'd like. Erland spared no expense with this ship. It has a fully functioning holo deck which will give us the illusion of white water rafting. Would you like to do that?"

"Really? Alright... but is that safe? I mean with me just getting my sea legs so to speak."

Laughing at her exuberance, Dane couldn't stop himself from pushing a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. A sharp intake of breath from Karen immediately followed. He hoped he hadn't pushed her too far too fast.

"Of course it's safe; it's only an illusion after all. It will feel real but honestly, you can't really hurt yourself in any way. Is there anything else you'd like to do?"

Karen stared at Dane. She'd heard him speak but wasn't sure her body would cooperate. She was still trying to catch her breath. How could one little touch cause her entire body to tingle? She tried in vain to find her voice. After holding him last night, all she'd really wanted was him to touch her just once more. The rioting feelings rushing through her were almost too much to bear. Finally she was able to gather her thoughts. "I'd like to camp as well. It was something else I saw on the disk last night and it looked interesting."

Reaching the holo deck fairly quickly, Karen watched as Dane logged their adventure into the computer. "Sure we can try camping if you'd like. I should warn you though that I'm a bit of a camping enthusiast. That used to shock the hell out

my subordinates when I was in the service. Quite funny actually."

"Why?" The sudden need to know every aspect about him was overwhelming and surprising. Why was it suddenly so important for her to find out as much as she could?

"In the Space Marines, it isn't uncommon to find yourself camping on uninhabitable planets. It can be downright scary sometimes. If anything goes wrong with the life support systems within your gear, well, I'm sure you can figure it out. Anyway, I've always found it nice roughing it, eating what you can catch and cook."

"Did I like camping as well? You know, before?"

She watched Dane shift uncomfortably for a few seconds. *Maybe that wasn't something I should have asked.* Finally, he looked her in the eye and smiled. "Karen would complain after a few days and wish to head home. She loved nature, but 'from a distance' she would always say. I think we should look at this as a new beginning for us so when we've camped, you can tell me whether or not *you* liked it. How about that?"

Karen watched as Dane finished programming the computer. Suddenly she stared in wonder at their surroundings. The flora and fauna had instantly appeared against the walls in four dimensional images. The sounds of animals and rushing water enveloped their senses. The floor morphed into a soft forest pathway beneath their feet.

"If we follow this path upriver we'll be at the raft site."

Karen could barely contain her excitement. This large empty room had transformed itself into a forest right before her eyes. *If I could program that computer, I'd never leave*

this room. Anywhere in the galaxy, whenever you want?
Wow! I wonder if Dane has one at home? I should ask him.
Before she could say anything, she stumbled as her foot slipped and she grabbed onto Dane to steady herself. Immediately, his arms wrapped around her and supported her weight.

"I'm so sorry. Are you alright? Did I hurt you? I wasn't watching where I was going. I didn't think it would actually feel like rocks." The words came out in a rush as her cheeks heated in a fierce blush. Suddenly, she became all too aware of where Dane's hands were on her body. Heat penetrated her at the point of contact. His hard thigh pressed against her own as he held her upright. One hand wrapped around her middle, his fingers brushing against her abdomen. The other hand gripped her shoulder and held her tight. Removing her hands from his shoulders she allowed them to brush against his body. Slowly, she ran them down the contours of his chest. His muscles rippled beneath her exploratory caresses. Feeling her body hum with awareness, Karen carefully pulled her arms away from the embrace.

Karen's nipples tightened and tingled from the contact. She knew Dane could see them through her thin shirt. His eyes had been riveted there since she'd stepped back. She fought hard to keep from revealing them to him and letting him have his way with her right here—right now. She let her gaze wander down his frame to where his erection was hard to miss. She almost groaned at the thought of what it would look and feel like. Shaking the thought of naked, sweaty bliss from her mind she sighed.

"I'm fine. You didn't hurt me at all." Dane's voice broke through her thoughts. "Are you alright?"

Looking down at her foot, Karen ran her hands over her sock. "I think so. I just wasn't expecting it to feel so real. I know you said it was a simulation so I guess I wasn't expecting this amount of detail. Oh, I was going to ask you, before I fell, do we have one of these holo rooms at home?"

"Honestly, we don't have a place at the moment. When this mission is over, we can look for one. I'm not too sure how many single family homes have a holo room but we can always ask."

Continuing on their walk, Karen marveled at the scenic woodland setting. It was breathtaking. She found that she just couldn't keep herself from stopping every few steps to look at something new. She put her hand on Dane's arm as she spotted something moving between a few distant trees. "Wait a second. Is that a deer?"

Dane's whispered response had her leaning forward to hear. "Yes. This is supposed to be a representation of our planet. The holo room uses a biosphere model that is nearly identical to our home planet."

Holding out her hand to Dane, she crept past the deer. "Will all the gear be waiting for us when we reach the water?"

"...Yep. I set up the program so when we finish with the rapids we'll be at our campsite. That way, we won't need to walk any further. You could say this was more convenient than real nature."

Cresting a hill, Karen froze at the sight below. The large river cut through the valley with trees and rocks flanking the

rapidly moving water. "You know Dane I'm not too sure about this whole rapid thing. You're absolutely sure we can't get hurt this way?"

"Trust me, we'll be fine. Come on, I'll help you with the gear."

It wasn't long before the raft was ready to go. With life jackets secured, they shoved away from the bank. Laughter came easily as they moved swiftly down the fast paced rapids. Using the paddle to help steer, Karen glanced back to watch Dane maneuver the boat over the white foaming water. She was enjoying herself immensely and wouldn't have to ask if he was enjoying himself, if the huge smile was any indication. Eventually, they began to slow as their small craft passed the last of the rapids.

Guiding them towards the riverbank, Dane couldn't wait to see if Karen would like camping. Before, his wife hadn't been crazy about all of it—although as an adrenaline junkie, she had liked some outdoor adventuring. "I can't wait to make you s'mores."

"What's that?" The look of this beautiful woman, wet from the raging river, asking him an innocent question had his cock hardening immediately.

Leaping off the end of the raft, Dane pulled it onto the bank. He paused just long enough to pull off his life jacket and t-shirt. Between the water and the sweat of exertion, his clothes were soaked. He purposely flexed a few muscles as he tied the raft to the nearest tree. He could feel Karen's hot gaze on his body as he shifted. Stifling a groan, he watched as her tongue darted out to wet her lower lip. There was only

one spot he'd like to see those hot lips, well more than one but right now only one was his focus.

Pulling her gently from the raft, her body brushed against his. The unmistakable glint of awareness in her toffee colored eyes brightened as he stared at her lush lips. While his hovered a scant few inches away from hers. It felt so natural to have her in his arms and even though he knew he should give her more time he just couldn't. He had to see if those soft pink lips tasted as good as he imagined.

As Dane's lips moved towards hers, he felt her body shiver. Her lips parted slightly in a silent invitation. Finally, his lips covered hers. The sensation of her warm, moist mouth moving against his had him intimately pressing his cloth covered erection against her soft core. An intense throbbing reverberated along his length as she deepened the kiss.

Dueling with her tongue he savored the taste of her sweet mouth. Slowly he twirled it in and out mimicking the act of sex. He felt her squirm against him telling him she was as aroused as he. He stiffened, as she pressed her aching nipples against the planes of his solid chest. Then as slowly as the kiss began he pulled away from her, breathing hard.

"Karen, I ... you should probably change clothes and then we'll set up camp."

With an agonized sigh, Dane watched Karen move away to do as he asked. He had been sorely tempted to take their relationship to the next level, to lose himself in Karen's body. She had seemed willing enough to explore the physical aspects of their relationship but Dane was concerned that she wasn't ready for that level of commitment yet. He didn't want

one night of passion to endanger their chances for a lifetime of loving. He would give her time to come to know him, come to love him if he was lucky. When that happened then he would have no hesitation claiming his wife and showing her the loving that two connected people could share. In the meantime Dane knew he would have to control his urges to make physical contact. A man could only take so much torture before conceding victory to the other side.

Making quick time, they changed their clothes and set up the camp site. A small fire blazed in the dirt, close enough to lend some heat but at a safe distance from the tent. After a leisurely meal, the supplies were stored for the night.

Dane headed for the sleeping bag he'd set up outside of the tent. As they'd set up the camp site for the night, he'd felt the need to let her sleep in the tent alone. She'd expressed a desire to sleep alone in the suite so he was only being courteous. Sinking into the sleeping bag, he sighed at the warmth sliding over his mostly nude body. Usually he slept in just his briefs and tonight was no exception. His body temperature had always run a few degrees higher than normal and Dane found he was more comfortable sleeping this way. Karen—the first Karen—had certainly never minded.

Karen. He thought about the woman in the tent a few feet away. She was Karen, and yet she wasn't. Last night, his heart aching, she'd pulled him into her arms and comforted him. Guilt assailed him as he'd never shared anything that emotional with the first Karen. And what about today? She'd had an ecstatic look on her face as they'd raced down the

rapids. The flushed look of excitement had had his cock hardening for the feel of her body beneath his.

His thoughts were interrupted as yet again Karen had managed to sneak up on him. Her cleavage was prominently displayed in the scoop of her muscle shirt as she bent low to speak with him. "Um... Dane? Can you... do you mind...sleeping with me? What I mean is can you sleep in the tent with me? I'm cold."

Her innocent slip had his cock standing at attention. *Could it possibly get any harder?* Unzipping the sleeping bag, he slid his long body out and stood up, the briefs leaving nothing to the imagination. Karen's eyes widened when she caught sight of his obvious arousal. He watched as her face blushed a deep crimson. Dane bent down, picked up the sleeping bag, and took Karen's hand in his.

He laid the sleeping bag adjacent to hers in the tent and lay back down. He didn't miss the shy, heated glances when she thought he wasn't looking. Timidly, she lay back into her own sleeping bag, settling her body closer to his warmth. Dane wrapped Karen into a tight embrace and pulled her back against his heated body. The smell of her tantalized his senses as he laid in the dark struggling to overcome the need for release that was battling its way through his body. It was going to be a long night. *But, Dane thought with a touch of humor, Karen won't be cold anymore.*

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Chapter Six

Walking by the various clothing and electronics shops on the Andromeda Nine Space Station, Dane thought about all that had happened in the last few weeks. He and Karen had spent as much time together as possible between his duties to the ship and his efforts to find the elusive pirates. The time had allowed their relationship to ease from that of complete strangers, with no shared memories and experiences, to that of good friends. Friends that were beginning to realize a common attraction bound them to each other.

Dane often reflected on the night he and Karen had gone camping by the waterfalls. She had snuggled close, wrapped her body around his and promptly gone to sleep. While she'd slept soundly, he'd felt the pressure of her soft body through the sleeping bag. He was glad that he hadn't rushed forward with their relationship that night, but his perpetual erection was beginning to be a problem. Dane didn't want to scare her with his feelings of desire, but every soft glance and gentle touch was beginning to have an immediate reaction. His body craved release in the shapely curves of his wife; the fact that they were strangers only weeks ago no longer seemed to matter.

Another wave of guilt washed over Dane. He had given a lot of thought to the selfish way he had cloned his first wife and expected the new Karen to become the woman he had once loved. But he was quickly coming to understand, and appreciate, that this wasn't the same Karen as before. The

new Karen had strengths and weaknesses that made her endearing to him, that gave him a sense of strength and peace he couldn't recall experiencing with his first wife.

Yesterday had been the worst, by far. Watching the men train while speaking to Bryce, he couldn't help but wonder where she was or what she was doing. All he could think about were her tentative touches. This woman was Karen in form only, and yet he found he was alright with that. He was enjoying the euphoric feelings Karen brought out in him. The unknown, yet to be discovered secrets of their relationship excited him immensely. The fact that he was moving on so quickly from the wife he had loved so deeply shamed him. But, being a realist, Dane recognized that Karen—his Karen—was gone and would never be back. Now he just needed to figure out what to do with the woman that shared his bed and his wife's body.

Drawing his thoughts back, yet again, to the projection map Shaddoc had taken from his wife the night she'd been murdered, Dane couldn't help but think it was a key part of the mystery still shrouding the attack on the Homerli. Why was the map important enough the pirate needed to kill her? What was it a map to? Dane swore he'd find out and then kill the man responsible for taking his wife's life and thrusting him into a living hell.

He was doing it again. Today was supposed to be a day for them to spend together getting to know one another better, not for him to be over analyzing everything. He needed to get this mystery out of his head. He hated to admit it, but he

would ask Bryce for advice when they returned to the Ragnorak.

"Hey there's HoloTron. Would you like to go in there? They have the latest in all things holographic, as if the name doesn't say that already."

A grin spread across Dane's thoughtful face. He'd been doing that all morning, smiling. Something about the way Karen had called him into the tent and pressed her sweet body against his that second night, had had his heart thawing. She wouldn't have done that, and suggested that they continue to share a sleeping space, had she not felt comfortable and safe with him. Knowing she was beginning to trust him lightened his burden. The first Karen may not be here to enjoy life, but this new Karen had gained the opportunity of experiences for a lifetime. She might not be able to share his old memories, but maybe he reflected, it was time he made some new ones.

"I find the holographic technology the most intriguing of all I've come across thus far. If you don't mind, I'd like to look around for a bit. I know you only have a few hours before you have to report back for duty."

"I do, but I'd rather spend the time letting you explore. It makes me happy to see the way your eyes light up when you see something new."

Dane didn't miss the spark of awareness that passed between them as she suddenly turned and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he didn't want to waste the opportunity she'd presented him. Running

a gentle hand in a soft caress down her cheek, he pulled her flush against his body.

People passed by them to enter the store, as they stood in their embrace, uncaring. All Karen could think about was his warm, hard body against hers. The night of 'the kiss' as she had come to think of it, she'd struggled with the possible reasons Dane had broken their heated embrace. It had been a grave disappointment. However, she had taken heart in the knowledge that he was willing to spend the night by her side in the tent, holding her and keeping her warm.

When they returned to the suite she had suggested they continue to occupy the same sleeping quarters. Dane was too large a man to sleep on the couch, and she found she liked the thought of having his body next to hers every night.

What she hadn't counted on was the discomfort she was beginning to experience when she laid next to his warm body and heard his quiet snores while he slept. Her body was starting to crave some form of intimate contact with her handsome husband. While her head was telling her it was too soon, that Dane was still seeing his first wife when he looked at her, her body was disappointed he hadn't taken advantage of their current sleeping arrangements.

Just the thought of his body covered only in briefs, caused her heart to seize and a coil of desire to rush through her core.

Karen couldn't help but notice his slight hesitation, even now, to bring his lips to hers. Making the decision herself, she stretched up to tentatively plant a kiss on his waiting mouth.

Immediately his hands tightened as he took control of the situation.

Feeling his tongue along the seam of her lips, she opened up greedily. His mouth claiming hers, Karen clenched her thighs to still the demanding ache she felt there. Dueling with Dane's tongue, she circled it and languidly ran it around the edges of his mouth, savoring his taste.

Breaking away from him as realization struck, her heart beat a frantic staccato in her chest. "Maybe we shouldn't do that out here in public." Karen said breathlessly.

A knowing smile spread across Dane's handsome features. "Any longer and I'm sure we'd have been arrested because audience or no, you came close to losing your clothes and finding out just how much I desire you."

With widened eyes, Karen fought the images of him doing just that. Experiencing him inside of her had seemed to take over her mind the last few days. The knowledge that he was feeling the same had her groaning in frustration.

Dane must have noticed her struggle as he took her hand and pulled her away from the store entrance. "What do you say we go find something to eat? There's a great little restaurant here that serves some inter-galactic delights."

"Sounds great! I'm starving." *In more ways than one.*

Dane stole quick glances at Karen as she studied her menu. He'd come close to stripping her bare and thrusting into her until he was sweaty and sated. And all of this in the middle of the crowded space station mall. *Have I lost my mind? I'm starting to think that's the case.*

Last night he had lain beside her and struggled with the need to ease himself into her body. He'd spent another sleepless night thinking he'd push her too far or worse yet; she'd reject him all together. The last thing he wanted was to push her completely away by moving this relationship too fast.

But, he hadn't missed the way her eyes sparkled as she'd pressed her lips to his, and hadn't been able to ignore the temptation to grind his throbbing erection against her writhing form. While he wasn't completely sure she was ready to take that next step, it was clearly time they discussed the situation. Even though his mind was unsure of how to proceed, his body craved the chance to see just how far she'd go the next time the opportunity arose. Pushing the heated thoughts from his mind, he quickly ordered lunch.

Waiting for their plates, he glanced up to find Karen watching him intently, a grim set to her face.

"Is everything alright?"

"Actually, I was just thinking about something Bryce said. He mentioned that his previous wife had brought their friends and family over to see him. It just got me thinking about us. Do I have any other family? Parents or siblings?"

Dane struggled with his answer. Her parents had died in a space-liner crash when they'd gone on an anniversary trip to explore the Mars colony. It had always been her parent's dream to travel to every planet in the solar system. On the return trip home, the thrust engine malfunctioned and exploded killing everyone on board. Karen had grieved for at least two years and had still struggled when their birthdays

and anniversary dates came each year. Her only brother, Rider, had been MIA since the war on Phaeton ended a year and a half earlier. His unit had been attacked and all contact lost. None of the bodies had been recovered nor the men heard from.

Considering everything she was experiencing, Dane didn't want to hurt Karen any further with news of her lack of family. But she had asked and he didn't want to start this relationship on a lie.

"Maria and Theodore, your parents, have been gone for a few years. They died while on a trip. You have one brother, Rider, but he hasn't been heard from in over a year. He was a space marine and was stationed in Phaeton during the war. No one's heard from him or his unit since the war ended. I'm so sorry honey." Dane reached out and placed a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Karen's eyes glistened with unshed tears, and the strangled cry from her lips had his heart aching for hers. He knew what he'd said had hurt her, it was written all over her face, but he was proud of the way she pulled herself together, nonetheless.

"It's alright, really. I just didn't expect it. While I have no memory of my parents or a brother, it was nice to think I had a family out there somewhere waiting to meet me. It made me feel more connected somehow. But hey, let's talk about something else." Dane rubbed his fingers over her hand in a slow swirling pattern. Her eyes closed and her lips parted in a soft sigh as he continued his ministrations.

Pulling away from her abruptly, Dane sat up in his chair.
What's that asshole's problem? Can't he see I'm with her?

Karen watched as Dane stiffened and looked past her.
What's going on? Following his gaze, she turned in her seat to the man sitting at the bar staring at her with a very suggestive leer.

Looking back at Dane, she noted his narrowed eyes and flared nostrils. *Oh my, he's jealous. Over me.* Giggling at his intense reaction, she ran her foot slowly up his pant leg to reclaim his attention.

Karen watched his breath hitch as he slid lower in his seat. The thought of him jealous over another man had her heart swelling. She was delighted to know she could bring out that type of fierce reaction in him. Maybe he wasn't as indifferent as he sometimes appeared to be. Feeling a sexual power fill her Karen ran her foot along his leg and was rewarded with an audible groan. His eyes took on an almost unnatural brightness as she was sure he felt the same tension thrumming between them.

He squeezed his legs together trapping her foot, stilling her movements. The knowledge that her simple touch had his control wavering in a public place caused a rush of desire to pool low in her belly.

At that most inopportune moment, the waiter brought their lunch. Setting down their plates, the waiter refilled their glasses and left, leaving them once again alone and heated.

A dirty thought wound its way into Karen's mind as she took a bite of her pasta. A sly smile crossed her lips while she picked up the breadstick from her plate and wrapped her lips

around it. Her tongue darted out to lick at the buttery garlic dripping off the end even as her eyes met Dane's over the table. The intensity of his stare drove her further. She kept the eye contact until she saw swift movement near his plate. His hands now rested on either side of his plate in hard fists as he continued to watch her tongue and mouth move over the breadstick.

The comm. link interrupted her delicious thoughts. *"Major Sorenson, this is Lieutenant Curvier. We have a problem back at the ship. Can you report back immediately? Three pirate ships have appeared out of hyperspace and have activated their shields and weapons."*

At that moment, the station alarm sounded, loud and commanding. *"Attention guests and employees of the Andromeda Nine Space Station. This is Commander Ranson requesting all guests report to the emergency guest lounges located in the east and west wings of every level. As you enter the passageways, follow the yellow lighted arrows embedded in the floor. Once there, please remain inside the lounge until directed otherwise. Employees, please proceed to your designated areas and await further instructions from your area supervisors."*

Clicking the comm. link, Karen listened as Dane hurriedly answered. "Roger that Lieutenant, I'll be there shortly, out."

Karen watched Dane's face change from arousal to steely determination. With a reserved smile, he stood and reached out his hand to Karen. She wasn't sure what he had planned. Taking his outstretched hand, she pushed her chair in and turned to leave. Dane leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to

her lips. "We need to go. Promise me you'll stay wherever it is I put you. I need to know you're safe. Promise. Me. Karen."

Barely taking the time to catch her breath, she promised Dane she'd do whatever he needed of her. Exiting the restaurant, Karen looked around at the organized chaos. Some people ran in and out of the crowds fighting to get to their designated stations, while the majority walked in an orderly fashion, following the yellow arrows to safety. Thinking of Dane, she prayed he'd stay safe himself. She understood his need to keep her safe, she did. But what about him? Who would watch his back? Who would keep him safe? A burning sensation started in her chest as she thought about what might possibly happen to him. She knew it was illogical but she wished she could stay with him through all of this.

Tightening his grip on her hand, Dane led her through the crowds in the opposite direction. Where he was going, she didn't know. As they moved, it became more difficult as people filed out and flooded the corridors. Not making sufficient progress through the crowd, he pulled her into a small alcove to wait until it thinned. With her body plastered between the alcove and Dane's hard frame, she struggled to see into the hallway. She could honestly say she was scared, but that didn't mean she didn't want to see it all happen.

Angry male voices shouting from the level above drew her attention away from Dane. Across the above foyer, she spotted him. Gasping audibly, she grabbed Dane's shoulders as fear gripped her. Pointing at the level above, she heard her

voice shake as she spoke. "Dane, isn't that the man from the holo-disk?"

Karen watched as Dane's line of sight followed where she had pointed. "Yes, Karen. That's Craven Shaddoc. How the hell did he get past security?"

She looked back at the men on the upper level. Five of the scruffiest men she had ever seen surrounded the man Dane had called Craven. At that moment, their eyes met. After a moment's hesitation as the pirate seemed to realize who was below him, a slow, wicked smile parted his lips showcasing gleaming white teeth. With a quick shout, weapons were drawn and the pirates opened fire.

Karen was thrown to the ground as Dane covered her body with his, shielding her from the plasma rounds. As the rounds burst above them, the crowd panicked and ran in all directions. The employee guards drew their weapons to fire back. Karen lay beneath Dane as she heard him mumbling to himself. Without warning, he leapt up and pulled her to her feet. She nervously watched as he kicked at the ventilation grate until it popped off. Karen was roughly shoved into the duct as Dane rushed to follow her just as a plasma round burst right where they'd been standing moments ago.

"Crawl! As fast as you can. Hurry!"

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Chapter Seven

At a crossway in the vent, Dane motioned for Karen to stop. The finger to his lips signaled that she remain silent as he surveyed the situation. Pointing to the left opening, he hoped he was taking them in the right direction. The grate up ahead was a promising sign that they had chosen well. Listening for any sounds from the other side, he scooted between her and the edge of the vent and was relieved to hear nothing. Now in front, he surveyed the grate for a way to remove it. The fastest way would be to kick it in but that might attract unwanted attention. It wasn't a risk Dane was willing to take when he had Karen's safety to consider.

Spotting several latches which kept the duct cover in place, Dane reached into his pocket for his survival knife. The standard issue knife came with an assortment of attachments which could be used for emergency repairs during catastrophic predicaments. It was still the Navy's policy to cross train Naval and Marine officers in as many fields as possible for extreme situations in outer space. It was a good thing he hadn't left the Ragnorak without it.

Shifting into an easier position, Dane winced in pain as the plasma wound in his upper arm ached in the cramped position. The gasp from beside him brought his attention back to Karen. Her hands went to his arm. "Oh my God, you're bleeding."

Holding his finger over his lips, he whispered "I've experienced worse. I'll survive. We need to get out of here first and find a safe place before doing anything about it."

Karen looked like she wanted to argue with him but thankfully she didn't. However, if he was a betting man he would say the odds were that she would give him an earful when they did find a secure place to rest. Pushing the grate away as he worked the last latch free, Dane exited the vent duct and looked around before helping Karen out. From the look of it, they were now in one of the station's numerous service corridors on the Andromeda Nine. Which meant he was completely lost. Finding a way back to the Ragnorak could prove harder than he thought.

Screams and weapons fire could be heard reverberating through the ventilation system they had just vacated. Dane calculated that they didn't have a whole lot of time to find a way back to the Ragnorak before more pirates boarded the station. Holding Karen's hand, he went in search of one of the station's numerous service centers where hopefully he would find everything they needed.

Dane reached for the comm. link on his belt. "Curvier, this is Sorenson. Pirates are on board attacking. It's going to take me some time to get back to the ship."

"Roger that sir, as soon as I can get a fix on your location I'll send an extraction team. In the meanwhile we have all hands preparing for battle."

"Understood, over and out."

Karen's eyes kept drifting to the bleeding wound on Dane's arm, all the while hoping that they found a first aid kit so that

she could treat his injury. As it was, she felt guilt ridden for having not noticed it earlier. Although it wasn't like he would have let her take the time to tend to it. The man was definitely going to hear about it when they finally stopped. What was scarier was the fact that even when they made it back to the ship, Dane would be expected to head back into the battle being waged around them.

Journeying through the corridors at Dane's side, Karen found her gaze drifting not just to his injury but to his eyes which blazed with a steely resolve. She was so glad he was here with her. She wasn't sure she would have known what to do under the present circumstances. Karen's thoughts veered back to the initial firefight when he had shielded her body for those critical seconds needed to take cover in the air duct. A sudden tightness settled in her chest at the way he had put her safety first each time they reached a new fork in the tunnels.

Stopping at a door, Dane used his knife to cut into its control panel. Karen watched with awe as he worked. *How does he know how to do all this?* Within moments he had bypassed the door's security locks and had it opened. "Wait here, I need to check out the interior."

Karen waited until he returned seconds later. "Head inside, I'm going to make sure that no one can tell we've broken in."

While Dane worked outside, Karen's eyes drifted over the scene before her noting the vast array of computers and monitors surrounding the circular room. There were two chairs in front of the display screens which had data and various images of this quadrant of the station.

"Shit, the weapons are gone. They must have taken them to fight the pirates shooting into the stations' shopping centers."

Turning around, Karen saw Dane standing inside the room rifling through the compartments "Well at least there's a first aid kit, so take your shirt off and sit down."

If only he could be taking that off for a different reason, Karen mused. Gingerly touching the skin around his wound, she noticed his obvious arousal at her soft caresses.

"It looks worse than it really is."

"Look, you're not invincible. You should have let me do something sooner...not that I know what I'm doing."

The dark colored clothes he wore had helped hide the fact that his wound had been steadily seeping blood since Dane was shot. "If you open the case you'll find a device in the upper left hand corner which is used to cauterize and seal wounds. There should be an injection gun below it that will have an antibiotic in it to kill any bacteria running through my system."

Reaching over to grab the soft rubber mouth piece within the kit, Karen froze to look at him inquiringly. "I'm going to use this to keep from screaming. Now, whatever you do don't stop until the indicator light turns green otherwise the wound could reopen itself. Okay?"

Karen wasn't sure she could stand to see him hurt by her own hand. However, she understood the necessity of what he was asking. She nodded. "Alright."

At his nod, she began the process he had described to her. The smell of blood, and then of searing flesh, wafted through

the air and into her nostrils making her stomach lurch. *I can't believe I'm doing this. I can't believe he's sitting there letting me do this.* Karen tried to keep from looking at Dane's expressions of pain. Focusing her attention on the indicator light, she waited for the change from red to green to occur. A few seconds later, she shut the device off as the indicator light finally flashed a welcome green.

Karen wished she could take the pain away from him. It had taken all of her willpower to keep using the cauterizer while Dane's face was contorted in agony. His wound had stopped bleeding and surprisingly looked good. The gaping hole in his arm was not only gone but soft pink flesh was all that remained as evidence that he had been injured at all. Reaching for the injection gun, she administered the antibiotic that would insure he didn't develop any further complications.

Now that Dane's injuries had been seen to, Karen couldn't stop herself from running her fingers over the newly regenerated flesh. She couldn't believe how effective this tool had been at treating his injury. It was almost as if the wound had been healing for weeks.

As her fingers caressed the warm, newly healed skin her mind wandered to the passionate embrace they had just shared. Her pulse raced and her nipples tightened in anticipation of what could have been. Trailing her hand across his shoulder and over his hard, tanned chest, she leaned closer to press a gentle kiss upon his lips.

Suddenly Dane's entire body went rigid. Abruptly pulled into his lap, Karen gasped as he whispered into her ear. "Get

under the desk and behind the chair. The monitor has pirates coming this way."

"What?"

"We have guests coming. Do what I say. Now!"

Karen fought to comprehend the situation through the haze of arousal clouding her mind. Pressing a quick kiss to his lips again, she hopped off his lap and darted to the desk. Safely under it, she listened as Dane pushed himself out of the chair and walked to the door.

She could barely see one of the monitors from her awkward location, but what she did see had her shaking. From the angle of the camera, she could make out at least three pirates with weapons drawn, heading down the hallway in their direction. Every thought swung to Dane. He had no weapon save for the knife he had used to pry open the vent. From the look of it, she could only guess the length to be around five inches. *Surely he's not going to try to fend off pirates with such a small weapon? He would be totally outnumbered!*

The thought of Dane getting hurt or possibly dying had tears blurring Karen's vision. Debating how best to help him, her head swam with ideas, none that seemed feasible. She didn't want to be the cause of any more pain or sadness for this man, nor did she want to imagine life without him. She was beginning to regret the speedy promise she made to stay safely where he put her.

Dane pushed the button which opened the door and rushed out. His eyes quickly took in the fact that while one pirate messed with the control panel, he himself had

previously tampered with, the other two stood guard on either side of the doorway watching the service corridor for any defenders who might come after them. Too bad it never occurred to them that someone might be on the other side of the doorway waiting to ambush them from the other direction. Immediately slashing with his blade, he felt the spray of blood from the closest pirate's newly cut throat as he fell lifeless to the floor.

With his slight advantage gone, the second pirate began to raise his weapon to fire at Dane, while the third man fumbled with his rifle propped up by the door. Unfortunately for them, the close proximity prevented them from aiming such large weapons. Stepping closer to the second pirate, Dane brought the blade around to stab him in the throat. The weapon from the attacker fired harmlessly even as he began to fall backwards to the ground. Now only one man was a threat to Karen. Dane sent a silent prayer that all of his training would help him kill the last attacker.

Raising his right leg, Dane brought his foot down on the other man's knee forcing him to the ground and causing the weapon to fire into the floor. The need to protect Karen, no matter the cost, drove him to press his assault. Dane pummeled the man with his fists as the pirate struggled to raise his weapon. The crunch of broken bones was heard as Dane's fist connected with the other man's face again and again. Within moments the other man lay unconscious on the floor.

Not wanting to cross that line from warrior to cold-blooded murderer, Dane went in search of something to bind the

unconscious pirate's hands and feet. Stepping back into the room, he began to search the compartments below the computer terminal for something useful. Finding nothing but old holo tubes and electromagnet repair pieces, he moved on to the next. Grabbing the ligament polymer from the second shelf he moved back to the still unconscious form and began to wind the material around his captive's wrists and ankles. Sure of his bindings, he dragged the man back into the room and secured him to one of the terminal chairs away from any communication device. No need to give the pirates any advantage. The last thing Dane wanted was to assist the bound man in communicating with the rest of his crew.

Small whimpers and whispers could be heard below the desk where Karen had been hidden. Knowing she was worried, he moved back out into the hallway to dispose of the bodies, lest she see them. There was no need to panic her any further.

Hoping her prayers were being heard, Karen strained to listen through the desk for any signs of struggle. When Dane had first left the room she'd been terrified of what could happen. Wracking her brain for anything that could be of assistance, she'd felt the tears flow silently down her cheeks as realization struck. It was impossible for her to help him. With no weapon or skills, she'd be nothing more than a distraction he couldn't afford. Feeling useless, she sat back and continued praying.

With a few grunts and plasma blasts, it seemed to be all over. She heard someone come into the room but had been too scared to reveal herself, afraid of whom she might find.

What if it wasn't Dane? What if he hadn't survived the fight? Her heart clenched and heaviness settled in her chest. This man, who'd done so much for her, caused such reactions in her body, this sweet, sweet man. He deserved so much more and yet had fought for nothing more than her.

The slamming of a cabinet had her jerking back to reality. Someone was there. Would Dane tell her if it was safe to come out? As if her prayers had been answered, she heard his reassuring voice.

"It's alright. You can come out now."

Mouthing a silent thank you to the heavens, Karen crawled from beneath the desk. Brushing the dust from her pants, she turned and froze at what her eyes beheld. Standing before her was her own warrior. Bare chest covered in blood and sweat, and a jagged tear in the calf of his pants drew her attention. It looked as though he had walked through hell and back. Just as she made a move towards him, a series of loud booms echoed through the hallway and shook the room. Instantly, alarms blared and red beams of light circled the ceiling. The door to the station immediately closed, sealing them inside with the unconscious man, she'd just noticed tied to the chair. Covering her ears, she closed her eyes to keep out the blinding luminescence as the vibrations continued to rock the room. Holding on to the desk for support, Dane rushed to her side with two plasma rifles, one on each arm. So thankful to see him alive, she tried to smile even as a fifth and sixth explosion rocked the space station.

Long seconds passed as the room seemed to shake and settle. Dust and small pieces of ceiling fell into the room,

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making it difficult to see. As the quaking ceased, Karen wished she could turn the deafening alarms off. Reaching for Dane, she wrapped her arms around his body and held on tight, not knowing what to say.

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Chapter Eight

"Major Sorenson? Major, are you there? Do you copy?"

Relishing in the feel of Karen's body flush against his, Dane fought to release her. If they were to survive this escalating attack, he needed all his mental faculties focused.

"Curvier, this is Sorenson. We're alright. According to the room equipment labels we're in the quadrant four, sector three service station. At least five or six explosions just shook the whole room. Do you know what's going on?"

Forcing himself to step back, he unwound Karen's arms from his neck and sat her down in the nearest chair. Sitting down next to her, he assessed the monitor. Luckily it was a simple holographic projection screen from last year. Whoever had been upgrading the space station's systems obviously hadn't reached this far. Touching the key codes, Dane pulled up the security access information. With the main database easily hacked, he frowned at the coding and images that flashed on the screen. Highlighted sections in red linked to warning information for those areas.

He heard Karen gasp as the computer audibly itemized the damage data downloading to the mainframe. "Life support non-functioning in quadrant one, sectors: two, five and seven; quadrant two, sectors: one, two and five; quadrant three, sector: four; and quadrant four, sectors: four and six. Do not attempt to move through those areas until the all clear has been given".

"Oh my God Dane. All those people." Dane's hand slid down to rest on her thigh, comfortingly, as Karen rested her head on his shoulder. He understood the loss of life and was all the more appreciative that they were still counted among the living.

"Major, this is Curvier. I've got a route mapped out to get you back to the ship but it's not going to be easy. The only way to take you is through one of the areas where the life support is non-functioning. The good news is that they are frantically working to repair it and it shouldn't be a long wait."

Dane clicked the comm. link open to speak to Bryce.
"Curvier, can you route that path to this service station?"

A few moments of silence passed before Bryce responded.
"Sir, I can do that. Are there any handhelds located in the room? I can route the map directly to it so it's easier to access if you like."

Dane looked back to the docking station for the handhelds each service station contained. Only two were still in their cradles. Picking them both up, he checked the battery life and was dismayed to see both only had about half life remaining. Cursing to himself, he took them both and handed one to Karen.

"Lieutenant, we've got two handhelds but neither have great batteries. We'll take both and keep one turned off in case of emergency. Can you send it to both for me?"

"Can do Sir. Give me a few minutes and you'll be ready to go. By the way Sir, the only way out of your current room is up. The security door does not open unless the life support system in the next sector is functioning. Unfortunately,

quadrant four, sectors: four and six are still down. Being in sector three, none of the doors will open until sector four is functioning. You'll need to use the utility tunnel in the ceiling to move to sector one where the security doors work."

Muttering a quick 'thanks' into the comm. Dane looked over at Karen. She'd been listening intently to what Bryce had said the entire time. Currently she was staring at the tunnel's pull down ladder with a firm conviction.

"I swear I never want to see another tunnel after we get out of here. You ready? Oh, and I want one of those rifles. Don't even think you're playing big hero and leaving me out of this again." With a quick peck on the cheek, she yanked the ladder down and started ascending the stairs without him.

Checking his handheld to confirm it had downloaded Bryce's map, he followed her lead. His heart beat a rough staccato as her ass swayed with each rung she climbed ahead of him. This perpetual hard on was going to be the death of him if survived the pirate attack. *Can this woman get any sexier*

Climbing into the tunnel, Karen surveyed the length. It looked as though it went for a few hundred yards before veering off in a different path. Luckily this was a service tunnel, and directional markings were imprinted every few feet. With a good foot of room above her crawling form, she breathed in a sigh of relief. At least she wouldn't feel claustrophobic as she had in the last tunnel.

She wondered what Dane had thought of her declaration a moment ago. Honestly, she had shocked herself with her bad ass attitude. It had been a split decision not to be useless

anymore that had driven her statement. Not that she knew how to use a plasma rifle, but how hard could it be? There were only so many things to pull. And even she could figure out which end to point at her enemy.

She didn't have the time to dwell on it right now as the tunnel split into three directions. Stopping to read the map conveniently printed against the metal, she turned to ask Dane what direction was highlighted on the route Bryce had given them.

"The map shows the first tunnel on the left should bypass sector two. A few more hundred feet shows another split, this time a four way, or so the handheld says. Can you imagine trying to navigate this without one? We'd be lost for hours."

Karen snorted. "Oh you mean like last time we were in a tunnel? That's right that was just a little while ago. How could I have forgotten?"

"Nope, haven't forgotten anything myself. You on the other hand need to stop sashaying that pretty ass in front of me before I do something about it."

Blood rushed to her face, resulting in a fierce stain on her cheeks as her temperature rose a few degrees. She could just imagine what he intended to do about it. Deep breathing followed as her mind fought against the images of them naked and sweaty, bodies entwined. *Maybe I should focus on staying alive. Can't have sex if I'm dead.*

The pair continued crawling until they came to the four way division in the tunnel. Muffled voices could be heard as they neared the gate opening in the floor. Cross checking the

maps they decided it was best to head down through the gate to reassess the situation and stretch their cramped legs.

Opening it, Karen pushed the ladder down and descended into the open hallway with Dane following directly after. Languidly stretching her spine, she pulled her arms over her head and leaned back. Once relaxed, she leaned forward to touch the floor. Satisfied her back was as comfortable as she could make it; she rubbed her fabric covered knees. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do about the intense throbbing. The tunnel hadn't exactly been the most accommodating means of travel a woman could wish for.

As he pushed the ladder back into the tunnel entrance, Dane surveyed the area. The hallway was large and bland like many sectors of the space station. Electro-key doors flanked an open doorway where he could hear voices. Seeing Karen standing a few feet away, breasts prominently displayed as she stretched her arms, formed an immediate cock stand in his pants. *Dammit! If I only had five minutes and a flat surface... Focus, Sorenson. You know you're going to want to take longer than five and you need to keep your asses in one piece to do so.*

Unhooking one of the weapons, he handed it her. "We don't know who's on the other side of that doorway. Stay close behind me and wait until I signal. I know I'm being a rude bastard but we just don't have time for niceties right now."

Dane watched as Karen tossed the rifle strap over her shoulder, and pulled her hair out from under it. "Understood."

They crept towards the doorway, all the while keeping an eye on each electro-key door as they passed. Not having a key prevented them from utilizing them, but there was no way to tell if they were actually out of order or not. The last thing Dane wanted was to be ambushed by enemies while they stood there unsuspectingly.

A visibly broken control panel came into view as they neared the doorway. Whoever had passed this way before them had obviously not taken the time or energy to code the panel. Motioning for Karen to stay behind him, he listened to the now audible voices on the other side. Multiple people spoke simultaneously, making it hard to discern individual conversations. But from what he could gather, this looked to be nothing more than guests and a few employees who had been stuck as they had.

Letting out a breath he hadn't known he was holding, he smiled at Karen and nodded his head yes. Placing the gun at his side in a handy but nonthreatening position, he walked slowly into the open area. Not immediately being shot at seemed a welcome change from their previous activities. With her hand in his, Dane weaved them through the crowd that had gathered near a holographic imager. Projected in true-to-life size was a uniformed Commander Ranson, in all his six foot glory, addressing the space station occupants.

"Attention employees and guests of the Andromeda Nine Space Station. We have successfully realigned the life force stabilizers in each quadrant and are now, as we speak, testing the previously nonfunctioning sectors. Within moments, the entire space station will be online. The complete security of

the space station is still under scrutiny until we can determine whether every intruder has been apprehended. Security officials in each quadrant will direct guests to the nearest exit. Thank you for your continued patience."

The crowd seemed to shift the moment his form winked out of sight, with the majority moving in the direction of the emergency pods. Spotting the security station to their right, Dane held onto Karen as they pushed against the sea of people. A tall, average built man with a mega rifle slung over his shoulder, appeared in front of them just as he was about to reach the desk.

"Who are you and where did you get the rifles?" Pulling his rifle from his shoulder as he spoke, the security official waited for a response. As the official readied his weapon, Karen visibly flinched.

"I'm Major Sorenson, this is my wife Karen. I'm Chief Missions Officer for the Ragnorak. We ran into a few pirates back in quadrant four. After neutralizing them, we headed through the service tunnel to where we are now."

"Major *Dane* Sorenson? Your lieutenant radioed in about twenty minutes ago and said to expect you. We can offer transportation for your wife back to your ship but we'd like to ask for your assistance. It seems there were three rebel ships each docking at a different quadrant when this began. According to the Ragnorak's reports, one has been destroyed but two more have just appeared in the Andromeda Galaxy and are approaching the space station."

Unconsciously tightening his hold on Karen, Dane decided to strike a bargain. "I'll assist your men, but I need one

hundred percent assurance my wife gets back to the Ragnorak safely."

"What? I don't want to go anywhere without you!" Dane was startled as Karen's body tensed and she ripped her arm out of his grip. "Listen, I'm not going back there without you. What do you expect me to do?"

A cold chill reverberated through his spine at the thought of Karen dying. Images of friends and comrades that had died in battle, flashed in his mind. Images of his first wife being shot by pirates would follow him to his grave. He couldn't bear to witness that happening to her, again.

Looking into her eyes, he saw her laughter on the raft, her spunky attitude in the service station and her flirty attempt at seduction at the dinner table. He could even feel the warmth her tender compassion had brought into his life.

"Honey... I can't have anything happen to you. Don't you understand? Knowing you're safe on that ship can let me focus. I need that assurance. I need to know you'll be there when I come back." Wrapping her in his arms, he held her tight against him. His muffled whisper was barely audible. "Please do this... for me."

"Excuse me Major, but the next emergency pod will be leaving in four minutes. We really need to get her in line if she's going to make it. Commander Ranson has requested that you meet up with his security team in sector five of this quadrant as soon as she's in the line. Apparently that is where the major fighting is still occurring and he could use your strategy experience."

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Relinquishing his hold on Karen, Dane kissed her tenderly as he begged God to keep her safe. Looking at the young guard he tried to impress him with how serious her safety was. "Her safety is your responsibility. God help you if *anything* happens to her." Turning away, he left her standing at the security desk as the officer gave him directions. *I hope I live to see her face again.*

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Chapter Nine

"Here put this on."

Taking the security uniform shirt with a half hearted nod to the guard, Dane pulled it over his head and felt a shiver of unease creep up his spine. Physically seeing to Karen's safety was better than only thinking she was safe, but he didn't have time to dwell on that. The sooner he helped take care of these pirates the quicker he could be there in person to ensure she was protected.

Dressed and armed with a fresh plasma rifle, Dane found his gaze shifting up and down the line of men that were going to help him win a victory over the pirates. While fear was present in their gazes, he noted determination in their clinched jaws and focused stares. There was no doubt in his mind that he could trust them in battle. Unfortunately, the lack of serious firepower could be a grave problem. While the pirates had already proven they had an ample supply of gamma exploders, the security team was reduced to plasma rifles and a few ray blasters.

Dane would need to create as many advantages as he could to increase their potential for survival. Inspiration hit, demanding he pull out the handheld and access the layout of the space station. Decisive victories were about having a superior concentration of firepower and attacking when and where the enemy least suspected. He needed to take a small group of men to an area where they could create a nasty bit of crossfire and lure the pirates in. They might not have the

superior weapons but if successful they could quickly take control and win this.

"Alright, gather round..." waiting until everyone could see the projector, he began to outline his plan "I'm going to take three of you through these ducts and we're going to exit here which would put us in an ideal firing position. While we're moving, the rest of you need to distract them by pressing in on attack. Any questions so far?"

Several seconds passed as he waited to see if everyone understood the basic outline of the attack. "Good, now for those of you staying behind, the key to moving towards the enemy during a battle is a continuous stream of fire. You need to operate in teams of four and leap frog forward." Randomly selecting four men he pointed to a hallway on the map layout. "You four will need to place yourselves on either side of that corridor's entrance. Once there, you'll need to wait for these four to signal they're ready," Dane added as he pointed out another group.

So far so good. He would've liked some time to practice moving through the line of fire with these guys as even among professional soldiers friendly fire wasn't unheard of. However, time was one thing he didn't have. "Here's the complicated part, team one needs to direct all their fire down this corridor. The goal is to keep the pirates from being able to fire at team two as they run for cover to the first alcove. Team one you will need to pay close attention to when team two reaches safety because you will have to stop firing long enough for them to become safely positioned. Team two you

have to remember to run straight along the outside wall otherwise you'll get hit. Understood?"

Dane continued as he noted the nodded affirmations. "Now team two, it will be your turn to cover team one while they move to your position. This time you'll have to trade off and it will be the first team's turn to move through the possible line of fire. If there are no questions, I'm going to take you four with me." Several seconds passed as everyone solemnly reviewed the floor plan again.

"Good, then as there are no further questions, let's go."

With a loose plan in place, Dane moved towards the duct and heard the other men moving into position behind him. He unrealistically hoped all of them made it through alive. Taking the lead through the shaft, his knees and elbows protested as he shimmied for the third time that day through a conduit. Behind him, he could hear the other men moving to keep up with him as best they could. Finally, as he double checked the handheld for position, he reached the room he was looking for.

With his ear against the grate, he listened for any sign that someone was on the other side. Satisfied that the room was unoccupied, Dane worked the latches free and dropped into the room. Seconds later the other three men dropped down behind him. "Alright, as soon as we open that door, we're going to charge through shooting every pirate in sight. If I'm wrong, and the pirates haven't collected in this corridor, then we'll reassess and move on."

"Aren't we going to do that leap frog thing?" Asked a young man who looked to be no older than a teenager.

"We won't have to worry about that. The element of surprise will probably cause them to flee rather than put up much of a fight." *At least I hope so.* He couldn't tell the young man that jobs like this were usually given to Special Forces units on a sweep and destroy mission and not under trained security guards. His revelation wouldn't do any of them any good. "Just keep firing and if everything goes our way the others will be breaking through the corridor on the other side before long to help us clear the area."

Readying his weapon, Dane moved to the door and opened it. Instinct and training took over as he charged in and began shooting rapidly at the pirates. Behind him, the guards had followed and were also discharging their weapons as fast as possible. A burst of light from a plasma round shot past him, followed by another and yet another. They wouldn't be able to stay here long as there were definitely more pirates here than Dane had first anticipated.

The large fountain occupying the center of the wide open gallery drew his attention. It would be the perfect cover for him and his men, providing them with adequate coverage, while allowing them to easily see the pirates gathered in the large area.

"To the fountain!" Running to it as he shouted, Dane saw the young guard he had spoken with only moments earlier, dead on the ground. No matter how many times it happened, it never got any easier seeing someone's young life end too soon. Hunkering down behind the fountain, Dane reassessed the situation as best he could with the information available.

From the security of the fountain, he noted that at least six men had fallen during this leg of the assault—one of them his.

"The rest are breaking through!"

The shout from the older man beside him alerted them to the fact that the other prong of the attack had succeeded cutting into the rear of the area currently held by the pirates. That was when he noticed a new group of pirates had also entered the area from the opposite corridor. Craven Shaddoc, himself, was leading half a dozen men towards the new contingent of oncoming attackers.

Seeing the need for immediate action, Dane barked orders. "Start firing, we have to cut them down before they can form a counter attack."

Raising his rifle, Dane pulled the trigger and cursed. *Damn it! It's out of ammo.* He'd need another weapon if he was going to be of any use. Darting out from the protective cover, Dane swung his empty weapon at the nearest pirate, the butt of it connecting with his jaw cracking audibly. Picking up the fallen pirate's rifle, Dane turned and shot him point blank in the chest. Rushing back to the fountain, Dane fired at additional pirates making their way towards him via the alcove to the west. It was then that he felt his heart stop.

Karen wasn't on the shuttle on her way to safety like she was supposed to be. Rather, she was crouched down with one of the men from the primary attack group. *How the hell did she get there? And what the hell does she think she is doing*

The safety of his wife quickly became Dane's sole mission. He'd need to act fast if he was to get to her in time. The thought of Karen dying—again—sent sharp spikes of pain into

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his heart. With a prayer on his lips, and his finger on the trigger, Dane rushed out from behind the fountain. His heart, his life, was across that room too damn close to the pirates hell bent on killing her. Dane could only hope he got to her before it was too late.

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Chapter Ten

Oddly enough, once Dane had agreed to assist Commander Ranson, the security officer had basically dumped Karen. All he had cared about it seemed was using Dane's abilities to help secure the ship. He hadn't wanted to bother with babysitting the man's wife. During the short walk to the emergency pod line-up no one had stopped her to inquire about the plasma rifle she still wore slung over her shoulder. *Didn't a civilian woman with a large weapon register anymore*

Karen stared at the man in front of her. He wore the ugliest, forest green shirt she'd ever seen. The small checkered print had her cringing. *Why would anyone wear that? And why am I standing here analyzing this? For that matter, why am I standing here at all?* She had no job, no useful skills, and most of her family was gone. All she really had was Dane. And at the moment she stood waiting to be taken away from him.

It was Craven's fault! This pirate owed them in so many ways she didn't have the time to enumerate. Righteous indignation rose within her. She wanted revenge not just for Dane but for herself as well. Yet here she stood, exhausted, and fighting to find her inner self.

Frustrated, Karen took a look around her. In the line, she could see teenagers, elderly couples, and entire families waiting to board an emergency pod. One young couple in particular had drawn her attention. The woman looked to be

around her age if she had to guess, but what really had her sighing in longing was the way her husband was protectively cradling her in his arms. Karen thought about how alone *she* was at that very moment. It was the last place she wanted to be.

Am I really willing to go back and wait aboard the ship? Do I want to spend the rest of my life being useless and beholden to Dane? Or worse, without Dane? No! She wanted to not only prove to him that she was capable of being a good help mate but to demonstrate that ability to herself as well.

In her pants pocket rested the handheld she'd yet to turn on. When Dane had handed it to her back at the service station hers had been turned off to conserve the battery. For some unknown reason, the plasma rifle hadn't been taken away from her either. Shuffling up a few positions in line she watched as people were loaded into the emergency pod headed to the Ragnorak. While this vehicle would take her to safety it would also take her further away from Dane.

Dane. She understood his need to see her safe but really, she wasn't useless. He was all she had. Not only had she desired to learn what he liked but she worried about him. Even now, she was petrified Craven Shaddoc would somehow hurt him. Could she really just go and leave him all alone to deal with the situation? Her mind made up, Karen exited the line in search of sector five and the pirate who'd taken everything from them.

Using the handheld to guide her down the corridor, Karen sent up a silent prayer for Dane's safety as well as her own. Just because she'd consciously made the decision to enter

this battle didn't mean she thought she was invincible. The question was how to find Dane and enter the battle without getting killed in the process. And how would he react when he saw her in the thick of things? She couldn't think about that now. At this very moment, she needed to keep moving. A sitting duck was the last thing she wanted to be.

Coming close to the entrance to sector five, Karen stopped to gather her thoughts. She could already hear the sound of plasma rifles in the not too far off distance. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves she ran over the plan she'd mentally thrown together. Once she got to the battle site, she'd slowly take in the situation and find someone who wasn't a pirate. *They should be easy to spot*, she mused, *the pirates are the ugly, dirty ones the security team is shooting at*. She felt pretty secure she wouldn't shoot anyone on their side. All she'd have to do once she found their team was join in on the fight. Shoot. And not get shot. That was pretty much the way it went. She'd just make sure to find something large to hide behind.

As Karen reached the sector five corridor, she quickly ducked into the nearest alcove and peeked out around the corner. Bursts of plasma fire exploded above her head as her presence was immediately detected. Stifling a scream, Karen flattened herself against the wall. *What was I thinking? Have I lost my mind? No, Karen Marie Sorenson you have not lost your mind and you are not a coward! Grab that gun, get your butt out there and kick ass! And don't get shot.*

With her mental pep talk concluded, Karen charged down the hallway, depressing the trigger of her weapon. The first

blast of the plasma round kicked her back a step but she quickly regained her momentum. A twinge of guilt ran through her as her second shot discharged and hit a pirate's chest. Pushing the feelings aside, she knew she had to press on for Dane's sake. She hadn't come all this way to chicken out now.

Ducking behind an open doorway, Karen waited as a pirate, shooting in the opposite direction, backed up into the room. She almost felt bad about killing the unsuspecting man but it was his stupidity not to watch his back and he was busily killing innocent men that fought beside her husband. As the man fell to the floor, she stepped over him and shimmied around the door hugging the wall. From the looks of it, the security team was beginning to push the pirates back into a second corridor.

Security guards began charging down the hallway towards a second group of pirates. She couldn't help whispering yet another silent prayer as she followed the guards. *I've been praying an awful lot lately.* One of the men pursuing the pirates saw her and motioned her closer. She quickly reached his position behind a guest computer terminal.

"Who are you and what the hell are you doing?"

Panic filled Karen as she fought for the right words to say. There was no way she'd let him send her back now. "Um.... I'm with the Ragnorak..." *Technically that was true.*

"They sent more! About time! Cover me! Quickly!"

Without waiting for a reply he propelled himself down the corridor leaving Karen no choice but to cover his advance. Opening fire, she tried to direct it down the corridor, away

from the running guard as best as she could. *I hope I'm doing this right. I so don't want to hit someone on our side.*

Seeing the guard hunker down behind a bench near the opening of the gallery, Karen ceased fire. Following his path, she quickly headed for the improvised cover and crouched down beside him.

All around her bright green flashes zipped in every direction, creating a cascade of flickering light illuminating the struggling forms of the combatants. A strange thought suddenly hit her. *This is oddly captivating. What the hell is wrong with me?* Her thoughts were interrupted as more security guards swarmed into the area from a side doorway.

That was when she saw him. Dane was swinging his rifle at a burly, long haired pirate. She stared in awe as he shot the man and ran for cover. Watching him, she missed seeing the security guard rush out into the fray leaving her alone behind the bench. Unexpectedly, Dane rushed out from behind an impressive fountain and ran towards her. Time seemed suspended as they made eye contact.

The emotion in his eyes overwhelmed Karen. Here was her fierce protector. She knew it was inappropriate but she had a sudden desire to rush into his arms, regardless of the situation. Halfway across the room Dane stopped as a pirate launched himself at him. Their rifles met in a clash as the pirate tried to force him to the ground. A sudden blast of rifle fire near her location had her attention swinging in that direction. A group of pirates led by Craven Shaddoc were splitting in two. Half of them headed towards the men at the

fountain, while the other half with Craven headed in her direction.

She watched in horror as one of the pirates stood and took aim at Dane who was still grappling with the man across the room. Not caring for her own safety, Karen shot out from behind the bench and ran towards the pirate. Raising her rifle as she ran, she took aim as best she could and squeezed off several rounds. The pirate's body tumbled back from the force of the impact as one of the rounds struck home. His weapon fell harmlessly to the floor as pain exploded across Karen's jaw. Staggering sideways she blinked to clear her wavering vision as an arm wrapped around her throat, dragging her back. She heard a vicious snarl against her ear that had her shaking in fear. "How many times do I have to kill you?"

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Chapter Eleven

"Cease Fire! Cease Fire!" It was the worst possible nightmare Dane could have ever imagined. Karen was plastered against Craven Shaddoc, with his arm wrapped around her throat cutting off her air supply. As she struggled in his arms, tears fell from her eyes to run down her cheeks and over her swelling jaw. Dane hadn't seen her get hit but the angry puffy mark was clear evidence she had. A red haze filled his vision with the need to kill her attacker, but his years of training, and the rational part of his brain, knew that wouldn't save her life.

At Dane's command, the security guards had stopped firing and dove for protection. Now they were looking to him for answers he didn't have. *What do I do now? I can't lose her.*

The evil glint in Craven's eyes was evident as he shouted to his men. "You hear that boys? Better stop shooting. We wouldn't want to hit princess here."

Shit! Where the hell did Karen come from? Why didn't she leave on the shuttle? His gut in knots Dane listened as Craven taunted him with her capture.

"So how did little princess get in here with a weapon? I don't remember inviting her to the party. By the way, she just saved your sorry ass you know? My man almost had you. Of course, if he was slower than *her*, I'm glad he's dead, saved me the trouble of killing him later." Craven tightened his grip around Karen's neck, and laughed at her choking sounds.

"How many times do I have to kill her? She's like a damn cat that keeps coming back but I bet she doesn't have nine lives!"

The weight of Craven's words struck Dane as he struggled with indecision. *Saved my life? Holy hell!* Past experience had proven that hostage situations rarely ended well, yet he couldn't give up on Karen now. He had to think of something fast, before that depraved bastard killed her right in front of him.

Dane knew once Commander Ranson took charge he'd no doubt order an attack to kill the scourge of the galaxy, with no regard for Karen's life. An ounce of luck happened his way when he spotted the older guard from his team behind, and to the right of, the pirates. Three other guards were following him. The knowledge that these men were putting their lives in even more jeopardy for his wife had a sense of pride welling within him. He had never expected such loyalty from these men.

"Craven! We have guards coming up behind us," one of the pirates shouted. As Craven turned, he dragged Karen's still flailing body around with him. At that moment one of the guards chose to fire his weapon hitting a pirate near Karen. Craven ordered his men to open fire as he used the gun fire to slip down the side corridor.

Running down the length of the corridor, Dane saw Craven drag Karen into an empty guest lounge and shut the door. He slowed as he came upon the door and tried to open it. *Damn it! It's locked!* His fists slammed into the door as frustration rushed through him. *How can I save her if I can't even get*

the damn door open? Backing away from the blocked entrance, Dane picked up the handheld to call the commander. That man might not like what Dane had to say but he should be able to tell him how to get into the next room. The rest he didn't care about anymore.

A blast from the gallery rocked the floor beneath him causing him to lose his balance. Looking back at the door showed it was still closed and probably locked. Connecting the handheld, Dane expected nothing but grief from the other end.

"Commander this is Dane Sorenson. We have a situation in Quadrant one, sector five; Craven Shaddoc has taken a hostage and locked himself into a guest lounge and a bomb just went off in the main gallery. I'm requesting backup and an access code to unlock the door."

"Sorenson, what the hell are you talking about? How'd he get a hostage and who is it? Damn it! I don't have time for this shit! I don't have any spare men right now. The guards know the security access codes for most doors in the station. Ask one of them

Sighing, Dane answered Ranson's question. "Commander, the hostage is my wife."

"Well then she had better hope you know what you're doing. Report back when you have Shaddoc ready to be taken out of here by the morgue tech!"

Deep breathing was doing nothing to calm Dane's nerves as he made his way stealthily along the corridor. Moving past an alcove, he slipped just enough of his head past the corner to survey the immediate area. The group of pirates that had

opened fire as Craven had run with Karen now lay dead among about five or six security guards. Unfortunately, the older guard that had started the latest round of gun fire lay among them. A black scorch mark and twisted metal pieces told him the bomb had been detonated in that general location as well.

Dane could still hear the explosions of plasma rounds from the eastern hallway so he knew the pirates had yet to give up. Pointing at one of the guards nearby, he shouted "Hey you! I need the access code for the lounge door."

"Damn it!"

"I take it that everything isn't going as planned?" Karen spat out as Shaddoc loosened his hold around her neck. Suddenly not having to fight for breath, she looked around the room for anything she could use to help her escape him. *A lounge? Why am I plagued with these God forsaken rooms? And why are they always so damn ugly?*

"You're as big a pain in the ass as your brother! You know that princess?" Shaddoc spat out as he jammed his knife into the door control. *What, is that the new way to lock doors now*

"You kiss your mama with that mouth?" It may not have been the smartest thing she'd said but the last thing she wanted was for him to think she was afraid of him. Anger flared in his eyes as he rushed back to squeeze her throat again with his beefy hand. She nearly retched as the bastard groped her ass with his other hand. *I'd rather die!*

"Maybe I should see just what's so special about you. There has to be a reason your husband brought you back."

Not if you were the last man in the universe! She needed to get his mind off of touching her. There was no way she'd ever allow another man to have what was Dane's. Suddenly her brain registered his earlier comment. *Wait a minute. Did he just say my brother is a pain in the ass?* "Rider's alive?"

"Yeah, well, not for long princess. As soon as I find him I'm going to kill him for stealing my projection maps."

Projection maps? What was so significant about them? But more importantly, how did Rider play into this? Hadn't Dane said her brother had been missing since the end of the war on Phaeton? "Why is it I'm not surprised that someone else has gotten the upper hand on you?"

"You stupid bitch!" Releasing her abruptly, Craven shoved her onto the couch. Whipping out his photon pistol he pointed it at Karen's temple. "I should shoot you now. Do you know how long I've been looking for that other map? By the time I had taken one from you, Rider had already hidden the second one. I still haven't been able to get it back. He didn't happen to tell you where he put it did he?"

Karen rolled her eyes. *Seriously how stupid could he get? Doesn't he know I'm a clone? How would I know that?*

"Listen, I'm pretty sure that was a memory Dr. Smyth failed to implant. But tell me, just so I know. Why are these maps so damn important? And why are there two of them?"

Her eyes tracked the pistol as Craven lowered it slightly in thought. "I guess it doesn't matter what I say to you. You're not leaving this room alive. Each projection map is only half of the route. You need both of them to get to Maddox's secret weapon. It does me no good to only have one."

Listening to his rant she thought about the holo-disk she'd seen that first night on the Ragnorak. Obviously he had killed her to get the first map. But, how had she ended up with it? Had Rider sent it to her thinking that Dane would be there to protect her? "If you're after these maps, why are you wasting your time attacking this station?"

Revealing his white teeth when he smiled, Craven relaxed his arm to the point that the pistol was pointing to the ground. "Even pirate captains have to respect the will of their crews. Blasted fools lost sight of the prize and threatened to blackball me if I didn't do something to fill their pockets with loot."

Karen could really have cared less why he attacked the station. But as long as he was talking then he wasn't shooting, or groping, her. And far as she was concerned that was the important part.

Shaddoc's eyes drifted back to the door. Sweat had pebbled along his forehead earlier when he'd heard the bang on the door moments after he'd jammed the lock. He had to know he was cornered—that it was only a matter of time before they found a way in here to kill him.

However, the last thing Karen wanted was to die as well. The image of Dane surfaced in her mind reminding her of everything she stood to lose and had yet to experience. She saw his breakdown that first night on the ship when she cradled him in her arms; and heard his teasing jokes around the campfire. The taste of his lips still lingered on hers and more than anything she wished she had the opportunity to tell him she loved him just once.

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As if her prayers were answered, the floor suddenly shook with a loud boom. Catching Shaddoc off guard there was no time to plan what to do. It was either lie down and die or fight to live. Making her only choice, Karen swept out her arm knocking the pistol out of Shaddoc's hand as he was distracted by the commotion. The pistol skittered across the floor as Craven turned to grab her. Leaping off the couch, she lunged for the gun as Shaddoc latched onto her ankle pulling her back towards him as her finger brushed the weapon's grip.

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Chapter Twelve

A photon blast resounding from behind the locked door had Dane screaming in agony.

"NO! Karen!"

Security had told him only moments ago that the only manual way to release the door was located inside the room. Essentially, there was *no* way for Dane to gain access from the outside without cutting it open with a phaze ray. He was just approaching the door when all hell broke loose.

Dane sank to the floor in a stunned heap. "Karen, I love you...I love you..." His life was crashing down around him. *Dammit! Why? She hadn't done anything wrong! She didn't deserve to die!* Her sweet, innocent face flashed into his mind. Her warm embraces and sparkling brown eyes, all gone! And why? Because he hadn't been there to protect her!

Through his shocked haze he heard one of the guards updating Commander Ranson.

"Sir, there's been a weapon discharged within the room. We think the hostage has been killed. Do we have the all clear to cut into the room?"

Hearing the security guard say his wife was dead had an immediate and violent reaction. Instinct and muscle memory took over and in a blink of an eye the poor hapless guard found himself flying in the air.

Dane could hear his heart thudding loudly as he fought to control his breathing. *My own heart beats. But Karen... why? God, why? She was everything to me.* Her laughter sounded

through his head. She'd loved white water rafting. He'd hoped to take her to enjoy the real experience when they got back to Earth. *Now... she'll never see it.* Tears streamed down his face unchecked as he thought about all the things she hadn't experienced yet—and now never would. Never again would he be able to show her something new or see her eyes light up with wonder.

Why didn't I tell her I loved her? Why didn't I say it? Regret filled him as he replayed their encounter earlier when he'd thought she was safe. *I should have said it then.* He almost had. But lingering doubts and the urgency of the situation had kept him from saying the words.

Bryce had said not to push her. *God knows I didn't want to push her away. Why did I listen to him*

From the corner of his eye, he saw the other security officers moving towards his position in the center of the corridor. A part of him knew that it was wrong to lash out at the very men who had tried to help rescue his wife. But his pain was just too much to bear. What was he supposed to do with it all? He'd spent every last credit and then some to get her back. He wouldn't do that to her again. Anyone could see how hard this transition had been on her.

"Major! Are you alright?" Another, older guard said as they stopped out of reach from him. His comrades were slowly surrounding him their hands raised in a nonthreatening but defensive position out from their bodies. He was sure they thought he'd hurt them too.

But they hadn't seen that bastard cut his first wife down so they wouldn't understand. That psychopath had murdered his sweet, innocent Karen. Twice!

Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! Karen jerked her foot out from Craven's now lax grip. Scooting herself to a sitting position, she dropped the deadly pistol and kicked it away. She didn't want to touch it anymore. Her mind forced her to think about what could have happened. *If I had been a second longer, I would have missed the gun. He would have killed me.* As it was, Karen had turned; the pistol in hand as Craven lunged, grabbing her ankle. That split second decision to pull the trigger had saved her life.

Now his lifeless eyes stared back at her from his prone position on the floor. The gaping hole in his chest the evidence of their close range encounter. With her arms wrapped around her, Karen rocked in a slow steady motion to sooth her nerves. *Just breathe Karen... in...out...in...out. Breathe. He would have killed you. Just remember that. He was going to kill Rider too. Rider! Wait 'til I tell Dane he's alive!*

Why am I still in here? I need to get out now! Forcing herself to her feet, Karen walked on rubbery legs to the door. *Damn! I forgot Craven jammed the lock.* Pulling the knife from the door control, she stared at the mechanism. The control was a square box no bigger than four inches that now had a large slash right through the electro-key slot. *Great! Just wonderful. Now how am I supposed to get out of here?* Becoming increasingly concerned, Karen looked about the

room. The box with emergency written across it drew her attention. *I'm pretty sure this constitutes an emergency.*

Running her fingers along the box as her eyes examined the area; Karen found a button to push. *I hope this doesn't launch me into space.* Crossing her fingers, she activated the box and sighed in relief when the box separated disclosing a keypad and computer screen. *So far, so good.*

"What is the nature of your emergency?" the computer broke the silence as the screen displayed a three dimensional avatar.

Thank God! The thing is fully interactive. "The electro-key box has been completely damaged."

"Attempting to bypass controls, please wait until process is complete."

Like I have a choice, Rolling her eyes, Karen wondered who the hell programmed this thing.

"Thank you for waiting...bypass was also damaged. Manual bypass must be used." As the computer continued speaking, another compartment opened up.

"In the box locate the tool which looks like this." The screen's avatar was replaced by a diagram of a tool. Reaching inside the box she took out a tool about five inches in length with a strange glowing piece on the end. *I hope the glowing piece is the business end of this thing.*

"Now, use the tool to remove the casing from the electro-key box." The screen now showed a diagram of where to locate the parts which fastened the box together.

Double checking the diagram each time she used the tool, Karen found it quickly and efficiently removed each of the

cylinder pieces which kept the box together. Putting the tool down, she worked the lid off of it. "Okay, now what?"

"Inside you will find a manual release lever to pull back on."

"Thanks!"

Squatting down, she looked inside for the lever the computer had talked about. Pulling it back, Karen fought the girlish urge to jump up and down as the door lurched open about six inches. "Don't shoot, it's me..."

Oh my God! It's Karen! Dane's chest burst with warmth at hearing his wife's voice. The need to see and make sure she was alright gave him the power of ten men. He pushed the door with all his strength, moving it the rest of the way open. His fingers touched Karen's as she reached through the door. Electric currents flowed between them.

"Where is Shaddoc?" As Dane was asking the question, and pulling Karen to safety, he glanced around at the empty lounge for her captor. On the floor, some ten feet from the door, lay the body of the detested pirate. "You killed him?"

A mere whisper on his lips, Dane spoke her name. "Karen." Pulling her against him, he folded his arms around her in a loving embrace. A frantic kiss to her lips, and he was quickly speaking. "Don't you ever do anything like that again! You hear me? I couldn't bear it if I lost you."

Ignoring the guards that came through the door to look at Karen's handy work, Dane cradled her against his chest and, rained kisses on her lips, face and hair. *Thank you God. You don't know how much I need her.* Pulling her back to look into

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her teary eyes, he pushed the hair out of her face and kissed her tenderly on the lips.

"I love you. I should have told you earlier, and I meant to. I'm so sorry I let you down."

Dane sighed as Karen moved her hand to stroke his cheek with a gentle stroke. "I love you too. I really do." A slow smile spread across her face as she leaned in and pressed her lips to his. "Let's go home, Dane."

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Chapter Thirteen

Karen watched the scenery unfold as Dane finished programming the computer on the holo-deck. After the debriefing with Commander Ranson and a clean set of clothes, they had boarded an emergency pod and flown back to the Ragnorak. After a long, hot shower and a bite to eat, she had asked Dane to spend the night under the stars with her again. This time she wanted to get it right.

As the wooded area and river bank appeared in the previously blank room, Karen smiled. This was her favorite part of the ship. A place where she could decide on a whim to do whatever her heart desired. *My heart desires only one thing—Dane.* Karen watched him as he grabbed their camping gear and flung it over his shoulder. The way his muscles rippled and bunched beneath his t-shirt had her shuddering with anticipation.

She'd done some long, hard thinking on the pod ride back to the ship. Finding herself on that cusp between survival or certain death, Karen had chosen to live. She hadn't regretted that decision for a moment since. Nor would she regret the other decision she had made while on that pod. Not a moment had passed when she hadn't thought of Dane. He had been what pushed her on no matter how scared she'd been. Now all she wanted was to give him the only thing she possessed—herself.

They walked down the pathway hand in hand, neither saying a word. Reaching the camp site, Dane unloaded the

pack. After quickly setting up the tent and sleeping bag, they built a roaring campfire. Blankets lined the ground where Dane and Karen lay watching the stars.

"Is this what it's like on Earth to star gaze? To watch them from far away?" Karen asked as she lazily stroked Dane's chest through his t-shirt.

"Yes. Although it's not this magical."

Propping her head up on her arm she leaned over Dane, a look of disappointment on her face. "Why not?" She would have thought that the real thing would beat the holo version every time.

He gave her a slow sexy smile before answering. "Because you're not there."

With a smirk, Karen pressed her lips to his. She felt Dane's tongue along the seam of her mouth, demanding entrance. She opened to allow him in savoring the feel and taste of him. A desperate need to be closer had her straddling his body with hers. His insistent and serious erection nudging against her cloth-covered core when she pressed against him.

Breaking the kiss, she grabbed the hem of Dane's shirt and pulled it over his head, revealing his sculpted bronzed chest. She rasped her tongue over his flat nipple watching him arch his chest in response. A groan escaped his lips as he gripped her hips.

Not satisfied with just his bare chest, Karen lifted herself off of Dane to sit next to him, her hands going to his belt buckle. Deftly opening the clasp, she unzipped his pants and pushed them down as his steel erection sprung free. Desire knotted deep in her belly as she realized he hadn't worn any

underwear. Karen leaned back as Dane pulled his pants off and tossed them to the ground away from the fire.

In the fire light, Dane's eyes blazed into Karen's. Her nipples hardened into tight points, at the sight. Karen could see he knew her intent as she lowered herself to face his erection. Licking her lips, she touched the tip with a quick dart of her tongue. His answering groan urged her on. Languidly drawing her tongue down his hard shaft, she wrapped her fingers around his base. Pumping slowly up and down she sucked his head into her mouth.

Fighting hard to restrain himself, Dane held onto Karen's head as she worked her mouth, sucking him in deep. Fingers twirled in her hair, he could do nothing but watch and feel as she feasted on his body. Watching his innocent, sweet Karen taste him was an erotic sight to behold; his hard shaft disappearing inside her pink lush mouth. Stilling her with his hand, he pulled away and sat up.

"I think you are terribly overdressed for the occasion. And though I should punish you for it, I believe under the circumstances I may be lenient. Any ideas what a good punishment might be?"

With a playful smile, he laid her back onto the blanket. The light from the fire casting shadows over them, Dane grasped the hem of Karen's shirt and pulled it off in one swift motion exposing her lace covered breasts. Reaching down to unclasp her bra, he watched as the bountiful mounds were revealed. Soft, round handfults topped with pert rosy tips had his mouth watering for a taste. *Not yet.* Holding back, he reached for her pants. Unzipping them he lifted her up to ease the pants

down her legs. Her lace panties were next. Hooking his fingers under the band he leisurely skimmed them down her thighs and over her feet to expose her glistening mound.

Dane couldn't help but stare at her glorious body. Her milky skin glistened in the wake of the camp fire. Her eyes stared back at him with a mixture of curiosity and excitement egging him on. Supporting his body on his elbows, he licked her lips and gently kissed her mouth. She closed her eyes and moaned as Dane's hands covered her breasts, massaging her nipples between his fingers.

"Mmmmm... I thought you might like that. I hope by tonight's end we've discovered more things you enjoy."

Kissing Karen's collar bone, Dane inched down her body, trailing kisses on every spot along the way. Reaching her breasts, his tongue darted out to flick her nipple. Her body shivering, he took her into his mouth and suckled deep. His fingers roamed further, reaching her quivering thighs. Gently pushing them apart, he caressed his way up her inner thigh to tease the curls nestled at her mound. Parting her with his fingers, he dipped one in and drew out her wetness rubbing it around her swollen nub in a circular motion.

"Dane...?" Karen asked questioningly as his mouth left her breast to travel lower. Once at her soft stomach, he licked a trail around her belly button before continuing south. A quick kiss to her hip had her arching her back off of the blankets. Dane gently pressed her back again as he looked into her eyes with wicked intent. Leaning his head down, he kissed her inner thigh and drew his tongue inward to stop at her slit. A slow languid lick and her body jerked upward. A second lick

to her engorged nub quickly followed. Out of the corner of his eye, Dane saw her fingers grasping the blanket.

The sensations rushing through Karen's body were almost too much to bear. Just the feel of Dane's hands on her had set her aflame. Now as his tongue delved into her folds, tendrils of pleasure curled around her to settle deep in her core. She felt herself growing wet with every lap of his tongue. When he moaned, she bit her lip to keep from crying out herself. While she had fantasized about his touch and this moment, she could never have imagined the intense bliss he was wringing from her body. As he moved a finger inside of her she felt that coil of pleasure increasing, causing a strange pressure within her.

A second finger joined the first and Karen cried out. She just couldn't help it. The coiled pleasure inside of her splintered into a thousand pieces as her orgasm rushed through her. Long seconds passed before her body stopped trembling and she was aware that Dane was poised above her, his shaft nudging her entrance. "Are you sure? If not, now is the time to say something. Once I've begun I don't know if I could stop."

Karen felt tears fill her eyes as he leaned forward and caressed her cheek slowly pressing into her. *How can I love him more? It's always about me, about my safety, my pleasure.* A brief sharp pain had her wincing as Dane stilled above her stopping his progression.

Dane's eyes widened in confusion as he realized what had just happened. His mind slowly grasped the significance of this moment. Being a clone, her body was created wholly

intact. He hadn't stopped to consider she'd be a virgin, causing her pain was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Baby, are you alright? Do you want me to stop?"

"I'm okay, just give me a second."

Keeping himself as still as possible, Dane tried not to think about her tight, wet channel gripping his swollen cock like a fist. Fighting desperately against the urge to thrust in to the hilt, sweat pebbled along his forehead.

With a gentle nod from Karen, Dane eased in the rest of the way. Slowly withdrawing and thrusting in, he watched for any further signs of discomfort. Her face relaxing, he continued to drive in and out in a steady rhythm. Each thrust slid in easier as Karen began to squirm beneath him. Leaning forward he rolled a nipple between his finger and thumb. The other distended peak he nipped and then ran his tongue over it to ease the sting.

"Oh my... Dane... I'm... I'm" Dane felt Karen's muscles squeeze his length as her pleasure spilled forth coating her passageway. Seeing her excitement pushed him to the edge of his own release. Thrusting in and out of her at a frenzied pace, Dane pulled her legs onto his shoulders to drive even deeper within her. All too soon, he felt his muscles tense as his own release jetted forth. Wave after wave of pleasure charged from him spilling deep inside Karen's eager body. Finally, after every drop was wrung from him, Dane collapsed into a satisfied heap onto the blanket next to Karen. Her lazy smile and uneven breathing told him she was content as well.

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Picking up a nearby blanket, Dane covered Karen and kissed her forehead. His arms wrapped around her, cradling her close to his body.

"I love you so much."

She twisted in his arms to kiss him tenderly on the lips. "I love you too Dane."

He wished they could stay like this forever, but he knew that was too good to be true. Tomorrow morning they had to head back to their suite and get ready for the mission debriefing with Dean Erland. Because of her role in the death of Craven Shaddoc, Karen would have to attend as well.

For now though, Dane forgot all about tomorrow and focused on the most important thing in his world—Karen.

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Chapter Fourteen

October 12, 2311

New York, NY, USA, Earth

"Watch where you're going!"

Dane stepped back narrowly avoiding the aero-cab as it took off from the curb. He was sure that the cabbie was still cussing him out as he shuttled his passengers to their destination. *Get your head out of your ass Sorenson.* It was hard though. The boxes lay heavy in his arms reminding him just how important tonight would be.

Since returning from the Ragnorak four months ago, Karen had received a five million credit bounty for killing Craven Shaddoc. No one had been more surprised than Dane to learn that the Interplanetary Commerce Association had issued a bounty on Shaddoc for his crimes of piracy. Erland had failed to mention this fact when he'd hired Dane for the mission. After a lengthy review process by a government issued coroner, Shaddoc had been positively identified, Karen had been exonerated of any wrong doing, and the credits deposited into her account.

Returning to Earth, Dane had supported every step she'd taken in becoming her own person. Enrolled in a Bachelor's degree program for fashion design at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Karen would be completing her finals for her first semester today. He couldn't believe how excited she was about the career track she was now pursuing. Design was a

long way from journalism—but then this Karen was a long way from his first wife.

Each day, Karen had come home gushing about all the new things she'd learned. Her enthusiasm was quite infectious, motivating Dane to look into a career change of his own. After that last mission, the decision had quickly been made that neither of them wanted to risk losing one another ever again. Because of that, they had sworn never to involve themselves in a dangerous occupation.

Sliding his key into the electro-key reader, Dane stepped into their loft apartment. They had decided that New York was the place to be while Karen pursued her degree. This particular apartment was only two long blocks and seven short blocks from the college. The large ceilings and the great midtown location had drawn them in. The fact that it had come fully furnished, and was priced in their budget had sealed the deal. Setting his packages down on the kitchen counter, Dane spotted the time crystal. Cursing, he rushed to get everything ready. He only had an hour left to prepare.

Shaking the rain off her umbrella, Karen stepped into the apartment building. Today had been a long day of exams, but she couldn't wait to tell Dane. *I so aced those tests.* She knew that he would be happy to hear that she'd found them easy. Poor Dane, she'd driven him nuts over the preparation. Of course, he was happy for her no matter what.

Her key out, she headed for the elevator. Karen had begun using the elevator ride to her loft apartment as a reflection time of sorts. She always tried to have a positive attitude about whatever happened that day by the time she left that

small cubicle. Today however, was a different case entirely. The significance of this day was not lost on her as she thought back to one year earlier. Waking up in a hospital room not knowing who she was had been devastating. But the days and weeks that followed had been a learning experience that had helped forge who she was now. Now, four months on Earth with Dane had helped her come to a decision. Tonight, she would officially enact her rights under the thirteenth amendment to the Confederate Constitution.

Exiting the elevator, Karen walked to the apartment door and swiped her electro-key. As the door slid back, she dropped the key on the stand inside the entrance and sat her umbrella on the metal entry way to dry. Turning the corner she entered the kitchen. Her jaw dropped at the scene before her. There was Dane sitting at their small table with a beautiful crystal vase full of red roses. Vanilla pillar candles sat on every available surface casting the room in a soft golden hue.

"What is...this..." she stammered.

Karen watched as Dane stood and walked toward her, his pace slow and easy. He took her by the hand, leading her to the other chair, pulling it out. She sat and allowed him to push her chair in, touched by his chivalry. His fingers brushed hers, as he handed her a small box. Butterflies filled her stomach and every muscle clenched in arousal. Her body reacted this way with each touch Dane had given her. She had expected the reaction to lessen as time passed, but if anything it had increased.

Her attention was drawn back to the stainless steel box she now held in her hand. It was cool to the touch and reminded her of the chilly autumn rain she'd walked through only moments earlier. Looking back at Dane inquiringly, he motioned for her to open the box. Anticipation filled her at what it could possibly contain. Depressing the release, the lid lifted to reveal a five inch clear crystal cube. Pulling it free from the fabric lined box, she raised it into the air, leaning close. Her brows furrowed in concentration. *Maybe it's supposed to do something? It looks like a crystal. What's so special about this?* Questioningly looking back at Dane, she found him with an amused expression on his face.

"Not funny, you know. What is it?"

"Rub your hands together and hold the cube in them. Then look closer." She could tell he was fighting a chuckle. He knew she hated when presented with an object she couldn't figure out.

"You had better not be messing with me. You know I hate that."

This time Dane outright laughed. "Uh huh. Just warm up the crystal. You'll see."

Setting the crystal back into the box, Karen rubbed her hands together vigorously. Sufficiently warmed, she picked it up and cradled it in her palm. As she peered close, she saw a moving picture emerge. The crystal warming with her touch, Karen noticed her own features take shape within it. In the crystal, a close up image of her face laughing as her hair whipped around her came into focus.

"Dane? Is this picture really moving?" Her eyes traveled between Dane's and the crystal image. "That's me laughing. I don't understand."

"It's a commemoration crystal. They are used to capture a special memory and share it with someone else. What you are seeing now is my memory of you during our white water rafting excursion. And yes, it is moving."

Karen settled the crystal into the box and sat it on the table. Her eyes searched Dane's face as he leaned towards her to caress her cheek. Unconsciously, she tilted her face to his touch. His warm fingers skimmed her temple and traced her cheekbone causing her to tremble.

"Why white water rafting? What was so special about that?" She asked on a breathless sigh.

Pushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, Dane spoke. "Honestly, that was the first time I saw your beautiful face light up in sheer pleasure. I've been captivated ever since."

Karen's eyes misted up as the beauty of his words wrapped around her, creating flutters of warmth. Gravitating towards Dane, she pressed her body against his. She brushed her lips against his mouth, as she enfolded her arms around him. Teasing his lips with her tongue, he opened and allowed Karen to feast on his mouth.

A bereft feeling came over her as Dane gently pushed her shoulders back to break the kiss. "You're not finished yet. There's more."

"What do you mean—more?"

"You'll see." Dane reached down and pulled out another stainless steel box from beneath the table. In all, he had

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created three commemoration crystals. Each was a memory of something they had shared together over the past year: the white water raft, the morning after they had first made love, and the day they had rented their first home together.

After a dessert of s'mores, Dane pulled out yet another box only this time he got down on one knee. Karen's breath left her in a rush as she realized the significance of the ageless gesture. She felt suspended in a moment of time as he slowly opened the box.

A round diamond surrounded by amethysts in a platinum setting sat inside the stainless steel box on a deep red pillow. It was the most beautiful ring Karen had ever laid eyes on. Her eyes wide, Dane picked up the ring and took her left hand. Suspending the ring above her third finger, he said in a choked voice, "Karen Marie Sorenson, I loved you once and I love you again. Will you love me, again?"

Tears welled in her eyes at his declaration of love. Her decision in the elevator reverberated in her mind. She would keep her identity as Karen Marie Sorenson. And she would treasure her life as the wife of Dane Sorenson. "Now and always."