



SKYPORT VIRGO 1

REFUGE

LOLITA LOPEZ

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Skyport Virgo, Volume 1

Lolita Lopez

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Blurb

As a political refugee on twenty-fourth century Earth, Laleh Sarafpour suddenly faces deportation to her hellish home planet because of a ridiculous clerical error. She never expects a chance meeting with Pike Grayson, a deliciously sexy Spacefleet admiral, to drastically change her life. In the span of a night, Pike saves Laleh from her sadistic half-brother sent to haul her back to the nightmare of her past life and offers her a chance to save herself: a marriage of convenience for naturalization papers.

From the moment Pike lays eyes on Laleh, he craves the breathtakingly exotic beauty. Pike's desire ignites the second she accepts his proposal, but her innocence in the pleasures of the flesh forces him to practice a little patience. With the gentlest of seductions, Pike introduces Laleh to all the naughty delights to be found in a marriage bed.

As they journey across galaxies to Pike's first command station, the sizzling attraction between the pair proves to be explosive. But when Laleh's past threatens to catch up with them, Pike risks everything to protect the woman who has managed to so perfectly capture his heart.

Chapter One

Hunched low in a corner booth, Laleh nursed her rum cocktail, enjoying the bursts of lime and mint on her tongue. Her fingers drifted over the slick dossier embossed with the official seal of the Federation's Office of Earthly Immigration and Naturalization. Paper documents, for all their rarity, always seemed so final. Generally, all correspondence, official or otherwise, went through her trusty transmitter, the telecom device seemingly attached to her palm every waking hour of the day. It just felt so odd to hold paper between her fingers, made the experience of her depressing day all the more surreal.

For at least the twentieth time, she opened the glossy folder and removed the blue form she'd received only hours ago. Her gaze settled on the bolded text of the official ruling.

Denied.

Laleh's belly clenched at the realization she was right and truly fucked. She wiped a hand down her face and kneaded her temples. *What am I going to do now?* There were only nine days remaining on her student visa, hardly enough time to find a lawyer and file an appeal. Fear gnawed at her nerves. The moment her name appeared on the deportation rolls, Dari would send someone to fetch her back to the place she'd fled with her mother all those years ago.

But she couldn't go back to that hell hole. Hezma-12 was technically her home planet, but it had never been a home to her. There was nothing warm or loving about the memories of that horrid place. Only the image of her late mother's smile conveyed happiness to Laleh. Here, on Earth, Laleh and her mother had found what they'd always desperately desired. Independence. Freedom. Security. They'd built a wonderful life for themselves in Houston's Delta Sector. Now all of that was threatened by a clerical error.

Laleh cringed as the rowdy crowd of Spacefleet airmen and women congregated near the bar grew even louder. She cast a wary glance in their direction and questioned her impatience for a drink and a place to mope. After leaving court, Laleh had boarded the maglev but quickly felt suffocated on the packed train. She'd jumped off at the first stop and wandered into the first bar she'd spotted. That she happened to be in the Alpha Sector—the Launch Pad as locals called it—had escaped her notice at first. At present, it was unavoidable. Officers and enlisted members of the Federation's Spacefleet caroused within the bar, the airwomen clustered in groups around tables, the airmen regaling eyelash fluttering groupies with tales of their deep space adventures.

Rolling her eyes, Laleh swirled the liquid in her glass. She lifted the glass halfway to her mouth before setting it down. Getting blitzed didn't hold the same appeal as it had an hour earlier. Right now Laleh needed to think without the haze of a drunken buzz. Surely there was some other option available to her? Perhaps she could lodge a—

"Mind if I sit here?"

Laleh's gaze skipped to the man standing just to her right. She gave him a quick once-over, noting the steel grey uniform hugging his athletic physique. Although Laleh knew little about Spacefleet, she recognized the admiral bars of the insignia embroidered on the left side of his chest. He struck Laleh as a bit young for such an advanced rank, but after the thirteen year war on the Outer Nine, she supposed the captains who had survived

the conflict and gained the necessary experience for promotion would have been few and far between.

Sandy hair framed an angular face, his square jaw clean shaven. Deep green eyes burned her skin with their heated gaze. The faintest lines of age and stress edged his lips and eyes. A sudden urge to reach out and touch him overwhelmed Laleh. Although stoic and even the slightest bit aloof in his manner, he couldn't hide the sadness reflected in his eyes. Laleh recognized that kind of emotional pain better than anyone else. After all, she'd spent most of her life diligently beating it down and hiding it away within herself.

Before Laleh could muster an answer, he slid into the booth across from her. A bemused smile slanted her lips. "Please sit."

He seemed to realize his *faux pas* and set aside his beer. "Pike Grayson."

"Laleh." She grasped his extended hand.

"Nice to meet you." Pike firmly gripped her hand, his palm chilled from holding the frosty mug. As their hands separated, his gaze dropped to the blue form. He frowned. "Immigration problems?"

Laleh quickly shifted the form back inside the dossier. "Just a little hiccup."

Pike sipped his beer and regarded her carefully. "You could always join Spacefleet. Citizenship to the planet of your choice is guaranteed."

She shook her head. "That's not an option for me. My planet of origin isn't a signatory on the necessary treaties."

"Sorry to hear that."

Laleh shrugged. "It happens."

Pike ran his finger around the rim of his glass. The movement drew her attention. She'd always had an odd fascination with hands of the male variety. There was just something ever so sexy about big, strong hands.

"Student visa?"

Her gaze snapped to his face. "Excuse me?"

"You're here on a student visa, yes?"

Laleh's eyes narrowed. "I am."

He seemed to catch her suspicious tone. Pike smiled and reached for her wrist. His touch elicited a ripple of excitement. Slowly, Pike rotated her wrist and traced the tattooed university crest there. "It caught my eye when we shook hands."

"Oh."

Pike's thumb settled over the mark. "Odd choice. Why not a class ring?"

"We don't wear jewelry on our hands before marriage," she murmured and gently removed her hand from his grasp.

"We?" Pike cocked his head as if thinking. "Are you from the Hezman Empire?"

Laleh was surprised he knew something so inconsequential about her home system. "Yes."

His jaw ticked. "Now I understand the desire to immigrate."

"I take it you've been there?"

"Unfortunately," Pike grumbled and took another swig of his beer. "We took a rather nasty hit and had to make an emergency landing on Hezma-12. Let's just say our arrival wasn't very welcome."

Grinning, Laleh chuckled. "I can imagine."

Pike looked thoughtful. "I was under the impression women weren't allowed to travel

off the Hezman planets."

"Generally, they're not. My mother didn't let that stop her though," Laleh wistfully added. "She managed to escape with me and gained refugee status here."

"How old were you?"

"Nine."

"And you've lived here how long?"

"Twelve years."

Pike frowned. "So, why the immigration issue? Shouldn't you have been granted residency by now?"

Annoyance twisted Laleh's face. "Apparently I was never issued the proper entrance formalities. As a minor, I was granted entrance on my mother's refugee visa. Later, I had no problems obtaining a student visa to study at university. All along I was under the mistaken impression that upon graduation and gaining employment, I would be issued permanent residency. Unfortunately, lacking that single electronic stamp on my passport means I'm technically on this planet illegally. I'd have to leave Earth, return to Hezma-12, and then apply for a new visa."

Pike exhaled loudly and shook his head. "What a mess! I'm sorry."

"So am I," Laleh replied dryly.

"How much time have you got to sort out this clusterfuck?"

"A little more than a week." Saying it aloud brought the reality home. Panic gripped her belly. Laleh needed to get home to research her options and formulate some kind of game plan. She flashed Pike a smile. "I should go."

"Would you like me to accompany you? It's late."

Laleh judged his tone. He wasn't fishing for an invitation for a one night stand. He seemed genuinely interested in welfare. "Thanks, but I'm fine."

"Are you sure? It's no bother."

"I'm sure." Pike nodded as she gathered her paperwork. She slipped the dossier and her sleek telecom device into her messenger bag before hiking it onto her shoulder. Laleh caught Pike's gaze. "It was nice meeting you, Admiral Grayson."

"Pleasure was mine," Pike replied, his voice low.

In that instant, Laleh felt an undeniable zing of attraction pass between them. Were it any other night and she any other girl, Laleh might have dared a bold move. The timing of their meeting couldn't have been worse. She had life and death matters to consider. An ill-advised relationship with a smolderingly sexy Spacefleet officer wasn't among them. Especially when said officer exuded the kind of relaxed temptation only found in older, more experienced men.

Exactly the kind of temptation I need to avoid.

Laleh slipped from the booth. "Goodbye."

"Good luck."

Nodding, Laleh backed away from their seats and pivoted into the crowd. Even as she moved through the milling swarm of bodies, Laleh felt his stare burning into her back. It took every ounce of willpower not to toss one final glance over her shoulder as she reached the exit.

Only later, when she gasped for her last breath, would Laleh wish she had.

*

Heat rolled low through Pike's belly at the sight of Laleh's luscious hips swinging

side to side as she left the bar. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the light blue fabric outlining the delicious curves of her tight ass. Even in that staid, law-mandated court suit, Laleh knocked the breath from his lungs.

In all his years traipsing the universe, Pike had never clapped eyes on anyone who compared to that girl. His fingers just itched to pull out the pins securing her brown waves in that tight, low swirl. He could only imagine how beautiful she'd look with all that hair cascading around her shoulders. And those eyes! They were the most striking mixture of the bluest blue with warm topaz flecks. Combined with her honey skin and those full pouting lips, they gave Laleh a decidedly exotic flair.

When he'd spotted her from the bar, Pike knew he had to meet her. She didn't fit the mold of the stereotypical starry-eyed fleet groupie and hadn't shown the least bit of interest in the dozens of eligible young officers surrounding her. Apparently, Laleh knew enough about Spacefleet to interpret his admiral's bars since she'd addressed him by his rank when leaving.

Pike had waited just long enough to make sure she wasn't waiting for someone before sauntering over and introducing himself. Although she'd been talkative and engaging, Pike had picked up on the skittish, almost distrusting vibe, she emitted. Of course, once he'd learned she hailed from the Hezman Empire, he understood her reticence.

Pike still shuddered with the memory of his three weeks on Hezma-12. He doubted a more frighteningly backwards civilization existed within the known universe. They treated their women worse than dogs. From birth, little girls were indoctrinated with the ideals of complete submission to men. Since their life's mission was to procreate and provide pleasure, they weren't allowed anything more than the most basic education required to run a household and were barred from all forms of employment. Their husbands kept them collared and chained when they weren't of use.

Outside of their homes, women dressed in head-to-toe red coverings with gold mesh face plates. The first time he'd seen a small body scuttling across a busy street, the voluminous fabric flapping in the breeze, Pike had been rendered speechless. But when the wind had kicked up the fabric, baring the woman's fully clothed leg, Pike had seen something even worse. Members of the so-called morality squad descended upon the woman with their clubs and snarling dogs. He and a handful of his officers had attempted to intervene on that poor woman's behalf but it was pointless. Pike often wondered what happened to her. From the rumors on the planet, he knew it was likely one of the harshest punishments on their books. If she was lucky, caning. If not, facial disfigurement.

Knowing Laleh came from that vile place intrigued him all the more. She'd turned out so incredibly normal—at least as far as he could tell. Curiosity clutched him. How had her mother escaped? What had brought them to Earth? What would happen to Laleh now?

As Laleh neared the exit, Pike caught sight of movements paralleling hers. Years at war had sharpened his senses so acutely the predatory shadow had no chance of escaping his attention. Without wasting a second, Pike moved out of the booth and onto the floor. Concern twisted his stomach. Someone was following Laleh, and he intended to find out why.

Pike grimaced at the sensation of muggy night air against his skin. He'd spent so much time in the climate-controlled confines of spaceships he'd almost forgotten what

real air felt like. Houston in early May was less than pleasant. Thankfully, he'd escape the stifling humidity when he took charge of a new flagship on Friday and left Earth for a new Skyport and his first command as an admiral.

He scanned the busy street. A flash of blue under a street lamp caught his eye. Pike zoomed in on Laleh preparing to board the maglev. His gaze moved to the man shadowing her. Not wasting a second, Pike hurried through the crowd, desperate to get on the train with her. Nearly frantic, he watched Laleh board the fourth compartment. There was no way he'd reach that car in time. Instead, he hopped onto the first compartment, waving his hand in front of the scanner to gain access. It chirped as it read the Spacefleet issued microchip implanted in his palm.

Pike grabbed the overhead rail as the maglev surged forward and then tilted sharply up toward the sky. His stomach swooped as the train merged onto the mid-air track. Pike quickly found his balance and slowly moved through the crowded compartment. The numerous cadets packed into the car hindered his progress, all of them standing and saluting as he wove in and out of the grouped bodies. Even in his hurried state, Pike maintained professionalism and acknowledged every one of them. He only hoped his civility wouldn't put Laleh at greater risk.

By the time Pike reached the middle of the third car, the maglev had already rocketed around the intricate rings circling above Houston. A small warning bell buzzed just seconds before the train dipped sharply downward. Unlike the seasoned riders, Pike barely caught the overhead rail in time to prevent a nasty fall. He marveled at the jarring and frankly dangerous ride he'd just taken, wondering how the transportation authority managed to avoid injuring the bulk of its riders.

The second the maglev slid to a halt, Pike was slammed against a window by the force of the passengers rushing out of the nearby exit. To avoid a trampling, he threw out his elbows and entered the crush of bodies. When he hit pavement again, Pike inhaled a steadying breath and instantly searched for any sight of Laleh.

He'd lost her.

"Shit." Pike surveyed his surroundings. The piquant scent of spices and meat saturated the heavy air, the various smells from the restaurants lining the street melding in the night. The Delta Sector logo flashed across the animated street signs. He'd only ventured into this sector once, years ago as a Spacefleet cadet, and doubted he'd be able to navigate through the labyrinth of streets. With its high-rise, rent controlled tenements, the area attracted students and immigrants by the droves. Houstonians in search of a cheap meal and bohemian entertainment prowled the sidewalks. *How the hell am I going to find her in all this?*

Up ahead, Pike spotted an information kiosk. He raced toward it, carefully skirting a pair of young lovers embroiled in a passionate kiss. Skidding to a halt, he placed his hand over the scanner and addressed the blue screen. "I need an address."

A pleasant computerized female voice responded to his request. "Welcome, Admiral Grayson. Please provide me with further information. May I have the name you wish to search?"

"Laleh."

"Surname?"

"I'm not sure." Pike braced his hand against the kiosk as he hoped against hope the terminal might be able to help him.

"I show two hundred eleven residents of Houston with the first name Laleh."

"Can you narrow it down to Delta Sector?"

"One moment." Pike's fingers twitched anxiously. "I show seventeen residents of Delta Sector with the first name Laleh."

Thinking, he rubbed his jaw. "Can you sort the list by age?"

"I'm sorry but I do not have permission to access that information."

"Planet of origin?" He was fishing now.

"I'm sorry but I do not have permission to access that information."

Pike desperately racked his brain. "Can you cross-reference these names with the admission rosters of Federation University of Houston?"

"One moment." The ensuing seconds felt like an eternity to Pike. Finally, the machine spoke. "Sarafpour, Laleh, doctoral candidate in sociocultural xenanthropology, resides at 441 Coelho Place, apartment 56A. Do you find this information useful?"

"Yes!" Pike quickly studied the map on the screen and oriented himself. Four blocks to the east, he'd find her.

"May I help with any further inquiries?"

"No."

"It has been my pleasure to serve you, Admiral Grayson. Goodbye."

Pike barely heard the computer's parting words. He was already a third of the way down the block and picking up speed. Scanning for obstacles, Pike raced down the sidewalks, darting in and out of the crowds. As he pounded pavement, he realized just how much he'd come to rely on the instantaneous transportation used by the fleet. He could have been at Laleh's side in the blink of an eye if only the Federation hadn't outlawed civilian teleportation for distances under one thousand kilometers.

Spotting the hi-rise, Pike kicked up his pace. He followed a trio through the automatic doors and glanced at the line waiting for elevators. Sure he couldn't waste the time, Pike headed for the stairwell. Gripping the metal banister, he launched himself up two and three stairs at a time. His heart pounded and lungs swelled in his chest. His legs burned from the exertion. Ignoring the discomfort, Pike focused only on reaching Laleh.

Pike burst through the entrance to the fifth floor. He rolled his eyes in irritation upon the realization he'd come out at the opposite end of the floor. He raced passed the ascending apartment numbers. As he neared the forties, Pike heard the unmistakable shriek of a woman in pain. His heart jumped into his throat. A sixth sense told him that was Laleh.

Up ahead, a door opened and a concerned man stalked across the hallway, pounding on a door that Pike could only assume belonged to Laleh. Just seconds after the man's blue fist hit the door, it jerked open and another fist, this one tan, slammed into the neighbor's face. The blue man reeled backwards in shock, bright orange liquid spewing from the injuries to his mouth and nose. Another scream erupted from the apartment as the same man who'd been shadowing Laleh strode out of her apartment, obviously intent on continuing his attack on the neighbor.

His full concentration on pummeling the blue man, the assailant didn't seem to notice Pike as he bent down and grabbed the blue man's shirt. Pike took advantage of the element of surprise. As he closed the distance between them, Pike drew back his foot and landed a nasty blow to the assailant's head. The thudding sound of his boot contacting the

attacker's face filled the hall. Pike threw his full weight into the downward movement of his elbow as he hit the back of the assailant's head. That was all it took to drop the bastard.

Pike paused just long enough to check out the wounded neighbor. The man raised an orange-smeared blue hand and waved him off, urging him to help Laleh. Pike pivoted and dashed into the apartment. His gaze moved around the ransacked living area and kitchen. His ears perked to the sounds of a scuffle in a back room. Glass shattered. Grunts and slaps filled the air. Something—someone—slammed into a wall with a sickening thud.

Stomach twisting, Pike raced toward the skirmish. He slid into a bedroom and found a hulking brute holding Laleh up against a wall, her feet dangling as he choked the life out of her. Laleh made weak gasping noises as her nails scratched at the man's hands. Pike rushed the brute and punched his fist into the man's temple over and over until he let go. Laleh slumped to the floor and made no noise. Pike fought the urge to run to her aid. Already the brute was turning his attention to him.

Pike recoiled with recognition. "Jai."

Prince Jai of the Hezman Empire curled his lip in a snarl. "Grayson." His dark gaze jumped from Pike's face to Laleh's. "I should have known she'd have whored herself out to a starman."

Realizing he could use the mistaken assumption to his benefit, Pike puffed out his chest. "Not just any starman." He tapped his chest. "An admiral, now."

Jai's jaw hardened as he seemed to waver between lashing out and maintaining some control. Finally, he uttered a noise of disgust and poked his finger in Pike's face. "You can't protect her forever. She will submit."

His piece said, Jai spun on his heel and left the apartment, slamming the door shut behind him. Pike hurried to Laleh and scooped her up from the floor. Cradling her to his chest, he sat on the edge of her bed and gently turned her face. Fury raged through his body at the sight of blood trickling from her nose and the center of her split lips. Only the sensation of her steady breaths against his chin calmed him. He brushed the hair from her face and allowed his fingertips to drift down her cheek to her neck. Already purpling bruises marred her silky skin.

"Laleh?" Pike's shaky voice surprised him. He was a man who'd faced certain death on distant battlefields only to escape at the very last nanosecond, yet seeing this girl's battered body shook him to the very core. "Laleh?"

She stirred weakly. Thick eyelashes fluttering, she slowly came around. Her unfocused gaze searched his face, confusion clearly apparent in her glassy eyes. When her gaze settled, the slightest frown twitched her lips. "Pike?"

Relief flooded him. His chest constricted at the realization she'd just uttered his name for the first time. Pike swallowed hard. "Do you need medical attention?"

Laleh shook her head. "I just need a few moments."

Pike wasn't so sure but decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. At the first sign of trouble, he was calling for medics. He suddenly remembered the injured neighbor in the hallway. He shifted Laleh onto the bed. "Will you be all right for a few seconds? I need to run out and check on the blue guy from across the hall."

Concern flooded Laleh's face. "Noozeen was hurt?"

He nodded. "Not badly but I'd like to make sure just in case."

"Of course."

"When I get back, we'll call the police to report this mess."

Laleh paled and wildly shook her head. "You can't."

"Why not?"

"They won't do anything but make it worse. He has diplomatic immunity, and I'm probably already on the deportation lists." Laleh's pleading gaze bore into him. "Please."

Her frightened tone struck a chord with him. He didn't want to know, but he had to ask. "Laleh," Pike said carefully, "how do you know Jai?"

Her delicate eyebrows arched in surprise. "You know Jai?"

"We had an altercation of sorts on Hezma-12 during our layover." Pike didn't elaborate, and Laleh didn't pry.

"I see."

"What is he to you?" Pike's chest clenched as he feared the worst. "Laleh?"

Tears shimmered in her blue eyes. "He's my brother."

"Your brother?" Shock filled his voice. "Then..." He rubbed his jaw. "Your father is Dari? The emperor?" She nodded stiffly. "And your mother was?"

"His third wife," Laleh quickly supplied.

"So that makes you—"

"A princess? Yes."

Any other young woman would have been thrilled to have been royalty but Laleh spoke with such sadness and reluctance. It was obvious she viewed her status as a burden. But that was a matter to ponder at another time.

"What did he want?" Pike was certain he wouldn't like the answer.

"To drag me home for my wedding."

Chapter Two

Laleh watched the weight of her bombshell filter across Pike's expression. She'd never spoken the truth about her heritage to anyone since coming to Earth. Like her mother, she'd born the truth like a secret shame to be concealed at all costs. Saying aloud what she'd denied for so long filled Laleh with such an odd sense of relief.

And dread.

Pike ran a hand through his hair and exhaled loudly. "We'll talk when I get back."

She nodded and watched him disappear. Her face throbbed and the taste of copper filled her mouth. Laleh wobbled a bit as she stood, her head pounding briefly before her body regained equilibrium. She sidestepped piles of clothing and broken furniture and bric-a-brac on her way to the restroom. Why Jai and Daneel had ransacked the place confounded her. She didn't have anything worth stealing. Most months, Laleh was lucky to make her rent and still have enough money for necessities. It wasn't as if they'd brought anything from Hezma-12 when they made their escape. She and her mother had arrived in Houston with just the clothes on their backs.

So what the hell did he want?

Laleh waved her hand in front of the faucet and activated the water flow. She flicked her fingers in front of the temperature control. Almost immediately warm water splashed her outstretched hands. She bent forward, wincing as her sore ribs protested the movement, and scooped a handful of water into her mouth. She slowly swished it around and spit the now pink liquid into the chrome basin.

Very gently, Laleh washed her face with a bit of hand cleanser, rubbing soft circles around the bloody smudges on her upper lip and crusting her nostrils. By morning, she'd likely sport a smattering of nasty bruises. She closed her eyes and rinsed the pink suds from her face. As water dripped from her face into the sink, Laleh's fingers clutched air as they sought the hand towel hanging from the towel ring.

The sensation of strong fingers wrapping around her wrist startled Laleh. She bolted upright, still jumpy after her run-in with Jai and his goon. Her nervous gaze settled on Pike's face, his eyes dark with concern. Towel in hand, he reached out and ever so gently wiped the cloth against her forehead and across her cheeks. Her eyelids lowered as the cloth moved over her face, wiping away the moisture clinging to her skin.

When his thumb touched her swollen lower lip, Laleh's gaze jumped to his. She'd never seen such anger boiling beneath a man's hardened exterior or such fierce protection playing on his face. It simultaneously touched and thrilled her. She'd never seen a man look at her like *that*, as if he'd commit unspeakable acts in the name of justice for her.

"We should put something cold on this," Pike said, his voice gruff. "Do you have a first aid kit?"

"No," she whispered, the movement of her lips hindered by his lingering thumb.

"I'll make do then." Pike's thumb swept softly over her chin before his hand dropped. "I'll wait for you in the kitchen."

As he left, Laleh gulped and put a steadying hand to her neck. Her pulse beat rapidly against her fingertips. She wasn't quite sure what was happening between them. And how had he come to be here, just when she needed him?

Mind reeling with questions, Laleh returned to her bedroom and chose a pair of pajama bottoms and a camisole from one of the piles of strewn about clothing. She hastily changed into her clothes and carried her bloodstained suit jacket top back to the bathroom. Certain she couldn't afford a trip to the cleaners, Laleh daubed a bit of shampoo onto the stains and worked the spots into a foamy lather. She left the top on the counter, hoping a little time and the old like-dissolves-like maxim she'd learned all those years earlier in chemistry would work.

Laleh found Pike wetting a small dish cloth in the sink. It was odd to see a man standing in the tiny space. While she and her mother had abandoned most of the restrictive Hezman customs, they'd never gone so far as to invite men into their home. Only when it came to modesty and virtue did Laleh's mother hold fast to the old ways. She'd had her fair share of relationships, always under the watchful eye of her mother, but never had she been totally alone with a man—especially in her pajamas!

Pike glanced over his shoulder, his expression softening at the sight of her. With a tilt of his head, he gestured for Laleh to come closer. She willingly complied. A shocked gasp escaped her lips as his hands grasped her waist and hoisted her effortlessly onto the counter. He stood so close she could feel the waves of heat radiating from his body. His scent, a delicious mixture of sweat and soap and cedar, invaded her senses. An unexpected coil of desire tightened low in her belly.

Laleh jerked back when Pike brought a cloth wrapped bundle close to her face. "What is that?"

"I couldn't find any ice in your freezer, so I wrapped up a bag of frozen strawberries."

"Oh." Laleh moved her face closer to his hand. "I don't keep ice. Seems wasteful considering water rationing."

"Makes sense." Pike placed the cold pack against her fat lip and busted nose. She winced at the shock of the chill but slowly the temperature lessened the pain. Pike picked up her hand to replace his and took a moment to check out her injuries. His fingers prodded the area around her right eye before drifting lower to her bruised cheek and jaw. "I don't feel any breaks. I think you'll have some swelling and bruises but nothing too nasty. If we were onboard my ship, you wouldn't even have the slightest bit of discomfort by now."

"The perks of Spacefleet," Laleh replied, shifting aside the pack so she could speak. "Not that I'm complaining about healthcare here. It's a million times better than what we had on Hezma-12. We just don't get all the nifty new miracle drugs like you do."

"We get them first because we're their guinea pigs," Pike jokingly said.

"Good point." Laleh moved the cold pack to the side of her face. "How is Noozeen?"

"He's going to have a pair of black eyes to go with that broken nose come morning." Pike hopped onto the counter beside her, his thigh touching hers. "He refused to go in for medical treatment or to call the police, too."

Laleh felt Pike's questioning stare. "He's legal, but his wife isn't. Salida came here on a work visa but her employer refused to hold up his end of the bargain. Noozeen can't sponsor her for a spousal visa because he's only been a citizen for a year. And she's pregnant."

"I see." An uncomfortable silence hung between them. "Are there a lot of illegal residents in this building?"

Laleh shrugged. "No more than usual in this sector. You know how it is. Generally, the authorities turn a blind eye since cheap labor keeps Houston booming. As long as you stay off the radar, you're fine, but once you're on it..." Laleh shook her head. "They're very efficient when it comes to deportation."

"Do you think you'll be deported soon?"

His question made her stomach lurch. "Yes."

"How soon?" Pike sounded worried.

Laleh cast a quick glance in his direction. "Days probably. If Jai found me, my name is already on the roundup log. My denied application put me in a weird limbo of sorts. I'm still technically legal for the next few days, but the odds of me gaining any kind of reprieve aren't high. Immigration will try to scoop me up before I run."

"Were you planning to run?"

"I don't know." Laleh set aside the cold pack. Her face felt oddly numb as she spoke. "I can't stay here because they'll deport me to my planet of origin. I suppose my only option is to flee to another planet with lenient residency requirements while my Earth refugee passport is still valid. Hopefully I can find a job. At this point, I'd take anything—even a position on a star cruise vessel."

"A star cruise?" Pike looked appalled. "You're earning a doctorate for god's sake!"

Surprise shook her. "How the hell do you know that?"

"The directory," he explained. "I used an information kiosk to find you."

Needing answers, Laleh swiveled to better face him. "Why were you looking for me in the first place?"

"I saw that man following you out of the bar. He looked like bad news so I gave chase but lost you on the maglev. I didn't know your last name, so I asked the directory to cross-reference the address list with university students."

"I'm impressed. You've got rather sharp problem solving skills. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised," she added. "I'd imagine captaining a starship requires the best multitasking minds."

"Generally yes," Pike agreed. He leaned back on his hands. "So tell me about this marriage."

Nausea swirled in the pit of her stomach. "I'd rather not."

"I'd rather you did."

Stunned by his grave tone, Laleh snapped her gaze to his face. "Why?"

Pike held her gaze. "I can't help you if I don't know everything."

"Why do you want to help me? You don't even know me."

"I know enough."

Realizing he wouldn't be swayed, Laleh sighed and launched into the sordid tale. "Childhood betrothals are very common on Hezma-12, especially among the aristocracy. When I was three, my father betrothed me to General Feeshan. I was to be his fifth wife. In our culture, polygamy is a symbol of wealth and importance and—"

"Feeshan?" Pike interrupted rather stridently. "That barbaric son of a bitch who keeps a harem of little boys in that compound of his?"

Disgust rippled through her. "Now you understand my mother's desperation to escape Hezma."

"Absolutely."

"Just before my ninth birthday, the general's fourth wife died under suspicious

circumstances. I didn't understand it at the time, but I realize now she was killed in some sort of deviant sexual play. Not your run of the mill games that some people enjoy but real and horrific torture."

"I can imagine," Pike grumbled. "His parties were rather notorious during our stay. I'll spare you the sickening details of what I've heard."

"Thanks."

"So your mother planned your escape?"

"The general was short a wife and wanted what belonged to him. My mother refused to let me suffer the same abuse she had her entire life. She made contact with an underground escape network that helped move us off planet aboard a trading ship. By the time we were missed, we'd already boarded an Earth bound spaceship. Once we landed in Houston, Mother applied for immediate refugee status under an assumed name."

"Sarapour?"

Laleh nodded. "It's not a Hezman surname. Mother saw it in a book from the ship's library."

"What was the ship's name?"

"Brennan."

"Orion class ship." Pike's forehead creased. "Twelve years ago? No." He shook his head. "I can't remember the captain that far back."

"Boreanaz," Laleh supplied.

Recognition colored his face. "He was a few years ahead of me at the Academy. Nice guy."

"Very," she said. "He took a huge risk allowing my mother and me to board his ship. If my father had been able to locate us, I think it likely he would have lodged a formal complaint with the Federation and demanded our hasty return. Until we reached Earth soil, we were in a quandary as far as our political refugee status was concerned."

"Can't you try to extend your refugee status now?"

"I tried, but I don't qualify. I'm no longer a minor so the threat of impending marriage to a man, I can't stomach the sight of doesn't exactly qualify me as suffering a hardship or imminent danger."

"But they have to know how women are treated on that planet!" Pike insisted angrily. He shoved off the counter and paced the small kitchen. "What's the use of all those fucking treaties and mandates if we can't protect the people who need it most?"

Laleh's eyes widened at the sight of this man stalking her kitchen, displeasure evident on his face. She sensed he felt as powerless as she did in this situation. When he passed close by, she snatched his hand. His focus moved to their joined hands. She tried to ignore the electric sensation of his touch.

"It's all right. I'm not looking for a savior, you know. I'll figure something out. I always do," she said, her voice soft. His fingers shifted until they were laced with hers. Pike took a step closer, his intense gaze boring into her. Her stomach fluttered with excitement and desire. In that moment, Laleh realized things could quickly spiral out of control between them—but she couldn't allow that.

Laleh untangled her fingers and slid off the countertop. "I should get some sleep. I have a long day ahead of me."

Pike's face fell slightly. In an instant, he'd steeled his expression. "Of course," he agreed, stepping back. "You need rest. I, uh, I'll sleep on the couch."

"What?" Laleh thought maybe she'd misheard him.

"You can't stay here alone, Laleh. The lock on your door is busted. You're not safe."

She couldn't argue with his logic. Even with a working lock, Laleh knew she was incredibly vulnerable to another attack. "All right," she conceded. "I'll grab an extra pillow and blanket for you."

"Thanks."

Laleh retrieved the promised items. When she entered the living area, she found Pike jamming a kitchen chair under the door handle. The sight of the melted metal and scorch marks surrounding the biometric lock made her stomach fall. *How much is that going to cost me?*

She placed the pillow and blanket on the couch. "If you like to shower in the mornings, you'll have to do it early. They cut off the water to Delta Sector a little after seven. It won't pop back on until ten or so."

"Good to know," Pike said as he lowered the zipper closing the front of his jacket and started to kick off his boot.

Realizing he meant to undress to some extent, Laleh averted her eyes. "Feel free to make yourself at home. Good night."

"Good night, Laleh."

As he started to peel off his jacket, Laleh fled. Safe inside her room, she switched off the lights and slipped into bed. The mess and her pressing problems could wait until morning. Right now, Laleh desperately needed sleep.

But the sound of Pike moving around on the couch kept her awake. Even after the trauma she'd just suffered, Laleh's mind automatically jumped to the question of what, exactly, Pike was wearing. Had he only shucked his jacket? Had he stripped down to his skivvies and nothing else? Was his chest smooth or lightly haired?

Just because she'd never been with a man in *that* way didn't mean Laleh wasn't curious. When it came to sex, she'd lived a surprisingly sheltered life. Her mother's strident desire to protect Laleh from the evils of men had prevented her from doing much more than sharing a few tongue kisses or having her breasts fondled through her shirt.

Rolling onto her side, Laleh squeezed her eyes tightly shut and tried to still her thoughts. This was not the time for entertaining lustful images of a man she hardly knew. Whatever he'd done to save her, Pike was still just a stranger.

Right?

Suddenly, Laleh wasn't so sure. How was it possible to feel so intimately connected to a person she'd known for less than a handful of hours?

*

Pike stared at the ceiling. He'd slept fitfully for the last seven hours or so. Every little noise set him on edge. He doubted Jai would be stupid enough to return. No it was Laleh's comment about deportation raids that made him nervous. If Jai really wanted Laleh returned to their homeland, all he had to do was put in a call to the right people. They'd round her up and do the dirty work for him—and all perfectly legal.

Through the paper thin walls of the poorly constructed building came the sounds of Laleh's neighbors greeting the morning. Pike glanced toward the far window and saw only darkness through the hazy window shade. He guessed it wasn't yet five. Wiping a hand down his face, Pike tried to remember the last time he'd been surrounded by so many early risers. Not since the academy, he realized. Over the years, he'd become

accustomed to the cushy lifestyle of an officer. Other than the occasional hostile encounter, Pike generally slept a solid eight hours in the comfort of his private quarters.

He shifted on the uncomfortable couch and debated whether or not to try to fall back asleep. Pike quickly decided it was futile and sat up, swinging his legs over the cushions. He rubbed his tired eyes and ran his hand through his hair. His mind reeled. He had a meeting with the Admiralty in a few hours, but he wasn't sure about leaving Laleh alone. And then there were his duties on base. He couldn't just abandon them because he'd happened upon a rather gorgeous damsel in distress.

Pike decided he needed a shower, coffee, and breakfast before he could even try to work out a solution. He gathered his carefully folded jacket, tee, and pants from the low table and carefully made his way around the messy living area. He made a mental note to straighten things up after his shower. Laleh would need help setting the small apartment to rights.

Pike hesitated in the open doorway to her bedroom. He'd noticed her anxious behavior when he'd started to undress earlier. Her body language told him all he needed to know. It wasn't just shyness but inexperience that made her flee. Considering the barbaric world she'd come from, he wasn't surprised. Had he been her mother, Pike would have sheltered Laleh as much as possible out of fear she'd fall prey to the sadistic whims of a man.

He took a cautious step into the room, afraid of waking or frightening her. Before moving further into the room, he allowed his eyes to adjust to the darker confines. Pike quietly crossed the room, skirting the edge of the bed on his way to the bathroom. He stepped inside and shut the door as the lights flicked on, the switch activated by his movement.

Cringing, he shielded his eyes from the harsh illumination. He'd grown accustomed to the self-adjusting lights aboard the starships he'd commanded. There was something comforting about a room that automatically adjusted to the occupants' preferences.

Of course, one couldn't expect those kinds of technological luxuries in a tenement like this one. It was painfully clear this building had been thrown up quickly and on the cheap so as to take advantage of the influx of immigrants and students flooding Houston in search of work or a first-rate education.

Pike placed his clothes on the counter and peeled out of his boxer briefs. He approached the tiny shower stall and waved his hand to activate the showerhead. Frigid water sputtered from the chrome fixture. He tried to adjust the temp, but it quickly became apparent the only available water was tepid at best. Braced for the shock of lukewarm water against his skin, Pike stepped into the alcove. He cursed under his breath, his hand flying down to shield his cock from the cold blast.

Not wanting to spend any more time than necessary under the uncomfortable spray, Pike slid his hand under the soap dispenser mounted on the wall. He worked the creamy liquid between his hands before slathering his body with the honey and almond scented suds. A quirked smile tugged at his lips. He wondered what his crew would say if they caught a whiff of their froufrou scented admiral. The ribbing would be brutal.

Pike washed his hair and rinsed off before switching off the water and turning on the overhead dryer. Surprisingly, the blast of heat he'd expected materialized. At least one thing worked well. As he spun underneath the stream of drying air, Pike got a better look at the cracked tile and flaking ceiling. He'd noticed the same rundown characteristics in

the kitchen. He couldn't help but wonder how Laleh made do with such subpar conditions. All his life, he'd been lucky and had never known any true hardship. Sure, there were stretches of weeks in his earliest days in the service where he lived on the barest essentials while fighting the Scourge on the Outer Nine, but the promise of an eventual hot shower, hot meal, and a comfortable bed aboard a starship kept him going.

And yet Laleh seemed strangely happy with her life. Even after being denied a new visa and having the shit knocked out of her, she'd been oddly positive. Rather than whining about the unfairness of her plight, she'd already started making contingency plans. They weren't particularly glamorous but they would keep her alive and safe.

Maybe.

Even if she made it off Earth without alerting Immigration, Laleh risked being turned away at whatever planetary port of entry she visited first. She'd have to port jump until she found a planet willing to grant her entry. With the expiration date on her Earth-issued passport nearing, the passport control officers she'd encounter would likely suspect she meant to lodge a residency request. Pike knew enough about the various bureaucracies of the galaxy to predict they'd boot her so quickly her head would spin. Eventually, she'd be forced back to Hezma-12.

Or worse.

Pike's stomach soured at the idea of Laleh in the clutches of skin traders. Granted her fate on her home planet wouldn't be much better. The tales of General Feeshan's sex parties made Pike's skin crawl. Pike enjoyed a little kink every now and then but the things Feeshan and his ilk enjoyed went beyond BDSM and ventured into the realms of horror. There was nothing safe, sane, or consensual about their activities. It was all about domination and pain and blood and tears.

Just imagining Laleh at the hands of that dirty bastard sent Pike's blood pressure skyrocketing. But what could he do?

A small part of him insisted that this wasn't his fight. He didn't really know Laleh. He owed her nothing. There was no reason to get involved in this mess.

And yet...

He couldn't turn his back on her. She needed him.

As he rifled through her cabinets in search of dental gel caps, Pike racked his brain. He found a bottle and shook a couple into his palm. He tossed them back and bit down. Nose wiggling at the bubbling sensation of the foaming cleanser, Pike rifled through his mental catalogue of contacts within the upper echelons of the Federation.

Outside of Spacefleet, Pike knew people working in various departments such as education, information dissemination, science and research, and legislation. At one time, he'd known a rather highly placed judge but she'd long since retired.

The only person of Pike's acquaintance even vaguely connected to the Office of Earthly Immigration and Naturalization was an ex-girlfriend, Melanya, who served as the Spacefleet liaison for service members who married off-worlders. Melanya might know someone who could help. She'd always been something of a bleeding heart.

If she'd found ways around the various regulations boxing in Spacefleet members, surely she'd be able to work her magic on Laleh's situation. Of course, during the last few years, most of those regulations had been softened for officers and a certain set of enlisted members as a perk of surviving the conflict on the Outer Nine. There were none of the usual hoops to jump through, nor the mounds of paperwork or wait times. Hell,

Pike's old friend, Tyson, had met and married a Venusian lap dancer during a seventy-two hour leave on *Hedonisma*.

The dental foam in his mouth liquefied completely. He swished the mouthwash around and spit it in the sink. He snatched his boxer briefs from the counter, stepped into them and adjusted his package. As he thought of Tyson's marriage, he couldn't help but smile. What had started out as a seemingly ill-fated mismatch had turned out surprisingly well. There'd been a series of bumps in the beginning, but somehow, the pair had managed to work through them. They'd almost convinced Pike marriage wasn't the prison it looked like. He'd even entertained the idea of someday—

Pike's head snapped up suddenly. His heart thudded against his chest as he stared at his reflection in the lightly fogged mirror. *Are you insane?*

But there was no other way. Pike could see that.

Before he could change his mind, Pike flung open the door and rushed into Laleh's bedroom. He tapped the base of the lamp on her bedside table. A dim light filled the room. He sat on the edge of her bed, his gaze traveling over the curves of her sleeping form. She'd kicked away the covers and curled her knees toward her stomach in a fetal position. The hem of her camisole had inched up to just below her breasts, baring a smooth expanse of caramel skin. Her nipples pebbled against the thin fabric, the swells of her breasts heaving above the neckline of the top with each relaxed breath.

Unable to help himself, Pike swept his fingers down her cheek. She made a kittenish noise and twitched her lips. He slowly removed his hand and placed it on her waist, the skin silken beneath his touch. With the gentlest of shakes, he attempted to wake her. "Laleh?"

She sucked in a sharp breath and bolted upright, hands smacking wildly at him. "Don't touch me!"

Pike recoiled, thinking she meant him, but then realized she was still in that dreamy haze of half-sleep. He cupped her face and spoke softly. "Shhh. Laleh, it's just me."

Her eyes focused on him. Immediately, she relaxed. "Sorry."

"It's okay," he assured her, his hand caressing her shoulder. "I understand why you're skittish."

She nodded and rubbed her eyes. "Is something wrong?"

He shook his head but before he could speak, her eyes widened and she fled back against the headboard.

"You're naked!" Laleh clutched at the sheets, drawing them over her body.

Pike looked down, almost doubting his memory of having pulled on his boxers. "No, I'm not."

"Close enough," she retorted, her gaze glued to his face. Heat blossomed on her cheeks, coloring them with the prettiest shade of pink he'd seen in quite some time.

Pike ignored the urge to tease her. "I'm sorry, Laleh. I'll make sure I'm properly dressed next time."

"Next time?" It didn't seem possible but her blue eyes widened even further. "What do you mean next time?"

"The next time we're alone like this," Pike clarified.

She shook her head. "I don't think there will be a next time."

"I do."

Laleh gulped loudly. "What are you saying?"

Never one to dance around a difficult subject, Pike just went for it. "Marry me?"

Chapter Three

Laleh's world tilted as she reeled in shock. She blinked rapidly as she replayed Pike's question in her mind. "Why?"

Pike snorted and laughed. "Well, that wasn't exactly the response I was expecting."

Realizing how rude she'd sounded, Laleh reached out and touched his hand. "I didn't mean it like that. I just don't understand how getting married solves my problems."

"It's the only foolproof situation, Laleh. You'll be given an immediate spouse visa because I'm a Spacefleet officer. After fourteen months, you'll get your naturalization papers."

"Fourteen months?" Laleh wondered at the feasibility of such an arrangement. "I don't know, Pike." She sighed and shook her head. "Look, I'm beyond grateful for what you did for me last night, but I don't need some white knight to ride to my rescue."

"I get that. I do, Laleh." Pike's fingers tipped her chin so he could hold her gaze. "I'm just offering you a chance to save yourself."

She mulled over his offer. The idea of marrying a man simply for immigration benefits seemed rather mercenary. Compared to her other options, namely making a run for the nearest hospitable planet and hoping for the best, at least marriage to Pike would guarantee her safety. If anyone could protect her from Jai, it was Pike.

But that brought another troubling question to mind. What, exactly, would Pike expect in return for doing this favor for her? Her gaze shifted to his naked chest. The sight of the ridged muscles and the smattering of crisp hair made her belly tighten. A tiny part of her desperately wanted to follow the line of dark hair leading down to the waistband of his boxer briefs but she held the urge at bay. Just the thought of his rippled arms wrapped around her body, his chest pressed to hers, made Laleh squirm.

Suddenly uneasy, Laleh wrung her hands in her lap. "If I accepted your proposal, what kind of marriage would this be?"

Pike sat back, his face betraying his uncertainty. Apparently, he'd not considered the full weight of his offer before he'd asked. Pike rubbed his jaw. "Well..."

Laleh realized she needed to be clearer. "Would you expect ... well ... you know?"

An amused smirk played on his lips. "We'll be under some scrutiny so it likely wouldn't be wise to look outside the marriage for satisfaction. And fourteen months is a long time to go without sex."

"Is it?"

Pike burst out with raucous laughter at her curious tone. "Yes, it is."

Laleh blushed. "I suppose it would be—if you're used to having sex, that is."

Pike quieted as understanding filtered across his face. Suddenly serious, he leaned forward. "Laleh, I wouldn't dare force anything between us."

Her anxiety level dropped at the genuine sincerity in his voice. She sensed he was a man of his word. "Thank you."

"No need for that." Pike made a dismissive gesture. "It's about respect."

Laleh smiled. "I think mutual respect would be a good foundation for a marriage."

"So you're accepting?" His green eyes searched her face.

Laleh inhaled deeply and nodded. "Yes. I am."

A wide grin curved Pike's mouth. "Okay." Suddenly all business, he started ticking off to-dos. "We'll have to visit the marriage office on base first get the necessary forms. You'll need a medical exam. I'll have to make arrangements for you to board the ship as soon as possible. We'll have to have your things packed up, too."

Laleh's head spun. "Why so rushed? I have eight days on my visa."

Pike looked as if he'd just remembered something important. "I ship out on Friday morning to Skyport Virgo for a twenty-four month command there."

"Oh." Laleh deflated at that bit of news. "And where is Skyport Virgo?"

"Delanian Galaxy."

"That's quite far away, isn't it?"

"Yes." He frowned. "Is there a problem?"

Laleh shrugged. "I'd hoped to find employment soon. After I graduate tomorrow afternoon, I'll lose my graduate stipend and will need an income."

"Skyport Virgo is a rather busy outpost, one of the largest in the fleet, actually. I'm not quite certain which departments operate out there, but I'd assume there's some kind of research in a field similar to yours. If not, you might undertake your own project. I'll support you until you find something."

"I suppose," Laleh said uncertainly. The idea of relying on Pike for monetary support didn't sit entirely well with her. She hoped to find a position of some kind as quickly as possible.

"We'll work out the details later." Pike rose from the bed. "I'm going to get dressed. We'll have breakfast and head out, all right?"

"Sure." As Pike returned to the bathroom, Laleh couldn't prevent her eyes from drifting to his taut backside. The grey cotton hugged his trim hips and buttocks so nicely. Laleh had the shocking urge to reach out and give them a swat.

Oh God! Get a grip!

Laleh buried her face in her hands. What had she just done? Had she really just agreed to marry a man she hardly knew for naturalization papers? She glanced around her still messy room. For years, she'd desperately wanted to leave this dump but now, faced with the reality of such a move, she wasn't so sure. This place was one of the last tangible ties to her mother.

And could she be happy living on a space station for fourteen months? Other than Pike, she wouldn't know anyone. Starting over was hard to do at the best of times but under her current stress level? Laleh shuddered at the thought of making new friends and finding a new job and adjusting to married life.

What would happen when they reached the end of their fourteen months? Did Pike intend to cut her loose or keep her around? Would she want to stay or make a run for the nearest divorce court? Laleh hadn't the foggiest idea. Pike struck her as the type of man she could easily fall head over heels for which meant he could just as easily break her heart.

"Second thoughts?" Neat and tidy in his uniform, Pike leaned against the door jamb and regarded her carefully.

If there was ever a time to change her mind it was now.

Laleh shook her head. "No."

Pike grinned. "Then, let's get moving. We've got a lot to accomplish today."

Feeling a little nervous, Laleh slid off the bed and prepared to greet her destiny.

* * * *

Pike paced the hallway outside Melanya's office, his boots squeaking against the polished marble. After swinging by his temporary quarters to change, he'd left Laleh at the sick bay under the care of a friend while he dealt with his morning meetings. He'd had the necessary forms sent to her transmitter. Hopefully she'd have her injuries seen to and her medical exam squared away.

The soft tap of footsteps drew his attention. Pike pivoted to see Laleh striding toward him, the vibrant purple fabric of her tiered dress fluttering against her legs. Gold bangles jingled with every swing of her bare arms. Her brown waves curled around her shoulders. The thin straps and low neckline of her dress displayed a few tantalizing glimpses of her cleavage. Pike didn't miss the breakneck stares of the Spacefleet staff lining the corridor. Annoyed, he strode out to meet her as if staking his claim. All eyes averted the second he took her arm.

Laleh smiled up at him. "Sorry I'm late. I got lost. Everyone speaks in abbreviations!"

Pike chuckled. "I should have sent someone to escort you."

She shrugged. "It was sort of fun, like a mini-adventure." Laleh gestured to her face. "Your friend, Dr. Karp, slathered some strange tingly gel on my bruises and lips. What do you think?"

Pike studied her now unblemished skin. He brushed his fingers against her cheek. "You look beautiful."

Laleh smiled shyly. "Thanks."

Feeling the interested stares of the staff, Pike dropped his hand and cleared his throat. "Melanya is expecting us."

Laleh's eyebrows arched. "Melanya?"

Pike caught her interested tone as he steered her toward the door. "Commander Pavlovskya," he corrected.

"An old friend?"

"Something like that," he muttered, following her through the door automatic doors.

"Uh-huh." Laleh shot him a mischievous glance.

Before Pike could utter a smart retort, Melanya wandered out of a side office, her black uniform crisply tailored to her willowy form. He noticed she'd cut her saffron red hair since the last time he'd seen her. The sharp edges of the diagonal bob touched her jaw. Beaming, she approached them. She stopped short and stood at attention, lifting her right hand in a salute. Pike returned the gesture and they exchanged the required niceties.

"Commander Pavlovskya, Laleh Sarafpour. Laleh, Commander Pavlovskya."

"Nice to meet you," Laleh said as they shook hands.

"And you," Melanya replied. "Come inside." She gestured with a manicured hand toward her office.

Pike led Laleh into the sparsely decorated room and pulled out her chair. Once she was seated, he sat next to her.

As Melanya settled behind her desk, she shook her head with disbelief. "I was stunned to see your message come across my desk this morning, Grayson. Getting married!"

Pike grinned and shot Laleh a playful glance. "Took us by surprise too."

Melanya leaned forward, obviously curious. "Whirlwind romance?"

"You could say that," Laleh replied.

Melanya offered an amused smile. "Let me just pull up your forms." She tapped the touch-sensitive screen inlaid in her desktop. "Do you remember when Tyson married that Venusian girl? That was a whirlwind romance that took us all by surprise."

"That is was," Pike agreed. "As was yours," he added pointedly.

Melanya shook her head. "It just looked that way. Pilar and I had been dating secretly for months. Seven, actually," she said. "So everything looks good here. Your record," she eyed Pike, "is impeccable. Laleh passed her medical exam with flying colors. Other than a small blip about an arrest for a prank gone awry, Laleh's criminal record is clean."

Pike glanced at Laleh who squirmed uncomfortably. She gave him a tiny shrug. He sent her a look that conveyed he wanted to hear all about her arrest later.

"Hmmm," Melanya murmured. "Now what's this?"

Pike's attention flicked to his friend's face. Brow furrowed, she moved through various screens and quickly tapped the illuminated keyboard. "What's wrong?"

"Seems Laleh has a deportation order awaiting execution." Melanya gave them a questioning look. "Anything I should know?"

Laleh sighed loudly and launched into a bare bones explanation of the problem at hand. Pike judged Melanya's expression as she listened intently to Laleh's story.

"Over my dead body," Melanya declared as Laleh finished her tale.

Relief flooded Pike. "So you understand our urgency?"

"Absolutely," Melanya replied, her fingers flying over the keyboard. "The earliest I can get you in front of a Justice of the Peace is tomorrow morning at eight sharp. I can try to make some calls and trade some favors to get you in later this afternoon but I can't promise anything."

"Tomorrow morning is fine." Pike made mental notes to rearrange his staff meetings. "Will Laleh have any issue receiving her new spouse visa?"

"No," Melanya replied. "She's still legally clear to reside here on Earth. We just have to make sure she isn't picked up and tossed onto a deportation vessel between now and tomorrow morning. Once she's in the custody of Immigration, it will be difficult to spring her before you depart on your next mission."

Pike frowned. "I have to overnight on my new ship, make sure it's in tiptop shape before we head out on Friday morning. I can't bring her with me."

Melanya directed her attention to Laleh. "Have you got some place you can lay low until tomorrow morning?"

Laleh chewed her lower lip. "Most of my friends live in Delta Sector. Do you think it's unsafe to go back there?"

Melanya pulled a face. "I wouldn't risk it. Tell you what." She sat forward, "Why don't you stay with us—Pilar and me—tonight?"

"I wouldn't want to intrude," Laleh said.

Melanya laughed. "Are you kidding me? I love having houseguests because it gives me a chance to show off my cooking skills. Besides, I think you and Pilar will hit it right off. She's a xenolinguist. With your educational background, I'm sure the two of you will have oodles to talk about."

"Well," Laleh wavered, "if you're sure."

"I won't take no for an answer."

"All right." Laleh assented with a smile. She turned to Pike. "What about my things?"

"I'll find someone to head over and box up your belongings." He sensed her unease and grabbed her hand. "I'll make sure they get to you in one piece."

As Laleh squeezed his hand, Pike turned back to Melanya, catching the smirk on her face. "Watch it, Commander."

Melanya twittered cheekily at his teasing reproach. "I didn't say a thing." She tapped her screen again. "If you two will just apply your thumbprints, we'll be all finished here."

Pike rose and pressed his thumb to the screen. Laleh joined him and applied her print. With a few quick chirps, the computer processed and approved their request. "That was quick," Pike said, somewhat surprised at how easily they'd accomplished their mission.

"Cold feet?" Melanya teased as she closed out the program.

Pike sent a sideways glance to Laleh. Any normal man faced with marrying a woman he'd known for less than twenty-four hours would have been an absolute wreck. Just looking at her, a sense of calm pervaded his belly. Somehow he just knew he was doing the right thing.

Pike shook his head and grabbed Laleh's hand. "Not at all."

Chapter Four

Curled in the corner of the plush sofa, Laleh threw her head back and laughed as Pilar regaled her with tales of her first deployment. As she sat there, sipping wine and enjoying her hosts' company, Laleh couldn't believe she'd been so hesitant to accept their offer for a night's stay. She'd never met two more welcoming and friendly people. A scrumptious dinner, good wine, and intelligent conversation—had she really considered passing this up to hide out in a dingy hotel?

"So you had a chance to look over the schematics for Skyport Virgo?" Pilar asked as she topped off Melanya's third glass of Shiraz.

Laleh nodded. "Pike took me over to the information center where they have all these holographic representations of the various ships and skyports for the public to see. Honestly, I was a bit surprised by just how big Virgo is."

"It's the second largest in the fleet," Melanya interjected. "It's the newest too. Pike's assignment to Virgo is a definite reflection of his standing in Spacefleet."

Laleh hummed in agreement. Touring Spacefleet headquarters with Pike had given her a little more insight into the man who was about to become her husband. Not counting the required snaps to attention, the cadets, enlisted, and officers all treated him with that kind of adoring admiration usually reserved for heroes. Their respect for Pike was clearly evident in their tones of address. The cadets, especially, seemed almost weak-kneed when Pike spoke to them. She'd never seen anything like it—and it intrigued her. Laleh only wished she'd had more time to sneak over to the hall of records to do a little snooping.

"Pike's flagship is new too," Melanya said, scooping her finger through the dollop of raspberry cream stuck to her dessert plate. "The *USS Spica* is sleek and shiny. I had a chance to take a tour a few days ago. I think you'll enjoy your time aboard."

"I'm actually a little nervous," Laleh admitted. "I don't really know anything about military service."

"You won't be the only civilian onboard the *Spica*," Pilar assured her. "I know there's a small detachment of ambassadors hitching a ride on the ship. And once you reach Virgo, you'll be surrounded by a good number of civilians involved in all departments of the Skyport. I think you'll find it easy to make friends and even develop a few professional relationships."

"That's good to know." Laleh's worries eased. "I'm hoping to find a position of some kind once we arrive."

"If you'd like, I can put you in touch with an old classmate of mine, stationed at Virgo," Pilar offered. "He's also a linguist, but I'm sure he'd know if there was anyone looking for an anthropologist with your credentials."

"Sure!" Laleh's enthusiasm colored her voice. "I'd really appreciate that."

Pilar smiled. "No problem."

"So what was the topic of your thesis?" Melanya wondered.

"I studied the effect of female sexuality on the cultural and social practices of three different civilizations: Earth, Hezma-12, and Venusianus. I showed the direct correlation between the richness of a civilization's social, cultural, and even political landscape and

the acceptance of women as sexual equals to men. The contrast between extremes—Venusianus and Hezma-12, specifically—were quite striking," Laleh said.

Melanya regarded Laleh with interest. "You should consider going into policy work, Laleh. I think someone with your life experience would be rather useful in Federation legislation."

Laleh shrugged. "At this point, I'm open to anything. Well ... *almost* anything."

Pilar laughed. "I think you'll be surprised at the opportunities you'll come across on Virgo."

"Absolutely," Melanya agreed. She sat back and traced the rim of her wine glass, her expression thoughtful. "Sexuality? That's a fascinating subject."

Pilar rolled her eyes and tucked strands of pink-streaked blonde hair behind her ear. "Oh, here we go."

Amused, Laleh wondered where this was going. "Yes, I suppose it can be."

"Can be?" Melanya looked stunned. "Sex is the only constant in the universe."

"Don't forget gravity," Pilar said.

Melanya shot her wife an annoyed glance. "You know what I mean, Pilar. No matter where we've gone, we've always found other beings getting down and dirty. Granted, they might go about it differently than we do, but they're still getting it done. And getting it done well." Face flushed, she eyed Pilar. "Do you remember that seventy-two hour pass we spent on *Hedonisma*?"

Pilar's eyes widened with the memory. "How could I forget?"

Laleh watched the sexual tension between her hosts play out with some interest. Her curiosity got the better of her. "What's *Hedonisma*?"

As if remembering her presence, Melanya cast a confused glance her way. "Oh. *Hedonisma* is a vessel orbiting Venusianus that caters to the, uh, kinky whims of Spacefleet members on leave."

"I see," Laleh murmured, her imagination already in overdrive.

Eyes gleaming, Pilar suddenly sat forward and smacked Melanya's knee. "We should give them a few days on *Hedonisma* as a wedding gift!"

"Ooh!" Excitement filled Melanya's voice.

Laleh's belly clenched with anxiety. "Them? You mean us?" She made a face. "I'm not so sure..."

"Don't be silly." Pilar waved her hand. "You'll love it. What better way for newlyweds to sample all the delights of the flesh than an anything goes weekend on a pleasure ship?"

"For any other couple that might be true," Laleh said carefully, "but we're not like other couples."

Melanya frowned. "What do you mean?"

Laleh squirmed under their intense gazes. "We haven't ... well ... taken that step yet."

Both women looked shocked. Seemingly scandalized, Pilar broke the silence. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Melanya shook her head in disbelief. "The Pike I know would have had a girl as gorgeous as you on her back in five minutes flat."

Laleh's eyebrows arched at this new piece of information about her soon-to-be husband. "Really?"

Melanya blanched. "Oh, Laleh, I didn't mean to imply that Pike is a womanizer. I just meant that he has a way with women."

"Obviously," Pilar grumbled into her wine glass. "He coaxed you into a nine month friends with benefits arrangement."

"That was six years ago, Pilar." Melanya frowned with annoyance. "And you can't blame me. There's just something about him, that voice, those hands—" She stopped short, her face aflame. "Oh God, Laleh! I'm sorry. You really don't want to hear this."

"It's all right," Laleh said with a reassuring smile. "Really."

Oddly enough, it was. Hearing about Pike's reputation and conquests wasn't as upsetting as it should have been for a fiancée. If anything, it piqued her interest. Uncontrollable nosiness took hold, and she had to know all the juicy details. "So Pike is rather popular among the ladies?"

Melanya grinned and settled back onto the couch. "What would you like to know?"

"Oh, lord." Pilar groaned and shoved out of her chair. "I'm getting another bottle of wine..."

Hours later as Laleh lay on her side in bed, all buzzed and filled with warmth, she couldn't help but wonder if she should have left well enough alone. *Curiosity killed the cat*, she silently reminded herself. While Melanya's tales of Pike's sexual antics were amusing and—quite frankly—arousing, Laleh couldn't shake the unsettling feeling of inadequacy.

Anxiety rippled through her belly. Pike had made it perfectly clear he would, at some point, bed her. The choice of when was hers, of course, but how long would she—could she—wait?

For some time now, Laleh's interest in her own sexuality, in finally taking the plunge into a carnal relationship, had been growing. Perhaps the negative environment of her childhood had impacted the natural evolution of her sexual urges, but Laleh truly hadn't had much interest in hopping in the sack with anyone until recently. There was something frightening about the idea of being so vulnerable to a man.

But over the last few months, it seemed she couldn't keep her thoughts from wandering to the naughty side. As a teenager, Laleh's interest in sex had been more clinical. With her mother, sex was a forbidden topic. It simply wasn't discussed. Laleh had been too young to understand much of what her mother suffered and had been shielded from the uglier details, but she now understood that the things her mother had been forced to do were humiliating and painful. Among Hezman women, the idea of finding pleasure in sex was laughable. Because of certain ritual practices, Hezman women were incapable of even achieving pleasure in private, by themselves.

However, Laleh had escaped her homeland before she'd been subjected to the barbaric cutting customs. She was fully capable of reaching the heights of ecstasy. And she desperately wanted to share the experience with another person.

With Pike.

Her thighs clenched at the image of Pike crawling between her legs, plunging his hard cock right into her wet depths. She could see his muscular arms rippling with exertion, could feel his lips pressed to her neck. Laleh shivered as she fantasized about his tongue *right there*—licking her swollen clit until she shattered against his mouth.

She wondered what he would taste like if she took him into her mouth. Would he spill his cum against her tongue or pull out at the last second? The curious side of her

hoped for the former. She wanted to know the flavor of his seed.

Mind afire with debauched thoughts, Laleh rolled onto her side and hugged a pillow. For a moment, she considered slipping her fingers into her panties for a little relief, but the idea seemed rather wicked considering her hosts were in the next room. Instead, she shut her eyes and hoped her sinful thoughts would filter into her dreams.

* * * *

From his position at the raised dais of the bridge, Pike watched the simulations play out on the screens lining the *Spica's* control deck. The ship's engineers had already tested and retested the ship's systems over the last two weeks. Tonight's practice run was simply a last minute chance to work out all the kinks. With the battle simulations already complete, there was little left for Pike to do. He gave his staff their orders for the night and left the bridge for his quarters. Without a doubt, he'd receive an early morning alarm of some sort. These supposedly unpredictable simulations were actually anything but random.

As Pike neared his private rooms, he unzipped his jacket. The doors reacted to his presence and allowed him inside his sanctuary. Immediately his eyes were drawn to the yellow containers stacked in the far corner of the living area. Other than the items Laleh had listed to be sent to Melanya and Pilar's home, everything she owned now sat in that corner. All of the furniture she'd instructed him to leave, confident in the knowledge her neighbors would pick through and take whatever they needed or could sell.

Pike crossed into the kitchenette and grabbed a glass of water before heading into his office. He set his glass on his desk and peeled out of his jacket, tossing it on the nearby chair. Kicking off his boots, he activated his captain's log with a series of voice commands and took a seat behind his desk. He sipped his water and made the necessary notations in his log before scanning the latest updates in his inbox.

His evening routine complete, Pike gathered up his jacket and boots and left for his bedroom. The lights flicked on to his preferred dim setting as he entered the room. He dropped his boots at the end of his bed and headed into the bathroom. He quickly stripped and placed his clothing in the laundry chute.

Knowing a hot shower was just what he needed to wind down, Pike adjusted the water temperature a few degrees higher than he normally liked. The steamy heat of the shower amplified the scent of honey and almonds still clinging to his skin. Immediately his thoughts flew to Laleh. He wondered if she'd had a nice evening with Melanya and Pilar. Was she nervous about tomorrow? Having second thoughts perhaps?

Pike leaned forward under the pounding spray and ran his fingers through his wet hair. Although he was firmly settled in his decision to marry Laleh, he now had some worries about the feasibility of marrying a woman he hardly knew. At first glance, they suited each other well enough, but who knew about her quirks? Or his for that matter.

Would she make the adjustment to skyport life well? She'd lived a largely stable life on Earth. The switch to space life caused problems for some people. He doubted Laleh would be one of them but there was always the possibility.

Could she handle the highly publicized life of an admiral's wife? Would she thrive under the responsibilities and duties she'd inherit? Once they reached Virgo, Laleh would be subjected to a great deal of interest. She'd not only be expected to play hostess to various dignitaries but would be looked to as a sort of den mother by many of the cadets.

Other Spacefleet spouses would look to Laleh for guidance and support as well. There was so much more expected of her that Pike was certain he was forgetting.

And what about his needs? Pike played the part of the stoic officer well, but deep down inside, he craved something more. For so long, Pike had lived a solitary life. Yes, he was surrounded by people day in and day out, but as a high-ranking officer, his friendships tended toward the professional rather than the personal. Those he considered his closest friends had all been promoted and shifted to command ships of their own. Even now, Pike was faced with befriending an entirely new crew. Some of the officers and enlisted assigned to the *Spica* he'd worked with before but most were new faces.

Pike yearned for a partner to share his burdens, someone he could trust with his darkest secrets and doubts. He needed someone who wouldn't judge him or think less of him for admitting his faults or his worries. Pike wanted a friend to support him when he had to make unpopular decisions. Could Laleh be that person for him? He hoped so.

A rich lather foamed between his hands, the familiar scent of his soap reaching his nose. As he spread the suds across his body, Pike's thoughts drifted back to Laleh—Laleh naked and spread out underneath him. His cock immediately stood at attention. Since that first glimpse of her, Pike had fought these primal urges. He found her so wildly intoxicating, he wondered how in the hell he was going to keep his hands off of her.

Pike respected her hesitance and meant everything he'd said about waiting for her to make the first move. The thought of Laleh giving herself to him out of some sense of misplaced gratitude made his stomach twist. No, he wanted her to come to him out of desire, not obligation. He just hoped she wouldn't hold out for weeks on end.

His hands slid down his stomach and wrapped around his cock and balls, slathering the skin with foam. What started out as simple cleaning soon morphed into something far more pleasurable. Eyes closed, Pike imagined Laleh kneeling before him, those pouting, slick lips suckling the head of his cock. She looked up him, blue eyes intense with desire. He caressed her face as she bobbed up and down on his rigid length, her saliva shining on the flushed skin.

He stroked his shaft and fondled his sac, all the while replacing his hands with her mouth and fingers in his mind. Pike pumped his hips just a bit, bumping the back of her throat with his cock. Incredibly, she hummed as she accepted his penis into the warm alcove of her throat. The vibrations drove him wild. Muscles flexing, Pike inhaled sharply as the rush of orgasm hit him. His cum shot out of the end of his cock in ropy bursts, the cream splashing his hand as it worked the sensitive head.

Panting and incredibly relaxed, Pike leaned his face against the shower wall. If Laleh played the blushing virgin for too long, he'd be sporting a bodybuilder's forearm in record time.

Pike finished his shower and set out another uniform before sliding between the sheets. As he rearranged his pillows, he couldn't help but laugh at himself. Any other man would have been out carousing with friends and enjoying his last night as a bachelor. But not Pike. As always, it was duty first, self second.

If he ever had to choose between Laleh and his duty, he just hoped she'd understand.

Chapter Five

Laleh trembled, her nerves on edge as she waited for Pike outside the entrance to the office of the Justice of the Peace. Melanya and Pilar were already inside; Melanya to ensure all the necessary approvals and forms were in order, Pilar for moral support. Thankfully everything was just fine. All they needed was a groom.

In her hand, Laleh clutched a simple wedding band. For a girl with a rather cheap price range, she'd made out incredibly well. Such were the perks of being neighbors and friends with a pawn shop owner. Looking at the platinum ring, Laleh didn't doubt for a second that Noozeen had taken a hit on his own bottom line to put the ring in her hand. He'd been only too glad to help her and seemed genuinely happy that she'd found a way to solve her immigration and brother problem. On parting, she'd wished him well and offered her help if ever it was needed.

She caught her reflection in a floor-to-ceiling window and took a moment to check her appearance. Rather than worry about changing later for graduation, Laleh had chosen to slip into her new dress. Delicate black and white flowers printed on a soft silvery white background complemented her honey skin tone, the scoop neck of the sleeveless dress showing off just a hint of her bosom. The cut of the skirt showed off her trim waist and curves nicely. Black strappy heels tilted her body forward, displaying her toned calves and improving her posture.

As Laleh fingered a loose brown wave, she noticed Pike rounding the corner. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of his determined stride. Not surprisingly, Pike wore his uniform, this one the dress uniform she'd only glimpsed on Spacefleet recruiting brochures and digital posters. The pleats of the gunmetal grey fabric were crisp, the medals decorating his chest highly polished. The snap of his boots echoed in the narrow hall.

Stomach aflutter, Laleh turned to face him. She smiled warmly. "Hi."

"Good morning." Pike stopped in front of her. His gaze moved over her outfit. "You look very nice."

"Thank you. You too," she added rather lamely. "How was your night?"

Pike shrugged. "Not bad at all. Yours?"

"Wonderful."

"Glad to hear it."

Laleh teethed her lower lip nervously at the succinct small talk. It seemed odd to feel so suddenly awkward in front of Pike. Nothing had really changed between them.

Pike tilted her chin and captured her gaze. "Are you ready?"

Nodding, she smiled. "Absolutely."

Laleh slipped her arm through the crook of his elbow and allowed him to escort her into the office. Melanya and Pilar's grinning faces welcomed them. The Justice of the Peace, a lanky elderly gentleman garbed in the red uniform of the Federation's judicial arm, greeted them with firm handshakes.

"So you're Admiral Grayson," Judge Hawkins said as he sized up Pike. "Heard good things about you from my girl, Clarie. She served on the *Icarus* during the Faltador Campaign. Believe you were just a captain then."

Laleh noticed a fleeting micro-expression twist Pike's face for the shortest of a second. Whatever had happened during that campaign still troubled him greatly.

"I remember Specialist First Class Hawkins," Pike said. "One of the best weapon's specialists I've ever had the pleasure to serve with," he added.

Like any proud papa, Judge Hawkins swelled a bit. "She's aboard the *Foucault* now as a Chief Petty Officer."

"Good ship," Pike replied. "Important to the fleet." He paused as if uncertain whether to continue. "And her eyes?"

Rather grim, Judge Hawkins shook his head. "Couldn't be saved, but the implants are just as well. It took me a while to get used to the orange irises though."

Laleh had seen artificial eyes before and was always struck by the vivid tangerine color of the irises. She hadn't the foggiest idea why the lab-grown organs looked so frighteningly orange though. Laleh wondered how the judge's daughter had lost her eyes. Maybe later she'd press Pike for details. Chief Petty Officer Hawkins might be just the segue Laleh needed to learn a little more about Pike.

"Well," Judge Hawkins clapped his hands together, "are we ready to proceed?"

"Yes." Laleh's voice echoed with Pike's.

Judge Hawkins gestured to the window overlooking a manicured park. He picked up his tablet and tapped the screen.

"Just a few quick questions to ask," he explained before launching into a series of queries regarding their marital, criminal, and familial status. Their answers satisfactory, Judge Hawkins crossed his arms, tucking his small PC under his arm, and cleared his throat. Smiling, he began a spiel he'd repeated who knew how many times.

"Friends," he eyed Milanya and Pilar, "we've come here today to witness the marriage of Laleh and Pike..."

Laleh felt rough fingers closing over hers. A buzzing sensation zipped up her arm and straight into her belly. Cheeks flaming, she listened intently to the judge's words. He belonged to the traditionalist camp when it came to their marriage vows, reciting phrases Laleh had only read in her historical romance novels. All the talk of love felt a little odd considering they'd known each other less than forty-eight hours. Still, Laleh took her vows seriously as she pledged herself to Pike. The intensity in his gaze and the steadiness of Pike's voice conveyed his sincerity.

"Rings?" Judge Hawkins asked.

Laleh uncurled the fingers of her left hand and lifted her palm. His ring on display, she turned to see what Pike had chosen. The stricken look on his face sent a ripple of anxiety through her. Embarrassment darkened his cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Laleh," Pike said contritely. "I forgot to pick one up yesterday."

Excitement deflated within her but she fought not to allow it to show on her face. She squeezed his hand. "That's okay, Pike. This was something of a rush, and I know how busy you were yesterday."

"That's no excuse."

She could tell he was mentally berating himself. Desperate to reassure him, Laleh released his hand and touched his cheek. "Pike, it's fine."

Melanya stepped forward and pried her wedding band from her finger. She nudged Pike and dropped the gold band onto his palm. With a quick wink, she stepped back. Pike mouthed a grateful thank you and then turned his attention to Judge Hawkins, an amused

smile playing on the elderly judge's face. Their little hiccup dealt with, Pike and Laleh exchanged rings.

Judge Hawkins beamed. "By the power vested in me by the supreme authority of the Federation of Coalition Planets, I pronounce you husband and wife." He stared expectantly at Pike before rolling his eyes. "Well go on! Give her a kiss!"

With the twittering giggles of Melanya and Pilar in the background, Pike stepped forward, his expression serious. Laleh licked her lips in anticipation and moved to meet his descending mouth. That first contact of their lips sent shockwaves through her. His fingertips brushed her cheeks as he held her face in his big, strong hands and claimed her lips in a kiss that curled her toes. When Pike broke contact, he pulled back just enough to look into her eyes. The corners of his lips quirked with a boyish grin. Her tummy flip-flopped at the realization she now belonged to this man.

Melanya and Pilar rushed forward and embraced them in congratulatory hugs. Even the judge seemed infected with their enthusiasm as he gave Laleh's shoulders a fatherly squeeze and clapped Pike on the back. Judge Hawkins wished them well before ushering them into a side office to make room for his next appointment.

They spent the next twenty minutes or so filling out the required digital forms and pressing their thumbprints to all of the necessary spots. Pike slipped his hand into the metal box to have his implanted chip updated first. Laleh followed and experienced her first real sensation of relief in months at the knowledge she was yet again a legal resident of Earth. Seeing the passport stamp on the screen of her transmitter filled her with such a sense of calm she had to blink back tears.

Safe. I'm finally safe.

As if sensing her overwhelmed state, Pike placed a steadying hand against the small of her back and led her out of the offices. She gravitated closer to him, her side bumping against his as they discussed dinner plans with their friends. There was something so comforting about his presence.

"I know the chef at Hikaru's," Pilar said, her fingers moving over the screen of her transmitter. "He'll make sure we get a great table."

As Pilar and Pike hashed out the details, Laleh slipped Melanya's ring off of her finger and returned it. "Thank you."

Melanya shrugged and slid the ring back onto her finger. She leaned over and whispered conspiratorially. "He always forgets the tiny details."

"Some best man you were," Pike interjected jokingly. "You're supposed to save me from myself."

"I'm no miracle worker, Pike." Melanya's watch chirped. She frowned. "However, I am late for a meeting." She glanced at Pilar. "All the plans for tonight worked out?"

Pilar nodded. "Eight at Hikaru's."

"Good deal." She grinned at Pike and Laleh. "We'll see you two later then."

The women headed off in one direction while Pike guided Laleh in another. His arm curled around her waist as he led her down a flight of stairs and out into the beautifully landscaped courtyard. Morning dew still glistened on the brightly colored blossoms and green leaves. People enjoying their morning cups of coffee sat on the benches, their transmitters held at eye level as they watched the morning news or read through their newest messages.

Pike steered her toward an empty bench. She sat and crossed her knees, carefully

arranging the fabric of her skirt. Pike perched next to her and toyed with his wedding band.

"If you don't like the ring, you're more than welcome to exchange it for something else," Laleh offered.

"What?" He seemed surprised, then realized he was touching the ring. "Oh. No! I like it. It's simple. Very me," he added thoughtfully. Discomfort tugged at his features. He looked terribly uncomfortable. "I really am sorry, Laleh, about forgetting the ring. I don't know how it slipped my mind."

"Pike," she interrupted with a light laugh. "You're preparing to launch a new ship halfway across the universe for a new post as a skyport commander. It's completely understandable. I'm not upset. Really."

He studied her face as if judging her sincerity. "I'll make it up to you. I promise." Warmth blossomed in her chest. "I'm sure you will."

"I know it's rather boorish of me, but I have to get back to fleet headquarters. I have a million things to do before we ship out tomorrow morning. You're more than welcome to come with me and hang out in my temporary office."

Laleh wrinkled her nose. "I think I'll just head over to campus as I'd planned. I wanted to talk to some of my profs and catch up with some friends before the ceremony this afternoon."

"I'm hoping to make it to the ceremony grounds in time to see you cross the stage, but I can't promise anything," Pike said apologetically.

She shrugged. "If you're really interested, I'm sure you'll be able to find footage online."

Pike smiled. "We'll see."

"We should probably make plans to meet somewhere since the crowds are sure to be thick. How about the maglev stop by the west entrance of the university?"

"Works for me."

"Great."

"Laleh." Pike touched her shoulder, his voice suddenly serious. "Promise me you'll be very careful today. We've solved your immigration problems, but there's nothing stopping Jai from trying to hurt you again."

Touched by his concern, Laleh nodded. "I'll be safe. I promise."

"I'm holding you to that." He glanced at his watch. "I need to go. I'm expected at the Admiralty soon."

"Go," Laleh said, shooing him off. "I'm a big girl. I can watch out for myself."

Grinning, Pike rose and cupped her chin. "Enjoy yourself today. You won't see Earth for quite a while."

"I will."

Pike's hand lingered on her skin, his thumb caressing the soft spot just below her lip. "Be safe."

Laleh nodded and watched him walk away. As he reached the stairs, Pike pivoted to face her again. A roguish smile curved his lips. "Welcome to Spacefleet, Mrs. Grayson."

Chuckling, Laleh shook her head. *Welcome to Spacefleet, indeed.*

* * * *

Pike scanned the surrounding crowds for Laleh's face. As the arena emptied, a rush

of recent graduates and family spilled onto the walkways and paved commons. He wondered about the practicality of their arranged meeting spot. The odds of them missing one another were rather high so he kept his eyes peeled for the distinct fabric of her dress.

Just the thought of losing her in the crowd made him antsy. All day, he'd worried about her traipsing about Houston without any sort of protection. Logically, Pike knew Laleh was fully capable of looking after herself yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he should be with her, protecting her. He'd already started thinking of her as *his*. If there was one thing Pike did exceptionally well, it was taking care of the things that belonged to him. He'd be damned if anyone harmed a single hair on Laleh's head.

Similarly, Pike had been struck by the oddest sensation of pride watching Laleh cross the stage to accept her doctorate. She'd practically glowed as she strode toward the dean. Judging by the shouts from the crowd of graduate students in her section, Pike had surmised she was quite popular. Laleh had flashed a sign of some kind to her friends and the section had erupted with raucous laughter. He couldn't help but wonder about the inside joke.

A flash of silver speckled with black caught his eye. Pike zeroed in and spotted Laleh moving the crowd, surrounded by people he assumed to be her friends. At the sight of her laughing, smiling face, guilt clawed his belly. In just a few short hours, he would be taking her away from everything she knew, from her friends, her support system. Even the knowledge she'd made the decision to marry and join him on Virgo of her own free will did little to lessen that gnawing sensation she might someday regret her choice or feel trapped.

Pushing aside those thoughts, Pike stepped into the light and into Laleh's path. Her face brightened at the sight of him. It had been a long time since any woman had looked at him like that. A quiver of anticipation pierced his belly as Laleh broke away from her friends and hurried over to meet him.

Knowing her friends would expect some kind public display of affection between newlyweds, Pike swept Laleh into his arms. Her blue eyes widened with surprise. Amused, he planted a lingering kiss on her soft lips. She stiffened and then relaxed into his embrace, her hands settling on his arms. The realization he could push the boundaries of their relationship made his groin tighten. Only the bustling crowd kept him from cupping her face and sliding his tongue between her lips.

Pulling back, Pike swept an escaped lock of hair from her face. "Congratulations, Laleh."

A pleased grin curved her face. Before she could speak, her friends descended upon them. In a whirlwind of introductions, Pike met the group of eleven compatriots. They were a motley bunch, a few of them obviously well-to-do by the looks of their clothing, the others barely scraping by on the fringe by the looks of their second hand suits and dresses. Physicists, mathematicians, biochemists, and writers—they covered the spectrum of academia.

Two of them decked out in the navy blue uniforms of ensigns drew his attention. He learned they were Spacefleet ROTC members preparing to ship out on their first deployments after completing their engineering degrees. Secretly, Pike was glad to hear the pair had been assigned to ships far outside any hostile zones. Green officers always made him nervous, even more so when the crews they commanded were likely to encounter hostilities.

He stood back as Laleh bid her friends goodbye, her eyes glimmering with moisture. It was obvious she shared a bond with this scraggly band of academics. He understood the camaraderie that developed. He was glad to hear two of them, Ginger and Hassan, had accepted jobs at Leo, a skyport in the vicinity of Virgo. Pike tucked away the information, already planning a getaway for Laleh in the near future.

As her friends climbed onto the maglev, Pike held out his hand and wiggled his fingers. Sniffing, Laleh grasped his hand. He gave it a reassuring squeeze. "You'll see them again. I'm sure of it."

"I know." She wiped her eyes with her free hand. "It's just—I don't know—I feel a little overwhelmed today. And I miss my mother."

Pike stopped dead in his tracks. His chest constricted at the sadness displayed on her face. Gripped by the need to comfort her, Pike drew her close. "I'm sorry your mother wasn't here to see you graduate. I'm sure it would have meant a lot to her."

"She was so intent upon me earning a doctorate. Didn't care what doctorate, just a doctorate," she added with a wry smile. "Education was so important to her, especially since she could barely read."

Pike wasn't surprised. Educating women didn't seem to be a priority on Hezma-12. "Perfectly understandable that she'd want you to earn an advanced degree then," he said, loosening his hold on her.

"Absolutely," Laleh agreed.

Sensing she felt better, Pike steered her through the crowd toward the transport cars heading downtown. A streetcar slid to a stop up ahead. Pike slid his arm around Laleh's shoulders and hustled her toward the open doorway. His hands clamped around her waist as he quickly lifted her from the sidewalk to the top step. He hopped on behind her.

Eyebrows lifted, Laleh sent a bemused smile over her shoulder. "My legs work, you know."

Pike chuckled as they moved through the filling car, bumping against her backside as the other riders knocked into him. Laleh found an empty spot in the middle of the car. Pike sidled up next to her. "I'm sure they do. I just thought we'd skip the crush."

"I'll let it slide this time," she playfully returned. "Just don't get used to manhandling me."

The streetcar hit a rough patch of track, throwing Laleh against his chest. He grabbed hold of the overhead bar with one hand and protectively curled his other arm around her waist, steadying her as she slid across the slick floor. Her nose touched his cheek, her lips pressing to his jaw. The gentle outline of her breasts pushed against his chest. He swallowed hard as desire rolled through him hot and fast.

Laleh grinned impishly. "Or maybe not."

Pike fought the urge to claim her lips. "Looks like the universe is intent upon me manhandling you every chance I get."

"Figures," she grumbled good-naturedly. Then, as if realizing she still clung to him, Laleh put a little space between them. Her gaze skipped from his face to his shoulders. "So what's the plan after dinner?"

He picked up on her feigned nonchalance. It was obvious the thought of being alone with him tonight unsettled her. "A good night's sleep."

Pike couldn't tell if the expression flitting across her face was one of relief or disappointment. Wanting to feel her out, he sprung his surprise earlier than he'd planned.

"We were going to the *Spica* after dinner, but I decided you might like to spend your last night on Earth some place nice."

Surprise filtered across her features. "Oh?"

Pike nodded, already feeling as if he'd made some headway in making amends for his embarrassing ring failure earlier. "I booked a suite at the Greenwood."

Laleh's jaw dropped. "The Greenwood? Pike!" She shook her head. "That's too expensive. I mean, it's a gorgeous place. I've always wanted to stay there, but it's outrageously overpriced."

Lowering his voice, Pike took a step closer to his new wife. "You only have one wedding night, Laleh." Pink heat colored Laleh's cheeks. Pike couldn't squash a mischievous grin. "I thought we'd spend ours in style..."

Chapter Six

Laleh had to hand it to Pike. He'd said he wanted them to spend their wedding night in style and they most definitely were. The Greenwood Hotel stood as the architectural crown jewel of post-Federation Houston and attracted the *crème de la crème* of the universe's VIPs. But unlike the usual sleek ultramodern buildings that had sprung up during its construction period, the Greenwood harkened back to the sumptuous luxury of the Gilded Age. Crystal chandeliers, gorgeous marble floors, breathtaking art—Laleh's first glimpse of the lobby had been just the beginning of an awesome journey through the opulent hotel.

Now standing in the colossal bathroom of their suite, Laleh splashed her face to remove the last suds of cleanser. She couldn't help but smile at the novelty of turning handles to control the water flow. Her eyes moved to the claw foot tub in the left corner. She hadn't seen a bathtub since leaving Hezma-12. After all these years of showering, Laleh had enjoyed the steaming soak. If she ever had the chance to design her own bathroom, she'd want something just like this. Well maybe not the gold-veined pink granite on the floors and countertops.

She patted her face dry with the super soft towel before applying a little moisturizer to her skin. Her evening routine complete, Laleh returned her dental tablets, facial cleanser, and moisturizer to the small toiletries case. She slipped it inside her battered overnight case, glad Melanya and Pilar had brought it with them to the restaurant so she didn't have to traipse halfway across Houston to retrieve it.

Laleh smoothed a hand down her stomach, her palm sliding over the thin cotton of her thigh skimming nightgown. She'd heard Pike moving around outside in the bedroom. Her mouth went dry at the thought of Pike making a move on her. She doubted he would since he'd promised patience, but there was always the chance he might. What would she do? Give in to the hunger piercing her belly? Or hold him at bay a little longer until she knew him better, until they knew one another better?

The dynamic between them was definitely shifting. She'd never been particularly flirtatious, but Laleh seemed unable to stem the coy smiles and light touches. Pike, too, appeared unable to keep his hands off of her. Whether grasping her hand or touching her back while they walked or patting her knee beneath the table at dinner, Pike seemed to crave contact with her. Laleh didn't mind it at all. She actually enjoyed it quite a bit.

But it left her wondering what, exactly, was happening between them. Was this attraction real or simply an effect of a rushed marriage? Would she figure it out before it was too late, before she'd given him everything only to learn she was a passing infatuation? After all, he'd made no promises to her. Pike had offered only to marry her for naturalization papers. He'd said nothing about his plans after the fourteen month deadline lapsed.

Laleh decided a cautious approach was smartest. Her mind settled, she exited the bathroom, the overhead lighting switching off as she moved through the door. She spotted Pike on the damask couch across the room, boots kicked off and jacket tossed aside as he relaxed and read something on his transmitter. Ankles crossed, he stretched from one end of the couch to the other. Pike looked up and then quickly looked down. He

sat up and set aside his transmitter.

Suddenly self-conscious, Laleh touched her nightgown. The thought of darting back inside the bathroom to change into her usual pajamas flittered through her mind but she cast it aside. From now on they'd be sharing close quarters. She had every right to sleep comfortably. Besides he was likely to get an eyeful sooner or later.

"Enjoy your bath?" Pike kept his gaze firmly fixed on her face.

Laleh nodded and crossed to the sitting area. She sat on the opposite end of the settee, curling her knees to the side. "Not having to worry about running out of hot water was nice."

"I bet. I think I'll stick to the shower though."

Laleh examined the ends of her hair. "I'm not surprised."

"Oh?" Pike seemed curious as to her reasoning.

She shrugged and dropped her hair. "You're a very efficient person. You just don't strike me as the type to lounge in a bathtub when you could just as easily scrub down in a shower in less than five minutes."

"True," Pike conceded, "but sometimes scrubbing down isn't the only goal."

Laleh's stomach quivered. She raised her eyes to meet his and expectantly arched her eyebrows. "I'm listening."

"Well," Pike murmured, bending down to take off his socks, "maybe the goal is relaxation after a long hard day." He stuffed his socks into his boots. "Or maybe the goal is seduction. Some bubbles, a sponge, even a little champagne. There's no better place for giving a woman a sensual massage than a hot steamy bath."

Laleh could almost feel his wet hands moving over her slick skin. Just the thought of his hands cupping her breasts through a sea of bubbles made her pulse with need.

She felt his gaze on her and swallowed hard. Not wanting him to know just how easily his words affected her, she shrugged casually and rose from the couch. "I wouldn't know."

As she slipped past him, Pike trailed his fingers along her arm. "Suppose I'll have to acquaint you with the finer points of water massage some time."

Laleh shivered, her sex throbbing at the very thought. She shot him her best coquettish smile. "I suppose you will."

Pike laughed as he stood. Shaking his head, he gathered up his boots and jacket and headed for the bathroom. "Why do I get the feeling I was just issued a dare?"

Smiling and feeling oddly unsettled by their saucy repartee, Laleh pulled down the fluffy white comforter and sheet and climbed inside. With a wave of her hand, she turned off the bedside lamp and turned on her side, toward the center of the bed. She snuggled down under the covers and waited for Pike. Still her body vibrated with excitement. With a wicked smile and a few teasing words, Pike had reduced her to this, to clenching her thighs together in hopes of assuaging the ache between them. She reached for the place he would soon lay, her palm sliding over the silky soft sheet.

Pike returned to the bedroom. Laleh snatched her hand back and pulled her arm in close, suddenly afraid of being so near to him. Pike appeared at the foot of the bed and sauntered around to his side. Laleh's gaze trained on his chiseled abs. She yearned to run her fingers over the muscled ridges, to feel the crisp hairs against her skin.

Sure he'd catch her staring, Laleh looked away as he switched off his lamp and moved onto the bed. She held her breath, wondering if he would move closer. He rolled

onto his back and slid his hands behind his head. Laleh breathed slowly and deeply, waiting for him to say something, anything.

"If you want breakfast before boarding the ship, we'll have to wake an hour earlier."

Laleh frowned at his odd choice of conversation opener. "Do you have a preference?"

"I never eat breakfast the morning of a new deployment. Nerves," he added, as if able to see the curiosity on her face.

"Ah. Well I suppose I can find something to eat on the ship."

Pike yawned loudly. "Mess hall serves food twenty-four hours a day, and you'll have access to room service of sorts. They'll bring food to our quarters upon request."

"Nifty," Laleh said, one of her concerns about living aboard the starship allayed. "I'm not generally an early riser, so I was afraid I'd miss out on breakfast most days."

"I'm sure most of the civilians aboard will be on your schedule." He snapped his fingers. "Which reminds me—you'll have to board the ship separately from me. You'll go through a quick orientation with the public affairs officer and a series of emergency drills."

"Gee, sounds like loads of fun," Laleh sarcastically replied.

Pike chuckled. "It's not that bad. But we'll definitely have to feed you before we leave. I'd hate for you to be bored *and* hungry."

"Aw, you're so thoughtful," Laleh teased.

Pike snorted and lowered his arms. "Good night, Laleh."

"Good night, Pike."

The small space between their bodies sizzled with energy. His breathing didn't slow as she'd expect of one so tired but quickened slightly. She wondered if he fought the same urges she did. Fingers almost twitching with the desperate need to touch him, Laleh closed her eyes and turned away from him. She hoped he wouldn't interpret her act for coldness toward him.

Pike's heavy sigh told her otherwise.

A pang of discomfort tightened her chest. She considered rolling over and explaining herself but found the right words wouldn't materialize. How could she explain what she was feeling when she barely understood it herself?

Resigned to a morning of awkwardness, Laleh shut her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

*

Pike woke to whimpering and a painful whack to his shin. It took a second for him to reconcile his whereabouts. Blinking, he let his sight adjust to the darkness but could barely make out Laleh's shadowy form next to him in the bed. She still faced away from him and appeared to be experiencing one hellacious nightmare. She thrashed violently, hands slapping and legs kicking. He heard Jai's name escape her lips just before she begged for him to stop.

Desperate to help her, Pike curled his arm around her waist and dragged her into a protective embrace. He placed his lips just behind her hear and whispered calmly, "Laleh. Wake up."

She jerked and gasped. He slid his other arm under her shoulder and wrapped it around her upper body. He pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. "It's just me. You're all right. It was just a dream."

Laleh sagged against him. "I'm sorry," she croaked, voice thick from sleep.

"Shh. Don't be." He kissed her shoulder and ran a soothing hand down her arm. "With all the stress of the last few days, it's natural."

Laleh relaxed in his arms and shifted back against him, as if seeking more of his warmth. His hand settled on her hip, his fingers splayed over the exposed skin. In her wild movements, she'd worked her nightgown up around her ribcage. Only a pair of low cut panties covered her lower half. He considered tugging the nightgown down into place, but the temptation to slide his hand along the curve of her waist was too much. He caressed her belly with feather-soft brushes of his fingertips.

Shivering, Laleh shoved back against him as if to encourage his touch. His cock stirred at the sensation of her bottom pressed against it. A nagging voice told him to stop before things spiraled out of control, but the primal side of his nature urged him onward. His hand traveled farther north, circling her navel before sliding up the center of her chest. His fingers moved under the thin fabric to cup her breast. Already her nipple stood erect. He rubbed his thumb over the peak, delighting in Laleh's sharp inhale at his teasing touch.

She reached back and grasped his hip. Pike teathed her shoulder and circled his tongue over her skin. Laleh's hand slid down between their bodies and clutched his cock through the cotton fabric. At her boldness, Pike hissed with surprise. Her searching hand fondled him, moving over his boxer briefs to trace his hard length. White hot desire pierced his belly.

Pike pressed on Laleh's shoulder, urging her onto her back, and captured her lips. A mewling sigh escaped her throat. Her fingers threaded through his hair as he peppered short kisses along her jaw. Pike's hand moved down over her belly but stopped at the waistband of her panties. He debated whether to continue or pull back.

"Please," Laleh begged, hips bucking toward his hand. "Touch me, Pike."

With a low growl, Pike claimed her lips again and dipped his hand into her underwear. Short crisp hairs tickled his fingers as he petted her sex. He stroked his fingertips up and down, eliciting whimpers of excitement from Laleh's lips. As if desperate for his touch, she opened her thighs wider. Wanting complete access, Pike pulled on her panties. Laleh lifted her hips as her undergarments were jerked down over her thighs to her knees. She kicked her right leg until it was freed from the elastic prison.

Lips on her neck, Pike placed his hand on her mound and parted her pussy with his fingertips. Her skin was so hot. He slid a searching finger between the folds and discovered her slick cream already leaking from her core. He rubbed his fingers around the entrance of her sex, not yet penetrating as he gathered her juices. The thought of tasting her sweet cunt drove him wild.

But that could wait.

"Baby, you're soaking wet." His rasped words made Laleh groan. Fingers slippery, Pike turned his attention to the little bud at the apex of her sex. She gasped as he circled her clit. Pike made love to her mouth, nipping at her bottom lip and sucking on the tip of her tongue. He worked the stiff nub. Laleh's breaths came in staccato pants against his cheek and mouth. She clutched at his forearm, nails biting into his skin, and rocked her hips. He could tell it wouldn't be long before she exploded.

Wanting to draw out the experience, he abandoned her clit for the moment. His fingers moved between her wet pussy lips. She inhaled a sharp breath when he slid his middle finger into her cunt. Knowing she'd never been with a man, Pike was extremely

gentle with his thrusts. There was no reason to rush or make her uncomfortable. He brushed his thumb over her clit and Laleh moaned loudly. His cock jumped at the primitive sound.

Laleh's hand moved between their bodies. He made no protest when her hand slipped inside his boxer briefs. She clasped his cock in her soft palm and tentatively stroked him. The sensation of her fingers clutching his dick sent shockwaves of pleasure through his body. By her clumsy movements, he could tell she'd never given a hand job. He pumped his hips, encouraging her to continue. Despite the lack of finesse, Laleh's touch already had his balls drawing up in anticipation.

Pike wanted Laleh to come with him, to feel her shatter against his hand. He flicked her clit faster and used a bit more force behind his finger thrusts. Her fingers tightened around his cock, her strokes quicker. Seeking more stimulation, Pike pushed his cock against her palm. Laleh's breaths hitched.

"Come with me, Laleh," Pike urged, his lips against her ear. She shuddered and bucked against his fingers. "That's it," he cooed.

Laleh's strokes stumbled. Her body tensed, knees drawing up, thighs closing a little. As if hyperventilating, she sucked in sharp, short breaths. Pike's groin tightened at the sounds of his wife coming undone. And then she came. Shoulders lifting off the bed, Laleh jerked and panted. "Pike!"

Laleh crying out his name as she peaked was all it took for him to break. Groaning, Pike shoved against her hand as he continued rubbing her clit. He buried his face in her neck as his body convulsed, his semen spilling onto her skin and his. Only when she pulled away from his fingers, did he stop. Ever so carefully, Pike withdrew from her body and cupped her mound. Her hand stayed on his cock, petting him as he deflated. For some time, they lay together, breathing hard in the darkness.

Eventually, Pike shifted away from her and took her hand from his boxers. He shirked the cotton garment and used it to clean first her hand and then himself. Balling them up, he tossed them on the floor. The necessities dealt with, Pike gathered Laleh in his arms and tucked her against his chest. Hand on her cheek, he kissed her deeply, lovingly. Clinging together, they fell back asleep.

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The whirring noise of a shower pulled Laleh from a sound sleep. Stretching her arms overhead, she yawned and blinked. As she lowered her arms, Laleh's hand drifted over a still warm patch of sheet. She rolled onto her side and touched the space where Pike had recently been. Memories of last night flashed before her eyes. Her belly flip-flopped as she remembered Pike's hot whispers against her ear, his fingers playing with her pussy.

What felt so natural at the time seemed so impetuous now. When he'd taken her in his arms and caressed her so gently, Laleh had simply melted. Feeling his cock pressing into the cleft of her backside had been the last straw. No matter how hard she might have tried, it would have been impossible to marshal enough restraint to keep her hands to herself. She'd surrendered to desire—and it had been beautiful.

The shower stopped. Laleh gulped nervously, wondering how this morning would play out after their late night tryst. Sitting up, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and faced the bathroom door. As she listened to the various noises Pike made getting dressed, Laleh used her fingers to brush out her hair, tucking the locks behind her ears.

A slick wetness clung to the very tops of her inner thighs. She embarked on a hunt

for her missing panties, finally locating them down at the bottom of the bed, sandwiched between the sheets. Slipping back into them now seemed a little ridiculous so she folded them neatly and set them aside.

Pike emerged from the bathroom in a clean, pressed uniform. A look of surprise crossed his face. "You're awake." Before she could speak, he frowned and apologized. "I didn't mean to wake you. I tried to be as quiet as possible."

She shrugged. "It's fine. How much time do we have before we have to leave?"

"A couple of hours," Pike answered, sitting beside her on the bed. His scent enveloped her, the woodsy leather smell making her nearly high. "Plenty of time for you to shower and have breakfast." He brushed aside her bangs. "How did you sleep?"

Laleh's entire body tingled. "Very well. You?"

"Better than I have in quite a long time." A flash of uncertainty tugged at his face. He seemed hesitant as he spoke. "Laleh, about last night..."

Her gut clenched as she thought the worst. "Yes?"

"I was thinking about it in the shower, and I can't help but worry that maybe I pressured you. Maybe I should have been more restrained." Pike shook his head, obviously disappointed with himself. "I don't want you to feel as if you have to continue the physical side of our relationship just because of what happened between us last night."

Laleh touched his cheek, the skin smooth from his morning shave. She searched for the right thing to say. "Pike, I wanted it. I wanted you. I still want you now."

At her bold declaration, his Adam's apple bobbed. He grinned broadly. "Well. All right then."

Laleh smiled and pecked his cheek. "I'm going to grab a shower."

Pike nodded. "I'll get our things together."

As Laleh stood and moved away, Pike snatched her wrist and tugged her down. His hand cradled the back of her neck, his fingers tangled in her hair. She realized he meant to kiss her and protested. "I have morning breath!"

He chuckled softly. "I really don't care."

Laleh relaxed into his searching kiss. His arms slid around her waist and pulled her closer. She gave into his tugging and settled her knee on the mattress next to his thigh. His hands massaged her back before sliding down to her backside. He cupped her buttocks through her nightgown. Laleh moved her other knee onto the bed and straddled his thighs. Her fingers sifted through his hair as she moaned into his mouth. Her pussy pulsed with need—and she realized they had to stop.

Breaking their kiss, Laleh pressed her forehead to his. "I'm sorry."

He inhaled deeply and slowly shook his head. "No, you're right. We don't have enough time for me to do this right."

Her entire body vibrated at the gruffness of his voice. She kissed him softly. "I'm going to take that shower now."

"Good idea." Pike smiled and ran his thumb over her lower lip. "Tonight."

His heated gaze promised a night she would never forget. Trembling with anticipation, she climbed off his lap and dashed into the safety of the bathroom. Back against the door, she exhaled a shaky breath. So much for taking things slowly...

Chapter Seven

Laleh muttered a dark curse upon the realization she was *still* lost. And hungry. That blueberry cheesecake muffin and cup of ginger chai were delicious, but they were hardly enough to tide her over for five plus hours. She scowled. *Quick orientation, my ass.*

If she ever found him, Pike was going to receive one mighty shoulder punch. He'd described the orientation and safety drills as short and sweet, but four hours of boring spiels from the heads of the various ship departments and three emergency drills were neither short nor sweet. Granted she'd met some nice people among the small group of civilians riding out to Skyport Virgo aboard the *Spica*, but would it have killed the public affairs office to provide them with snacks? Pike was going to get an earful about the dreadful PR aboard his ship.

Laleh's stomach growled as she stared in consternation at the navigation screen mounted on the wall. A blue dot blinked in representation of her position while a red line zigzagged through various deck layers of halls, elevators, and escalators. Somehow she'd ended up down on the sub-decks near the engine room rather than up on the second deck where the mess was apparently located. If she hadn't dropped and broken her transmitter during a safety drill, she would have simply called Pike and asked him for help.

She glanced left and right for some kind of landmark to aid in orientation. According to the map, an elevator should have been just to her right and yet it was nowhere to be seen. Rolling her eyes, she headed for the stairwell she could see and hoped for the best. Her heels clacked against the metal stairs as she climbed to the next deck. Feet throbbing from all the walking, she paused long enough to take off her heels and then kept going.

That was another bone she had to pick with Pike. While the dress code for civilians was very relaxed, the disembarkation of a new flagship called for a nice outfit. Knowing the maiden voyage of his ship was important, Laleh had chosen one of her favorite ensembles, a pleated A-line skirt and matching bateau top cut from a fabulous blue and black abstract print against a white background. Had she known there was going to be such a great deal of physical activity, she'd have worn flats rather than heels.

Apparently, Laleh hadn't been the only civilian in the dark about the full extent of the orientation and safety drills. The whole lot of them had been improperly dressed for the occasion. Laleh added that little tidbit to her laundry list of gripes for Pike.

Barefoot, she climbed four flights of stairs before reaching another deck with a prominently displayed navigation screen. As she started toward the screen, Laleh noticed the hallway was lined with doorways. She realized this was one of the decks housing the hundreds of crew members.

A side door opened and Laleh plowed into a rather large body. The big toe on her right foot slammed into something rock hard—a boot—and she stumbled forward. An arm looped around her waist, but she'd tipped so far forward there was no stopping the fall. Instead she ended up taking down the owner of the arm and boot.

"Shit!" Laleh cursed as she untangled herself from the bigger body on top of her. She sat up and clutched her injured foot. Tears pricked her burning eyes. Blood dribbled from the cracked nail onto her fingers. Her stomach lurched at the sight.

"Fuck!" A rough male voice echoed in the hallway. "Are you okay? I didn't see you."

"No, I'm not okay! I think you broke my toe!" Laleh glared at the man hunched next to her. With his stubbled cheeks and unkempt brown hair, he had a rather roguish look. His blue eyes were dark with concern. The black uniform with its odd silver and red patch on the chest didn't register as anything she'd ever seen.

He frowned. "Why aren't you wearing any shoes?"

"I hardly think my heels would have done much to prevent that," Laleh snapped, pointing at her already swelling toe.

Snorting, he rolled his eyes. "No need to be melodramatic. Let me take a look at it."

Without waiting for her permission, he picked up her foot and gently prodded the toe. Laleh winced. "Ow!"

"Sorry." He shook his head and stood. "It's broken." He hauled her off the ground. "Let's get you to the sick bay."

"My shoes," Laleh said, gesturing to her heels resting against the far wall where they'd fallen during her tumble. He picked them up and thrust them into her hands.

"Thanks."

He slid an arm around her shoulder and braced her weight. "Elevator's that way," he said with a flick of his head. "Think you can make it?"

She nodded and accepted his help as she hobbled down the hall. "Do you have a name?"

"Quinn. You?"

"Laleh."

"Nice name," Quinn said, glancing down at her. "So what's a gorgeous civvie like you doing on this ship?"

"Spare me," Laleh muttered.

Quinn barked with laughter. "Can't blame me for trying."

They paused outside the elevator and waited for the car to arrive. Quinn helped her inside. Laleh shifted her weight off of him and used the wall for support, leaning back and lifting her pulsing foot.

"Sick bay," Quinn announced loudly. The elevator dinged and began to ascend. He stared intently in her direction.

Laleh frowned under his scrutiny. "What?"

Quinn shrugged. "Just trying to work out the odds of slamming into one of, what, a dozen civilians on board this ship. Can't be that high."

"I wouldn't have been prowling around the staff quarters if those navigational screens weren't worthless," Laleh grumbled. "I mean, seriously, what is the deal with those things?"

"They're pretty useless," Quinn agreed. "Spacefleet personnel have to memorize the schematics of the ships they're assigned to so I'm sure the barest amount of thought was put into designing the navigational screens for civilians. These ships aren't geared toward people like you. They're set up for people like me."

"Fair enough," Laleh said. She studied his patch again. "So what do you do?"

"Omega Force," he said, pride tingeing his voice. Apparently her cluelessness played out on her face. "Special forces," he explained. "We do the dirty work."

"Oh." Laleh was impressed. "Sounds dangerous."

"It is but it's more exhilarating than you could ever imagine."

"I'll take your word for it."

The elevator glided to a halt. Quinn was at her side in an instant, his arm around her waist as he helped her from the chrome box. They emerged into a hallway bustling with activity. Laleh recognized the green colored uniforms as those of the medical branch.

"You never said what it is that you do," Quinn said as they waited to be triaged.

"Sociocultural xeno-anthropologist," Laleh replied, her eyes scanning for a nurse or doctor.

"No shit?" Quinn's awe was evident.

Laleh shrugged casually. "It sounds a lot more interesting than it is."

"Sounds like brain trust territory," Quinn said. "Definitely not for the likes of me."

Laleh sized him up. "I'd hazard a guess you're much more intelligent than you let on since your chosen field favors brawn over brains. Of course," she added knowingly, "you and I both know a job like yours requires intense mental agility."

He smiled crookedly. "I think you and I are going to be good friends, Laleh."

She laughed. "We'll see."

A familiar face came into view as Dr. Karp, Pike's friend and the same doctor who had treated her bruised face and given her a physical, emerged from an exam room. His attention flicked from the touch screen tablet in his hand to her face and then down again. As if suddenly recognizing her, Dr. Karp's head snapped up again. "Laleh?"

"Hi, Dr. Karp," she greeted, extending her hand.

He gripped it in a firm handshake. He appeared to notice she held her right foot awkwardly. "What happened to your toe?"

"Me." Quinn piped up from beside her. "We had a collision on Deck Twelve."

"I see," Dr. Karp murmured. "Well, let's get you into an exam room, Mrs. Grayson." He gestured to a nearby door and walked away from them.

As Quinn stooped down to help her, he frowned. "You're married?"

Laleh remembered she wasn't wearing a wedding band. "Yes. Just yesterday actually."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." But Laleh could tell he was anything but happy for her and wondered why. And then it hit her. He'd been operating under the assumption she was single. Laleh quickly recalled their interaction to make sure she hadn't done anything to lead him on. She couldn't remember anything vaguely improper.

"So who's the lucky man?"

"Pike Grayson."

Quinn stopped abruptly. "The admiral?"

Laleh nodded. "The very one."

"Well, I'll be damned."

She found that an odd reply but said nothing. Quinn helped her onto the exam table and left the small room while Dr. Karp and a nurse examined her purpling toe. It wasn't a bad enough injury to warrant any of the super therapies they carried on board the ship, so she had to do with a localized pain injection while they reset the bone. She received another dose of tingling anti-swelling, anti-bruise gel and a toe brace filled with a squishy pad soaked in a nail rejuvenating solution.

While the nurse searched out a pair of temporary shoes, Dr. Karp made notations in her chart. "You know, Laleh," he said, "I just realized I forgot to offer you a contraceptive at our visit the other day. I was so hurried to get your physical completed it

slipped my mind."

"Oh," Laleh murmured, suddenly realizing she hadn't given the matter any thought. Remembering Pike's promise about their upcoming evening, Laleh figured she should take care of business now. "What are my options?"

"Well," Dr. Karp sat back, "I can't for the life of me remember whether or not Pike has scrotal blocks."

Laleh's cheeks felt hot. "I wouldn't know. We haven't discussed his, um, well."

Dr. Karp chuckled. "I see. Well—you've got a few choices. If you want long-term protection, we could do an implant, but it wouldn't be effective for a week or so. For immediate protection and little to no inconvenience, you can opt between a pill, patch or a vaginal ring."

The idea of messing with a flexible ring didn't appeal to her. "Tell me about the pill and the patch."

"You apply the patch once a week for half an hour. You take the pill once a week. Both are incredibly effective and provide complete protection within three hours of application or ingestion. They'll also allow you to skip your period for six months at a time. We'll send an automatic reminder to your transmitter so you won't forget take your dose," he added.

Laleh weighed her options. "I'll do the pill."

Dr. Karp nodded. "Wait right here and I'll bring you the prescription."

Fifteen minutes later, Laleh had taken her first dose of birth control. A courier would deliver the remainder of her six month prescription as well as a pain killer to her quarters. She also wore the ugliest pair of orange orthopedic clogs imaginable. When she stepped out of the exam room, she hadn't expected to see Quinn waiting for her. He glanced at her feet and made a face. She sighed. "Yes. I know. They're hideous."

"Yeah. They are," Quinn agreed. "But, hey, at least you're walking without a limp."

"Small consolation," Laleh groused.

Quinn laughed and fell into step beside her. "So where to now?"

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" She didn't want to get him in any trouble.

"Not really," Quinn replied. "I'm something of an independent operator."

"Oh."

"Where were you headed before our crash?"

"Mess hall," Laleh said. "I'm starving."

"Want to join me for lunch?"

Laleh shrugged. "Sure."

Quinn laughed and punched the elevator button. "Gee, don't sound so excited."

Laleh couldn't help but chuckle. As they stepped into the elevator, she decided a broken toe was a small price to pay for a new friend.

* * * *

Pike glanced at his watch and frowned. *Where the hell is she?*

Anxious to see how her morning had gone, he'd sent a message to her transmitter hours ago arranging a lunch date in their quarters. He hadn't received a reply one way or the other but had gone ahead with his plans, hoping she'd simply been busy with the orientation. Staring at the two warming containers sitting on their dining table, Pike now had to wondering if she was ignoring him. That thought didn't sit well with him.

Hunger gnawed at his belly. He was expected back on the bridge in twenty minutes. Even if Laleh flitted through the door in the next minute or so, they'd be hard pressed to enjoy their lunch in leisure. With a heavy sigh, Pike sat down and lifted the cover on his lunch. The tantalizing aroma of his traditional deployment lunch tickled his nose. A juicy ribeye steak, pile of steak fries, and steamed baby carrots. His stomach growled with anticipation.

Pike practically inhaled his meal. His plate clean, he tidied up the dining table and moved Laleh's lunch tray into the refrigerator, switching off the warming mechanism that kept her food hot. He finished his glass of iced tea and plunked it in the sink. For a moment, Pike considered leaving Laleh a note but his annoyance got the better of him. It was petty to be irked with her over something so small but he couldn't help it.

His mood dark, Pike left their quarters and headed to the elevator at the end of the hall. He stepped back when the doors opened, surprised to see Karp trying to exit. "Doc."

"Grayson!" Karp grinned as he stepped off the elevator. "I was just heading to your quarters."

"Oh?"

Karp held out a small box. "Your wife's prescriptions."

Pike frowned and accepted the box. "Is Laleh ill?"

"She came by the sick bay about an hour ago with a rather nasty broken toe. She was on her way to the mess hall, so I told her I'd send up her prescriptions."

Pike felt like a cad. "How did she break her toe?"

"Collided with an Omega on the crew deck apparently."

What the hell was she doing down there?

"You said she was headed to the mess hall?"

Karp nodded. "Probably still there, if you hurry."

Pike clapped his friend's arm and hopped into the elevator. It was a short trip down to the mess hall. Upon entering the hall, he scanned for Laleh. The place was bustling with activity as hundreds of the ship's crew moved through the various lines in search of a meal to satisfy their tastes. He could barely hear over the raucous crowds and wondered how he would ever find her.

As he moved through the crowded aisles, crew members jumped up from their seats to salute. Pike quickly put them at ease and continued moving forward. His gaze flicked from table to table, face to face. Just as he began to despair of finding her, Pike spotted the cerulean blue and inky black fabric of her dress. Relief flooded him as he hurried to the corner table.

Pike frowned as he watched Laleh reach over and scoop her spoon through a bowl of pudding on another tray. His gaze snapped to the owner of the tray. Black uniform. Omega patch. Young. Lean. Handsome.

Pike's stomach churned as Laleh laughed at something the Omega said. Jealousy surged through his veins at the sight of Laleh—his wife—giggling and sharing dessert with another man. His hand tightened around the box as he strode up to the table. It was all he could do not to knock the spoon out of the Omega officer's hand.

Sensing his presence, Laleh glanced up and smiled. "Pike!"

He couldn't understand it but that sweet smile pierced right through his angry shell. The need to stake his claim, to kiss her right there in front of the entire mess hall, overwhelmed him. Pike mastered the urge and nodded in her direction instead. "Laleh."

Her lunch mate rose and saluted. "Admiral Pike, sir."

Pike glanced at the insignia on the man's patch. "Petty Officer."

Laleh seemed to notice the hard edge to his voice. She stood, shifting her weight to the left, and put a calming hand on his arm. "Quinn and I had a little run-in when I was lost earlier. He took me to the sick bay and then helped me find the mess hall." She turned to her companion and smiled. "He's been really helpful."

"I'm sure he was," Pike replied dryly. Understanding flashed in the other man's eyes.

"Pike." Laleh spoke softly, her expression on the verge of embarrassment.

Quinn met his steady gaze. "Just thought I'd step up to the plate, sir. It was obvious Laleh hadn't been adequately prepared for ship life."

Pike bristled at the insinuation he'd just dumped Laleh on the ship without any concern for her welfare. Not wanting to be drawn into a war of words, Pike turned his attention to Laleh. "Are you ready to head back to our quarters?"

Laleh nodded. "Just let me clean up my tray."

Quinn slid over and grabbed her tray. "I've got it."

"Thanks, Quinn."

"No problem, Laleh. I'll see you around?" Quinn shot a challenging gaze at Pike.

"Definitely," Laleh replied, her voice bright.

Pike gritted his teeth but said nothing. Laleh slipped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her away. As she rocked awkwardly against his side, he remembered her injury. He cast a glance at the orange clogs on her feet and slowed his pace as they crossed the mess hall toward the elevator bank.

"That must get so tiring," Laleh said as they stepped inside an elevator. "Having all those people standing up and saluting you," she clarified.

"I don't want you fraternizing with the crew," Pike stated as the doors closed.

Laleh stiffened and pulled away from him. Those bright blue eyes widened with surprise. "What?"

He knew he was being ridiculous but he couldn't stop himself. "I don't want you having lunch and hanging out with those guys."

"Those guys? I was having lunch with one man. A very nice one, I might add. We had a great discussion about my field of study."

"Nice?" Pike scoffed. "Trust me, Laleh. I know his type. All he cares about is finding the quickest way into your pants. If that means sitting around, listening to you talk about your thesis, he'll muscle through the boredom."

Laleh recoiled. "Wow, Pike, why don't you tell me how you really feel about my boring work."

He silently cursed his stupid remark. "That's not what I meant, Laleh."

"Funny because that's exactly what it sounded like."

Knowing he couldn't talk his way out this *faux pas*, Pike changed the subject. "He broke your toe."

"On accident," Laleh snapped back. "It's not like he was lurking in the shadows looking for a toe to stomp."

"What were you even doing down there?"

"I got lost. Those stupid navigational screens don't work."

"Why didn't you just ask someone for directions?"

Laleh sarcastically smacked her forehead. "Of course! Why didn't I think of that

while I was traipsing from one end of this godforsaken ship to the other? Gee, I could have saved myself so much aggravation if only I'd used my brain. Silly me!"

Pike glowered at her. "There's no need for histrionics."

"Histrionics?" She gaped at him. "You're the one acting like a colossal jackass."

"I'm the jackass?" Pike touched his chest. "You're the one who blew me off to have lunch with Petty Officer First Class Testosterone."

Laleh fumed. "That's right, Pike. I deliberately got lost and broke my toe so I could fraternize with *those guys* and blow off a lunch date I knew nothing about!"

Jaw hardened, she lowered her gaze and shook her head. When she lifted her face, tears glistened in her eyes. His gut clenched. "Laleh..."

She held up her hand, silencing him. "I don't expect a lot of you, Pike, but seriously, would it have killed you to have shown even the slightest bit of concern? You haven't seen me all morning. When you finally get around to looking for me, you find me with a broken toe. You haven't even asked if I'm in pain. Instead of asking me *why* I was lost, you jump down my throat and make stupid assumptions. I'm not an idiot, Pike. If I'd seen a crew member or had a working transmitter in my hot little hand, I would have made good use of either."

The elevator halted and the doors opened. Laleh practically stomped from the box. Shame twisted Pike's belly. He'd be an unconscionable ass.

"Laleh, wait!"

She didn't even slow down. Instead she lifted her right hand over her shoulder and shot him the finger. Pike's eyes widened at her crass gesture. Apparently, he'd really pissed her off this time. Instinctively, he set off after her, fully aware he was going to have to prostrate himself at her feet to earn her forgiveness.

"Admiral Pike to the bridge. Receiving signal from unidentified starship."

Pike slowed as the intercom message filtered across the transmitter clipped to his waist. *Shit.*

Laleh paused at the door to their quarters. She raised her tearful face as if wondering what choice he would make. What she couldn't understand was there was no choice to be made. His duty required him to report immediately.

And he did.

Chapter Eight

She couldn't believe he turned his back on her and walked away.

Prickling with anger, Laleh entered their quarters for the first time. It was a bigger space than she'd expected and furnished stylishly albeit a bit monochromatic and bland for her tastes. She liked the open floor plan, the living room flowing into the dining room and kitchen. Laleh spotted her stack of boxes in the corner. Homesickness rattled her.

What the hell have I done? Laleh slumped into the nearest chair and placed her elbows on her thighs. Face braced on her palms, she tried to wrap her mind around the argument she'd just had with Pike. He hadn't struck her as the jealous type, but then again she didn't really know him that well. Maybe that kind exterior cloaked a rather possessive streak. Or worse.

Laleh's stomach tightened with unease. What if this was just the beginning of a nasty, controlling relationship? Could she last fourteen months?

A voice of reason interrupted her worst case scenario thoughts. Until just a few minutes ago, Pike had been unbelievably chivalrous and respectful. His jealous behavior was definitely an anomaly. Even Laleh had her moments, had lashed out at others during times of stress and change. It wasn't fair to assume Pike had done anything more than that.

Still—she deserved an apology. Anything less would be unacceptable.

Prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt, Laleh decided to explore her new home. On the opposite wall of the living area, Laleh found an entertainment center hidden in the wall. She wondered what sort of programming came standard on a spaceship. Hopefully she'd have access to some of her favorite shows.

Laleh poked around in the kitchen, examining the upscale appliances. She'd seen a small market in the mess hall. Cooking the occasional meal in their quarters would be much more preferable than eating in the cafeteria every day. The refrigerator shelves had been stocked with various beverages but nothing else. She'd need to make a small list before hitting up the market.

The dishes in the sink and the covered tray holding a steak and fries gave her pause. Obviously Pike had ordered a nice lunch for them. How she was supposed to have known was beyond her. If she'd been informed of his plans, she would have gladly joined him for lunch.

Leaving the kitchen, Laleh discovered a good-sized office just off the dining room. A comfy looking couch sat against the far wall. Built-in shelves lined two walls, one of them crammed with memory drives, the other free for her things. Whether Pike had planned it that way, she couldn't tell. Tomorrow she'd dig through the boxes in search of her books. It would be nice to have a place to retreat and think.

Laleh found the bedroom next. It was surprisingly roomy with a rather large bed and panoramic view of the seemingly endless star-specked sky surrounding them. She played with the buttons controlling the various shade settings for the window. Amusement tugged at her lips upon discovering she could project seaside views and urban landscapes on the window.

Utilitarian furniture rounded out the space. She ran her hands over the dove grey

comforter before sitting down and testing out the mattress. It was a bit firm for her taste. Kicking off her clogs, Laleh reclined against the pillows. They were soft and plush and smelled new. She wrinkled her nose and decided to spritz her pillow with a little lavender scented perfume later.

Careful not to bump her toe, Laleh rolled onto her side and faced the window. She hadn't seen that view in twelve years. Unlike some who found the vast unknown of space incredibly thrilling and exciting, Laleh found it daunting and frightening. Even if she'd been eligible to join Spacefleet, Laleh never would have. To spend years in space just wasn't her cup of tea.

And yet here she was, hurtling across the great wide open, toward a floating mega city of sorts.

Her disastrous first day aboard the *Spica* had confirmed her concerns about fitting in with a largely Spacefleet society. Until she learned the lingo and memorized the ship's layout, Laleh knew she'd be something of an outsider. But adjusting to a new culture wasn't anything new to Laleh. She'd done it twelve years ago when they'd landed in Houston and started their new lives. She could do it again now.

Remembering that trying period in her childhood, Laleh thought of her mother. She'd been gone almost ten months yet the grief remained raw. Her mother's accidental death had devastated Laleh, had left her feeling so very alone. She'd had no choice but to press forward through the mourning. Sometimes Laleh experienced tremendous guilt over her inability to mourn her mother properly. On Hezma-12, a girl went into complete seclusion for six months after the death of her mother. She embraced complete solitude, seclusion, and silence.

But Laleh had been in the very final months of her doctoral studies. She taught undergraduate courses and depended on that income to survive. So she'd modified the old rituals to fit her new life—and felt guilty the entire time.

And confused.

Even now Laleh still wondered what her mother had been doing in Houston's Beta Sector. In all their years living in Houston, they'd only crossed into that territory once or twice and never on purpose. The Beta Sector housed commercial ports and warehouses and served as the trading hub of the city. Almost all of the intergalactic trade sanctioned by the Federation moved through that sector. It simply wasn't a place her mother ever would have gone.

Yet, somehow, for whatever reason, she'd gone there that morning and had been crushed by a falling stack of shipping containers. The police called it a freak accident and hadn't done much more than the necessary investigation into the matter. After a few weeks, Laleh had simply accepted she'd likely never know what had really happened to her mother.

A part of her didn't want to know. Laleh had a sneaking suspicion she might uncover something ugly if she dug too far. Too much of a coward to brave such a discovery, Laleh had let it go.

Suddenly needing to do something, anything, to keep her mind off of her mother, Laleh sat up and left the bedroom. She made her way into the kitchen, snatched a bottle of orange soda from the fridge, and sat down on the floor by her stack of boxes. She called out to the entertainment center, activating the television and channel surfed for something interesting. Eventually she landed on a news feed and left it there.

With the news anchors droning on in the background, Laleh began sorting through her things, rearranging them in piles depending on where they should go. Hours passed as she stuffed her things back into boxes and slid them around to their respective rooms. One box she filled with bric-a-brac she'd place around their home later. Another box held her mother's things. Laleh wasn't quite ready to go through that one yet.

She started in the kitchen, unpacking her small selection of dishes, cookware and cutlery and finding new homes for them on the shelves. In the office, she unloaded her collection of antique books, taking the time smell each one and run her fingers over the hard spines. While her transmitter contained thousands of eBooks with untold numbers more available for download, Laleh still loved her hardbacks. She'd always wanted to add paperbacks to her collection, preferably some deliciously naughty romance novels from the early twenty-first century, but they were so costly! So very few had survived the last three hundred years. Some day...

Her books dealt with, Laleh considered where she might set up a work station. Using Pike's desk seemed like a rather bad idea. She supposed she could simply use the dining room table during the day. Until then, she left her desktop items in a box in the corner of the office.

Laleh turned her attention toward the bedroom. She inspected the built-in dresser, finding half of the drawers empty. Laleh moved her socks, bras, and undies to the drawers. She tugged a box of folded clothing over to the closet. Pike's uniform tops and tees hung on the upper bar, his pressed pants on the lower bar. She found some extra hangers in a recessed cubby hole and used them to hang up her things.

Stepping back, she eyed the collection of clothing with amusement. Where Pike's half was nothing but steel grey and black, Laleh's side burst with vibrant colors. She couldn't help but wonder what Pike wore on his days off—if he ever had them.

She checked the drawers of the left bedside table and found an eReader, an extra transmitter, and small container of heartburn medication. Realizing Pike had already staked his claim on this side of the bed, she moved to the right side and set up her things: a digital photo frame, an eReader, and a selection of lip balms and hand lotions.

Laleh carted her toiletries into the bathroom and chose a shelf for her dental and facial care. She took a few minutes to play with the shower's various settings. Jamming her hair care and soap refills into the extra dispensers mounted on the shower wall took a little extra work. They were brand new and the latches difficult to pop open and closed. The shower set up, Laleh checked out the control pad for the lighting, heating and cooling. Pike had already programmed specific settings so she decided to leave them be for the moment.

A devilish smile curved her mouth. If Pike ever pulled a stunt like he had earlier, Laleh doubted she would be as considerate.

Back in their bedroom, Laleh noticed the time. Her eyes widened in surprise. Time had flown by as she unpacked. It was late and she was hungry. Uncertain, she teethed her lower lip. Should she wait for Pike or make her way to the mess hall alone? She settled on waiting half an hour before heading out on her own.

Laleh collected the empty containers from the bathroom and bedroom and carried them into the living area. She darted into the office and grabbed a pair of empty boxes.

As she entered the living room, Laleh froze. She sensed another person's presence. Her gaze jumped to the doorway. Pike stood just inside their quarters, arms at his sides,

face serious. He still held the white box he'd been holding earlier. She held her breath, wondering what was about to happen between them.

"I'm sorry, Laleh."

She exhaled with relief.

Pike took a tentative step forward. "I was a complete jackass. There was no excuse for my behavior."

Laleh smiled understandingly. "It's all right, Pike. I'll let it slide this one time," she teasingly added.

Pike grinned and shook his head. "You're too kind."

She shrugged playfully. "I'm feeling rather forgiving at the moment."

"Lucky me." Placing the box on the sofa, Pike crossed the living room and removed the containers from her hands. He set them aside and then leveled his gaze. "There's one thing, though, I can't apologize for, Laleh."

She frowned. "And that would be?"

"Walking away from you earlier," he clarified. "It turned out to be nothing, just a freighter with communications problems, but it could have been something serious. This entire ship depends upon me. I'm bound by very specific rules and regulations, and as much as I wanted to come after you and make things right, I couldn't. My duty comes first."

The magnitude of Pike's reality struck her. Even though he'd risen to nearly the highest ranks of Spacefleet, he was likely less free than he'd been as a young cadet. She began to understand the weight of his responsibilities.

He moved even closer, his hand cupping her cheek. "Even though my duty comes first, it doesn't mean I—," he paused, as if searching for the right word, "care for you any less. You are my wife. In all things, you come first."

Laleh's tummy trembled at his declaration. She wondered what she could possibly say in return.

"It's just that," Pike continued, "there's always the possibility I may have to put you second for a short while. I don't like it but it's simply the reality of my position."

Laleh sensed he was incredibly troubled by this. Wanting to calm his worries, she turned her face just until her lips touched his palm. His fingers tightened against her cheek as she kissed his palm. She looked up at him. "I understand."

And then his lips were upon hers, gentle and warm. Laleh melted into his increasingly insistent kiss. His arms slid around her waist, tugging her against her body. She looped her arms around his shoulders, fingers fisting the fabric of his shirt. His tongue flicked against her bottom lip as if seeking entrance. Laleh parted her lips, allowing his warm tongue inside. Her knees went weak at the sensation of his tongue sliding against hers. When he sucked gently on the tip, she nearly collapsed.

In one swift move, Pike lifted her into his arms. Her mouth was too busy mating with his to protest. Holding tight to his shoulders, she gave in to the deliciously romantic sensation of being carried by her man. Breaking their hungry kiss, Pike set her down by the foot of their bed. Breathless, they stared at one another.

Terrified he'd change his mind, Laleh made the first move. With shaky fingers, she found the zipper of his jacket and tugged it down to his waist. She couldn't meet his eyes as she pushed the jacket from his shoulders and onto the floor. She tugged the hem of his tee from his pants and dragged it up and over his chiseled abs. Pike lifted his arms and

took over the removal of his shirt.

Desperate to touch him, Laleh placed her palms against his chest, the crisp hairs tickling her skin. He felt so hard and hot. She moved her hand down the flattened plank of his stomach right down to the top of his pants, her gaze fixed upon the bulge stretching the fabric. The naughtiest suggestion filtered through her thoughts. Pike inhaled sharply as she acted upon it, running her tongue over his nipple. She danced her moist lips over his chest, kissing his breastbone before licking his other nipple.

"Christ, Laleh," Pike groaned, his hands tangling in her hair and lifting her face to his. He devoured her mouth with a passionate kiss that made her toes tingle. He jerked on her top, drawing it up over her head. He'd barely tossed the blouse aside before his hands were on her skirt. Crouching a bit, he captured her lips while fumbling with the zipper at her side and then shoving the fabric down over her hips.

She stepped out of the skirt and reached for his belt buckle. In between feverish kisses, Pike toed off his boots and Laleh unbuckled his belt. As he bent down to rip off his socks and pull of his pants, Pike peppered kisses along her neck, across the curve of a breast, and down her belly. He grasped the backs of her thighs and hauled her off the ground. Laleh's legs curled around his waist as he sat down on the mattress.

Nose buried between her breasts, Pike unhooked the clasp of her bra. Laleh's mouth hung open with anticipation as he peeled away the garment. When he sucked her nipple into the hot wetness of his mouth, she whimpered. She grasped his head, her fingers moving through his sandy hair as he laved the sensitive peak. He gently squeezed her other breast, fingers kneading the plump flesh most expertly. As his lips changed nipples, he rubbed his thumb over the now wet peak, extending the arousal.

Laleh bucked on his lap, her panties already damp. Her clit pulsed, her belly flip-flopping as she remembered just how wonderful Pike had made her feel only last night. She could feel his erection stabbing through his boxer briefs. It prodded her sex, sending little shockwaves of delight through her body. She shifted back on his lap just enough to slide her hand between them and into his boxer briefs. Pike stilled as she clutched his rigid length. Her finger encountered wetness on the tip of his cock. Curious, she brought her damp finger to her mouth and licked the shiny juice.

"Laleh!" Pike's surprise echoed in the room.

She met his shocked gaze and shrugged. "It's different than I thought."

"You say the damndest things," he whispered, lips brushing tenderly against hers. His arms tightened around her waist as he moved suddenly to the left, rolling Laleh onto her back. He yanked off his boxer briefs before pressing his lips to her skin. She sighed in pleasure as he licked and kissed his way down her body. When his fingers gripped the sides of her panties, she swallowed hard. Her body vibrated with apprehension. Yes, he'd touched her *there* last night, but now he could see her, all of her.

"Lift," Pike murmured as he pulled on her panties.

She did as he asked, lifting her hips off the comforter. Thighs tensed, Laleh kept her knees as close together as possible, feeling suddenly self-conscious. Pike caressed her calves and brushed his lips over her knees. "Scoot back a little."

Laleh inched up on the bed. His hands slid up her outer thighs and then backtracked along the valley where her inner thighs touched. Ever so gently, Pike pushed her knees apart and planted her soles on the mattress. Feeling incredibly open and vulnerable, Laleh gulped. Pike's fingernails drifted up and down her inner thighs, setting her skin alight

with goose bumps. His tongue swirled along the inner edge of her knee.

"Relax," he cooed, his voice vibrating against her skin. "Let me show you how good it can be."

Laleh's clenched fists opened, her flattened palms against the comforter. Pike touched her sex with petting movements. One finger slid between her lips, sending shivers down her spine when it moved over her extremely sensitive clit. With two fingers, he traced her labia, parting her just a bit. The air felt cool against her cream-slicked skin. She could feel her juices dripping from her pussy, the slippery wetness spreading with every searching caress.

"You have the prettiest pussy I've ever seen," Pike said, his voice gruff with arousal. Laleh squealed in surprise as he nuzzled her sex with nose and mouth. "That's it, baby. I want to hear you scream while I eat your cunt."

As his filthy words registered, Laleh nearly swooned. Hot and cold quivers pierced her tummy. Only in her wildest fantasies had a man ever spoken to her thus.

Pike held her open with his thumbs and licked her clit with the tip of his tongue. Laleh arched off the bed. She'd never imagined it would feel like that. Pike's slick tongue traced one pussy lip and then the other before circling back to her clit. He sucked the little pearl between his lips and ran his tongue over it. Laleh couldn't control the noises emanating from her throat. She sounded almost feral as Pike devoured her cunt like a starving man, his hands gripping her thighs as he feasted upon her flesh. Her hips pumped to meet his flicks and swirls. Sometimes she gasped at the intensity of the act. When she tried to pull away, Pike held fast and attacked her throbbing clit with such ferocity it knocked the breath from her lungs.

As Laleh felt her orgasm rising toward its peak, Pike inexplicably moved away from the pulsing nub. "No!"

Pike's deep rumbling laugh met her ears. "Trust me, Laleh. I'm going to make it even better for you."

Considering she had no actual knowledge of such things, Laleh relented to his torture. He nibbled her labia and swept his nose against her clit as he moved his mouth further south. When his stiffened tongue stabbed her opening, Laleh rose up off the bed with a shriek. His tongue thrust in and out of her soaking hole, mimicking the sex act in a way that drove her insane with lust. She undulated wildly as his nose brushed against her clit while he tongued her. She clutched at her belly, fingernails biting into her soft skin. Laleh doubted she could hold out much longer.

Pike's lips returned to her clit. He sucked hard on the engorged bud and slid a finger inside her slick channel. Her juices eased the entrance of his pumping digit. When a second finger joined the first, she moaned. Although a bit uncomfortable at first, she grew accustomed to the stretching sensation. A part of her understood this was Pike's way of preparing her for actual penetration. Just the thought of his cock inside of her, filling her, made Laleh breathless with need.

Coupled with the flick of his tongue against her clit, Pike's finger thrusts had her clawing the comforter and bucking her hips. Arousal coiled low and tight in her belly. Her breaths deepened and grew closer together. Thighs quivering, Laleh reached down to touch Pike's head. She wanted to feel him as she came. As if sensing how near she hovered on the precipice, Pike went wild on her clit.

Like a tidal wave, Laleh's orgasm crashed down upon her. She couldn't breathe, just

shuddered violently. Finally able to inhale, she sucked in a shaky breath and cried out, her primal moans ricocheting off the walls and ceiling. Her fingers tightened around Pike's hair as she ground her pussy against his mouth, desperate for every last ounce of pleasure she could possibly milk from his scandalously talented tongue. Only when she felt she might pass out completely did Laleh pull away from that unbelievable mouth.

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Breathing hard, Pike watched Laleh as she shook and panted atop the comforter. Her musky scent filled his nostrils. Her delicious flavor clung to his lips and tongue. His cock ached for release. Looking down, he watched a clear drop of fluid ooze from the tip. In his entire life, Pike couldn't ever remember being this hard. Just listening to her come had almost had him spilling all over his own leg like some horny teenager. Staring at the honeyed lips of that beautiful cunt, he couldn't wait to bury himself to his balls in her welcoming heat.

Only the knowledge that he was her first kept him from jumping on her right then and there and taking what he desperately needed. Summoning every last bit of self-control, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and crawled over his lovely young wife. He would make this good for her—even if it killed him.

Insinuating himself between her thighs, Pike nuzzled her neck, uncertain if she'd be open to receiving a kiss from him after what he'd just done. To his surprise, Laleh cupped his cheeks and drew down his face. Obviously curious, she traced his lips with her tongue. A quirky smile curved her mouth. "Not what I expected either," she whispered.

Pike chuckled and kissed her properly. She curled a leg around his waist, her heel touching his ass. As his cock prodded her slippery folds, a sobering thought entered his mind. He pulled back from her wet heat and stared down in her dreamy eyes. "Contraception."

Her brow furrowed a moment, as if irked by reality intruding into this moment. She then smiled and touched his jaw. "Dr. Karp put me on a pill earlier today. It's completely effective within three hours."

Relieved, Pike moved closer. His fingers drifted through her soft hair as his lips grazed her cheek. The need to be gentle and tender gripped him. He prided himself upon being a considerate lover, but he'd never been in quite this position. Throughout all of his relationships and one-night stands, Pike had never been with a virgin. Usually he worried only about pleasing his partner and getting pleasure in return. Tonight, Pike worried about showing Laleh all the pleasures to be found in bed without causing her too much pain or discomfort. The idea of being the man who ruined Laleh sexually made him very nearly ill.

He gazed into her trusting blue eyes. Pike's heart clenched as she smiled up at him almost encouragingly. It was as if she sensed the reason for his hesitation. Holding her gaze, he gripped his cock and slid it between the lips of her slippery cunt. Her eyes widened when he circled her clit with the purpling head. He grinned mischievously and nipped her lower lip. He continued rubbing that little pink nub with his cock until she practically purred.

When her thighs tightened around his waist, Pike knew she was ready. He placed his cock at her drenched entrance, right up against the perforated barrier, and leaned over her. Braced on one elbow, Pike caressed her face and brushed the tip of his nose against hers. He kissed her and thrust against the thin barrier. Laleh stiffened beneath him, her

nails digging into his shoulders. Even though he'd broken a bit of her hymen before, he knew it hadn't been enough.

Knowing there was no other way, Pike pulled back and thrust inside again and again. Only when he was fully sheathed in her hot, pulsing heat did Pike still completely. As he allowed her to acclimate to the sensation of being stretched, Pike kissed her lovingly. He caressed her cheek and stared down into her eyes. A single tear rode the curve of her face. His heart nearly broke at the sight.

"We can stop," he said, voice thick with desire. Even as he spoke, Pike's cock twitched inside her. "I won't mind."

"Please don't," Laleh whispered, rocking her hips against him.

"Unnnhhh." Pike shuddered.

"Just go slow," Laleh murmured.

Pike nodded and gritted his teeth, suspecting it might take a while for Laleh to relax completely and enjoy the experience. With shallow, slow thrusts, Pike made love to his wife. Her slick cream coated his cock, easing his movements. He'd never felt anything so tight or wet and it drove him mad with desire. Only his promise to her kept him from picking up the pace and chasing his own release.

By slow degrees, Laleh relaxed. Her hips rose up to meet his thrusts. Her grip on his shoulders changed, her fingers loosening and drifting toward his nape. She moaned into his mouth as he kissed her. Laleh's enthusiasm sent ripples of excitement through Pike. With one hand cradling the back of her head, Pike slid the other down her stomach toward the juncture of their bodies. He found her clit and thumbed it with tight circles.

"Oooh." Laleh's passionate sigh buffeted his cheek. He swallowed her groans as he rubbed the sensitive nub. He pumped faster, his cock plunging in and out of her juicy cleft. The frenzied meeting of their bodies created the wickedest noises. Skin slapping against skin. The soft squish of her wet cunt as he impaled her with his cock. The pants and groans and grunts.

Pike felt the first spasm of Laleh's pussy even before she gasped. He worked her clit furiously, wanting to feel her come around his cock. Head thrown back, she clutched at his sides. Pike bit the tender flesh just at the point where her neck met her collarbone.

"Pike!" Laleh's cry of ecstasy made his chest swell. She came hard and fast, her cunt clenching and releasing around his thrusting cock. His thumb stayed on her clit until she practically wept for mercy. Only then did Pike release the hold on his own orgasm.

Hands planted on either side of her head, Pike fucked her hard enough to shake the bed. His breaths came in little gasps and pants as he chased the heights of ecstasy. Laleh held tight to his shoulders, her teeth against his bicep. "Pike! Uh! Uh! Uh!"

His orgasm hit him like a ton of bricks, shocking him with its intensity. Eyes clenched, he couldn't breathe as his cum rushed through his cock and spilled inside her hot depths. For a moment, Pike thought he might actually black out. He jerked a few times, his balls pressed up against her slippery skin, her juices drenching them both.

With a guttural groan, Pike relaxed and practically collapsed atop Laleh. Her arms curled around him, holding him tight as they both fought to breathe, to think. When he could move again, Pike rolled onto his back, his cock sliding from her core in a gush of fluid. Laleh made a strange noise. He glanced over at her and couldn't help but laugh at the slightly disgusted expression on her face.

"Sorry," Pike said, drawing her close to his chest. "That's the not so glamorous side

of sex."

Looking rather pensive, Laleh snuggled deeper into his embrace. "I suppose it's a small price to pay."

Pike smiled. "You could say that."

She played with the hair on his chest and walked her fingers up to his chin. She traced his jaw. "Thank you," she said eventually.

Considering that an odd statement at a time like this, Pike looked down at her. "For what?"

She pressed a soft kiss to his jaw. "For making this an experience I'll never forget."

Even as she spoke, Pike realized he'd never forget it either. Just now, they'd shared something so real and significant. Pike knew the connection between them had been reinforced. Part of him wondered if it could ever be broken.

Pike hugged her even closer and claimed her lips sweetly. "Anything for you, Laleh." And he meant it.

Chapter Nine

Laleh loitered outside the entrance to the *Spica's* bridge. Before he'd left to report for duty that morning, Pike had asked her to meet him for lunch. He'd said nothing about whether or not she was allowed to enter the bridge though. She chose to play it safe and waited in the busy hall. She watched the seemingly never ending stream of crew members darting in and out of the bridge or scurrying down the hall.

"There you are!" Pike announced as he appeared in the hallway. He leaned over and pecked her cheek.

Heat blossomed on her skin. Just that innocent kiss made her think of all the wondrously naughty things Pike had done to her for half the night. He'd completely worn her out. How he'd managed to roll out of bed so early, she'd never understand.

Pike took her arm and led her to the elevator. "You find those schematics and that cadet manual I left out for you?"

Laleh nodded. "I studied them all morning. Hopefully I'll have everything memorized by the time we reach Virgo."

Pike chuckled as they stepped into an empty elevator. "I'm not going to test you, Laleh. I just thought they might help you adjust a little better to ship life."

"If I'm going to learn some, I may as well learn it all."

"Fair enough." Pike trailed his fingers over her cheek. "Did you get enough rest?"

She shook her head. "The trade off was definitely worth it."

He smiled devilishly. "We'll have to start a little earlier tonight."

Laleh trembled with anticipation. "We could have dinner in our quarters. I could cook something."

Pike looked surprised by her offer. "I've never had a woman cook me dinner. Other than my mother, of course."

For some reason, Laleh found that rather comforting. The idea of being the first woman to do something for Pike filled her with excitement. She'd accepted there were few, if any, things she could do with Pike inside the bedroom he hadn't already done. But outside the bedroom? The possibilities were endless.

"Any requests?" Laleh wondered as they stepped off the elevator.

"Surprise me," Pike answered and guided her through the mess hall. They grabbed trays and separated as they sought out the foods that appealed to them. As Laleh piled her plate high with fresh veggies and fruits, she inadvertently picked up on a one-sided conversation across the salad bar. It was the language that piqued her interest. Outside of her graduate courses, Laleh hadn't ever heard Pimmalanian actually spoken. Hearing it now was something of a novelty.

Feigning interest in the selection of dressings, Laleh edged around the corner of the bar. She spotted one of the civilians from her orientation course, Ambassador Leroy, talking agitatedly at the video screen of his transmitter. Listening discreetly, she figured out the problem. She considered whether or not to intrude on the conversation. Fearing the ambassador might stroke out from sheer aggravation, she waded into the fray.

Laleh touched his arm and drew his attention. The elderly gentleman glared at her, his brown eyes flashing annoyance. "Yes?"

"Tee-leh," Laleh said, "not tee-lek."

Confusion played on the ambassador's face. "Excuse me?"

"You've been requesting to speak with the secretary of sidewalks," she quickly explained. "I think you want to speak with the secretary of commerce, yes?"

Ambassador Leroy scowled. "Damned translation programs!" He gave her a curious stare. "You're fluent in Pimmalanian?"

"Yes."

"Good." He handed over the transmitter. "Tell him I wish to speak with the secretary of commerce, and I won't be fobbed off on some lowly assistant."

Leaving her tray on the edge of the bar, Laleh accepted the transmitter. Getting the proper secretary on the line wasn't half as difficult as translating between the ambassador and secretary who often talked over one another. She did her best though.

"Thank you." Ambassador Leroy pocketed his transmitter.

"No problem," Laleh replied, grabbing her tray. Before she could move along, the ambassador engaged her in conversation.

"You're the admiral's wife, yes?"

Laleh nodded. "But that's not all I am."

"Obviously." He smiled at her snappy remark. "Do you know how rare Pimmalanian fluency is?"

"I do. I was the only student at Federation University of Houston to study Pimmalanian in over three decades."

"I'm not surprised. Do you speak anything else?"

"I'm fluent in seventeen languages and am knowledgeable of the various dialects of many of those," Laleh said, trying not to sound too conceited. "I recently earned my doctorate in sociocultural xeno-anthropology so fluency in a variety of languages was necessary."

"Impressive," Ambassador Leroy replied. "Still," he said pensively, "that's quite a few more language fluencies than I'd expect from a person in your field."

"I lived in Houston's Delta Sector. Within my apartment building, I had access to at least a dozen languages," she explained. "I've always had a knack for soaking up language."

"I'd say it's more than a knack," he murmured, his gaze dancing over her shoulder. "I think your husband is waiting for you."

Laleh glanced back and spotted Pike waiting patiently a few feet away. "I should join him. His lunch break is rather short."

"Of course," Ambassador Leroy replied. "One thing..."

"Yes?"

"You said you'd recently earned your doctorate. Do you have a position waiting for you at Skyport Virgo?"

Laleh shook her head. "I haven't had time to send out any resumes. I'm hoping to find something once we dock."

"Come by my quarters tomorrow morning around ten," the ambassador instructed. "And bring your resume."

Shocked, Laleh watched him saunter away. Pike joined her, his eyebrows raised expectantly. "What was that about?"

Bewildered, she smiled at him. "I think I just found a job."

* * * *

Pike cast one last glance around the bridge before nodding to Captain Arnot, his relieving officer, and striding out of the ship's control center. A spring in his step, Pike strode determinedly through the halls. He wanted to see Laleh.

Just the thought of nibbling on her neck and listening to those soft sighs she would undoubtedly make had his groin tightening. One night with her and he was hooked. All day he'd been plagued with explicit visions of Laleh in the throes of passion. Leaving her to report for duty that morning had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. Pike had desperately wanted to call in sick so he could roll her onto her back and sink into that tight, wet cunt one more time.

Because she'd been a virgin, Pike had feared she wouldn't find sex all that enticing or might have been hesitant to express herself. But he couldn't have been more wrong. Between the sheets, Laleh was a hellcat. She oozed sensuality and a reticent confidence that made him weak with desire. She might smile nervously when asking him to touch her a certain way or to take her harder, faster, but she *asked*. That she felt comfortable enough to speak up assured him he'd done right by her.

The second Pike stepped into their quarters the most delicious scents filled his nose. His mouth nearly watered as he moved through the living area. He spotted the dining table and stopped. She'd covered the plain metal table with a brightly striped cloth in various shades of blue and green. A pair of complementing placemats and a simple glass vase rounded out the decor.

Pike took a moment to look around and realized she'd finished unpacking the box of collected kitsch. For the first ever, his quarters felt like a home, not just a group of rooms for sleeping, showering, and catching the occasional sports event. He couldn't believe how big of a change she'd made with just a handful of artistically placed picture frames, vases, and curios.

Ponytail bobbing, Laleh stood with her back to him as she tended something on the stove. He could just barely see the hot pink buds tucked into her ear canal, feeding sound to her ear drums. Pausing at the entrance to the shared dining room and kitchen, he watched her, amused. She obviously hadn't sensed his presence and continued singing as she stirred a pot of the brightest yellow rice he'd ever seen. He recognized the lyrics from one of Vega's latest hits. Even though he wasn't a fan of the intergalactic pop star, there was no escaping Vega's music.

His gaze traveled over her pert backside, her ass nicely outlined in a pair of low slung jeans. An orange tank top bared her slim arms and the gentle curve of her neck. His hand reached out to cup her bottom but pulled back. Startling her while she stood at the stove seemed like the worst possible idea. Instead, Pike cleared his throat.

Laleh gave a small jump and whirled on him. She grinned and tugged the pink buds from her ears, stuffing them in her pockets. "Hey! You're home."

Pike moved closer and slid his arms around her waist. She held a slotted spoon awkwardly to the side as he kissed her, his body buzzing with need. Knowing he couldn't have her right then, Pike kept the kiss as chaste as possible. He released her and she moved back to the stove. He stood close behind her, hands on her hips, as he watched her tend the two pots. "Smells delicious."

"Pomegranate chicken and saffron citrus rice. I had to improvise a little." Laleh switched off the heat beneath both pots. "The market is fairly well stocked, but they didn't

have everything I needed. I managed to wheedle a few strands of saffron from the chef in charge of the mess hall."

Pike snorted at the image of Laleh cajoling the Chief Petty Officer of the kitchen to hand over a sampling of the herb. "You're something else, Laleh."

"I figured it wouldn't hurt to try. The worst he could was say no, right?" She shrugged and pointed to a cabinet. "Plates, please."

Pike helped Laleh finish up dinner. He found the shared domesticity oddly exhilarating. He hadn't set a table in decades, not since he'd left his childhood home and embarked on the adventure that had become his Spacefleet career. Sitting down to dinner with his wife filled Pike with an almost wistful sense of homecoming.

"Where did you get that?" Pike eyed the single pink blossom in the vase centered on the table.

"The greenhouse," Laleh said, handing him a plate of steaming food. "I found it by accident and struck up a conversation with one of the officers assigned there. His Spacefleet research is with vegetable plants, but he likes to grow pretty things for his own amusement. He cut that peony for me when I told him it was my favorite flower. Sweet, huh?"

"Very." Pike slid into his seat. "It sounds like your second day aboard the *Spica* was better than the first."

"Huge improvement," Laleh agreed, picking up her silverware. "And your day?"

As they tucked into dinner, Pike hesitantly launched into a description of his day. He tried to gauge Laleh's interest, not wanting to bore her with the somewhat boring details. She seemed genuinely interested though and asked him a dozen or so questions. He could tell some of his answers didn't satisfy her. The idea he simply did some things because of regulations, regardless of how ridiculous and repetitive they were, obviously perplexed her. Pike sensed Laleh, for all her brilliance, would have made a poor Spacefleet officer. Accepting orders without question would have proved most difficult.

"I'll help with that," Pike offered as Laleh started to clear the table.

She waved her hand. "I've got it tonight."

"You sure? You did cook after all."

"Positive."

Pike stood up and pecked her cheek. "I'll be in my office then. I have some notes for my log."

Glass of water in hand, Pike went to his office. He sat down behind his desk and vocally logged into the record system. He tapped the widescreen and read the various entries automatically captured by the ship's documentation program, dictating additional notes where necessary. Every time he issued a command on the bridge, it was immediately logged. In times of distress, Pike could activate the mobile transcription program that would recognize his voice anywhere on the ship and log all actions.

As he submitted his notes, Pike heard Laleh cleaning up in the kitchen. He realized how quiet and solitary his life had been. Typically he spent his evenings completely alone with only the noise of a television keeping him company. Occasionally, he ventured out for a drink with friends. He'd never particularly cared for shared living spaces as he rose through the ranks of Spacefleet. Inevitably, Pike ended up with a roommate absolutely his opposite.

But so far living with Laleh had been surprisingly enjoyable. Of course, sex was

involved. Everything was more enjoyable with sex.

Out of the corner of his eye, Pike noticed a blur of movement as Laleh passed by the office. He logged off and headed after her. Heat rolled through his belly. His cock stiffened with anticipation.

Pike found Laleh in their bathroom. She'd just popped a dental gel cap and looked a bit surprised to see him standing in the doorway as she peeled out of her top. He liked keeping her off-guard and strode toward her. He took the bottle from her hand, shook a gel into his palm and returned the bottle to the cabinet. As the dental cleanser foamed, Pike started the shower and stripped. He quirked an eyebrow at Laleh who stood seemingly transfixed by his naked body. As if realizing she stared, Laleh turned away and shucked her clothing.

Inside the steamy shower, Pike pulled Laleh close and kissed her beneath the pounding stream of water. She grinned madly as he released her lips. "What?"

"It's like something from a romance novel," she shyly explained. "Kissing in the rain, except, well, we're in the shower."

Pike chuckled and kissed her again. He touched his forehead to hers and murmured, "Some day, I'll kiss you in the rain."

Laleh's fingers tightened on his biceps. She pressed her lips to his chest and sucked lightly. Pike lowered his mouth to her neck, kissing and licking that sensitive spot he'd discovered last night. She shivered in his arms. A thrill rippled through him at the knowledge he could affect her so easily.

Pike put a little space between them and put his hand under her soap dispenser. A dollop of her almond and honey scented body wash dropped onto his palm. He rubbed the creamy soap between his hands before gliding them over her nubile curves. She arched into his touch and even parted her thighs when he nudged between them. She welcomed his lathered fingers in her soft folds.

"Are you sore?" Pike gently ran his hands over her skin.

"A little," Laleh admitted.

He moved lower, soaping up her thighs and calves. "We don't have to do anything else tonight, if you'd rather not."

Laleh looked at him as if he were crazy. "Are you kidding me? I've been thinking about having sex with you all day, Pike."

Laughing, he scrubbed her toes and soles before rising. He steered her under the water. When she was completely rinsed, Laleh returned the favor, running her curious hands all over his body. She saved his package for last. He sucked in a shuddery breath at the sensation of her soapy hand gripping his cock. When the other slid down and cupped his balls, Pike had to put his hand against the wall just to keep his balance. She licked his bottom lip while stroking his shaft and rolling his testicles between her slick fingers. The torturous little minx worked her ringed fingers just below the head of his cock where it was the most sensitive.

His stomach clenched and he pulled back quickly. "Not yet, baby."

She nipped his lip. "Take me to bed."

That was all the instruction he needed. Pike quickly rinsed the soap clinging to his skin and switched over to the dryer. Unable to wait for a full drying cycle, Pike scooped up his still damp wife and carted her into the bedroom. He tossed her onto the bed.

As she giggled wildly, he crawled onto the mattress and parted her thighs. He wasted

no time diving into her pussy, shocking her by the sound of her high-pitched squeal. He circled the tiny pink pearl of her clit before sucking it between his lips and rolling his tongue against it. She moaned and lifted her hips.

Emboldened by her enthusiasm, Pike slid his tongue between her folds and dipped into the juicy opening of her sex. He'd never been with a woman who got so wet and aroused so very quickly. He loved the taste of her, the salty musk bursting on his tongue. He returned his attention to her clit, suckling and licking the swollen nub until she practically ground her pussy against his lips.

With one final kiss to her pink flesh, Pike pulled away rather suddenly. He had her right where he wanted her. Laleh whimpered with protest and clutched at him. He avoided her grasp and settled next to her on their bed. He grabbed her by the waist and dragged her onto him. Laleh seemed to understand what he wanted and straddled his hips. He caressed her stomach and gripped her waist. "I want to you to ride me, Laleh. Ride me until you come all over my cock."

Laleh gasped, her bright blue eyes widening at his naughty request. She timidly clasped the base of his penis and lifted her ass. Tongue against her lower lip, Laleh lined up their bodies and slid down onto him. With a little wiggle, Laleh settled into a comfortable position.

Pike's eyes closed at the heavenly sensation of being swallowed by her molten heat. His eyes snapped open as she swayed forward and then back. He sensed her uncertainty and used his hands to guide her movements. She had the most adorable look of concentration on her face as she slid back and forth over him.

Cupping the back of her head, he sat up and kissed her. Her arms curved around his shoulders as she made tiny rocking movements. Pike laid back down and ran his hands over her stomach and breasts. As she grew more confident, Laleh flicked her hips a bit more wildly. Those gorgeous breasts bounced and jiggled. He toyed with her stiff nipples, eliciting sharp gasps when he pinched them lightly.

Laleh braced her hand on his lower stomach and shifted her bottom up and then down. Her eyes widened at the realization she could bounce on his rigid cock. His hands moved to the plump globes of her ass, holding them as she lifted up and slammed down on him. Her skin flushed with exertion and passion. The bed rattled with her almost frantic movements.

The slick inner walls of her pussy squeezed him with every down stroke. Her slippery cream coated their skin. Lifting his head, he watched his dick sliding in and out of her cunt. As she gyrated atop him, Laleh looked like the most exotic thing he'd ever seen. When she cupped her own breasts and threw back her head, Pike nearly came. He clamped down to regain control but knew he wouldn't last much longer.

Pike ran his thumb over her lips, coaxing them to part. He brushed his thumb over her tongue, wetting the rough pad. She regarded him curiously. Pike placed his wet thumb over her clit. Laleh groaned in delight, suddenly understanding what he meant to do. Leaning forward, she placed her hands on his shoulders and went wild on his cock. He'd never seen anything like it. Laleh was a woman possessed by lust as she rode him hard and fast. His thumb circled her clit with quick strokes. Her fingernails scratched him as she panted and neared her climax.

"I'm coming!" Her blue eyes widened in shock as her juicy cunt shuddered with spasms.

Pike couldn't hold back any longer. He clasped her waist and pounded his cock into her wet sheath. Hips snapping, he plunged repeatedly in and out of her pussy, making her scream with pleasure. She practically convulsed. His toes curled and legs muscles tightened as he neared his crisis. He growled as he came, his pelvis slamming into her. Laleh continued rocking, the tight slick channel of her sex milking his cum.

She fell onto him, cheek against his shoulder. Her damp hair covered his face and jumped with every heavy breath he exhaled. He brushed the tendrils from his face and stroked her back. His pulse pounded in his veins, his breaths still ragged. She nuzzled his neck with the tip of her nose, obviously content to be held by him.

And for just that moment, Pike wished they could stay like that forever, clutched in the heaven of afterglow.

Chapter Ten

Perched in a hardback chair in Ambassador Leroy's office, Laleh waited nervously as the ambassador read through her resume on his touch screen tablet.

"Impressive," Ambassador Leroy murmured as he set aside the tablet. "I did a search yesterday evening and found some of your published papers. I even took the liberty of contacting your advisor, Dr. Malzanowski. He couldn't say enough good things about you."

Laleh wasn't quite sure how to respond. Luckily, the ambassador continued talking.

"I understand your focus up to this point has been generally on academic research. Unfortunately, I'm not in a position to offer that kind of work."

"I understand," Laleh said, her hopes for employment fading.

"However," Ambassador Leroy continued, "I am looking for a cultural attaché of sorts."

"Attaché?"

Nodding, he sat forward and rested his arms on his desk. "In the traditional sense, a cultural attaché represents the culture of his or her home country or planet, as may be the case. My needs are somewhat different. I need someone expertly versed in the various cultures and customs I might encounter on any given day as the Federation's Ambassador from Earth to Skyport Virgo."

"I see."

"With your educational background and polyglot status, you're the perfect candidate for such work. Would you be interested in such a position?"

Although working in diplomacy wasn't exactly what she'd imagined doing after earning her PhD, Laleh knew she'd be a fool to turn down what promised to be an interesting post. "I'd be very interested." She paused, wondering how her immigration status might affect his offer. "I think I should tell you I'm not a full citizen of Earth yet. I'm currently on a spousal visa, awaiting naturalization."

Ambassador Leroy waved his hand. "Oh, I know all about that. Your status as a refugee from Hezma-12 and the visa problems you recently encountered."

Laleh sat back in surprise. "You do? How?"

He smiled. "I make it my business to know everything about everyone. I couldn't very well offer you a job without knowing whether or not you'd even be eligible."

"Of course," Laleh replied.

"There is something that concerns me." A grim frown flattened his lips. "I noticed your family—a brother, I believe—lodged a complaint with the Immigration board."

Laleh reeled with shock. "What! When?"

"The day the *Spica* left Houston. Did you not know?"

She shook her head emphatically. "My transmitter was busted the morning we boarded the ship. It's still in the repair department. If any messages were sent to me, I wouldn't know about them."

"Ah," Ambassador Leroy said. "Apparently your brother believes you should never have been issued a marriage license as you're legally engaged to someone on your home planet. However, the Federation doesn't recognize engagement contracts issued between

adults and children. From what I gathered from a friend in the department, he was laughed out of the office. He reacted violently and was forcibly removed from the building—and Earth, as I understand it."

Laleh winced at the thought of Jai causing such a spectacle. Her stomach twisted, knowing Jai wouldn't leave it at that.

"I wouldn't worry, Mrs. Grayson," Ambassador Leroy said, as if sensing her worry. "You have the protection of the Federation behind you. Not to mention a husband at the top of Spacefleet ranks."

"That's true." Laleh tried to convince herself of it as she spoke but something deep down inside told her otherwise. She shook off the anxiety, choosing instead to focus on the present. "And you should call me Laleh."

"As you wish," the Ambassador replied. "I'll have my contacts in the human resources department send along the necessary forms. Hopefully, we'll have all the red tape squared away by the time we reach Skyport Virgo. Now," he sat back, "let's discuss your duties..."

For the better part of two hours, they discussed the ins and outs of her position. She'd have her own office in the consulate and would be expected to serve as a consultant to the various Federation ambassadors stationed at Virgo. By and large, Laleh would operate independently and without oversight. She'd even have the chance to host cultural galas and exhibits, if she wished.

As Laleh left Ambassador Leroy's office, the endless possibilities of her new position swirled in her mind. If she was smart, Laleh figured she could even find a way to work in a little research here and there. Who knew what various planetary races she might encounter working in the diplomatic service?

"Hold that elevator!"

At the sound of Quinn's voice, Laleh's hand snatched out between the closing doors. He jogged inside and shot her a dazzling smile. "How's the toe?"

"Better," Laleh said, lifting her sandaled foot. "I still have the brace for a few more days but I'm not in any pain."

"Glad to hear it. Where are you headed?"

"The bridge," she replied, talking loud enough to activate the elevator. "You?"

"Launch pad. We've got a space leap training exercise."

"What exactly does that mean?"

Quinn leaned back against the wall and began talking animatedly. "It's a type of maneuver Omegas do. It allows us to move between ships sans tether. We literally jump from one ship to the other, utilizing various thrusters and stabilizers mounted on our suits."

Terror rippled through Laleh just thinking about leaping through space without any kind of safety net. Sarcasm filled her voice. "Sounds like fun."

A boyish grin lit up his face. "You have no idea. Maybe sometime you can come over to the simulator. I think you'd enjoy it."

Laleh suppressed a shudder. "I don't think so. I like to keep my feet firmly settled on the ground."

Quinn laughed and shook his head. "You don't know what you're missing."

"I'd prefer to keep it that way." The elevator stopped on her floor and the doors opened. As she made to leave, Quinn touched her shoulder. Her gaze skipped to his hand.

"Yes?"

"You want to get together some time? Maybe catch a movie or go bowling on the Rec Deck?"

Laleh realized she needed to be perfectly clear with her new friend about establishing boundaries. "Quinn, I'm married. Happily married," she added for good measure.

"I know."

"Do you? I'd like to be friends with you, but I just have to make sure we're on the same page."

"We're on the same page," Quinn assured her.

"Okay." Laleh nodded. "Then sure I'd love to get together on the Rec Deck."

"You free tomorrow evening? Say 1900 hours?"

"Sounds good. I'll meet you there." Laleh stepped off the elevator. "Bye!"

"Later."

She found Pike waiting for her. By the perturbed expression on his face, he'd recognized the voice of her elevator companion. Remembering how he'd acted the last time she'd been with Quinn, she decided to be completely up front with him. She wasn't about to let him dictate who she could and couldn't be friends with but respected his feelings enough to be honest.

"Yes, that was Quinn, and yes, we're getting together tomorrow evening on the Rec Deck." Laleh brushed her lips against his cheek. "Please don't blow your stack."

His jaw twitched but he remained calm. "I trust your judgment."

Pleased by his response, she smiled. "Good."

"How did your interview with the ambassador go?"

She bubbled with excitement. "You're looking at Skyport Virgo's new cultural attaché."

Pike's jaw dropped with surprise. He crushed her in a bear hug. "Congratulations! That's great!"

"I was stunned," Laleh said as he released her. "I thought I was going to be offered a position as an assistant. I never imagined I'd be offered a place on the diplomatic service."

"I know it's not academic research, but I think it's perfect for you." He tipped her chin and kissed her. "I'm really happy for you."

Laleh tingled under his warm gaze. But then she remembered what else the ambassador had told her.

"What's wrong?" Pike seemed to sense her worry.

She sighed heavily. "When Ambassador Leroy pulled my file yesterday, he discovered an issue."

"What kind of issue?" Pike warily asked.

"Jai lodged a complaint with the Immigration office, disputing the issuance of a marriage license to me—us. They wouldn't give him the time of day, and he apparently became violent and was booted from Earth."

"You're worried he's going to pop up again, aren't you?"

"You don't know what he's like, Pike. He's not going to stop. It's about family honor now. Mother and I embarrassed my father by running away. Jai failed to bring me back. Now I've married someone else." Laleh swallowed hard. "There's only one way to restore the family's honor."

Pike swore under his breath. Apparently, he understood the warped principles behind Hezman honor codes. He knew what she meant. A fierce look of protection flashed across his face. He cupped her cheek. "Laleh, he's never going to touch you again."

He spoke with such ferocity it shook her to the very core. The strongest sense of safety and security washed over her. Standing there, his hand on her face, she truly believed he could protect her from Jai, from anything. She just hoped her belief would translate into reality.

* * * *

Laleh nearly collapsed in a fit of giggles as Quinn threw yet another gutter ball. For a man so skilled in weapons and combat, he was an absolute nightmare with a bowling ball. He'd busted his butt on the first throw, his shoes sliding on the polished wooden floor. The sight of him flailing on the ground had nearly killed her. Laleh's ribs still ached from the laughing fit. How a man could leap through space from ship to ship but not have the balance to remain upright when launching a bowling ball confounded Laleh.

"That's it!" Quinn threw up his hands. "I'm done making a fool of myself today. You win."

Laleh pointed to the digital scorecard. "It's not much of a forfeit when you haven't a snowball's chance in hell of winning."

Quinn snorted and flopped down beside her on the retro style chairs. The bowling alley had been designed rather whimsically in a twentieth century style, the 1970s if Laleh remembered correctly. The garish color combinations—brown and orange and chartreuse—would have looked absolutely hideous anywhere else. Even the music blaring over the sound system was period appropriate.

As she sat back and sipped her soda, Laleh wondered if Pike liked to bowl. "I should bring Pike here," she mused aloud.

Quinn swallowed a mouthful of beer. "He won't come."

She frowned. "Why not?"

Quinn gestured around the bowling alley. "Take a look around, Laleh. Do you see any other officers?"

She didn't. "You're an officer."

"Non-commissioned," Quinn corrected. "The admiral is the highest ranking commissioned officer aboard this vessel. It would be completely inappropriate for him to fraternize with enlisted members."

Laleh started to object but realized Quinn was likely right. And it made her sad. Even in the mess hall, Pike sat apart from the general crew in an area populated with officers. So where did he go to blow off steam? She knew there was an officer's club a few decks up but it hardly seemed like a place to go for a little fun. It was more of an upscale restaurant and bar.

Quinn stretched out his legs. "I don't envy him one bit. A lot of pressure on that man's shoulders." He shook his head. "You know he's the youngest admiral in the history of Spacefleet."

"I didn't," Laleh admitted, feeling a little guilty at how little she knew of her husband.

"Well he is," Quinn said. "After the Faltador Campaign, it's no surprise."

Laleh's interest piqued. The judge who'd married them had mentioned his daughter

being injured in that conflict. "What was the Faltador Campaign?"

Quinn got a far-off look in his eye. His entire mood shifted from happy to somber. "Thirteen months of the bloodiest fighting on the Outer Nine. We'd pushed the Scourge back and forced a retreat. They regrouped in the Faltador System and launched a brutal series of sustained attacks. They even hit us with terrorist attacks, blowing up our vessels from the inside out. Absolute nightmare."

He paused and rubbed his chin. After a long swig of beer, he continued with his tale. "We'd lost thousands of Spacefleet members. Entire ships destroyed. Everyone knew the Faltador Campaign would make or break the war. When intelligence located the Hive, a massive floating vessel hosting almost the entire Scourge force, they decided to act swiftly, decisively."

Completely enthralled, Laleh leaned forward. "How?"

"The Admiralty loaded up the ships captained by their best and brightest with Spacefleet's most powerful bombs and sent them on a kamikaze mission." He stared into his mug. "My crew was held back on the second wave of contingency ships. We watched the live feed from the launch pad. I'll never forget it as long as I live. How Grayson or any of those who survived ever manage to get a wink of sleep, I'll never know."

Dread gripped her belly. "What happened?"

"The first wave of ships was detected and all hell broke loose. They took heavy fire. You couldn't see much of anything on the video screens for all the explosions. Somehow, Grayson kept his ship, the *Icarus*, moving forward. They took a nasty hit to the weapon's deck. They couldn't launch anything. One of the other Spacefleet ships had managed to damage the Hive until they were sitting ducks. Another ship had slammed into their main weapon's system. They were finally vulnerable."

Laleh's stomach churned as she listened to the violent tale. "But?"

"No one knew how long the Hive would stay down. Admiral Grayson made the only choice he could. He ordered an immediate evacuation of the ship and set the *Icarus* on a collision course for the heart of the Hive."

"What's so bad about that?"

Quinn turned a grim face toward her. "Almost a fourth of the ship's crew couldn't jettison their escape pods. The *Icarus* had taken too much damage on that one side. Grayson knew this, of course, but he didn't have any other choice. He knew the arithmetic of war. Sacrificing a few hundred lives saved hundreds of thousands of others."

She couldn't comprehend what she'd just heard. Her belly lurched at the idea of Pike sending so many to their deaths. She knew nothing of the realities of war and would never judge him for what he'd done. But she couldn't imagine how he'd borne that burden, how he'd lived every day knowing he'd sacrificed his own crew.

"I shouldn't have told you." Quinn seemed suddenly regretful. He sat forward and touched her jean-clad knee. "You have to understand, Laleh. The rules of the battlefield are nothing like those of civilized life. We do things out there..." His voice trailed off. "Just don't look unkindly on your husband. His decision ended the conflict on the Outer Nine. Within Spacefleet, he's revered as a true hero, a leader willing to make the ugly choices that sometimes have to be made."

Laleh finally understood all the adoring looks of the cadets and the respect the *Spica's* crew showed him. And that haunted sadness she'd spied in his eyes that first night

she'd met him. It all made sense.

Overwhelmed by the need to see him, Laleh stood rather abruptly. "I need to go."

Quinn nodded understandingly. "I'm sorry if I've upset you."

She touched his shoulder. "You haven't." Not wanting Quinn to feel awkward, she grinned mischievously. "Before we get together again, I'd suggest you practice your bowling game. It's pretty sad how thoroughly I whipped your ass tonight."

Quinn threw back his head and laughed. "Forget bowling. Next time we play pool." "Deal."

Laleh ruffled his hair and headed toward the exits. She paused at the shoe counter to exchange her bowling shoes for her clogs. Ugly as they were, the orange clogs were delightfully comfy. She hurried through the various halls, rode a series of escalators, and hopped onto an elevator.

When she entered their quarters, Laleh found Pike lounging on the couch, bare feet propped on the coffee table. He'd obviously showered, the smell of his soap filling the air. Her gaze swept down his naked chest and abdomen. Only a pair of boxer briefs touched his skin.

Pike turned down the soccer match on the television screen. "You're home early."

And suddenly Laleh didn't know what to say. Maybe it was better not to say anything at all about what she knew. He looked so relaxed and content. Bringing up such an ugly memory seemed cruel.

She shrugged casually and kicked off her clogs. "Quinn's a terrible bowler. Didn't take me long to clean the floor with him."

Pike chuckled. "I know it's petty, but I'm really glad to hear that."

Laleh giggled and kissed his cheek. "It's okay. I won't tell anyone about your gloating." She snuggled close and idly rubbed his tummy. "So who's winning?"

"The red team." And by red team he meant the crimson-skinned players.

"Darnathians," Laleh said. "The red guys are from Darnathia."

"I wondered what that abbreviation stood for." Pike gestured to the scoreboard in the lower left hand corner of the screen.

"Interesting race," Laleh murmured as she drew her initials on Pike's skin.

"How so?"

"They have a rather unique mating ritual."

Pike's attention snapped to her face. "How unique?"

She rolled her eyes, not at all surprised the mention of sex had intrigued him so. "When a male Darnathian reaches his twenty-fifth birthday, he visits a female matchmaker. She uses a system of star charts to find his perfect soul mate—another man. They live together for eighteen months before visiting a second matchmaker, who is always a male, to find their female soul mate."

Pike looked skeptical. "Two men sharing one woman?"

"They have some of the highest rates of self-reported happiness in the Federation. And it's not always just a threesome," she added. "Sometimes widows and widowers are folded into existing marital units."

Pike scoffed. "I don't buy that happiness bullshit for a minute. You expect me to believe there aren't any jealous flare ups?"

"It's a different culture, Pike. From birth, they're surrounded by polyamorous relationships. I'm sure they look at us and think we're nuts for pairing off. Maybe there's

something to be said for variety in a long-term relationship. I'm sure there are other perks."

Pike eyebrows arched. "Is that so?"

Laleh's shoulders bobbed. "If a woman has two partners, she'd likely have a better chance of always having emotional support. If Partner A is having a rough week, Partner B can always step up to the plate. And sexually a woman with two partners might be more satisfied."

"Off!" Pike addressed the television as he jerked his feet from the table and turned on the couch. He gave her a hard look. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"What?" Laleh was bewildered by his apparent unease.

"You just came from a bowling date with Quinn and now you're talking about the perks of threesomes. What am I supposed to think, Laleh?" Pike looked incredibly upset.

Laleh realized her blunder. "Ohmigod! No! I was just discussing Darnathians from a purely cultural and sociological standpoint." She moved closer and put her hands on his shoulders. "I am so not interested in that kind of relationship, Pike."

"Good thing," he gruffly replied. Possessiveness gleamed in his eyes. "I don't care to share what's mine."

Excitement rippled through her body. There was something so primitive about a man staking his claim on his woman. She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. "Me either."

Chapter Eleven

Pike rubbed his sleepy eyes and glanced at his alarm clock. It wouldn't chirp for another twenty-seven minutes. He considered slipping out of bed and into a shower, but the sensation of Laleh's warm naked body curled up against his kept him in place. Her cheek rested against his chest, her arm draped over his stomach. He stroked her hair and enjoyed a few minutes of relaxing silence.

They'd made good time, just a little over three weeks, crossing the various galaxies on their route. In a just a few short hours, the *Spica* would dock at Skyport Virgo, and Pike would relinquish command of the ship to Captain Arnot. Although the *Spica* remained his flagship, he likely wouldn't captain her again for at least two years. Once he relieved Admiral Bolanle, the temporary commander of the skyport, Pike's full focus would be on carrying out his orders on Virgo.

Pike had full confidence in his ability to serve with distinction in his new post, but it was impossible to completely squash that niggling doubt. There were new responsibilities and duties. No matter how hard he'd prepared for this moment, it wouldn't be nearly enough. He had to trust in his ability to adapt and overcome.

Laleh's breathing changed. Certain she'd drift off again, Pike continued his slow petting. Although she'd been working out of Ambassador Leroy's office every day for the past two weeks, today was Laleh's first official day at her new position. He'd sensed her anxiety last night and couldn't blame her. Going from the rather insulated world of academia into the often high-stress realm of diplomacy wasn't going to be simple. She'd likely face a few bumps and make a *faux pas* or two along the way.

A quirked smile curved his mouth as he considered her propensity to speak rather frankly. In the diplomatic world, a poorly chosen word could tip the delicate balances. He found her bluntness rather endearing. There was no bullshit to wade through when it came to Laleh. But others? He could see how they might take offense. He wondered how long it would take her to learn to temper her statements. Or if she even could.

Laleh stirred, her hand drifting across his belly. His eyes closed at her feather soft touch on his skin. She always seemed to know just how to touch him. Her lips danced across his chest, her tongue flicking his nipple. In a single fluid motion, Laleh slid on top of him, her knees settling on either side of his thighs. Her teeth grazed his left pec, her nails brushing over his shoulders.

Pike shuddered as she kissed her way down his body. Her tongue zigzagged down his abdomen, following the trail of hair leading straight down to his stiffening cock. Palms flattened against the sheet, Pike gulped and gave in to the excitement of a little early morning head. She'd only put her mouth on him once before, just a few days earlier. She'd been eager but a little hesitant. He'd stayed perfectly still, quelling the desire to pump his hips or guide her movements with his hands on her face, for fear of spooking her. She'd gotten him close to coming before sliding onto his cock and riding him to her own orgasm.

Later, when he'd questioned her, she'd admitted she feared he would find her skill lacking. He'd done his best to explain to her he could care less about her inexperience. Her enthusiasm more than made up for a little fumbling here or there. He never wanted

her to feel inadequate or uncomfortable with him.

Laleh disappeared under the covers. She pulled away from his body just long enough to toss back the comforter and top sheet before moving back between his legs. Hands on his thighs, she kissed and teased all around his cock, her mouth coming dangerously close to closing around his crown but never quite touching him. She finally grasped his rigid length and lightly stroked. Pike could feel her hot breath against his skin as she moved closer. He held his breath in anticipation.

When her wet tongue laved his sac, Pike stiffened and groaned. Her ringed fingers fondled his shaft. She sucked his balls between her lips, her tongue languidly sliding over the sensitive patch of skin. Pike thought he might die in that moment of absolute ecstasy. She released him from her mouth and worked her tongue along the seam and up toward his cock.

With one long swipe, Laleh licked the length of his dick. Her tongue fluttered against his frenulum. Pike's jaw tightened as her mouth engulfed the head of his cock. The gentle suction of her hot, wet mouth drove him mad. Ever so slowly, Laleh took more of him into her mouth. Her slick lips slid down his cock, her velvety tongue pressed to the underside of his shaft. His breath caught in his throat as he felt her jaw relax. His penis found its home in the back of her throat.

He didn't dare move. He knew one bump of his cock to her sensitive throat could end it all.

Just as slowly, Laleh moved back up his shaft. Saliva slicking her strokes, she bobbed on his cock. Her hand curled around his stem and worked in tandem with her mouth. Sucking and licking, she alternated the depth of her bobbing movements. Head back, Pike stared at the ceiling and reveled in the sensation of his wife's amazingly talented mouth. The noisy squelch of their naughty activity filled the darkness. He became so hard he ached for release.

When Laleh hummed in apparent pleasure, Pike gasped and clutched the sheet. The vibrations rippling through his cock made his balls draw up tightly. His hips pumped inadvertently. Laleh took it in stride and moaned as if to encourage his participation. His fingers tangled in her hair as he gently clasped her head and slowly thrust into her welcoming mouth.

As if sensing he was close, Laleh's teasing tongue and lips concentrated on the head of his cock. White hot desire roiled in his lower belly. A few more strokes and he'd be done for. Although it took every ounce of his self-control, Pike stilled his pumping hips. He didn't want to force Laleh to do anything she wasn't ready to do just yet.

"Baby, I'm about to come." Pike's voice was thick with sleep and desire.

"I want to taste your cum."

Her boldly spoken words nearly had him spurting right then and there. When her lips settled around his cock, Pike let loose of his control. He thrust into the molten wetness of her mouth. Calves flexing, breaths short, Pike chased his climax.

"Laleh!" Growling her name, he spilled his seed into her receiving mouth. He could feel her lips tightening around him, her tongue fluttering over his head as she swallowed every last drop of his cum. He jerked again and again as she continued stimulating him, drawing out his release until he begged her to stop.

He wiped a shaky hand down his face. "Fuck, Laleh! That was incredible."

"You're welcome."

In her cheeky reply, Pike could almost hear the mischievous smirk she now likely wore. He reached for her. "Come here."

Laleh crawled into his arms. He captured her lips in a deep kiss. His flavor clung to her tongue. Pike rolled his wife onto her back and nibbled his way down her body. He nuzzled her pussy, inhaling the scent of her arousal. "One good turn deserves another..."

* * * *

Laleh slumped into her desk chair and sighed with exhaustion. She'd been on her feet all day without a break. First she'd rushed to the observation deck to watch the docking of the *Spica* at Skyport Virgo. Finally seeing the floating space city had knocked the breath from her lungs. It was simply too colossal to comprehend. As a central hub to a fleet of fifteen docked starships, Virgo supported tens of thousands of Spacefleet personnel, Federation employees, and civilians. Her stomach had dropped at the realization she'd have to learn a whole new series of schematics.

Luckily, her fears had been proven unfounded. The second she stepped off the *Spica* and into the bustling world of the skyport, Laleh had spotted interactive wall maps and even a handful of Virgo employees whose sole purpose was to provide directions. Finally, a place designed with the less navigationally blessed in mind!

The skyport was so vast Laleh had barely reached the diplomatic wing when she'd been summoned to the lushly landscaped and sumptuously decorated central atria for the handover ceremony. She made it to her seat in the front row just seconds before Pike marched onto the stage.

Who would have guessed a ceremonial handover of command between Pike and Admiral Bolanle would have been so involved and boring! Standing in the crowd, Laleh had easily read her husband's face. Others might have been fooled, thinking his demeanor professional and serious, but Laleh knew better. He was bored to tears and likely found the whole ceremony a waste of time.

As soon as the ceremony ended, Laleh had been shuffled over to a luncheon celebrating Admiral Bonlanle's retirement and Pike's promotion. Even though she sat at Pike's side, they hardly exchanged a handful of words. It seemed everyone at their table had a list of questions they were desperate to ask. Laleh's head still reeled from the crush of new faces. She hoped she'd have time to browse through Virgo's directory to acquaint herself with the names of people she'd likely cross paths with again.

The second lunch ended, Pike rushed off to take proper command. Ambassador Leroy had whisked Laleh back to the consulate and introduced her to the other ambassadors and staff. A total of nineteen ambassadors representing various planets and planetary systems were stationed at Virgo. They each had support staffs ranging from just a handful to a dozen members. Getting to know everyone would take weeks.

Since Ambassador Leroy occupied the senior position in the consulate, Laleh answered directly to him. Not having to adjust to a new superior lessened some of her anxiety. Judging by the dozens of messages blinking on the widescreen atop her desk, the ambassador had been talking her up to his colleagues. Already she had requests for consults. Her blood pressure skyrocketed just thinking about the backlog she already had to work through—and she'd been on the job less than a day!

Laleh cast a surveying glance around her office. It was a nice size, twice that of the personal office in their quarters. It was centrally located in the consulate wing too. Since

the opening of Virgo a few months earlier, the office had been used for storage. It was obvious some of the diplomatic staff had tried to clear out the room and convert it to office space. A few stray boxes remained behind. Mismatched furniture had been hastily placed: a desk by the panoramic window, a pair of high-backed chairs for guests, and a bookshelf.

Laleh made a face as she tried to find a comfortable spot in her desk chair. It was terribly uncomfortable. Tomorrow she'd go begging around the department for a new one.

A timid knock gained her attention. She snapped her gaze to the open doorway. An ensign in the yellow uniform of the technical sector waited expectantly. "Yes?"

"I've brought your transmitter, Mrs. Grayson." He crossed the office and set the device on her desk.

Laleh nearly laughed. Her missing transmitter had becoming something of a joke between Pike and herself. "Oh. Thanks."

"On behalf of the repair department, I wanted to apologize for the poor service we rendered you. The transmitter fell behind a desk. We only found it earlier today when we had to make room for a new workstation. Again, I'm so sorry for the inconvenience."

Laleh dismissively waved her hand. "Don't worry about it. I had most of my email routed to the hub in our quarters." She decided not to say anything about the three weeks of video messages she'd now have to wade through.

The ensign disappeared and Laleh switched on her transmitter. The familiar greeting tune filled her with relief. When the screen lit up, she winced. Thirty-nine video messages and more than four hundred emails. Moving her finger up and down in front of the screen, Laleh scanned the video messages for anything urgent. Her gaze skipped over the entries but jumped back to one specific caller ID.

Jai.

Heart in her throat, Laleh dropped her transmitter. Mouth dry and legs shaking, she bolted from her chair and rushed to the door. She quickly shut and locked it before racing back to her chair. Fingers trembling, she opened the message. Her brother's snarling voice filtered through the speakers.

"You conniving little slut!" Jai's angry face filled the small screen. Fury twisted his features, making him look even more intimidating than usual. There was so much of their father in him. And it terrified her. "You're just a lying, thieving slag like your whore of a mother. You don't have me fooled for one minute. I won't allow you to embarrass this family again." He lowered his voice and moved closer to the camera. "Don't think for one minute your starman can protect you from me."

The feed cut out suddenly. Nausea swirled in Laleh's belly. She clutched at her throat and gulped for air. *Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.*

Laleh knew Jai wouldn't leave well enough alone. Restoring the family honor demanded blood—her blood. In the civilized world, the idea of slaughtering a woman for some transgression—whether real or imagined—was simply unthinkable, barbaric. On Hezma-12, it was the law. A family's besmirched honor cast them as pariahs.

Laleh could only imagine the humiliation her father and Jai had suffered because of their escape. Bringing her back to marry and satisfy a contract would have made things right in their eyes. Now that she'd gone and married Pike, she'd made that impossible. General Feeshan would never accept her. He'd probably demanded a hefty sum to recoup

his loss of honor as the spurned bridegroom.

And she'd had sex with Pike, lots and lots of sex. In the eyes of Hezman society, Laleh was little better than a whore. Her marriage to an outsider, a starman, would never be recognized. Within the Hezman world, she'd simply been engaging in premarital sex, a crime punishable by death. If Jai ever managed to drag her back...

A message box popped up on her widescreen monitor. She jumped when Ambassador Leroy appeared and addressed her. "Laleh, would you mind coming down to my office? I need some assistance with a translation."

She quickly regained her composure. "I'll be right there."

The box closed, and she exhaled a shuddery breath. There was nothing to be done about Jai right now. She pushed aside her fear, boxed it away, and left her office.

Chapter Twelve

Exhausted and desperate for some peace, Pike traversed the seemingly endless corridors and elevators between his office in the skyport and their rooms aboard the *Spica*. He couldn't wait until the admiral's quarters on Virgo were cleared out and ready for occupation. His daily commute would be much shorter then.

Of course, Laleh had been less than excited about the idea of packing up and moving so soon, but the promise of nearly triple their current space and a chance to really decorate had appeased her somewhat. He made a mental note to look into finding some movers. Surely there were some ensigns aboard the *Spica* hungry for a little extra spending money and a chance to ingratiate themselves with the admiral.

Pike wondered if the day could have been any more of a clusterfuck. The public handover ceremony had dragged on for what felt like hours. It was a pointless exercise and a complete waste of time. Instead of getting straight to the business at hand, Pike had been forced to smile and schmooze.

By the time they'd finally gotten around to the official handover, Admiral Bolanle's access codes had already expired, making it impossible for him to relinquish command to Pike. What had followed was five mind numbing hours of untangling and hacking away at bureaucratic red tape. Every time they neared a solution, some random regulation popped up to derail their progress. Finally, they'd managed to obtain new codes but not before a literal act of Federation congress had been hastily applied.

Nightmare, what an absolute nightmare!

Pike spied the door to their quarters. A sense of calm immediately washed over him. But the moment he stepped into their living area, Pike sensed something was wrong. Laleh banged around in the kitchen. Knowing they had busy days ahead of them, they'd agreed to order in room service that morning. *What in the world is she doing knocking around in there now? And what the hell is that smell?*

"Laleh?"

She jumped and spun toward him. Irritation creased her forehead. "Don't do that!"

Pike recoiled in shock. She'd never snapped at him like that. He tentatively moved closer to the kitchen but kept a safe distance, just in case. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Her snippy retort didn't convince him. She angrily stirred a pan of obviously burned food. Rice maybe. Chicken too.

Some primitive part of his brain urged Pike to beat a hasty retreat. The idiot in him pushed him forward to seek an answer. "You don't seem fine. And that's burned."

Spoon raised, Laleh pivoted quickly. "Really, Pike? Is it?"

He stepped back as she switched off the heat and tossed the pan into the sink. It hissed and sizzled as a stream of water rushed into the steaming hot pan. Immediately, Laleh attacked the burned food with the spoon. She sloshed water and burned bits everywhere. Shiny tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Stop." Pike wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her tight against his chest. He wrenched the spoon from her hand and dropped it into the sink. His cheek touched hers as he stroked her face, desperate to calm her. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I burned dinner."

"I don't care," he said over her wail. "Did something happen at work?"

"No, but they found my transmitter."

He kissed her temple as she sobbed. "Was it broken beyond repair?"

She shook her head, crying loudly now. "He's never going to stop. He's never going to leave me alone."

Concern pierced his stomach. He knew even before he asked. "Who?"

Laleh wormed free of his embrace and strode to the dining table. She picked up her transmitter, scrolled through the screen, and thrust it into his hands. Rage surged through his veins as Jai threatened Laleh. That sniveling little shit! Pike's fist curled as the need to pound Jai's face overwhelmed him. If he ever got his hands on Jai again, he wouldn't be able to let the bastard walk away.

The sound of Laleh's panicked sobs tore at his heart. Pike set aside the transmitter and gathered her in his arms. She trembled violently so he squeezed tighter, desperate to reassure her. He sensed she'd finally had enough. He knew only too well the shock of the unexpected. Receiving this kind of threat could throw one's carefully orchestrated plans off-kilter so quickly.

At night, when they clung to one another in the darkness, she'd often confessed she felt more safe and secure than she ever had at any other point in her life. Now Jai was threatening that security, the thing she'd craved most since childhood. Pike wouldn't allow it. He vowed silently to ensure Laleh never again experienced such fear.

When she jerked on the zipper of his jacket, each sharp tug knocking their bodies together, Pike's first instinct was to stop her but he sensed she needed intimacy to feel safe again. He understood that desperate desire for skin to skin contact, had craved it so keenly on too many nights to count. Her lips moved along his jaw. Her hand cupped his half-mast cock through his trousers. Resistance was futile.

Not that he cared to resist his wife's seduction.

Pike crouched and grasped the backs of her thighs, lifting her from the floor. She plundered his mouth, her tongue darting between his lips to swipe his tongue. He took a few cautious steps forward and deposited her on the dining table.

He wasted no time with the buttons lining the front of her blouse. Taking two handfuls of material, he ripped downward and out, scattering buttons everywhere. Laleh gasped with surprise. Lust darkened her gaze. She licked her lips and grabbed his tee, pulling it from his pants. She frantically unbuckled his belt and dealt with his fly. In an instant, her greedy little fingers were on his cock.

Groaning with hunger, Pike bent low and captured her mouth. His hands slid inside her ruined blouse and glided over red lace covered curves. He skimmed her ribs and waist before outlining her hips and legs. He roughly shoved the black and grey pinstripe fabric of her ass hugging skirt up her thighs.

Hands braced on the table, Laleh lifted her bottom long enough for Pike to push her skirt up around her waist and take hold of the waistband of her lacy red panties. In a few quick jerks, he divested her of the undergarments and left them dangling from her ankle. He stepped between her thighs and crushed her lips in another passionate kiss.

Tonight there would be no finesse, no gentle caresses and patient discovery.

Laleh reached between their bodies and clasped his rigid cock. She pulled him close and rubbed the head between her silky folds, her slippery cream already coating the pink skin there. Her musky scent filled his nostrils. His belly clenched with need.

Pike grabbed her hips and drove into Laleh with one forceful thrust. Eyes widening, she sucked in a short breath. He slammed into her again, her slick walls welcoming his aching dick. Laleh collapsed back onto the table. Her legs wrapped around his body, her heels touching the backs of his thighs. Pike plunged into her soaking wet cunt again and again. Laleh grunted, arching her back, shoulders barely touching the table top. Arms over her head, she gripped the table's edge, her body sliding up and down, the tablecloth bunching under her bare buttocks. She seemed lost in the ecstasy of the moment.

"Touch your clit, Laleh."

She shuddered at his order and brought trembling fingertips to her mouth, wetting her own fingertips with her saliva. He watched her hand move to her mound, her fingers sliding between her cunt lips. She found the pink nub and rubbed in circles. Pike stared at his shiny cock plunging in and out of her pussy, at her fingers working her clit. Lust rocked his core.

"Harder, Pike," Laleh begged. Her thighs tightened around his waist as the pace of her fingers quickened. "Faster."

He did exactly as she asked. He took her hard and fast, shoving the table across the floor with every frantic thrust. The walls of her sex fluttered around him in a split-second of warning before she exploded in bliss.

"Pike!" She bucked wildly atop the table, her fingers still manipulating her clit. "Pike!"

He loved the sound of his name on her lips when she came. It touched something primal in him. Gritting his teeth, Pike thrust one last time, his cum spurting inside her. Thighs trembling, he leaned forward and slid his arms under shoulders. He lifted her quickly, their bodies still joined, and kicked out the nearest chair.

Slumping into the seat, Pike cradled Laleh close. Their fluids mingled as they came down from the high of orgasm. She buried her nose in the curve of his throat. Her fingers sifted through the short hair at the nape of his neck. Every now and then she pressed soft kisses to his jaw. Pike kissed her forehead and the tip of her nose as he raked his fingers through her long tresses.

With no other woman had Pike ever cared to cling and cuddle after sex. He'd always been the type to make a dash for the shower, all the while thinking of an excuse to boot his lover from his quarters or a reason to leave hers. But with Laleh he craved these moments of contact. He found himself questioning what exactly it was he felt for Laleh. Honestly, he knew; however, the thought of saying it aloud terrified him. He couldn't risk the delicate balance of their relationship. He couldn't be the first.

Laleh sat back on his lap and brushed her fingers over his cheek. Tears shimmered in those beautiful blue eyes. She kissed him with such gentleness it took his breath away for a moment.

Pike cupped her cheeks and stared into her watery eyes. "What is it?"

She seemed to hesitate, as if afraid to even speak her fear. Finally, she whispered so softly he barely heard the words. "I'm afraid I'm going to lose you."

Chest constricting, Pike crushed her in a protective embrace. "Never," he swore. "Never."

* * * *

The next morning, once his regular duties were squared away, Pike headed to Virgo's

Office of Customs and Perimeter Guard. All night a nagging worry about Laleh's safety had gnawed at him. He'd gotten hardly any sleep as he tried to work out all the ways he could protect her and all the possible ways to circumvent them. Although it left him agitated, Pike had to accept there was no way to keep Laleh safe every minute of every day.

But he would do the best he could.

"Admiral Grayson!" The ensign assigned to the OCPG front desk snapped to attention.

Pike saluted and put the young woman at ease. "I'd like to speak to Chief Kinsella."

"This way, sir."

Pike followed the ensign down a hall lined with glass doors. He cast quick glances inside the offices, glad to see the various staff members hard at work. Idleness irked Pike.

The ensign knocked on a door and waited for a command to enter. She announced Pike and stepped aside, shutting the door behind him. Pike's gaze swept over Chief Kinsella's office. Impeccable. Neat.

"Chief Kinsella," Pike addressed her with a smile. "I was wondering if we could discuss some personal safety issues."

"Of course," she replied, gesturing to the chair in front of her desk. Her forehead creased as she settled into her seat. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"Mrs. Grayson was a refugee seeker on Earth from a rather nasty little planet called Hezma-12."

Chief Kinsella cringed. "I've heard about it. All ships emanating from Hezma-12 are flagged on the restricted list."

"And that means what exactly?"

"Any ships bearing the Hezman flag are immediately stopped at Virgo's outermost perimeter. We then board the ship and do a search for any and all illegal weapons and contraband. They're rather notorious for transporting Federation prohibited products and, quite frankly, people. Women," she added with a hint of a snarl. "They've recently entered the skin trade, it seems."

Pike's stomach soured at the image of young girls being trafficked from one end of the universe to the other for sex and worse. "And after the ship is boarded?"

"Depending on their stated business, we may or may not allow them temporary docking privileges on Virgo. Generally, we boot them to the next skyport, but every once in a while, they have legitimate business and we give them a twenty-four hour, highly tracked pass."

"Good to know," Pike murmured as he reached for his transmitter. He touched the screen and brought up the profiles of Jai and his goon. "I'd like to have these two men, in particular, barred any and all access to Virgo." He handed over the device. "They've already done bodily harm to Mrs. Grayson in Houston. She's recently received more threats of violence. She's going to fill out the necessary complaints with security later today."

With a few quick taps of her keyboard, Chief Kinsella transferred the information to her system. "I've flagged them individually. I'll send out another memo about Hezman ships. If anything nears the vicinity, you'll be the first to know, sir."

"Thank you." Pike stood and shook Chief Kinsella's hand.

"You're more than welcome, sir."

Pike left Chief Kinsella's office feeling a bit more settled. But there was one more thing he needed to do.

Safely ensconced in the privacy of his office, Pike stuck his transmitter in its charging base. He sat back in his chair and contemplated how best to get his point across. Pike detested alpha male, chest thumping, brutish behavior. Just the thought of sinking to that level now made him uneasy. Yet he suspected Jai wouldn't respond to anything else.

Pike sat forward and switched on his transmitter's message recorder. His face hardened as he remembered Jai's threats and Laleh's breakdown. No more. It ended now.

"Jai, let me make this perfectly clear. When you threaten my wife, you threaten me. I don't take kindly to threats. I will not allow you or anyone else to hurt Laleh ever again. This stops here. I'll meet with you once and only once. Here. On my turf. Contact me, if you're interested."

Pike flicked off the recorder. He hesitated only a moment before sending the message. His work done, he turned his attention to his duties. There were inspections to be carried out and personnel members still to meet. At some point, he needed to sift through the financial reports of the last few quarters to familiarize himself with the normal expenditures of Virgo.

He snatched up his transmitter, grabbed a touch tablet, and left his office. Weelo, his *aide de camp*, rose and awaited instruction. "I'm heading down to the medical clinic."

"Yes, sir."

Pike had barely reached the corridor outside his office when his transmitter beeped with a message alert. He stopped and glanced around, making sure he was alone, before opening the message.

"Name the time and place, starman." Jai issued his statement and clicked off just as quickly.

Pike backtracked to his office and poked his head inside. "Mr. Weelo, do we have a travel agency here at Virgo?"

Weelo nodded. "Would you like me to contact them, sir?"

"I need a weekend trip to Skyport Leo. Transport, lodging, and some kind of fun recreational activity."

"For two?" Weelo asked, his fingers flying over his keyboard.

"For one. My wife."

Chapter Thirteen

"How's your dessert?"

Laleh smiled at Pike as she savored a bite of the creamiest, most scrumptious cheesecake she'd ever had. Caramel, chocolate, and pecan melded together so deliciously. "Amazing."

Grinning, Pike watched her as she enjoyed the rest of her slice. She'd been pleasantly surprised when he'd swung by her office to take her out to lunch in one of Virgo's more upscale restaurants. For the last few days, Pike had been acting a bit more protective than usual. He hadn't quite ventured into the realm of annoying but wavered just on the edge. Laleh took it in stride, knowing he only wanted to keep her safe. She hoped the complaints she'd filed with the security office and Pike's request for tighter perimeter control would convince Jai to give up or, at the very least, back off.

"I received a notice from the housing department," Pike said, his fingers drumming on the tablecloth. "We can move into our new quarters as soon as we please. I'll try to round up some movers."

"I'll start packing this evening." Laleh contemplated scraping the last yummy bits of cheesecake from her plate but decided against it for fear of appearing gauche. "I'll leave the necessities in the kitchen, bathroom, and office for the last minute."

"If you'd like, we can take a tour of our new home later this evening or tomorrow some time. I'm sure you'd like to start making some decorating plans."

Laleh nodded. "It's exciting, you know? Having our first real place together. Doesn't it feel more like a home? There's just something so inviting about having a nice, new permanent place."

A warm smile curved his mouth. Something flashed in his green eyes, and her tummy bubbled with heat. When he looked at her like that, Laleh always wondered what he was thinking. Was he feeling the same pull? Was his attachment to her deepening as hers was to him? Did he love her just as desperately as she now loved him?

Yes, she loved him. It had come upon her gradually, but there was no denying it. Every time she spied Pike, Laleh's heart nearly burst. So many times over the last few days, she'd almost confessed her feelings. When he pulled her close in the mornings after his alarm sounded or when they enjoyed a bit of down time in the evenings, Laleh's head resting on Pike's lap as they watched television. But every time she'd hesitated and changed her mind. What if he didn't feel the same way?

Pike drew her attention as he reached inside his jacket. Curiosity got the better of her when he produced a purple card and slid it across the table toward her. She picked it up and glanced at the lemon yellow lettering. *Virgo Travel*. "What's this?"

Pike smiled indulgently. "Plug it in and see."

Laleh eagerly slid the small card into the slot on the side of her transmitter. A few seconds later, a travel itinerary popped onto the screen. "We're going to Skypoint Leo this weekend?"

He shook his head. "You're going to Leo. I thought you'd like to see your friends, Ginger and Hassan. It's been a month, and I know you're a little homesick."

Touched, Laleh leaned over and pecked his cheek. She wanted to do more than that

but knew it would be highly appropriate to climb onto the admiral's lap in the middle of a crowded restaurant. "Thank you so much."

Cheeks flushed, Pike glanced around the restaurant. Obviously embarrassed, he cleared his throat. "I got you three tickets to see Vega. I know you how much you love her music."

She nearly squealed at that tidbit. Seeing one of Vega's live shows had been at the top of her to-do list for the last two years. The tickets were notoriously expensive and sold out within seconds of going on sale. Try as she might, Laleh and her friends had repeatedly failed to grab tickets. She couldn't wait to message Ginger and Hassan with her awesome news.

"I wish you were coming." Laleh placed her hand on top of Pike's. "Not to the concert," she clarified. "I know you'd rather chew glass than sit through two hours of Vega."

Pike chuckled. "That pretty much sums up my thoughts on it." He turned his hand and intertwined their fingers. "I promise we'll try to get away in a few months. Once things have settled down around here, we'll disappear to some place relaxing and quiet."

"I'd like that." Her hand tingled where his thumb rubbed soft circles.

Pike started to say something else but was interrupted by the arrival of his *aide de camp*. He angled to face the panting and sweating young man. Apparently, he'd been running. "Yes, Mr. Weelo?"

"Sir. Ma'am." Weelo inclined his head in her direction before turning back to Pike. "Sir, I'm sorry for the interruption, but there's been a collision on the perimeter. The *Cassiopeia* struck a freighter coming in with supplies for the skyport. The supplies are acting like projectiles and causing quite a bit of damage. You're requested immediately in the Situation Room."

Pike wasted no time rising. He bent low and Laleh brushed her lips to his. "I'm sorry, Laleh. I'll see you later."

"It's all right. Good luck."

Pike hustled from the restaurant, leaving Laleh to settle the bill and make small talk with their waiter. She gathered up her transmitter and headed back to her office. With a few minutes left on her lunch hour, Laleh sent quick messages to Ginger and Hassan. She activated her sleeping widescreen with a wave of her hand and noticed the collision update crawling across the bottom of her screen.

Apparently all traffic in and out of Virgo had been halted. All non-emergency patients were currently being diverted to the sick bay on a starship docked on the opposite end of Virgo. Laleh winced at the thought of Pike trying to sort out such a logistical nightmare. She wondered what kind of mood he'd be in later. As of yet, Pike hadn't run into anything too stressful since they'd married. Would he bring his work home with him?

Having plenty of her own work to complete, Laleh resumed a memo for the upcoming vacation visit of the Sandrino imperial family. They were a rather quirky set with an extremely rigid social hierarchy and complex dietary restrictions. There were proscribed methods of address and expressly forbidden types of physical contact too. Breaking any of those rules would lead to great offense and embarrassment.

As the cultural attaché, it was Laleh's duty to head off any disasters of etiquette. The memo was simply the first of her preparations. Next week, she'd host a series of

workshops for the senior divisions of the various departments on Virgo, starting with the diplomatic service and moving through Spacefleet, hospitality, food service, recreation, retail, and any other departments she was currently forgetting. It would be monotonous work, but it had to be done.

The memo dispersed, Laleh turned her attention to a series of translations and queries from her colleagues. Most were simple enough to answer. A few she skipped over to tackle later when she had some time to research. She was three-quarters of the way through correcting a shoddily translated free trade amendment when someone knocked on her door.

"Come in!" Laleh frowned at her screen, wondering what use translations programs were when they made such elementary mistakes. She glanced up as Ambassador Floridan entered her office. "Hello."

Ambassador Floridan smiled and stopped in front of Laleh's desk. She tucked a strand of shocking green hair behind one ear. "I had a request from the diplomatic office on a planet I represent to pass along a message to you."

Laleh's brow furrowed. Ambassador Floridan represented the Skalox System and a total of nine different planets, none of which Laleh had ever visited. She couldn't for the life of her remember a single acquaintance from any of them. "Really? What kind of message?"

"It seems a friend of yours was recently deported from Earth. Houston, to be exact," the ambassador added. "From what I understand, she was a neighbor. She's exhausted all official channels. I suppose she's reaching out to you as some sort of last ditch effort."

Laleh's stomach dropped. "Is it Salida Noozeenus?" Ambassador Floridan nodded. "Do you know why she was deported?"

"Apparently she was reported by an anonymous source. I suspect her name was handy when Immigration pulled together a list for one of their raids. She wasn't given time to file an appeal. Now that she's back on her home planet, there's not much hope. In any case, it's out of my colleagues' hands. We're past the point of being able to intervene."

"It's all my fault," Laleh whispered, her stomach roiling.

"I doubt that, unless you turned her in yourself."

Laleh shook her head. "I think it was my brother. He has a nasty streak."

Ambassador Floridan shrugged. "These things happen, Laleh. It's simply the way the law works. If it hadn't been your brother, it would have been someone else."

Even though the ambassador spoke the truth it did little to allay Laleh's clawing conscience. "Do you have some way I can contact Salida?"

Ambassador Floridan tapped her transmitter's screen. Seconds later, Laleh's pinged. "There you go. She's staying with relatives, I think."

"Thanks."

"Let me know if there's anything I might do." The ambassador paused in the doorway. "I am sorry about your friend, Laleh."

As soon as Ambassador Floridan was gone, Laleh cued up the contact information and tried to put through a call to Salida. No one answered but she was given the choice to leave a message. She sat forward and looked straight into the recorder of her transmitter. "Hi. This is Laleh Sarafpour Grayson, and I'm trying to reach Salida Noozeenus. Please feel free to contact me any time. Thanks."

Laleh disconnected and scrolled through her contact list until she found Noozeen's name, but he didn't answer either. Feeling incredibly antsy, Laleh hopped out of her chair and paced her office. She racked her brain for some way she could help. She considered Melanya but doubted there was much her friend could do. Melanya dealt specifically with Spacefleet. Still it was worth a try.

"Sorry, Laleh," Melanya said after patiently listening to the circumstances. "There's nothing I can do. I can put you in touch with someone I know who works over in deportation, but I'm sure he'll tell you the same thing. Unless an appeal is filed before deportation, there simply aren't any channels to manipulate. The best your friend can hope for is a new spousal sponsored visa once her husband has reached the residency requirement."

Laleh sighed and leaned back against her desk for support. "I thought as much."

"Other than this, how are things at Virgo?"

"Very well." Laleh tried to sound upbeat. "We're moving into new quarters soon. I'm enjoying my work with the consulate. Pike's really taken to his command."

"I'm glad to hear it." Melanya grinned lasciviously. "And the sex?"

Laleh sputtered with surprise at her friend's blunt question. Her cheeks warmed. "It's fine."

"Just fine?" Melanya fished for details.

"Amazing, actually," Laleh admitted. "But that's all I'll say over my transmitter."

Melanya giggled gleefully. "Fair enough. I want the full details next time I see you."

"Deal."

"I've got to go. I have a backlog of marriage license applications to work through. I'll talk to you later. Good luck helping your friends."

Melanya disconnected and Laleh placed her transmitter on her desk. She kneaded her temples. Never had she felt like such a failure. Her friends needed her help. Despite all of Laleh's connections, she could do nothing. What was the use of working in the diplomatic service and being married to one of the highest ranking officers in Spacefleet if she couldn't even accomplish something as small getting her pregnant neighbor a new visa?

Suddenly Laleh needed Pike. She needed to feel his arms holding her close. She needed his calm, reassuring voice in her ear. If anyone could make her feel better, it was him.

Laleh snatched up her transmitter and strode from her office, pausing at the front desk to let the receptionist know she was heading out early. Taking all the shortcuts, she managed to reach the cluster of offices comprising Virgo's nerve center. All of the Spacefleet personnel hustling from office to office took Laleh by surprise until she remembered the accident.

She stopped and reconsidered. Only the knowledge she'd drop everything for Pike kept her moving forward. Laleh cautiously crossed the busy lobby, stepping out of the way as officers and enlisted men and women hurried between offices. She popped her head into the open doorway of Pike's office and found her husband rummaging through a shelf of memory cards. "Pike?"

Annoyance flashed across his face as he glanced over his shoulder at her. "What?"

Laleh hesitated in the doorway, suddenly uncertain. Maybe she'd been wrong to come.

Pike stopped his rummaging and stared expectantly in her direction. "Did you need

something, or did you just come here to rubberneck?"

Taken aback, Laleh blinked and frowned. "I needed to talk to you."

Amid a seemingly never ending series of intercom calls for his presence on this deck or that, Pike resumed his search. "If you're not bleeding or dying, I really don't care right now. I've got a string of ass-packed freighters and taxiing vessels stalled on Virgo's perimeter, a starship hemorrhaging fuel, and a few thousand stranded passengers."

"Salida Noozeenus was deported from Earth." Even as she blurted it out, Laleh wished she could have stopped herself. It was obvious he didn't have time for her problems.

"Who?" Pike tossed a stack of cards onto his desk and turned back to the shelves, his fingers moving over the white cases.

"My neighbor's wife."

"And this concerns me how?"

"I don't know," Laleh admitted, feeling rather ridiculous. "I just thought you might be able to help."

"Help?" Pike scoffed as he rounded on her. "In case you weren't listening, Laleh, I've got a few thousand people clamoring for my help right now. If your neighbor's wife was so concerned about being deported, she should have followed the law."

Laleh's jaw tightened. "You don't have to be so rude about it, Pike."

"Goddammit, Laleh!" Exasperated, Pike slammed his hand onto his desk. "I don't have time for your bullshit today. Why don't you try fixing your own problems for once?"

Recoiling in shock, Laleh stared at Pike. He'd never spoken to her like that. His words, his tone, cut so deeply. She didn't even bother replying. Pivoting on her heel, Laleh left his office—and came face-to-face with a stilled lobby of gawking Spacefleet personnel. They all quickly averted their eyes, obviously embarrassed for her. Humiliation flushed her cheeks.

Tears stinging her eyes, Laleh fled the lobby. With deep breaths and fists clenching, she managed to hold it together until she stepped into one of the elevators with access to the *Spica*. Once inside the car, she sobbed into her hand, big fat tears sliding down her cheeks. Yes, she shared some of the blame. The moment she realized Pike was busy, she should have left.

But that didn't excuse Pike's outburst. He had no right to talk her like that, especially not in earshot of his entire staff.

As the elevator announced a stop on the crew quarters' deck, Laleh hastily wiped at her face. She sniffed and blinked as the doors slid apart and a new passenger boarded.

"Laleh!" Quinn seemed surprised to see her. "I thought for sure you'd still be at work. I—" He stopped abruptly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she lied and attempted a smile.

Quinn pinned her with his gaze. "Please don't lie to me."

The floodgates opened as she poured out the entire story to him. Quinn wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder and patted her back as he listened.

"I'm sure he didn't mean it, Laleh." Quinn's voice rumbled against her ear, her cheek pressed to his chest. "He's under a lot of stress right now." She started to protest, but he continued talking. "But you're right. He didn't have any business talking to you like that in front of all those people." He set her back a few steps and leveled a stare at her. "He has no right talking to you like that ever, Laleh."

"He doesn't. Really," she added, sensing Quinn's skepticism. "This was just a one-off."

"It better be." Quinn's grumble was barely audible. "Officer's deck." As the elevator began its ascent, he leaned back against the wall. "I might be able to help you."

"Really?" Hope filled her voice. "I just feel so guilty. If it wasn't for me, they wouldn't be in the bind they're in now."

The elevator stopped on her floor. Quinn walked her out into the corridor. "Let me make some calls. I can't promise anything, but I'll try."

"I appreciate whatever you can do. Even just trying," Laleh said, touching his arm.

"I've got to save some stranded folks." Quinn backed into the elevator. "As soon as I'm done with this mission, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

Still dazed by her interaction with Pike, but hopeful after running into Quinn, Laleh entered their quarters. She felt so restless and impotent waiting to see if Quinn's idea would pan out. Maybe Pike was right. Did she rely on others to solve her problems? She didn't think so, but perhaps her view was skewed. Granted, she'd accepted help whenever it was offered. Was that so wrong?

Her stomach twisted as she realized they were probably going to have it out once Pike returned home for the evening. She simply couldn't allow Pike to think he could talk to her like that—even if he was at the end of his rope. She'd seen enough of that in her childhood. Laleh wasn't about to accept it in her own marriage.

Desperate to get her mind off Pike, Laleh kicked off her heels and strode into the kitchen. She reached for a bottle of wine but changed her mind, not particularly keen on the idea of getting drunk. She chose a bottle of her favorite orange soda and splashed the fizzy liquid into a glass. After a long sip, she settled on starting the packing that needed to be done. She grabbed some containers from the closet and headed back into the living room.

Laleh wrapped and packed the bric-a-brac in the living area and dining room. Anything that wasn't absolutely necessary found its way into a box. She moved to the kitchen and sorted through the shelves and drawers, leaving out a pair of everything and a selection of multipurpose pans and utensils.

With the kitchen finished, Laleh headed into the office. She tackled her book collection first. The work was boring and repetitive but it served a purpose. She ran through various scenarios of the heated discussion she and Pike were likely to share. Laleh hoped she'd keep her cool and not say anything she'd later regret. It was so easy to snap when feeling defensive or attacked.

Laleh's stomach grumbled. She glanced at her watch. Had she really been packing that long? And where was Pike? He was always home by now.

Certain the aftermath of the collision kept him, Laleh took a break and fixed a sandwich for dinner. It felt so strange to eat dinner alone after all those weeks of sharing dinner with Pike. Laleh bristled with irritation that she missed him even after he'd been such a jackass. Love just wasn't fair.

As Laleh cleaned up her plate, someone rang the doorbell. She crossed the living room and answered the door, not sure who to expect. The sight of Quinn surprised her until she remembered their elevator discussion.

"Quinn! Come in," she said, stepping aside.

"Thanks." He swept a hand through his already ruffled hair.

Laleh followed him into the living room. He looked rather tired. Stains marred his usually impeccable uniform. There was a red cut on the back of his right hand. "Can I offer you something to drink?"

Quinn wavered, as if uncertain. "I wouldn't say no to a beer," he said finally.

"A beer it is." Laleh returned to the kitchen, Quinn just a few steps behind. "How did your rescue mission go?"

"Just fine," he said, leaning against the counter. "Once we got the passengers off the freighter, we were able to get some engineering crews out to the stalled ships. We got them started and docked. There's a crew patching up the hull on the *Cassiopeia* as we speak. Shouldn't be any problems once that's done."

"I'm glad to hear it." Laleh poured a beer into an icy mug and handed it over. "Here you go."

Quinn accepted with a nod and gulped the cold brew. "That's really good."

"Pike only drinks the best."

"I'm not surprised."

Laleh detected the sarcasm in his voice but let it slide. She gestured for Quinn to follow her into the living room. "Sorry about the mess. I've been packing for the move."

"Move?"

She nodded and settled onto the couch. "We're upgrading to permanent quarters on Virgo."

"Lucky you." Quinn took another drink and set aside his mug. "I spoke with my sister."

"Your sister?"

"She runs a star cruise company with her husband. It's a very popular line. She's always looking for new employees. I told her about your friend's predicament, and she offered to hire and sponsor her for a visa and eventually permanent residency. All of Steffi's ships are Earth-based so she meets all the qualifications for visa sponsorship. Obviously, Steffi wouldn't expect your friend to do any kind of hard labor since she's pregnant. She mentioned something about the daycare facility."

Stunned, Laleh sat back. "Why would she do that? She doesn't even know Salida."

"My sister and I grew up in a group home," Quinn explained. He didn't elaborate as to the reasons why. "She's always had something of a soft spot for people in rough situations."

Unable to contain her gratitude, Laleh threw her arms around Quinn and hugged him tight. "Thank you so much! You have no idea what this means to me."

Quinn's arms lingered around her a bit longer than she'd expected. She pulled back gently, not wanting to hurt his feelings—or encourage them. Laleh stiffened when his fingers brushed her bangs from her eyes. "Quinn," she said carefully.

Lust darkened his gaze. Laleh's heart leapt, not with desire but fear. Before she could stop him, Quinn kissed her, his lips warm and pliable—and wrong. He wasn't Pike.

Vaguely, Laleh heard the front door open. She broke the kiss and spotted Pike standing just inside their quarters. Rage blazed across his face.

"Get your hands off of my wife!"

And then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Fourteen

Of all the things he'd expected when he walked through those doors, Pike had never imagined he'd find Laleh kissing someone else. Kissing Quinn. Furious, he strode aggressively toward the couch. Quinn jumped to his feet, his weight shifted into a defensive boxer stance. Pike didn't even hesitate. He balled up his fists and slammed Quinn with a right cross followed by a nasty uppercut. Shock filtered across the other man's now bloodied face.

Pike's smug smile didn't last very long. Quinn rushed him, knocking him into the wall. Pike kned Quinn in the stomach and received a foot stomping in return. They grappled, fists swinging, fingers gouging.

"Stop!" Laleh shouted, frantically tearing at them. She shoved hard on Pike's chest and sent him hurtling backwards. Hands raised, she stepped between them. Tears rushed down her cheeks. "Just stop."

Panting hard, Quinn backed down. He roughly wiped at the blood dribbling from his nose and bottom lip. Pike felt something wet trickling from his nose. The coppery taste of blood filled his mouth.

"Please go, Quinn." She practically pleaded for him to leave.

His foe glanced at Laleh, seemingly torn. When Quinn fixed him with a menacing gaze, Pike's ire rose. "If he hurts you, Laleh..."

Pike couldn't believe what he'd just heard. He gritted his teeth. "How dare you! I've never put a hand on her."

"Just like you've never snapped at her in public like some kind of dog," Quinn snarled.

Pike swallowed hard. "That wasn't—"

"Doesn't matter what it was," Quinn interrupted. "Everyone on this damn skyport is talking about it."

Shame turned Pike's stomach. What Quinn said was true. He'd noticed the whispers and stares. There was no doubt he owed Laleh an apology, but Pike wasn't about to take a scolding from a subordinate. "What happens in our marriage is our business."

Quinn scoffed. "Marriage? She doesn't even have a wedding band."

Pike followed Quinn's angry gesture. Laleh hid her left hand behind her back. His jaw hardened at yet another reminder of his failures as a husband. "You've overstepped the line, Petty Officer."

Nodding, Quinn straightened, as if finally remembering the gap in rank between them. "I likely have, sir. But you can be damn sure if she was my wife I'd treat her with a little more respect."

Laleh's eyes widened as Quinn leveled a heated gaze in her direction. It was all Pike could do to contain his anger. "You'd do well to remember she's *my* wife."

Quinn shrugged nonchalantly. "For now."

His parting shot fired, Quinn left their quarters. Tense silence stretched between them. Pike couldn't think straight. The first time he'd spotted them together, he'd suspected the worst. But he'd done the level-headed thing and bit his tongue when Laleh chose to pursue a friendship with Quinn. Being reasonable had bitten him in the ass. He

squashed the urge to lash out at her.

Laleh tentatively stepped forward. "Your face..."

Pike flinched at her touch and moved away from her. "Don't touch me."

Her lower lip wobbled as she put space between them. "All right."

"What the hell was he doing here?"

"His sister operates a star cruise line. She's offered to give Salida a position and sponsor a visa that will allow her to rejoin Noozeen."

Envy rattled Pike. Not wanting to accept Quinn had helped Laleh when he'd refused, he snapped at her. "So what? You just go running to Quinn every time you have a problem?"

"No."

"How long?" Even as he asked, Pike wondered if he really wanted to know.

"How long what?" Confusion played on Laleh's face.

"Don't play games with me, Laleh," Pike warned. "Just tell me the truth."

Laleh took a step forward and then, as if rethinking her decision, retreated a few steps. "Pike, tonight was the first time anything inappropriate happened between us. It was just a kiss. It didn't mean anything."

"And my kisses? Don't they mean anything?"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

Pike arched his eyebrows. "Do I, Laleh? I thought I knew you until I walked in here a few minutes ago."

"Oh, that's rich," Laleh retorted angrily. "The same could be said about you. I thought I knew you, but I was wrong. I never imagined you'd humiliate me like that."

Pike's guilt made him defensive. "What did you expect, Laleh? I was in the middle of a class A clusterfuck. You know my duty to this skyport comes first."

"You're right," she agreed. "I guess I just never realized how bad it was going to make me feel. Maybe I don't like coming second."

"That's not fair, Laleh. You chose to marry me. You came into this with eyes wide open. You don't get to start complaining now that you've gotten your first taste of reality. And you sure as hell don't get to throw yourself at the first swinging dick that pretends to care."

Laleh blanched. The sight of her blinking back tears made his gut clench. He'd gone too far, and he knew it. Pike silently cursed his anger-induced stupidity. Unless he shut his mouth soon, he'd never get out of the hole he kept digging. "Shit," he swore under his breath. "Laleh, I—"

Shaking her head, Laleh held up her hand. "You know what, Pike? I think you've said enough." Laleh slipped her feet into her heels and grabbed her transmitter.

"Where are you going?" Fear struck his heart as Laleh stomped toward the door.

She rounded on him. "Apparently I'm going to throw myself at the first swinging dick to cross my path."

And then she left.

Completely at a loss, Pike stared at the closed door. He couldn't believe she'd actually walked out on him. Had he just driven her straight into Quinn's arms? His belly churned at the thought. Pike reeled as he glanced helplessly around the room. His gaze fell on the beer mug. Thinking of Quinn drinking his beer, in his glass, on his couch and kissing his wife made Pike furious. He snatched up the mug and threw it against the wall.

The sound of shattering glass filled some dark need inside him.

Pike flopped onto the couch. He gingerly touched his face, wincing as his fingers grazed his split lip. He could already see the curious stares on the faces of his staff tomorrow morning. Gossip would spread like wildfire through the fleet tomorrow. Fist fighting a petty officer?

"Christ!" He shook his head with disgust. *What the fuck was I thinking?*

"You weren't." His answer echoed in the lonely apartment. Pike slumped under the enormity of his poor decisions. He rarely behaved so rashly. He'd simply been blinded by jealousy and rage.

And guilt. He'd been so unkind to Laleh when she'd come to him. Yes, he'd been busy. Yes, he'd been stressed. But to lash out like that? Pike's stomach soured. He was a better man than that. More importantly, Pike was painfully aware of the world she'd come from, of the horrors of her childhood. What damage had he inflicted by shouting at her and humiliating her in front of his peers?

Pike was torn between chasing after Laleh and giving her some space. Considering how badly he'd mucked things up already, he decided to wait for her return. He couldn't risk making things worse between them.

So he sat back and waited.

* * * *

Vision blurred by tears, Laleh wandered aimlessly through the corridors of the *Spica*. Desperate for some place quiet where she could think, Laleh aimed her feet in the direction of her office. Fifteen minutes later, she slipped into her darkened office. The lights flicked on brightly and slowly adjusted to a less harsh setting. She walked to the sofa set against the far wall and sank onto the firm cushions.

Try as she might, Laleh couldn't shake Pike's wounded face from her mind. When he'd snapped at her not to touch him, she'd nearly died. Disgust had been clearly evident in his voice and in his expression. She brought her fingers to her lips. The memory of Quinn's unwanted kiss still burned there. She felt so dirty.

Shame blazed across her cheeks. Laleh remembered Pike's warning the first day she'd met Quinn. She felt so stupid. Quinn had assured her they could just be friends, but obviously he'd been lying. She shared some of the blame, of course. She'd asked him inside, poured him a beer, and sat on the couch with him. Laleh had never intended to lead Quinn on, but perhaps she had unknowingly done so.

Feeling foolish and naive, Laleh curled on her side on the couch and kicked off her shoes. She wondered what sort of disciplinary actions Pike would now face. Granted neither man had been on duty at the time of their altercation, but surely the news would filter through the ranks and reach Pike's superiors. By the time the rumors made it that far who knew what sort of embellishments would have been tacked onto them. Would Pike be called on the carpet? Would his punishment tarnish an exemplary career? And Quinn? She knew striking a superior officer was grounds for imprisonment.

Guilt clawed at her belly. She sobbed pitifully at the realization she'd ruined so many lives. Noozeen, Salida, and their unborn child. Quinn. Pike.

A memory she'd long ago repressed rushed to the forefront of her mind. Laleh could still feel the sting of her father's palm against her cheek, the toes of his boots slamming into her soft belly, and the crack of her collarbone and arm as she hit the corner of a desk

and crumpled to the floor. Her father's enraged voice rang in her ears. He'd called her a curse, an abomination who ruined everything she touched.

Laleh covered her face with her hands as her mind swam with the ugly memory. She couldn't remember what had triggered her father's violent explosion. He'd never seemed to need much to push him over the edge into abuse. For some reason, Laleh was his favorite child to beat on at the time. Of her twenty some odd siblings, Laleh seemed to spend the most time on the receiving end of his balled up fist.

That night had been the last straw for her mother. Four days later, they were on the run and had never looked back.

Though Laleh rarely gave her father a thought, she couldn't help but wonder if maybe he'd been right. Hezmans were notoriously superstitious about birth signs. Laleh knew the stars had been misaligned the night she came into the world. Perhaps there was some truth to it all. Maybe she really was cursed to ruin the lives of those she touched.

Laleh dozed off to that troubling thought. She woke hours later with a stiff neck and cheeks sticky with dried tears. Rubbing her aching neck, she sat up and squinted her sleepy eyes at the clock in the corner. The early birds on the diplomatic staff would start arriving in an hour or so. She couldn't let them find her looking disheveled in yesterday's clothes.

But the thought of returning to their quarters, of running into Pike, made her stomach roll with nervousness.

With no other choice, Laleh put on her shoes and left her office. She stuck to the less traveled corridors and the least popular elevator banks on her return trip, not wanting to deal with the questioning stares. Blessedly, she made it to their quarters without running into any acquaintances. She paused in the hall outside the door to their quarters. With a deep breath, she forged onward.

The coward in her rejoiced to find their rooms empty. Glass shards littered the floor in the living room. The covers on the bed were undisturbed. In the bathroom, Laleh encountered Pike's scent. Her heart clenched. Fresh tears sprung to her eyes. That he hadn't come looking for her or waited for her to return spoke volumes. She sensed she'd crossed a line last night. That Pike could forgive or forget was unlikely.

As she showered, Laleh pondered her choices. She reached a painful conclusion and packed a small bag. Until Pike asked her to come back, she'd sleep elsewhere. A lump in her throat, Laleh cast one final glance over their quarters, her gaze lingering on the broken mug. Like that glass, their relationship had been shattered.

Perhaps irrevocably.

* * * *

High above the launching deck, Pike stood on an elevated breezeway and scoured the crowd for a glimpse of Laleh. For the last four days, he'd followed her around like this, skulking in the shadows like some kind of stalker. When he'd come back to their quarters to find some of her clothing and toiletries missing, he'd nearly thrown up as the reality of what he'd done hit him square in the gut. He'd done more damage in one day than could possibly ever be undone.

As far as he could tell, Laleh had moved into her office. He'd trailed her early one morning to the recreation deck on Virgo where she darted into the gym and—he assumed—used the showering facilities there. That his wife had been reduced to using

public showers made him feel lower than dirt.

So many times he'd started to approach her, to beg her to come home, but he just couldn't muster the courage. He'd faced certain death with less trepidation. Now, when he needed his courage the most, it failed him. The thought of Laleh rejecting him completely threatened to drive him over the edge.

His staff bore the brunt of his unhappiness and frustration. They'd taken to scurrying into offices or turning in the opposite direction any time he left his office. Pike couldn't blame them. He'd been an absolute asshole since Laleh had left him. He wasn't proud of it.

Nor was he proud of having been taken to task by his superiors. Technically, he'd done nothing wrong. Yelling at one's wife in public was uncouth at best. Fighting a subordinate in private, off duty, was frowned upon at the very least. Only his impeccable record had saved him from an official inquiry. For that Pike was eternally grateful.

He scanned the throng of travelers lining up to board the evening transport vessel bound for Skyport Leo. Pike had wondered if Laleh would take the trip. He'd come across her travel pass on the dining room table and had sent it to her office, unsure if she'd return in time to find it. He'd kept a close eye on her side of the closet. When he'd discovered Laleh's breezy bright dresses and skirts missing last night, he'd known she was going. Part of him was sad to see her go. Part of him was relieved. Jai would arrive tomorrow afternoon. Pike needed Laleh safely out of the way.

A splash of chartreuse caught his eye. He zeroed in and spotted Laleh moving to join a queue. His appreciative gaze moved over her deftly outlined curves. The first time he'd seen that slim fitting dress hanging in her work clothes section, Pike had been skeptical. The color struck him as rather garish. But against her honey brown skin it was simply breathtaking.

Even now, two stories up, Pike lost his breath at the sight of her. Whatever happened between them he knew now that she was The One. She would always be the only woman he'd ever loved—could love. Accepting that fact made the possibility of losing her for good all the more terrifying.

As Pike watched her board the vessel, he vowed then and there he would do whatever it took to win her back. It was time to swallow his pride. When she returned from Leo, he'd throw himself at her feet and plead forgiveness in front of the entire population of Virgo if need be. Whatever Laleh wanted, whatever she needed from him to move forward, Pike would give her.

He couldn't lose her. Not now. Not ever.

Chapter Fifteen

Agitated, Pike glanced out the panoramic window of his office high atop Virgo. He could see Jai's stopped vessel just on the perimeter. Laleh's brother had been forced to leave his ship and take transport aboard a guard ship. Pike had watched the vessel ferry his enemy to an open docking station. He glanced at his watch and calculated the necessary time for Jai to make his way through customs to here.

Pike had ordered that at no time was Jai to be left alone. Even if the man needed to take a leak, he was to be followed and watched like a hawk. Pike would take no chances today. If Jai protested his treatment, he was free to leave. Pike would extend this olive branch only once. Should Jai fail to take advantage of it, he'd quickly become acquainted with Pike's nasty side.

Weelo appeared in the doorway. "Admiral Pike, Prince Jai of Hezma to see you."

"Show him in," Pike said, crossing his office to receive the man.

As arrogant as ever, Jai strode into the room, clad head to toe in black leather. His long coat fluttered behind him, the deep purple lining clearly visible. Silver hooks and chains embellished the outfit. He'd slicked back his blond hair. The angry red scar stretching from just beside his left eye to the edge of his mouth stood out against his pale skin.

Once, during a trip to *Hedonisma*, Pike had seen a rather titillating S&M show featuring whips and chains and all the usual paraphernalia. To say Jai could have been the star of that show was understatement. Of course, the Dom involved in that exhibition hadn't been a soulless waste of space. He'd played by the rules and looked after his sub. Pike knew enough of Jai to know his self-control was practically zero when it came to his harem of sex slaves. How many of those poor women had died at his hands was anyone's guess.

Jai halted a few spaces from Pike. He grasped his hands behind his back and looked down his aquiline nose. "Grayson."

"Jai." Jaw squared, Pike chose to take the high road. He gestured to the chairs in front of his desk. "Would you like to sit?"

Jai shook his head. "I don't plan to be here that long."

"As you wish," Pike replied.

"Where's Laleh?"

"Not here. And you can abandon all hope as far as that's concerned."

Jai smirked. "You spent enough time on our homeland to understand the concept of blood debt, starman. She dishonored the family name not once, not twice, but three times. She can't be allowed to live."

Pike's fists tightened at his sides. "You'd do well to remember where you are, Jai. Threatening a Federation citizen is an offense which warrants arrest."

He snorted. "I'd like to see you try."

Pike gritted his teeth and tried to keep calm. "What do you want?"

Jai seemed to realize he wasn't going to get a rise out of Pike. With a sigh of annoyance, he launched into an obviously memorized spiel. "In view of her recent marriage, Laleh has been deemed unacceptable and soiled. My father will accept a

written apology addressed to the court and a statement relinquishing her titles, rights, and dowries. If she fulfills those requests, my father will be willing to forget she even exists."

"How kind of him," Pike dryly replied.

Jai shrugged. "Father wishes to gain eligibility as a signatory on the Federation treaties. We—he—feels the time has come to join the fold. This little bit of family drama has caused a bit of bad publicity."

And there's the real motive. "If Laleh refuses?"

"Father has contingency plans. I'd hate for Laleh to have an accident of the permanent variety."

Pike saw red. "Are you sure you want to risk that?"

"Try me." Jai grinned smugly and strode to the door. "Oh, and my father would like the return of the wedding jewelry he gave to Laleh's mother."

"Wedding jewelry?"

"He's getting married again in a few weeks. Doesn't make sense to buy another set."

"I can't promise anything."

Jai paused in the doorway. "This is a one time offer, Grayson. I'd encourage Laleh to consider it most carefully."

"I trust Laleh to make her own decisions."

Jai laughed. "You would be stupid enough to think a woman could be trusted to make her own choices and decisions? A little advice, Grayson; you'd do well to show her the back of your hand a bit more often. As I remember it, she was quite responsive to the back of our father's hand. The heel of his boot, too."

"Get out!" Pike snarled, his stomach churning at the idea of Laleh suffering so terribly under her own father's hand. "Just get out!"

"Gladly."

In a whirl of leather, Jai strode from the office and out of Pike's sight. Fuming, Pike clenched his fists and exhaled an explosive breath. If he was honest, the meeting had gone exactly as he'd expected. Jai had behaved boorishly—no surprise there. But what did surprise Pike was the offer from Laleh's father, from the emperor.

Would Laleh agree to write such a letter? Pike assumed Laleh had no qualms about formally rescinding all of her rights as a member of the royal family. She'd been actively hiding her connections for twelve years. Obviously she saw no benefit to them.

To grovel at her father's feet and essentially beg forgiveness? Pike doubted that would be easy for her to stomach. The man had abused Laleh and her mother for years. Pike hated to even consider asking her to mince principles, but was there any alternative? If Laleh wanted freedom from her past, this was likely her only chance.

But the choice, ultimately, was hers. If Laleh refused to meet her father's demands, Pike would support her without question. For her safety, though, he hoped she'd see reason.

* * * *

Laleh settled into a window seat on the transport vessel carrying her back to Virgo. Tired but content, she buckled her lap belt and leaned back against the head rest. She closed her eyes and tried to block out the noise of her fellow passengers settling onto the Sunday evening shuttle. The last forty-eight hours blurred through her mind.

She'd arrived late on Friday night at Leo and had been whisked away to her hotel

room by one of the travel agency liaisons. Ginger and Hassan met her in the lobby and gave her just enough time to drop off her luggage before dragging her out for dinner. They'd spent half the night knocking back drinks and chatting away in a booth at the twenty-four hour diner.

Sleeping on a bed had seemed like such a novelty after camping out in her office. For some reason, Laleh missed Pike even more when curled up in her hotel bed than she did on her office couch. She'd woken that Saturday morning clutching a pillow, her cheek pressed against the fluffy softness in the same way she often woke cuddled against Pike's chest.

Although she'd tried her best to enjoy her carefree weekend, Laleh found it impossible to keep thoughts of Pike from intruding. Sometimes she'd see something interesting and automatically turn to point it out to Pike, only to remember at the last second he was still on Virgo. Every glimpse of a couple wrapped in a loving embrace sent a spike through her heart.

Laleh missed Pike's gentle touches more than anything. The way he'd hold her hand when they sat together in the evenings. His idle caresses as they clung together in the dark. His fingers sweeping her bangs from her eyes before he moved in for a kiss.

She touched her lips, trying desperately to remember the heat of Pike's mouth on hers. Fear gripped her belly at the thought she might never feel his lips again. The stark reality slammed down upon her. He'd made no attempts to reconcile. And he'd sent her travel pass to her via interoffice courier. He couldn't have been clearer about his feelings. He could have asked her to stay, to try to work things out, but no. He obviously wanted her as far away from him as possible.

With a heavy sigh, Laleh resigned herself to another night on her office couch. She realized she'd need to look for new lodgings on Monday. She couldn't live out of her office forever. Apartment space was at a premium on Virgo. Laleh hoped she could get on a short list.

Another ugly thought penetrated. Once she permanently moved out of Pike's quarters, Laleh was required to notify Immigration. But she couldn't stand to think of that now.

Laleh rubbed her face and glanced at the seat next to her. Selfishly, she hoped no one would sit there. The idea of being smashed up against the window or enduring hours of endless chattering didn't appeal at the moment. Peace and quiet and a chance to unwind after a busy weekend did though.

"This seat taken?"

Laleh's heart stilled at the sound of Quinn's voice. Her gaze snapped to the aisle where he now stood. Seeing him in civilian clothing was a bit surprising. The bruises on his face had begun to fade and turn a sallow shade of yellow.

She gaped up at him as he stowed his bag in the overhead compartment. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you, too, Laleh," he dryly replied and slid into the seat next to her.

"You can't sit here!" Laleh's sharp protest drew glances from nearby passengers.

"Actually I can." Quinn flashed his transmitter, his electronic boarding pass clearly evident. "Seems rather twisted of the universe."

Laleh issued a loud humph and moved closer to the wall. She wanted as much space between them as possible. Quinn looked pointedly at the gap. He frowned. "I'm not going

to try to kiss you again, Laleh."

"Yeah, well, you once told me we could just be friends, that you respected my marital status." She crossly reminded him. "We know how well that worked out."

Quinn exhaled roughly. "I meant it. At the time," he added. "I thought we could be friends."

"But?"

Quinn caught her gaze. He suddenly looked so serious. "You're not like any other woman I've ever met. I just couldn't help myself."

Laleh heard the regret in his voice. She didn't quite know what to say. It wasn't every day that a man confessed his infatuation. "I'm sorry."

Quinn snorted and laughed harshly. "Thanks." A grave expression hardened his face as he turned in his seat to better face her. "I really am sorry, Laleh. I crossed a line between us that never should have been crossed."

"I appreciate that."

Chuckling, he touched his bruised jaw. "Your old man has one helluva right cross."

Laleh stiffened. "I'm not sure he's my old man anymore," she said finally. "Pike hasn't spoken to me since that night. I've been living out of my office."

Quinn went silent as he processed what she'd said. "I didn't know. They booted me off ship for a few days, ostensibly for R and R, but I think the brass just wasn't sure what they were going to do with me or him." He seemed suddenly uncomfortable. Uncertainty tinged his voice when he spoke again. "Do you ... do you love him?"

Laleh's stomach dropped. She'd never admitted her feelings aloud to anyone, not even to herself. She met Quinn's unwavering stare. "Yes."

Quinn nodded slowly. "Well, he definitely loves you."

Although that was Laleh's greatest hope, she denied it. "I'm not so sure."

"I am. He risked his career to kick my ass, Laleh. If he didn't love you, he wouldn't have gone that far."

"Maybe."

"No maybe," Quinn firmly countered. "Look, I'm being generous when I say he's not my favorite person, but even I can accept he made a mistake yelling at you that day. I saw his face when I insinuated he might be cruel to you. He looked sick at the thought. I don't for one second believe Grayson ever meant to snap out at you like that." He made a face. "And defending him makes me practically sick, Laleh."

She smiled. "I can tell."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but damn it, Laleh, if you love him, you can't just let him walk away from you."

Gobsmacked, Laleh stared at him. For a trained killer and hardened soldier he gave rather useful love advice. "You're in the wrong field."

"Yeah?"

"You should go into relationship counseling."

Quinn barked with laughter. "This is a one-off, Laleh. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," she said seriously.

"Good." Quinn leaned back and made himself comfortable. "So what were you doing on Leo?"

"Visiting friends and going to a Vega concert."

He wrinkled his nose. "That girl with the hot pink hair and bikini made of bubbles?"

Laleh nodded. "She's amazing."

Quinn shrugged. "I guess."

"And you? What were you doing at Leo?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't at Leo. I was at *Hedonisma*. I just couldn't get a one way ticket back to Virgo."

Laleh shifted uncomfortably. She really didn't want to hear about his antics on the pleasure ship. "Your sister contacted me on Wednesday. Between the two of us, we worked out the kinks for moving Salida from her home planet to one of your sister's ships. Salida arrived on Friday. Her husband was waiting for her."

A satisfied smile curved his mouth. "I'm glad to hear it all worked out for them."

"I can't thank you enough."

Quinn smiled at her. "You forgave me for making a complete ass of myself. That's all I want." Sadness tugged at his features. "I wish we could still be friends."

"We still are, Quinn. It's just..." Laleh sighed. "We can't be friends right now. Not until I figure things out with Pike. If they can be salvaged," she added. "Maybe in the future..."

Quinn grinned sardonically. "Hope springs eternal."

They sat in companionable silence as the vessel left the dock and rocketed into open space. A few minutes into the flight, Quinn pulled down the game table mounted on the seat back in front of them and challenged her to a game of holographic chess. He proved to be a worthy opponent, beating Laleh three out of five games. When they tired of chess, they sat back and sipped drinks—a beer for Quinn, an iced green tea for Laleh—and talked about random things. It was nice and exactly what their friendship needed to heal.

At the captain's announcement they were nearing Virgo, Laleh's pulse quickened. Her tummy swooped with anticipation. She sensed tonight would make or break her marriage to Pike. There was enough blame to go around. Hopefully he'd see that and not grow defensive. She prayed he wanted to reconcile as badly as she did.

"Fuck me!" Quinn's breathless exclamation interrupted her thoughts. He leaned across her to stare out the window.

Annoyed, she frowned. "What?"

He gestured to a rather battered looking ship docked at the main gates of Virgo. "The *Magellan*," Quinn said, his voice tinged with awe. "It left on a deep space exploration nearly five years ago. Last I heard the entire crew was assumed dead."

"Obviously not," Laleh murmured as she gazed out the window. The ship looked as if it had been to hell and back. Large swatches of the outer shell were missing. Crude patches had been hammered into place. How the ship remained in one piece now befuddled her. She expected it to explode or crumble at any second.

As their vessel docked, Laleh heard the other passengers discussing the *Magellan*. She and Quinn stayed in their seats as others rushed to depart the ship. He took down her one suitcase and slung the strap of his bag over his shoulder. She took hold of her suitcase's handle and followed him down the aisle and out the exit.

"I guess I'll see you around," Quinn said as they walked down the tunnel connecting the ship to Virgo's launch deck. "It won't hurt my feelings if you turn and run the other way though."

Laleh laughed and rolled her eyes. "That's childish. Obviously we can't have lunch or hang out together, but I'm not going to run away from you as if you had the Narwadian

plague."

"Good to know." Quinn paused as they neared the humming crowd of travelers. He regarded her carefully. Then with a boyish grin, he extended his hand. "Good luck."

She shook his hand. "Thanks."

They parted, Quinn heading off to the left and Laleh to the right. As she moved through the crowd, she quickly realized almost the entire throng of travelers was concentrated in one spot. Motionless except for the occasional rise on tiptoes, they gawked at some spectacle Laleh couldn't yet see. Unable to squash her curiosity, Laleh joined the ring of bodies. She could just hear what sounded like a fight of some kind. The crowd reacted in unison, gasping and oohing simultaneously.

Laleh lifted high on her toes and peered over the shoulder of the woman in front of her.

Her heart stuttered at the sight of Pike trying to fend off a knife wielding vagrant. She quickly realized the other man wasn't a vagrant at all but a filthy, bearded Spacefleet member. His flight suit was ripped and stained. There were no boots on his grime caked feet. Even so thin and emaciated, he obviously possessed tremendous strength. Vaguely, Laleh remembered reading about space psychosis. If this man didn't fit the criteria, she didn't know who would.

Wild-eyed, he shouted like a feral beast and lunged at Pike. Laleh screamed, her voice drowned out in the crowd. Pike jumped back just in time. The man stumbled forward but quickly regained his footing and rounded on Pike. Laleh frantically searched the crowd for safety officers. Where were they? Why was Pike the only one doing anything?

Elbows out, Laleh abandoned her luggage and shoved through the crowd. Jostled side to side, she managed to stay upright despite the numerous feet tripping her. She had to get closer. She had to make sure Pike was all right.

The man charged Pike. Entangled, they fell to the ground. Laleh's terrified gaze moved over the men, desperate to find the knife. Her eyes zeroed in on the gleaming blade. Pike held tight to the man's wrist, keeping the knife from plunging into his neck. Laleh couldn't breathe. Bile rose in her throat as she watched them struggle.

And then the psychotic man jerked. The knife clattered to the floor just beside Pike's ear.

Dr. Karp emerged from the crowd, arm raised and a dart gun clamped in his hand. The crazy man slumped forward as the sedative took effect. Pike's hand flew to the man's chest, steadying the limp body as he rolled the man onto his back and then to his left side. Pike kicked aside the knife and raked a shaky hand through his hair.

Security officers rushed to the scene. The crowd dispersed around her, but Laleh remained rooted to the spot. Soon she was the only non-essential person lingering on the perimeter of the scene. She could hardly breathe let alone move. Relief flooded her body, but the fear of losing Pike was stronger. Nausea bubbled in the pit of her tummy. Her limbs shook wildly. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

When Pike looked in her direction, shock registered on his face. Their gazes clashed. A desperate need to hold him seized her chest. Pike took a hesitant step forward but stopped, seemingly uncertain. Laleh wasn't nearly as restrained.

She bolted from her spot, sneakers squeaking on the polished floor, and sprinted the distance between them. Without a care for propriety, Laleh flung herself at Pike. Her legs

wound round his waist, her arms curling around his shoulders. She clung tightly as she claimed his lips in a fervent, nearly frantic, kiss. The salt of her tears mixed on their mouths. The scent of his sweat and soap invaded her senses.

Pike's arms tightened around her body as he took a step back and to the side to keep his balance. He groaned against her mouth, the vibrations driving her wild. His fingers bit into her skin as he gripped her so tightly.

A loudly cleared throat interrupted the magical moment. Pike broke their kiss, his reluctance evident on his face. He touched his forehead to hers. "Wait for me."

"Yes," she whispered breathlessly.

"In our new quarters," Pike clarified, setting her gently on the floor, her jeans raking against the front of his pressed trousers. He must have seen the surprise on her face. "I had our things moved while you were gone. I thought we could use a fresh start."

His words were so softly spoken only she could hear them. He tenderly swiped the apples of her cheeks with his thumbs, gathering her tears on his skin. "I might be a while."

She smiled lovingly up at him. "I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter Sixteen

Pike practically ran through the corridors. He'd spent the last two hours trying to figure out where the *Magellan* had come from and what to do with the battered ship. The crazed lieutenant had been placed in a medically induced coma and quarantined until further notice. Teeth on edge, Pike had flown through the necessary forms and filed the required reports. He could barely concentrate, his thoughts focused squarely on Laleh. He'd had to start and restart some of his reports for all the mistakes.

The familiar sensation of her lips pressed to his, of her arms holding him close, had nearly brought tears to his eyes. Even now a lump rose in his throat. He swallowed hard as he hustled around a corner. Embracing his emotions wasn't of Pike's strong suits. But the relief he'd felt at Laleh's eager agreement to wait for him was overwhelming. In that moment, he'd finally understood just how much he'd almost lost. There was no other woman in the universe like Laleh.

And she was his.

Pike burst into the entry hall of their new quarters. Cock aching and pulsing in his pants, he strode down the short hall into the living room. He spied Laleh sitting atop a moving crate. At the sight of him, she jumped up and ran into his arms. He could barely breathe, barely think, as he gathered her tightly to his chest and claimed her lips. He had only goal: to show her how much he loved her, how desperately he needed her in his life.

"I'm sorry," Pike whispered against her lips. "For everything."

"So am I." Laleh trembled violently in his arms.

He cupped her cheek and tilted her head gently back. He searched those gorgeous blue eyes, the topaz flecks even more pronounced tonight. "What?"

She gulped, tears shimmering in her eyes. "I thought I was going to lose you to that crazy man. Please," she begged, "don't ever do anything like that again, Pike. I can't—I couldn't..." She shuddered and buried her face against his neck, seemingly unable to finish the thought.

His chest tightened. He needed to know. He needed to hear her say it.

Pike kissed her tenderly. "Tell me, Laleh." He teased her lips with his tongue. "Tell me."

"I love you."

Elated at her confession, Pike swallowed her ragged sob in the most passionate of kisses. He scooped her into his arms and sidestepped boxes as he carried her through their new home to the master bedroom at the rear of their quarters. He was grateful he'd had the forethought to place crisp, clean sheets on the bed.

Laleh's lips were on his neck as he lowered her feet to the floor. They wasted no time undressing. Side by side, they kicked off shoes and stripped off socks before shucking pants and shirts and undergarments. At the sight of Laleh's honey skin, Pike bit back a groan. His hands shot out on instinct, palms gliding over her supple curves. He cupped a breast and lowered his lips to the erect peak, sucked it inside and rolled his tongue over it. Laleh sighed and arched against him. The neatly trimmed curls guarding her sex brushed against his thigh.

Pike gently pressed her backwards toward the bed until she fell back onto the

mattress. Her brown waves splayed wildly on the white comforter. Pike crawled over her, pinning her to the mattress. Knees planted on either side of her thighs, he made love to her mouth, flicking his tongue against hers and playfully nipping her lush lower lip. His hard cock slid against her belly, the stimulation just enough to keep him on edge.

They'd barely begun their sensual dance, but already Pike could smell her arousal. The tantalizing scent of her pussy teased his nose. He slid a searching hand along the slope of her belly, down over mound, and between the lips of her sex. Slick cream coated her skin. His mouth on her throat, he guided a pair of fingers into her cunt. She bucked at the intrusion. Her low moan encouraged him to continue pumping. His thumb brushed over her clit. Laleh quaked beneath him.

Pike slowly removed his wet fingers and placed them against Laleh's lips. Her eyes widened with surprise, but that didn't stop her soft pink tongue from darting out to swipe her own juices from his skin. Pike shivered at the sensation of her tongue sucking on his fingers. He bent low and kissed her cheek, his lips mere centimeters from hers. He skimmed his mouth over her chin and along the curve of her throat. His kisses danced across her collarbone and between her perky breasts.

Swiping his tongue over her torso, he licked his way to her navel and pecked a straight line down to the apex of her thighs. Pike grasped her inner thighs and forced them wide. The dewy petals of her sex glistened in the low light. Her juices leaked from her core and dampened the comforter. Desperate for a taste of her, Pike slid his tongue into her wet hole. Salty musk exploded on his taste buds. He nuzzled his nose between her folds and rubbed the tip of it against her swollen clit.

Laleh yelped and tried to pull away. Pike kept a firm grasp as he explored every delicious inch of her cunt. As he lapped and sucked, Laleh squirmed and whimpered. His teeth grazed gently against her tender flesh and she gasped. Pike slurped her clit between his lips and circled his tongue over the firm bud. Laleh rocked her hips, pushing her pussy against him. Pike went wild on her clit. He wanted to feel her shatter against his mouth, to taste her sweet cum on his lips.

"Pike!"

White hot excitement rippled down to his toes. When she called out his name like that, it made his dick so hard. Her clit pulsed against his tongue. She sucked in a long breath and went rigid as she came. As the explosion of her orgasm's beginning passed, Laleh gripped his head and rode out the waves of ecstasy. Driven nearly insane by her endless shrieks and groans, Pike lapped at the pink pearl until she was reduced to absolute putty in his hands. With every touch of his tongue to her cunt, she shivered and shook.

Pike took pity on his blissed out wife and abandoned his sensual torture. He kissed her inner thighs and moved back up her body, covering her small frame with his much larger one. Laleh reached up and ran her fingers through his hair, pulling his face down toward hers. She kissed him, her tongue searching and sliding against his. As their mouths mated, Pike realized just how much he'd missed her.

He nudged between her thighs, his stiff cock seeking entrance to her wet heat. Pike bit his lower lip at the unbelievable sensation of her slick cunt as he slid home. Stilled, he stayed just like that, buried to the hilt in his wife. It was the sweetest of homecomings.

Pike touched his forehead to hers, their breaths mingling, as he thrust agonizingly slow. Laleh rose up to meet his movements, her gaze trained on his. He lost himself in the

blue pools, her desire for him taking hold and swallowing him up whole. Something incredibly powerful seized his heart, knocked the breath from his lungs.

"I love you, Laleh." His voice was thick as he finally confessed his secret. "God, I love you."

A knowing smile curved those pouting pink lips. Laleh's arms curled around his upper body and she clasped his shoulders. She held tight as he took her with increasing force and speed. He plunged her silken depths in a desperate bid for release. Her lips brushed against his ear. She murmured softly with encouragement. "Take me, Pike. Show me how much you love me."

He could do no less than she asked. He took her with as much intensity as he could muster. Their bodies rocked and bucked atop the bed. Her heels pressed into his ass. He leaned on his elbow for better leverage, his fingertips brushing her forehead as he held her gaze and made love to her as only he could. He wanted her to remember this night always. The night they declared their love for one another for the first time.

Tension coiled low inside him. One of Laleh's hands drifted to her clit. She teathed her lower lip and inhaled shallow breaths. He swept his lips over hers. "Come with me, Laleh."

"Pike," she whispered breathlessly. "Pike! Unnhhh."

The spasms of her wet cunt pushed him over the edge. Laleh's shaky breaths buffeted his cheek as she shook beneath him. Her nails bit into his flesh as he slammed into her again and again. With a primal growl, Pike spilled inside his wife. The mixing of their fluids only further cemented their bonds of love. Tonight it meant so much more than it ever had before this.

Their passion spent, they clung to one another, bodies hot and sweat-slicked. Pike trailed his fingertips over her face as they traded languid kisses. It was as if the world outside their bedroom had ceased to exist. In their ecstasy-induced haze, they lived only for the moment, only for their love.

Pike realized there was no better time than now to do what he should have done weeks ago. He uncurled her arms and moved away from Laleh. She pouted and protested with a mewling whimper. He kissed her nose. "I'll be right back."

He slipped from the bed and crossed to the built-in dresser. He found what he wanted under a pile of neatly folded socks in the top drawer. Small blue box in hand, Pike returned to the bed. All his carefully laid plans and scripted words seemed rather out of place now. He'd imagined this going a different route altogether. There would be candle light and wine and, well, clothes.

Pike decided to wing it. He climbed in bed beside Laleh who now sat back against her pillow and frowned curiously. He was reminded of the first time he'd done this, all those many weeks ago in Houston. Then, she'd been bleary-eyed and battered. He'd been less than appropriately dressed in just his boxers.

Sitting back on his heels, Pike suddenly felt rather vulnerable. She loved him, yes, but was it enough? Was she really ready to forgive and forget and move forward? *Christ, I hope so.*

"What's that?"

He chuckled at Laleh's insatiable curiosity. "It's for you."

"Oh?" Interest sparkled in her eyes.

Pike cracked open the box to reveal the rings he'd chosen only days earlier. Laleh

gasped in surprise. Her hands flew to her mouth. He smiled in satisfaction, certain he'd chosen just the right set for her. As he'd perused the selection at Virgo's best jeweler, the pale purple Dooneelian diamond had caught his eye. A sizeable square stone, it sat in a rather unique setting with white diamond trillions on either side. Curling tendrils of platinum hooked together to form the intricately designed band. A matching platinum ring similar to his complemented the engagement ring.

His mouth dry, Pike gently tugged Laleh's left hand from her face. It trembled slightly in his as he held tight. Pike met her questioning gaze. "Laleh?"

"Yes?" Her whisper soft words were barely audible.

"Will you stay married to me?"

She nodded quickly, determinedly. "Yes. Absolutely yes."

Pike broke out in a broad grin and threw his arms around her. They held fast and shared a series of short kisses. Pike took the rings from the box and reverently placed them on Laleh's ring finger. He pulled her into a loving embrace and reclined against their pillows.

As she examined the rings now glinting on her finger, Pike stroked her shoulder. A sense of calm pervaded his every bone and tissue. He squeezed her tight and kissed her forehead. "I'm glad you're home."

*

Laleh snuggled closer to her husband. "Me too."

They settled into a comfortable silence. Laleh closed her eyes and reveled in the sensation of Pike's arms holding her close. Cuddling with Pike after those nights of separation was as satisfying as the first drink of water after wandering in the desert. She couldn't imagine being away from him again.

"Did you enjoy your weekend?"

"Very much."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Pike's caresses changed. Laleh could tell he was thinking about something. She shifted in his arms and glanced up at him. "What is it?"

He seemed hesitant but spoke anyway. "Your brother came to see me while you were away."

Dread clutched her heart. She went rigid. Pike gave her a reassuring hug. "Shh," he murmured against her ear. "It's all right. I asked to meet with him."

"What?" Laleh bolted upright and stared down at him. "Why?"

Pike sat up and kissed her temple. He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his chin on her shoulder. "I won't allow him to threaten you. This was his one chance to get whatever it is he wants."

"And what did he want?" She hated the fear coloring her voice.

"A letter of apology addressed to the Hezman court and your father where you also rescind your rights. If you do that, your father will forget you even exist."

Laleh's skeptical gaze settled on her husband's face. "He's willing to just forget about everything? I don't believe that for one minute."

"Your father wants to join the Federation. He knows he's got to make compromises. I'm sure granting you your freedom is a calculated move on his part. Jai seemed honest when he delivered the demands. He did make sure to point out your refusal wouldn't be looked upon lightly."

"So that's it? A letter?"

"Your father also wants your mother's wedding jewelry returned."

She frowned. "Jewelry?"

"Apparently your father is remarrying and doesn't see a reason to buy another set when another will do," Pike explained.

Laleh snorted. "Why doesn't that surprise me? I doubt his new wife will like the set. I remember it was a very strange metallic creation, no stones at all." She racked her brain for a moment. "I don't even know if I still have it. Mother might have sold it after we arrived in Houston all those years ago. We needed the money."

Pike shrugged. "If you don't have it, you don't have it." He paused and trepidation tinged his voice when he spoke. "What will you do?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "The thought of apologizing to *him* and begging for is forgiveness makes me sick, Pike. The way he treated me—" Laleh stopped, unable to continue, refusing to think about those nightmarish years. "But," she sighed with resignation, "I can't go on looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life."

Pike's protective embrace tightened. "I know it's not a particularly glamorous compromise, Laleh. Just remember whatever you write is just the means to an end. Flatter his pompous ass and be done with it. We know the truth. That's all that matters."

Laleh allowed Pike to pull her back down onto the bed. She put her cheek against his chest and listened to the comforting thud of his heavy heartbeat. "I'll write the letter."

As if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Pike relaxed. "You've made the right choice."

The matter seemingly resolved, Laleh couldn't shake the unsettling feeling she'd just been played by Jai and her father. "I hope so."

* * * *

By the time Laleh walked into her office the next morning, it seemed news of her reconciliation with Pike had spread far and wide. She ignored the curious glances at her ring finger and the accompanying whispers. What happened within the confines of their marriage was the business of no one else.

Luckily the unexpected arrival of the *Magellan* and its one surviving (and psychotic) crew member was the juicier bit of gossip. When asked, Laleh divulged what she'd learned from Pike. Her colleagues apparently knew all of that already and left her office looking decidedly disappointed. She'd simply shrugged and returned to her work.

The day sped by quickly. Laleh made a quick stop on the food court to pick up the takeout she'd ordered earlier and grabbed a bottle of wine from the gourmet food shop. She stowed the wine in the fridge and dinner in the warming compartment above the stove.

Knowing Pike wouldn't be home for another hour or so, she turned her attention to the myriad of boxes crammed into their living room. She scanned the labels and shifted stacks until she found the crate holding her mother's things. Laleh dragged the box over to the sectional sofa and plopped down on a cushion. She unsnapped the latches and started sifting through the contents.

Her mother's favorite dress, a scarf, a beaded shawl—Laleh reverently placed the items on the cushion next to her. She'd kept only the most important things after her mother had died, donating the bulk of her clothing to a charity. There were random bits

and pieces in the bottom of the crate. Laleh pulled out a stack of her mother's favorite books and some porcelain curios she'd found at an antique market. She found the napkin with her mother's first scrawled words, the handwriting childish and disjointed.

I am Safyra. This is my daughter, Laleh. She is my life.

Laleh's throat grew tight as she ran her fingers over the paper and ink. The memory of her mother learning to print those letters remained fresh and real. Captain Boreanaz had come to their quarters aboard his ship every evening and taught them both English and writing. Laleh had soaked up the lessons like a little sponge, but her mother had faced more difficulty in learning. Since she'd never been afforded an education, learning to read and write at twenty-three had proven a bit more trying. Still, she'd done her best and practiced until she mastered her lessons.

Looking back, Laleh couldn't help but wonder if there had been something between her mother and Captain Boreanaz. At twenty-three, her mother had still been a fresh-faced beauty. She'd been far too young for a nine-year-old daughter. Would things have happened differently if her mother hadn't had a child in tow?

A pang of guilt infiltrated Laleh's conscience. Her mother had always chosen her child over her own needs and desires. Laleh found some comfort in the idea she'd accomplished everything her mother had ever wanted for her: an education, a respectable job, a loving husband and marriage.

Her thoughts drifted to the letter she'd drafted during her lunch break. The sycophantic, syrupy tone nauseated Laleh. She'd laid on the groveling rather thick. Even though she knew the letter was the only way to escape her past, Laleh viewed each word as an absolute betrayal of her mother's memory, of everything the woman had risked to save Laleh from a life as bleak and horrific as her own. If she could see Laleh now, would her mother understand?

Laleh's fingers swept over the tattered hardback cover of the book in her lap. She rolled her fingertips over the hard surface, the hollow tapping echoing softly. At first she didn't notice anything odd. It wasn't until the fourth time she'd rapped her fingertips against the cover Laleh realized it didn't sound quite right.

Curious, she lifted the book and glanced at its spine. *The Handmaid's Tale*, her mother's favorite book of all time. A classic, it had been among the first her mother had tackled after reaching an advanced reading level. She'd encouraged a then teenaged Laleh to read it. They'd both related to the dystopian novel on a deep personal level. To think a fictional story written hundreds of years earlier and, ostensibly, based upon the author's greatest fears of a theocratic world so closely mirrored their reality was disturbing.

Laleh cracked the cover and thumbed through the well-worn pages. A third of the way through the book, she discovered the secret it held. Her mother had carved out a small square and stuffed the jewelry inside. Laleh stared at it, wondering what in the world had possessed her mother to deface her most favorite book in the whole universe just to hide an ugly necklace and bracelet.

She retrieved the pieces from their hiding place and studied them. They had been created of the dullest coppery metal Laleh had ever seen. Visible hammer marks marred the small disks linked together by a series of looped metal rings. The style reminded Laleh of a chain mail exhibit she'd seen in a Houston museum years ago. There were no jewels, only the oddest markings lining the underside of the bracelet and necklace.

Even as a child, Laleh had noticed the glaring difference in the wedding jewelry her

father had gifted to his other wives compared to what he'd given her mother. As the sixth wife, her mother had been rather low on the totem pole. The jewelry she wore every day seemed only to exacerbate her lowly status as it publicly marked her as less than the others. Privately, she'd been treated no differently.

"Why did you keep this?" Laleh wondered aloud. The collar and bracelet were the last tangible items linking them to her father's subjugation and abuse. Had it been up to Laleh, they would have been sold and forgotten. But surely the fact her mother had taken the time to hide them meant something. Why were they so important to her?

Laleh heard the front door open. As Pike footsteps approached, she hastily returned the jewelry to its hiding place and closed the book. Pike entered the room and swept his gaze over the room. As it settled on Laleh, he smiled. Warmth bubbled in the pit of her tummy. "Hi."

"Hey." He bent down and kissed her. "Did you find the jewelry?"

Without missing a beat, Laleh shook her head and frowned. "No. I guess she must have sold it."

Pike shrugged. "Oh well. Your father will just have to deal with it."

"Yes."

Pike sniffed the air. "Dinner?"

"Waiting for us in the kitchen."

"Great. Since you cooked," he smiled slyly, "I'll set the table and put out dinner."

"Thanks." As he walked away, Laleh felt guilty for lying to him. She'd have to tell him eventually. She just hoped she'd have a more concrete reason for keeping the jewelry than the pettiness and uncertainty now motivating her.

Laleh returned her mother's belongings to the box, placing the hollowed out book on top of the scarf. She joined Pike in the dining room and watched him dish heaping portions onto their plates. She scooted past him, smacking him teasingly on the bottom, and retrieved the bottle of wine from the refrigerator. A quick dash into the living room and she found two wine glasses in a box marked "kitchen."

Laleh sat down and splashed some wine into their glasses. "So how was your day?"

"Busy." Pike settled into his seat and picked up a fork. "I had to referee an argument between Karp and a bioethicist over Karp's desire to keep Lieutenant Ello sedated until he's completely physically recovered."

"Sounds fascinating," Laleh joked.

"You have no idea," he grouched. "We hammered out a compromise. I swear I saw Karp stick out his tongue at her when they left my office."

Laleh laughed. "Boys!"

Pike playfully glared in her direction. He sipped his wine and shook his head. "Spacefleet brass want the *Magellan* taken apart and studied. It's dry-docked in a service slot. I've got engineers going over it with a fine tooth comb. Who knows what they'll find?"

"Doesn't it strike you as a little creepy?" Laleh swirled the liquid in her glass. "I mean, this guy's been floating out there for years, probably alone, and then he just happens to limp into a skyport. It's so bizarre. What happened to his crew mates? How the hell did he keep that ship going? What's he been eating?"

"Not much by the looks of him," Pike said. "That's one of the reasons Karp wants him sedated. He needs to rehydrate and pack on some weight. It'll be easier to heal the

lieutenant if he's knocked out."

"Makes sense." She pierced a steamed piece of cauliflower with her fork. "I wrote the letter."

Pike swallowed his mouthful and regarded her carefully. "Was it difficult?"

Her shoulders bobbed. "It wasn't the most fun I've ever had drafting a letter. I tried to channel my father's toadies. It seemed to work."

"When are you going to send it?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll need to hire an off-skyport courier service. He'll require a print copy."

"Not a problem," Pike said, gesturing with his fork. "I'll go with you to the mail depot. We'll send duplicates and require a receiver's signature. Just in case," he added.

"I'll just be glad to be done with it all."

Pike's hand slid across the table and grasped hers. "So will I."

Chapter Seventeen

Wiping a hand down his face, Pike sat back in his desk chair. He scratched just above his temple and yawned. While there were some bursts of excitement in his new position, his days were generally filled with tedious, mind-numbing work. He'd just gone through nearly fifty pages of acquisitions requests. Separating the needs from wants had been fairly simple. Tomorrow he'd tackle separating the absolutely-must-have-now requests from the can-wait-until-next-quarter requests. He frowned at the realization he'd have a line of angry department heads outside his door on Monday morning. They'd have all weekend to stew over his rejections.

Weelo entered the office, a stack of mail cards clutched in his hands. "These came via courier, sir."

Pike accepted the stack of blue cards. "Thank you."

"Will you be working late, sir?"

Pike knew his secretary wanted to head out for his weekly hot wings and beer get together. "I'm just about finished for the day. Why don't you head on out?"

"Thank you, sir."

As Weelo left, Pike flipped through the cards and scanned the sender's address. He paused as his gaze drifted over Melanya and Pilar's address. Wondering what they'd sent, he opened the blue case and gave it a shake. His eyes widened at the glittery red travel pass that fell onto his palm. They'd sent a two night pass to *Hedonisma*.

Pike snorted and shook his head. Leave it to Melanya to gift him with a weekend to a pleasure vessel with his wife. The thought of introducing Laleh to the kinkier side of sex play had him shifting in his chair. She'd proven to be an incredibly curious lover. A few times, he'd playfully suggested he might tie her up or introduce a sex toy or two. She'd turned up her nose at the ideas, but he'd seen the flash of excitement in her eyes.

Pensive, he fingered the pass. Ultimately the decision to visit *Hedonisma* was Laleh's choice. He wouldn't dare pressure her into visiting such a place. If she went against her will, she'd never enjoy the experience. Pike knew there were certain sections of *Hedonisma* they'd have to avoid. With Laleh's background, anything heavy in submission and domination might be upsetting.

But that was only a very small segment of the offerings at *Hedonisma*. There were so many other possibilities...

Settled on giving Laleh the pass and letting her make her own choice, Pike turned back to the remainder of the mail cards. Trepidation seized his chest at the sight of the Hezman postal code on the second and third cards. For a little more than a week, he and Laleh had been anxiously awaiting any news of the receipt of her letter. He quickly snapped open the blue case and plugged the small yellow card into his transmitter. A relieved sigh escaped his lips as Laleh's father's response flashed onto the screen.

Satisfactory.

It was over. Finally.

Pike pocketed his transmitter and shut down his workstation. He grabbed the stack of mail cards and left his office, desperate to tell Laleh the good news.

* * * *

Laleh dictated spoken notes as she skimmed the surveys she'd gathered from her week of Sandrino seminars. Some responses annoyed her. Others were actually useful. Apparently her teaching style seemed too academic for the workplace. Laleh rolled her eyes at that but accepted she needed to lighten up a bit when presenting these workshops. The needs of Federation and Spacefleet personnel were vastly different than those of university students.

A chirp interrupted her reading. Laleh glanced at her widescreen monitor. A few days earlier, she'd scanned in some of the symbols on the back of her mother's wedding jewelry and had been running them through recognition software in search of an answer. So far the program had tossed out a few similar symbols.

Laleh scooted her chair closer to the screen and studied the result. It was an exact match. Curious as to its origin, she touched the blinking square on the screen and enlarged the information. What she read didn't make sense. She blinked with surprise and reread the paragraph.

"That's not possible," Laleh whispered.

The software had matched the symbols on the jewelry to the Scourge. Laleh carefully compared her scanned image with the software's example. There was no doubt. The result was absolutely correct.

But what the hell were Scourge symbols doing on her mother's jewelry? Laleh had been so young when the war on the Outer Nine began. On Hezma-12, women weren't generally involved with discussions of politics or news from the wider world. She hadn't known anything about the conflict until boarding the spaceship *Brennan* after they'd escaped her homeland.

So what was the link between her father and the Scourge? Had he simply purchased the jewelry from a trader without any knowledge of its origins? Or was it something else altogether? Something more sinister? Knowing her father, Laleh wouldn't be surprised if he'd done something incredibly stupid.

"Busy?"

Laleh looked up at the sound of Pike's voice. As nonchalantly as possible, she reached out and tapped the screen to close the program. She shook her head. "Just finishing up these surveys. Did you need something?"

He flashed a handful of mail cards as he strode into the office, the door sliding shut behind him. "These just arrived. I thought you'd like to see them."

Laleh rose and met him on the other side of her desk. She took the cards and glanced at the address on the top case. Her eyes widened. Heart thudding against her chest, she asked, "Is this what I think it is?"

Pike grinned and nodded. "He accepted your letter."

"It's over?" She could scarcely believe it.

"It's over," Pike murmured and kissed her. She melted into his warm embrace. Tears pricked her eyes as relief flooded her system. He squeezed a bit tighter. "Are you all right?"

She nodded and pressed a kiss to his jaw. "I'm fine. Just a little rattled, I guess."

"Understandable," Pike said, loosening his grip.

Laleh slid from his grasp and hopped onto the desk behind her. "So I hear the Federation has ordered the *Magellan* be towed back to Earth for further study."

"Good riddance, as far as I'm concerned," Pike replied dryly. "That thing has been nothing but a problem. First, the lieutenant tried to fillet me. Then, the ship infected the entire fleet service bay with a computer virus. Now, they've found traces of Scourge technology aboard?" He shook his head. "The sooner it's off my skyport, the better."

Realizing this was her in, Laleh toyed with the zipper seam of Pike's jacket. "That's odd, isn't it? The Scourge technology."

"Damned odd," Pike said, his voice thoughtful. "That ship left five years ago and was never in the same areas as any Scourge vessels. We ended the war four years ago, wiped those bastards out, so how the *Magellan* came across Scourge technology is a mystery."

Laleh shrugged. "Maybe not."

Pike raised his eyebrows. "How do you figure?"

"Space junk," she offered. "The crew might have intercepted some bits and pieces here and there and took them aboard for study. Maybe they found a way to use them."

"Makes sense," Pike agreed.

"Where did they come from?" At Pike's confused expression, she quickly clarified. "The Scourge, I mean."

"Oh." Pike inhaled and screwed up his face. "Well, you know, I'm not really sure. I remember a vague mention when I was a cadet. That was, oh, twenty-two or so years ago. A Federation starship had a run-in with an unknown vessel in the Kardathian System."

Laleh schooled her features, not wanting to show any surprise. "That's my home system."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" Pike had obviously never put two and two together. "After that, we had sporadic sightings of Scourge vessels and the occasional attack. The actual war didn't start until four years later in the Outer Nine. Of course, you know the rest."

"Thirteen years of war and now four years of peace," she said on autopilot, her mind somewhere else. Was that the connection? Twenty-two years ago, around the time the Scourge showed up on Federation radar, Laleh's father had been preparing to marry her mother. Was there something else to the story? Something more insidious? If there was, Laleh now had in her possession a priceless bargaining chip.

"What's with the Cheshire Cat smile?" Pike tipped her chin and stared searchingly into her eyes. "Something I should be worried about?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she replied, quashing the smug smile. She looked down at the mail cards in her hand. The second was just the duplicate copy she'd sent her father, but the third was far more interesting. Laleh giggled madly as she stared at the red card. "I can't believe they actually sent this!"

"You knew?"

"Melanya and Pilar joked about sending us to Hedonsima for our honeymoon. I never thought they'd actually go through with it."

"You don't know Melanya like I do," he muttered.

"I'd venture only Pilar knows Melanya like you do," Laleh said without thinking.

Pike stiffened with surprise. He looked decidedly uncomfortable. "She told you about that?"

Laleh enjoyed having Pike off kilter and decided to tease him. "Oh, she told me much more than that. I heard all about your wicked, wicked ways."

"Christ!" Pike cursed, his ears showing the slightest hint of red. "I knew I shouldn't have let you stay the night with them. I'm almost embarrassed to ask what you thought of

me."

Laleh shrugged casually and traced the insignia on his jacket. "I still married you the next day, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did." Pike regarded her carefully. He stepped in closer. "Why?"

"Well, I needed a visa and my brother was trying to kidnap me."

Pike's warm hands grasped her bare knees and slowly opened them wide. He stepped between her legs, his hands sliding under the fabric of her slim fitting skirt. "Are those the only reasons?"

Laleh's hands settled on his waist. She met his lustful stare. "No," she admitted. "You were the kind of man I could trust. You were kind and caring. From the moment I met you, I knew you were the kind of man I'd always wanted. You were the kind of man I could love."

He seemed surprised by her honesty. His Adam's apple moved as he swallowed. "Laleh..."

She sensed he didn't know what to say. Laleh reached up and touched his jaw. He turned his face and kissed her palm. A mischievous smile tugged at her mouth. "And, of course, after hearing Melanya's tales of your mad skills in the bedroom, I knew I'd be a fool to throw away the chance for a master's introduction to sex. You definitely haven't disappointed."

Pike teasingly bit the plump flesh of her palm. "Baby, you've rocked my universe, too."

Shivering, Laleh laughed. "That so?"

Pike nuzzled her neck and grazed his teeth over her skin. She shuddered at the sensual flick of his tongue. When he pumped his hips, grinding his hard cock against her, she gasped. "Pike! We can't. Not here."

"Why not?" Pike sucked on her earlobe.

"Someone could come to the door."

"I know."

She could hear the excitement in his voice. Everything responsible in her clamored for Laleh to gently put a stop to their office tryst, but when Pike's searching fingers found their way inside her panties, it was all over. "Fuck me."

At her breathy request, Pike groaned and captured her mouth. His tongue darted between her lips. She moaned hungrily, her tongue sliding against his. Pike grasped her waist and pulled her off the desk in one swift jerk. Smashed up against him, Laleh felt his cock stabbing into her belly. Pike spun her around and used the toe of his boot to widen her stance.

A thrill of exhilaration rippled through Laleh. When Pike took charge of their lovemaking, it made her knees weak. Her pussy pulsed as his hands snaked under her dress. He looped his fingers through the damp crotch of her panties and pulled them away from her body. Laleh gasped in shock when she heard the unmistakable click of Pike's pocket knife. With a quick slash, he dealt with the obstacle of her panties.

Her cunt pulsed at his nearly barbaric behavior. Laleh's palms slapped against the desktop as Pike placed his hand in the center of her back and shoved gently. He stepped between her legs and prodded her sex. Pike cheek pressed up against hers, the light stubble rasping her skin. "Your pussy is so wet."

"Pike," she begged. "Please."

"Do you want my cock, Laleh?"

"Yes." She pushed back against him. "I want your cock in me now."

She heard the lowering of a zipper. Pike fisted her skirt in both hands and jerked the fabric up around her waist. Looking over her shoulder, Laleh watched him take his stiff cock in hand and guide it toward her body. She bent forward, angling her ass up as she shifted forward in her heels. When the head of Pike's penis drifted teasingly between the cheeks of her buttocks, she moaned. He always teased her there, sometimes going so far as to brush his finger over the hidden pucker, but had yet to make any move to take her in that way. She'd fantasized about his cock filling her ass, stretching her.

Pike's cock slipped between her juicy folds. With one quick thrust, he fully sheathed himself in her wet heat. Laleh whimpered and rocked her hips. Pike pumped fast and hard. There would be no sweet caresses or soft words today. This was fucking for the sake of an orgasm. And she loved it.

Laleh reached down and touched her throbbing clit. Her thighs tensed as she squeezed her intimate muscles around Pike's cock. Every flick of the pink nub made her toes curl. The angle of Pike's thrusts drove her wild. With every stroke of his cock, he bumped her G-spot. He moved closer, his chest against her back, panting in her ear. Laleh braced herself against the desk with one hand, her nails scratching against the shiny surface.

Heat invaded her lower belly. Her cunt quivered as she approached her orgasm. Pike's fingers tightened on her waist, signaling his own eminent release. Laleh rubbed her clit furiously. "Uh. Uh. Unnhh."

Her orgasm engulfed her, the sensations overwhelming and breathtaking. Even as she shook with ecstasy, Laleh thought of Pike. Knowing how much he loved it, she slid her fingers away from her still throbbing clit and reached low, fondling his balls.

"Laleh!" Pike's growl echoed in her ear as he slammed into her pussy. His hot cum splashed inside her, filling her spasming channel with its warmth. She could feel his sac pulsing against her palm. He jerked twice, the most feral of groans leaving his throat.

Bodies rigid, they remained in their clenched position, Pike's hands around her waist, Laleh's fingers still cradling his balls. Pike shuddered and groaned as he pulled out of her. She whimpered at the sudden loss of his cock. His fingers slid around the side of her neck and cradled her chin. He turned her face gently and kissed her. "I love you, Laleh."

A satisfied smile curved her lips. "I love you, too."

Pike pecked her temple and stepped back. As he set himself to rights, Laleh's gaze fell on the *Hedonisma* pass. She picked it up and turned to face him. "Let's go this weekend."

"Are you sure?" He touched her cheek. "I don't want you to feel like you have to go there to prove some point. I want you go with me because you want to."

"I do want to go," Laleh assured him. "We can celebrate my newfound freedom. And try new things," she added in her most seductive tone.

Obviously interested, Pike moved closer. "Like?"

She rose on tiptoes and placed her lips against his ear. "I want you to fuck my ass."

Pike went rigid with apparent shock. She could actually hear him gulp. "If that's what you want..."

Laleh captured his smoky gaze. "I want it. I want it bad."

Pike clasped her derriere and yanked her close. His lips moved against hers as he

spoke in a low growl. "Baby, I'm going to fuck you so good you won't be able to walk when I'm through with you."

As he devoured her mouth, Laleh shivered with delight. "Oh, god, yes..."

Chapter Eighteen

Tummy trembling with anticipation, Laleh glanced around the arrival deck at *Hedonisma*. A tiny frown of disappointment turned down the corners of her lips. Everything looked so *normal*. Where were the scantily clad women and half-naked men? What about the sex toy stores she'd heard so much about?

"What?" Pike inclined his head as he looked down at her.

She shrugged. "It's just not what I was expecting."

Pike laughed and curled his arm around her waist, pulling her close to his side. "The public areas are strictly non-sexual. All of the fun stuff happens behind closed doors or in designated areas."

"Oh." She felt a little foolish. Of course they'd want to separate sexual and non-sexual activities. *Hedonisma* was known for discretion, after all.

"Come on." Pike patted her backside. "Let's check in."

As Laleh fell in step beside her husband, she marveled at his newfound ease. Aboard the *Spica* or on Virgo, Pike wouldn't dare swat her ass in public. The occasional quick peck, a little hand holding and looped arms were the most PDA she managed to squeeze out of him when in uniform. She understood and respected the rules and regulations dictating his conduct and never pressed the issue. In private, Pike seemed always to be reaching for her. Laleh often wondered if it was simply because he craved her touch during the day.

As they approached the check in counter, Pike stepped away from her. Laleh raked her gaze over his civilian clothing, fully aware his freedom stemmed from the lack of identifying insignia. Although the sight of Pike in his uniform made her naughty bits tingle, the sight of Pike in jeans and one of his charcoal grey tees had her lusting after him. She couldn't wait to peel off his shirt and run her hands all over his chiseled abs.

Pike completed the registration process. His arm settled around her shoulders as he guided her through the crowded lobby and into a glass elevator. Laleh noticed the double takes from a few of their fellow riders. They'd obviously recognized Pike, possibly even pegged him as an admiral. She wondered if it was difficult for them to resist the urge to snap to attention and salute.

They exited the elevator on the second uppermost floor of the vessel. Laleh's gaze skimmed over the welcoming screen. Pike angled them toward the left. She read the plaques on the different suites. The Versailles. The Parloonian Oasis. A Night at the Opera. Whips and Chains.

Laleh's breath eased as they continued past the Whips and Chains suite. "I thought our reservations were for a normal room."

"I upgraded to something a little nicer." Pike gestured to a room on the right. The Brass Bed. He touched his thumb to the pad. "And here we are."

As the doors opened, Pike stepped aside and gestured for Laleh to enter their suite. She spotted their luggage sitting just inside the cozy sitting area. A dinner service had been set up on the small table in the corner. Champagne chilled in silver bucket.

The decor reminded her of a cottage with its buttery yellows and creamy whites and pale pinks and blues. She ventured into the bedroom. A massive brass bed sporting fluffy

white bedclothes sat against the left wall. There was a red box sitting at the foot of the bed. Gauzy netting draped the canopy and framed the sides. Laleh fought the urge to take a running start and fling herself into the center of the cushy looking mattress.

Pike's hands slid around her waist, his fingers drifting beneath her cotton camisole to stroke her belly. His lips teased her neck, setting her skin afire with goose bumps. "Well?"

"It's perfect," Laleh whispered, eyes closing at the sensual feeling of his mouth on her skin. She shivered as Pike sucked on the curve of her neck. Her hands moved behind her, grasping at his erection through the denim constraining him.

Pike's lips loosened on her neck. He kissed her cheek and caressed her stomach. "Let's eat first. Then, we'll play."

Already vibrating with arousal, Laleh followed Pike into the sitting area and took her seat. Pike skillfully popped the cork and filled their glasses with the fizzing liquid. They clinked glasses and made small talk as they tucked into their delicious meal.

"If we get separated or you head out on your own, I want you to avoid the fourth, fifth, and sixth floors." Pike scooped his spoon through the layers of berries, cream, and angel food cake in his dessert cup. "I don't think you're quite ready to see what those floors have to offer."

Her curiosity flared. "What sort of things would I see?"

Pike smirked. "I should have known you'd ask." He wiped his mouth and sat back. "The fourth floor is a place where people can explore fetishes like food play, latex, shoes and such. The fifth floor allows people to go a bit further and engage in some rather risky games involving ... well..." Pike paused and looked a bit uncomfortable. "Body functions."

Laleh thought perhaps she'd misunderstood him. She almost asked him to repeat himself but his unease made it perfectly clear she'd heard him correctly. "I don't want need to hear anything else about the fifth floor."

Pike chuckled. "I'm glad to hear that. I know everyone has their kink, but I'd prefer it if we never strayed into that realm."

"Happily agree," Laleh said. "And the sixth floor?"

"They showcase very hardcore sadism and masochism on that floor. With your background, I think it might be a little too much for you see those kinds of games. You come from a place where women aren't allowed to choose whether or not they want to play. Here, it's all consensual, but it might trigger some unhappy memories for you."

Laleh's heart warmed at his concerned tone. "Thanks for the heads up."

Pike shrugged. "I want you to enjoy yourself, Laleh. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable or unsafe. When we're out tonight, I want you to tell me immediately if you want to leave. I won't care. I promise."

"I know," Laleh assured him. "I trust you to take care of me."

Smiling, Pike rose from his chair and held out his hand. "Come."

Laleh grasped his hand and stood. He led her through their suite to the sumptuous bathroom. Her gaze fell on the claw tub and then snapped to Pike's face. His words on their wedding night echoed through her mind. "You remembered."

"I promised I'd show you a bathtub seduction." Pike grasped her waist and lifted her onto the marble counter. He cupped her face, his thumbs caressing her cheeks. He lightly nibbled her lower lip before stepping away from her. Crouching down, Pike twisted the

antique knobs and started to fill the oversized tub. He emptied the tiny bottle of bubble bath into the swirling water. Foam erupted.

Pike stood and kicked off his boots. Laleh's lustful gaze moved over his muscled body as he peeled out of his shirt and jeans and undergarments. His cock started to grow before her very eyes, twitching and pulsing as it pointed right at her. She licked her lips, desperate to taste him again. Like a prowling cat, Pike crossed the space between them. He bent down and tugged off her sneakers and socks. She lifted her arms when he started to take off her shirt. His arms looped around her back as he undid the clasp of her bra and gently removed it from her body. Laleh sighed as his fingers outlined her breasts, his thumbs brushing over the hardening peaks

When Pike's hand sipped into the front pocket of her jeans, she frowned questioningly. He just smiled knowingly and retrieved the elastic band she kept on her at all times. Laleh found that so oddly comforting. That Pike noticed the tiny things spoke volumes. His fingers combed through her loose waves, gathering them low and coiling them into a loose bun of sorts. He wound the elastic around her hair, securing it up and away from where the water would reach.

He touched her back and scooted her off the counter. Her bare feet contacted the cool stone. Kneeling down, Pike unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans. He tugged them down over her hips and thighs. She put her hands on his shoulders as she lifted one foot and then the other to step out of her jeans.

Lips pressed to her belly, Pike swiped his face from side to side, moving south from her navel to the top of her low cut bikinis. When his teeth grasped the waistband, Laleh giggled. His eyes flashed with amusement as he pulled them down in small increments, his teeth moving from the center to the sides until they were free of her hips and moved easily down her thighs. After she kicked them off, Pike nuzzled his nose in the short curls there. Laleh moaned, loving the sensation of his lips on her most intimate place.

Pike planted a kiss right on her clit before leading her to the tub and helping her inside. He shut off the faucet and climbed in behind her, his legs widening just enough for her to sit back against his broad chest. Eyes closed, Laleh enjoyed the steamy water. Bubbles clung to her breasts and neck. Pike's strong arms curled around her waist. His cheek rested against hers, his hands idly stroking her breasts and ribcage.

Laleh sighed as his splayed hands explored her body. She relaxed under his gentle touch. He kneaded her shoulders and pressed the softest kisses to her cheek and temple. A plastic wrapper crinkled as Pike removed a sea sponge from its protective covering. He dipped it in the water and then squeezed the excess over her breasts. She sat forward as Pike dragged the sopping wet sponge over her shoulders and down her back. The sponge moved between her breasts and swirled on her tummy. His motions weren't for cleaning but to stimulate.

Pike abandoned the sponge and ran his hands all over her again. She murmured with absolute contentment and turned her head until her cheek rested against his shoulder. Pike nipped at her neck. His cock jutted into the small of her back. It pulsed every now and then, teasing her with promises of what was to come.

Laleh's thighs opened as Pike's hand drifted lower, seeking entrance to her sex. She purred as he strummed her clit, his pliable fingers expertly working her flesh. Pike's free hand moved between her breasts, squeezing and pinching. Frothy water lapped against her skin. She grasped Pike's knees as her lower tummy trembled. Her breaths deepened as

the flicks of her clit worked her into a frenzied state. She pumped her hips, desperate for more stimulation.

A ragged whimper left her lips as Pike's hand stilled upon her mound. "Pike," she begged, grinding herself against his hand. "Please."

"No." Laleh couldn't see his face, but she could hear the amusement in his voice. Obviously intent upon torturing her, Pike placed a noisy kiss on her neck. "Let's get out of the tub."

He moved lithely as he left the now warm water. Snatching a towel from a nearby stack, Pike made a come here motion. Legs shaking and pussy pulsing, Laleh reluctantly climbed out and joined him. She mewled with desire as he dried her body with the fluffy cotton. Always a tease, he kept his hands far away from her sex. She watched hungrily as he wicked away the moisture beading on his skin. It was all she could do not to fall to her knees and suck his cock.

Pike's hand closed around hers. She followed him back into the bedroom, a slick wetness pooling between her thighs. He directed her onto the bed. As she sat back, Pike knelt in front of her and reached for the red box. He lifted the lid and placed it on her lap. Laleh's eyes widened and a quiver of uncertainty pierced her belly as she stared at the contents.

A bit tremulous, she touched the selection of black silicone toys, a set of tapered anal plugs in different sizes and two strands of anal beads of increasing circumferences. She scanned the labels on the tubes of lubricant, noting their various uses. A small egg-shaped vibrator and black silk ties rounded out the contents.

Laleh gulped nervously and met Pike's expectant gaze. He smiled reassuringly and kissed her knee. "If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right. There's no need to rush into it and cause you unnecessary discomfort. Your pleasure is my only concern."

Her anxiety faded. She leaned forward and pressed her mouth to his. "Thank you."

Pike grinned impishly, took the box from her lap and set it beside him on the floor. He gently pushed her shoulders back to the mattress. Laleh sighed as he cupped her heel and raised her leg, his lips brushing against the inside of her ankle and along her calf. He placed her foot on the bed and repeated his movements on her other leg.

She still burned with arousal, her clit aching for his touch. Pike took his time loving her. He alternated between sensual kisses and playful nips along her inner thighs. Laleh's fingers dug into the comforter. She fought the urge to beg him to put his mouth on her, to grab his face and put it exactly where she craved it most.

Just when she couldn't take another moment of his torture, Pike lowered his lips to her pussy. Laleh arched her back, lifting her hips to meet his swirling tongue. He circled her clit with soft strokes that grew more insistent. She bit her lower lip and concentrated on the feeling of his firm, wet tongue licking her. Sucking in a shuddery breath, Laleh stiffened with anticipation. She didn't need much stimulation to send her over the edge. Her orgasm flowed through her body in powerful waves.

Laleh had barely come down from the peak when Pike moved his tongue lower, outlining her labia before dipping into her pussy. He hummed eagerly as he ate her cunt, lapping at the cream flowing from her core. Her toes curled at the almost overwhelming sensation of his continued stimulation.

When his tongue drifted farther south, Laleh inhaled sharply. She stilled completely as Pike's tongue glided over the pucker hidden there. It felt strange and yet incredibly

erotic. His thumb moved over her clit with light strokes, keeping her in a permanent state of arousal. She heard the unmistakable flip of a lid opening. A few seconds later, a cold dollop of lubricant touched her anus. On instinct, Laleh went rigid, suddenly afraid of the thing she'd wanted for so long now.

"If you want to stop at any time, just tell me." Pike's husky voice penetrated her fear. He kissed and sucked on her inner thigh. She relaxed under his gentle touch. When a finger probed her anus, she breathed deeply and gave into the odd sensation of being explored. Pike's thumb rubbed her clit slowly. He added a second finger to the first with shallow, unhurried thrusts. The stretch stung just a bit at first, but the throb of her clit lessened the discomfort.

Soon Pike's fingers were buried past the knuckle in her ass. As she acclimated to the intrusion, Laleh found the sensation unbearably arousing. When his lips fastened around her clit, she yelped with surprise. The soles of her feet tingled. Pike licked and sucked at her cunt until she hovered at the edge of another orgasm, this one threatening to be more powerful than she'd ever experienced.

His tongue lashing slowed, keeping just there but not allowing her over the precipice. He gently removed his fingers from her bottom. Laleh moaned in protest, wanting him back inside her. Instead Pike generously lubed the smaller of the two plugs and pressed it against the pucker.

"Oh!" Laleh's eyes widened at the cool silicone plug sliding into her ass. Pike worked it in and out by slow degrees, pushing more of its length into her with each thrust. His mouth returned to her pink pearl. As he continued fucking her ass with the plug, he lapped and flicked her clit until she fisted the sheets. The first panicky quivers of an orgasm rocked her lower belly. Thighs tensing, Laleh sucked in shuddery pants of air. She was going to come so hard—and it terrified her.

"Pike! Pike!" She groaned loudly. His face whipped quickly side to side, his tongue and lips moving across her clit. Laleh shrieked as she came. She writhed and bucked atop the bed, her palms slapping the comforter. Pike moaned enthusiastically as he feasted on her cunt and continued his delicious anal pleasuring.

"Oh, god, stop!" Laleh pulled away from his mouth. She couldn't take any more. Pike's chuckle echoed in the room. He nibbled at her leg and stilled the thrust of the plug. Ever so slowly, he pulled the silicone toy from her anus. She shivered at the sudden loss of sensation.

The loss was short-lived. Pike surprised her by slathering the second, larger plug with lubricant and sliding it inside her ass. Its wider girth stretched the muscular ring there, causing her the smallest bit of unease. Pike crawled over her and claimed her lips in a deep kiss. Her musky tang invaded her senses. She wondered what sensual torment he had planned next.

Pike kissed his way down her neck. "I want you to get dressed."

She frowned and lifted her head to meet his eyes. "What?"

Smiling mischievously, he kissed her chin. "We're going to watch something special."

Excitement rippled through her. "What kind of show?"

"It's a surprise." Pike caressed her breast. "I want you to wear the plug."

She went quiet, contemplating his request. "You mean, like, walk around with it in *there*?"

Pike nodded and brushed his lips over her cheek. "I want to know you're walking around with my plug in your asshole."

Laleh shivered under his heated gaze. She licked her lips, wondering if she could go through with it. Pike seemed to sense her uncertainty. He touched her face. "If you don't want to, I understand."

"I want to try." Laleh couldn't believe the words that had just fallen from her lips. Was she really going to traipse all over *Hedonisma* with a plug in her bottom?

"Thank you." Pike kissed her tenderly. He sat up and swung off the bed. His stiff erection caught her attention.

Laleh rolled onto her side, her facing twitching at the odd sensation of the plug firmly stuck in her bottom. She gestured to his cock. "What about you?"

Pike grinned devilishly. "I can wait."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. And Laleh?"

"Yes?"

"Wear something with a skirt."

*

Out of the corner of his eye, Pike watched Laleh as she slipped into a sexy amethyst dress. The low cut neckline showed off her gorgeous cleavage. The fluttery skirt skimmed mid-thigh and displayed those unbelievable legs. Pike knew she'd catch the attention of every man with the good fortune to clap on eyes on her. He experienced an undeniable pang of pride at the thought of having the most delectable woman in the universe on his arm.

Pike noticed her movements were more fluid as she grew accustomed to the plug. He'd been a bit surprised she'd agreed to his kinky request. His lower belly tightened at the realization they could explore all sorts of naughty whims together. He hoped she would enjoy the show he'd reserved. After her discussion of Darnathian mating rituals, it seemed apropos.

"Ready?" Pike held out his hand.

"Yes." She joined him, threading her arm through the crook of his elbow.

Pike kissed her temple and led her out of their suite. They hopped onto an elevator and made their way down to the third floor. Pike fought the urge to back Laleh up against the glass wall and devour her mouth. The thrill of the anything-can-happen atmosphere aboard *Hedonisma* brought out his inner sexual demon. He wanted to embrace the taboos, to share them with Laleh.

They stepped off the elevator into a lushly decadent lobby. The low lighting and silk draped walls gave the cloistered space a highly sexualized charge. Naked men and women danced in cages and swung from trapeze bars. Some guests in various states of dress and undress reclined on plush couches and chairs, watching their peers strip and dance. Other guests fucked right out there in the open.

Pike cast a glance at Laleh. He noticed her increased respirations and the lusty sparkle in her eyes. She licked her plump lower lip as she watched a man bury his face between a woman's legs. Laleh swallowed and turned to him. "Where are we?"

"Voyeurs and Exhibitionists deck," he said, bending low to speak into her ear. Pike curved his arm around her waist and hugged her tightly to his side. He'd noticed the interested stares and wanted to make it clear Laleh wasn't available for public play. He

guided her along the edge of the room, pausing at the concierge desk for the key to their room.

As they passed under the arched doorway leading to the play rooms, Laleh glanced over her shoulder for one last look at the debauchery. She tripped over her spiky sandal. Laughing, Pike steadied his wife and kissed her cheek. He was glad to see she was enjoying the experience so far.

They walked down a corridor lined with rooms and double entrances, each door marked with a V or E. Pike stopped in front of their door and swiped the card. The lock chirped and granted them access. Holding Laleh's hand, he led her inside and shut the door behind them. Dimmed lighting cast a sexy glow over Laleh. Except for a low, wide black leather couch in the center of the small room there was no other furniture. A doorway in the back led to a bathroom.

Laleh placed her hand on his chest. She cast him a questioning gaze. "What is this room for?"

"Watching." Pike drew her close for a kiss. Her lips parted to his searching tongue. His fingers tangled in the loose locks at her nape. She pressed against him, her breasts so soft and warm against his chest. When Pike withdrew his kiss, Laleh's eyes lazily opened. He loved the sight of her kiss swollen lips.

She said nothing as he led her to the couch and pulled her down onto his lap. He pointed to the wall in front of them. A green light lit up in the far corner and the black glass rippled clear. Laleh gasped as the scene on the other side of the partition came into view. A lushly curved blonde stood sandwiched between a pair of naked men, one with black hair, the other brown. While the black haired man kissed the blonde, the other caressed her back. The sounds of their passion filtered into their room through one-way speakers "Can they see us?"

He sensed the trepidation in her voice. His lips drifted over her bare shoulder. "No."

"So, we're the voyeurs."

"Yes."

"The exhibitionists, are they employees?"

"No. Guests just like us," Pike clarified.

Her curiosity sated, Laleh leaned back against him and watched the threesome in the other room. Pike's hands stayed on her waist for the moment. Her fingers clutched at his wrists. He could feel her trembling with excitement.

The exhibitionists moved to the plush mattress on the dais in the center of the room. Both men climbed over the blonde, kissing and licking and kneading her body. She rolled onto her side and braced her cheek in her palm. The black haired man moved between her thighs, lifting her leg and crooking it over his shoulder. He buried his face in her pussy while the other man slid his cock into the woman's waiting mouth.

Pike slid his hands down Laleh's hips and thighs. Her fingers stayed on his wrists. When he reached her knees, he swirled his hands along her inner thighs and pushed the fabric of her skirt out of the way. She'd worn no panties so his fingers encountered her hot skin as she widened her thighs. A soft moan escaped her lips.

Inside the room, the brown haired man moved onto the mattress and reached for the blonde. Facing his feet, she lowered herself onto his cock. The black haired man stood in front of her and fed his penis between her parted lips. As she bounced on one cock, the other pumped in and out of her mouth. He gripped her face as he rocked his hips. She

held onto his thighs while the man she rode flicked her clit.

Laleh squirmed atop Pike. He rubbed his thumb over the swollen nub hidden between her folds. She groaned and pushed against his hand. Wanting her to come undone for him, Pike circled her clit. The fingers of his other hand found their way into her slippery cunt.

Eyes glued on the threesome, Laleh swiveled her hips and rode his hands. The black-haired man pulled out of the woman's mouth and laid down in front of her. When he fastened his lips onto her clit, the woman cried out with surprise. Her other lover pounded his cock into her while the other man licked and sucked at her pussy.

"Oh, god!" Laleh's cunt quivered around his fingers.

"That's it, baby." Pike worked his wife's clit a little faster, thrust his fingers a little deeper and more forcefully. His cock pulsed in his pants as Laleh climaxed with the nameless woman, their sharp cries and moans making the sweetest music. As Laleh shivered in the aftermath of her orgasm, he slowly removed his fingers from her sex and licked them clean. He couldn't get enough of her delicious cunt.

"Pike!" Laleh's exclamation drew his attention. The three lovers had changed positions again. This time the blonde rode the black-haired man, their mouths mating hungrily, while the brown-haired man knelt behind her and slipped his cock into her ass.

Laleh's scandalized expression made him chuckle. "Do you like watching those cocks sliding in and out of her?"

She sucked in a surprised breath. "It's so dirty," she said finally. "And hot."

He smiled against her shoulder. "Do you want to see how it feels?"

Laleh's gaze snapped to his face. She gulped with obvious fear. "You want to share me with another man?"

"Hell no!" Pike shook his head. His hand slid down between her thighs. He tapped the plug as if to remind her.

"Oh." Her eyes sparkled with interest. She nodded enthusiastically and before he could offer a suggestion for a position, Laleh had clambered off of his lap and knelt on the floor. She wasted no time in freeing his erection and wrapping her hot, wet lips around the head. Pike groaned and ran his fingers through her soft hair. His gaze alternated between Laleh sucking his cock and the two men fucking the blonde until she squealed. It was almost more than he could take.

Laleh seemed to share the same sense of urgency. With a few languid licks of her velvety tongue, she released his cock and climbed onto his lap. Her fingers clasped his rigid shaft as she lowered her soaking wet cunt onto him. Pike's jaw hardened as he tried not to come right then and there. His evening of teasing and pleasing Laleh had worked him into a near frenzy.

"Oh, Pike." Laleh's breathless whisper rocked his very core. "I feel so full."

"You're so fucking tight." Pike embraced her and pulled her close for a kiss. Her pussy pulsed around his cock. He could only imagine what it felt like to be taken both ways and hoped it felt amazing for her.

As he flicked his tongue against hers, Pike fought the urge to move his hips. Gritting his teeth, he let Laleh take control. She looped her arms around his shoulders and leaned in for a sensual kiss. He loved it when she kissed him like that, her lips unhurried, her tongue pliable and searching. In the midst of those kisses, he felt the entire world stop.

They traded deep, tender kisses as Laleh rocked on his lap. Pike clasped her hips, the

fabric of her dress draping over his hands. Her pace quickened, her thighs lifting and dropping, her fingers grasping his neck. She rode him with abandon, head thrown back, mouth open wide. Her slick cream flowed from her sex. Pike clasped her backside to guide her wild movements.

"Touch my clit," Laleh pleaded huskily. "Make me come, Pike."

His thumb found the tiny bud. She moaned and pushed against his finger. Her pussy fluttered around his cock. Pike's other hand slid around the curve of her ass. He took hold of the base of the anal plug and gently pulled it out a few inches before sliding it right back inside of her. Laleh gasped and bucked. "Do it again, Pike!"

He couldn't deny her that request. While she bounced on his cock, Pike pumped the plug in and out of her ass. Laleh shuddered and made the wildest noises he'd ever heard from her lips. It drove him insane with lust. Soon he snapped his hips beneath her. With the moans and cries from the exhibitionists as a soundtrack, they chased their orgasms together.

"I'm coming. Oh, god, I'm coming!" Laleh clenched her thighs and pressed her cheek to his. Pike's arms tightened around her, crushing her to his chest as she shook with the power of her orgasm. He followed quickly after her, the air rushing from his lungs. His teeth grazing her collarbone, Pike growled and came hard.

Laleh stroked the back of his neck and kissed his cheek. "Pike..."

"I know, Laleh," he said, sharing her awe. "I know."

Chapter Nineteen

Laleh tugged at the silk bonds binding her wrists to the brass headboard. Her ankles were similarly bound to the canopy posts at the foot of the bed. Pike had left a little more slack in those ties, allowing him to move her legs however he saw fit. She sighed with pleasure as Pike nibbled the curves of her backside. Resting on her belly, she couldn't see what he was doing and could only react to his touch. It greatly heightened the experience of her first taste of light bondage. After spending the entire day being pampered, Laleh couldn't imagine a better way to end their last night on *Hedonisma* than giving her complete trust and submission to Pike.

He kneaded her buttocks; his warm, strong hands worked and loosened the muscles. He'd already spent half an hour rubbing down her entire body in a sensual massage. Laleh felt so relaxed and calm. Her eyelids drooped as she focused solely on the sensation of Pike's skin on hers. She shivered as Pike's finger trailed between her cheeks and drifted over her anus. Tonight he'd promised to take her there—and she couldn't wait.

When Pike's tongue traced the pucker, Laleh moaned and pressed back against him. The delicious invasion made her toes curl. He grasped her hips and lifted her ass in the air, her knees sliding closer together. His tongue slipped lower and prodded her pussy. He kept his thumb on her anus, stimulating her as he lapped at her cunt. Her lower belly quivered.

Pike smeared lube between her cheeks. Her eyes widened at the sensation of a small silicone bead sliding into her passage. A second and third and fourth bead followed, each a little wider than the one before it. Pike's fingers manipulated her clit as he slowly pulled the beads out of her ass and then fed them back inside again. Laleh panted and groaned at the competing sensations. It felt unbelievably good.

With the string of beads completely buried in her ass, Pike turned onto his back and slid underneath her hips. His tongue moved between her slick folds. When his lips fastened around her clit, Laleh yelped and ground her pussy against his mouth. "Pike!"

"That's it baby," he coaxed huskily. "Ride my face."

Laleh gripped the comforter and bucked, desperate to come against Pike's mouth. His tongue circled her clit. Her movements were jerky and without finesse because of the silk ties. Pike held tight to her hips, forcing her to keep contact with his torturous mouth. He sucked and teathed at her pulsing nub. Heat pierced her belly as her orgasm twisted tight and low. Her hips swiveled over Pike's lips. She was close, so very close.

"Unnnhhh." Her feral growl echoed in the room. Just as she exploded in ecstasy, Pike pulled the beads from her anus. With each bump of a bead leaving her ass, Laleh shuddered as shockwaves rippled through her cunt. "Pike! Oh god! Oh god! Oh god!"

Overwhelmed, Laleh collapsed forward. Pike slid out from beneath her and peppered kisses along the backs of her thighs and buttocks. As he caressed her, she reveled in after glow. Pike moved over her, his chest against her back, and yanked on the ties binding her wrists. He kissed his way back down her body and released her ankles.

Ever so gently, Pike rolled her over and settled between her thighs. Laleh reached for him, grasping his shoulders and pulling him close. She threaded her fingers through his hair and claimed his mouth. His cock jutted against her belly, the tip releasing pre-cum

onto her skin. She clasped his hot shaft and stroked his length. Pike nuzzled her neck and licked lazy circles on her skin. His hand slid down her stomach and over her mound. She arched beneath him as his fingers slipped inside her slick pussy and thrust languidly.

Pike's lips brushed against her ear. "I'm going to fuck your ass now, Laleh. I'm going to slide my cock inside you and fuck you until you beg me to let you come."

Laleh shuddered at his heated whisper. His smoky gaze told her he meant to do exactly as he'd promised. She nipped his lower lip. "Make me beg."

Pike grinned devilishly and retied her wrists, binding her arms wide to the headboard. Laleh trembled with anticipation, her tummy clenching tightly. She watched Pike slather his stiff cock with lubricant. He worked a little more lube into her anus, readying her for his penetration. When the head of his cock pressed against her pucker, Laleh inhaled a slow, steady breath and mentally relaxed her body. Pike's hand caressed her belly as he pushed forward. Laleh's eyes widened as his penis slid inside her, the muscled ring accepting his girth by slow degrees. The anal plug and beads were nothing to Pike's cock.

Exhaling quietly, Laleh welcomed Pike further into her body. The sensation of fullness eclipsed anything she'd ever before experienced. When Pike was fully sheathed, he stilled and grasped her inner thighs. She could see various emotions playing out on his face. He looked as if he was in heaven.

"Christ, Laleh!" Pike's jaw hardened. "I've never—I can't believe how tight you are, how amazing this feels." He leaned forward and passionately captured her lips. Cradling her face, he kissed the tip of her nose and then gazed into her eyes. "Are you okay?"

Laleh nodded. She yearned to run her hands along the muscled ridges of his chest. His elbow braced beside her head, Pike pulled out a few inches and thrust back inside her ass. She shifted beneath him to ease some of the discomfort. After the first few strokes, Laleh grew accustomed to the invasion. She whimpered at the intensity of the sensation. Pike swallowed her mewling cries as he pumped his hips. His fingers trailed along her cheek ever so tenderly. She closed her eyes and lived for the moment.

Pike seemed to sense when she'd really relaxed and sat back again. He snatched the egg-shaped vibrator from nearby and switched it on. When he placed it against her clit, Laleh's shoulders shot off the bed. Her nipples hardened, the peaks painfully erect. She clutched at the silk ties and breathed erratically. The vibrations flowed through her pussy and ass right down to her toes. Her thighs squeezed his waist. She was so close.

Rather cruelly, Pike removed the vibrator from her clit. She cried out in protest and jerked against her bonds. "Put it back."

Pike shook his head. "Not yet."

She remembered his promise. He was going to reduce her to begging—and she loved it. Pike's cock plunged in and out of her ass. Her slick juices dripped from her pussy. She couldn't remember ever being so hot, so aroused. Pike pinched her swollen clit between his fingers. Laleh couldn't breathe. The tugging and rubbing was too much. It threatened to push her into a place she'd yet to reach in any other tryst.

Again, Pike abandoned her clit. She hovered on the edge, her entire body humming. Enraptured, Laleh gave into the experience of being completely at his mercy. He tortured her with his fingers and cock. Laleh groaned and bucked, sometimes wanting to escape the overwhelming sensations, sometimes pushing against him for more.

When his fingers found their way inside her cunt, she nearly died. His curved fingers

stroked inside her slick channel in a come here motion. With his other hand, Pike held the vibrator against her clit. "Beg me, Laleh. I want you to beg for it."

"Let me come, Pike," she pleaded, her voice thick with desire. "Please let me come."

Pike said nothing but hastened the pace of his fucking. He took her asshole fast and hard, his snapping hips and straining thighs shaking the entire bed. The fingers of his hand continued thrusting and stroking her pussy, sliding over her G-spot again and again. On instinct, her knees lifted toward her chest. Her feet touched his ribs, her toes curling into his sides. Laleh grasped the silk ties and held tight for the ride.

At the first quivers of her cunt, Pike growled. He'd obviously felt the spasm around his fingers and cock. "Come for me, Laleh. Come for me now."

She couldn't deny him. Shrieking like a banshee, Laleh convulsed as she came, each wave of bliss more powerful than the last. She gushed around Pike's fingers, her juices drenching his hand. Pike growled and cursed with lust as he pounded her ass. She was barely aware of Pike finding his release, his body going rigid, his hot cum filling her passage. Something happened as she writhed in ecstasy. She slipped into the strangest space between awareness and unconsciousness. It was as if her body simply overloaded and tripped a circuit of some kind. She felt only extreme bliss.

When Laleh finally came to, Pike had freed her from the bonds and cradled her against his chest. The soothing sound of his beating heart brought her down from the heights of her orgasmic haze. He caressed her face and kissed her forehead. As she stirred in his arms, he smiled warmly. "You're back."

Laleh nodded and snuggled closer, suddenly chilled. "That was mind-blowing."

Pike chuckled. "Apparently," he said. "I thought I'd killed you for a second there. I mean, I've heard of that happening, but I've never seen it before."

"It's your fault."

Grinning, he brushed away the damp hair clinging to her face. "I suppose it is."

They lay together in silence, enjoying the warmth and intimacy of the aftermath. Eventually, Pike spoke. "Thank you for trusting me."

"I love you," she said matter-of-factly.

Pike held her gaze. "It's as simple as that then?"

Laleh nodded. "I love you, and I trust you implicitly."

Even as she spoke another thought intruded. She'd kept something from Pike. It wasn't right. She did trust him. She had to tell him. "Pike, I lied to you."

He stiffened and shifted so he could look at her better. Concern creased his forehead. "Just now? Did I hurt you? If I did, I'm so so—"

Laleh touched her fingertip to his lips. She shook her head. "Not now. A few weeks ago."

Pike dragged her finger away from his mouth. A grim expression settled over his face. "Tell me."

"The necklace and bracelet," she said carefully. "I lied about Mother's jewelry. I found it in the box. Well," she added quickly, "I found it in a copy of her favorite book."

Pike looked relieved. "That's all? I don't care if you kept the necklace and bracelet. Obviously your father didn't either."

"That's not all." Laleh gnawed her lower lip. "The jewelry had markings on it. Strange symbols I'd never seen. I scanned them into a recognition program." She paused, hoping he'd take the rest of her confession well. "They were Scourge symbols."

Pike went rigid. He stared at her in disbelief. "You're sure?"

"I checked and rechecked them. They're absolutely Scourge."

Pike became lost in a pensive silence. His outburst shocked her. "That son of a bitch! He sold out humanity." A sneer of disgust curved his lips. "No wonder he wanted the jewelry back. It's evidence the Federation can use to prosecute him and keep the Hezman Empire from signing the treaties."

"Yes," Laleh said softly. "That's what I figured as well."

"Is it safe?"

"It's in our quarters, locked in my desk."

He regarded her carefully. "What do you plan to do with it?"

"I'm not sure," Laleh admitted. "It's a bargaining chip I can use to keep them away from me. Or," she sighed, "I could hand it over to the Federation and let them do what they will."

"But?"

"What will happen to my homeland?" She voiced her greatest fear. "Those people have suffered enough. The Federation will likely impose sanctions and worse."

"Yes," Pike agreed, "but if your father was the one who brought the Scourge here, who sheltered them in their early years, he deserves to die. He's responsible for the deaths of millions, Laleh. And let's not forget what he did to you. To your mother."

"I know." She rubbed her face. "I know."

Pike hugged her close and kissed her forehead. He heaved a heavy sigh. "Laleh, you know I can't keep this a secret. I love you more than anything in this universe, but I just can't risk my career."

Laleh touched his cheek. "I would never ask you to risk your career. I am sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

He shook his head and brushed his lips over hers. "It's all right. But when we get back to Virgo, I need you to give me the jewelry so I can hand it over. We'll let the Federation sort it out."

"I understand." Guilt clawed at her belly. She'd put Pike in an ugly spot—again.

Pike rolled on top of her, pinning her to the mattress. He kissed her deeply, his lips moving oh so tenderly across hers. There was no mistaking the love he felt for her. He broke the kiss and nibbled at her lower lip. "It's all right, Laleh," he whispered. "I not the least bit upset with you."

Heat prickled her eyes. His absolute forgiveness filled her with warmth. "I won't keep anything like that from you again."

"Thank you." Pike nuzzled her neck and kissed her jaw. "Want to join me for a nice long soak before bed?"

"Absolutely."

Pike trailed his fingers along her cheek before moving off of her. She gazed at his sexy ass as he strode into the bathroom. He paused in the doorway. "Coming?"

"I need a drink first." She sat up and slid off the bed. "Want anything?"

"Something sweet and fizzy."

Laleh giggled. "I'll do my best."

She left the bedroom and headed for the minibar in the living area. As she sorted through the high-priced beverages, Laleh heard Pike running water and filling the tub. She selected a bottle of water and one of Pike's favorite sodas. Just as she turned back to

the bedroom, someone knocked at the door. She set aside the drinks and grabbed her robe from the back of a chair where Pike had tossed it earlier in his quest to get her naked quickly.

Crossing the room, she slipped her arms through the sleeves and tied the sash. She didn't bother peeking through the peep hole and waved her hand in front of the sensor to open the door. Her broad smile cracked as Jai came into view. She took a step backward but was too slow. He snatched her wrist and yanked her forward. Before she could scream, something sharp stabbed her neck. A second later, Laleh felt her entire body go slack, her eyes suddenly heavy. Her last thoughts before passing out completely were of Pike. Would he save her in time?

*

Pike switched off the faucet. He ran his fingers through the bubble topped water and tested the heat. Wondering what was keeping Laleh, he returned to the bedroom. When he didn't find her there, he proceeded to the living room. "Laleh?"

His gaze fell on the drinks on the end table next to the door. He noticed her robe was missing from the chair. She wouldn't have ventured outside the suite in just her robe. Had someone come to the door?

Pike frowned. Unease filtered through his belly. Something was wrong. He started to turn back to the bedroom to get dressed when he spotted the transmitter on the floor just inside door. He quickly strode toward it and picked it up from the ground. A video message blinked on the device's screen. His stomach fell at Jai's face lit up the small window.

"I have your wife. If you want her back, you'll meet me at the following coordinates. Bring the jewelry. You have until oh seven hundred hours."

Jaw squared, Pike fought the urge to throw the transmitter across the room. He needed the blinking coordinates to rescue Laleh. His stomach churned at the thought of Laleh at her brother's mercy. No doubt he would put his hands on her. Pike's fist clenched as rage surged through his body.

Suddenly suspicious, Pike cast a mistrusting gaze around their suite. It was too coincidental. Laleh had just told him of the jewelry's existence, of the Scourge ties, and Jai just happened to find them?

"Bullshit," Pike muttered crossly. He hurried into the bedroom and rifled through his luggage for his transmitter. He scrolled through the various programs until he found the anti-bugging software he used before official meetings. He walked slowly through the bedroom, his transmitter held at arm's length. When he neared the bedside lamp, the transmitter chirped. Pike tossed it onto the bed and grabbed the lamp. After a short search, he located the miniscule bug on the base. He crushed it with his palm against the table top, the metal scratching the polished surface. There would be hell to pay once Pike learned who had bugged the room for Jai.

Pike sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to marshal his thoughts. He plugged Jai's coordinates into his transmitter's mapping function. The beacon blinked in a largely uninhabited system three space jumps away from *Hedonisma*. There was no way Pike could get back to Virgo, grab the jewelry and then make it to the meeting place by morning.

What the hell am I going to do? Pike weighed his options. He could contact his superiors and use the full force of Spacefleet to get her back but that option left too much

too chance. The Federation likely wouldn't sanction any kind of rescue mission until they'd exhausted all diplomatic channels. Even if he presented them with the evidence of the Hezman/Scourge link, they'd take forever to reach a decision. Large bureaucracies moved at a glacial pace.

Faced with the Federation gaining knowledge of his family's duplicity, Jai would likely kill Laleh anyway. She would serve no further purpose. Pike refused to let that happen.

He ran through a mental list of contacts. All of his wartime friends, men and women who would join him in an instant, were all too far away to be of any help. Pike considered the various members of his staff on Virgo. *Who would be willing to drop everything to help Laleh?*

Pike's stomach soured as a name popped into his mind. As much as it pained him, he knew there was no better man for the job. He left his transmitter on the bed and walked to their luggage. He located Laleh's transmitter in her purse. His finger flicked and scrolled through her list of contacts. Pike's teeth ground together as he touched the screen and put through the call. He made sure to keep the transmitter level with his face, keenly aware of his naked state. Four rings later, it was answered.

"Hey, Laleh!" Quinn's grinning face quickly morphed to a confused stare. "Admiral Grayson, sir."

"I need your help, Petty Officer. Laleh's been kidnapped."

Quinn's feed shook as he sat up and reoriented his transmitter. He slammed it into a stand and started pulling on black cargo pants. The backdrop of his bedroom came into view. Seriousness pervaded his features. "I'm at your disposal, sir."

"Thank you," Pike said, and he meant it. "Here's what I need you to do..."

Chapter Twenty

Laleh came to with a pounding headache. Mouth dry, she blinked and tried to focus. Her head swam and tummy roiled. Her left side had gone numb and was pressed against something hard. A floor, she realized, as her eyesight cleared. Oppressive heat saturated the space. She could feel silk fabric clinging to her sweating skin. Heavy chains attached to cuffs on her wrists and ankles. *Where am I?*

A rush of memories flooded her mind. Without moving or making noise, Laleh scanned her surroundings. She was in some kind of a small spaceship, likely a private cruiser and an older model at that. She wondered why Jai was piloting such a piece of shit. He'd always been so ostentatious when it came to his starships.

Laleh heard the shuffle of boots and shut her eyes, leaving only the tiniest sliver for watching. Shirtless and sweating something fierce, Jai entered the piloting deck of the ship. His blond hair hung limp and damp around his face. He looked as if he hadn't slept in days. Had he been following them all that time?

"I know you're awake." Jai's gruff statement caught her by surprise. "You're not the first bitch to pretend to be passed out to avoid me."

Laleh opened her eyes and started to snap back but stopped when she caught sight of Jai's chest and arms. The mutilation made her ill. Lines of metal hoops ran from just below his collarbone to a few inches above his bellybutton, following the inward curve of his pecs. He'd strung black leather laces between the hoops in a sort of skin corset. Heavier silver hoops pierced his nipples. Dozens of scars marred his tanned skin, running the length of his arms and crisscrossing his torso. Some were tiny and thin, others big and nasty.

"What have you done to yourself?" Laleh could scarcely believe what she was seeing.

"What? These?" Jai gestured to his scars. "You wouldn't understand the ultimate pleasure to be gained from a needle piercing the skin or the tug of a hook in one's back."

"Pleasure? From hooks and needles?" Laleh shook her head. She didn't know what to say and knew she'd only anger him if she spoke her mind. "No, I wouldn't understand."

Jai smirked and leaned back against the captain's chair. "Give it some time. After what I heard in your room tonight, I'd say your starman will have you collared and eating dog food from a bowl in no time at all."

Shame blossomed on her cheeks. "We're not like that."

Jai laughed derisively. "Don't tell me what you are or aren't. You're no better than the whores I keep chained up in my harem. At least they don't beg me to fuck their asses."

Disgust rolled through her stomach. In so few words, Jai had managed to turn something beautiful and intimate into something dirty and humiliating. Avoiding her brother's mocking gaze, she sat up and rolled her shoulders. "I'm not going to defend my personal life to you."

"You can do what you like. But you honestly don't find it the least bit ironic that your mother dragged you halfway across the universe to escape the collar and the bonds, and yet you still ended up at the mercy of your starman."

"It's not like that," Laleh retorted angrily. "He doesn't abuse me. He gives me the

freedom of choice. What you do is nothing short of torture. Those women you tie up and beat and cut on don't enjoy it. They aren't screaming in pleasure. They're screaming in horror."

Jai shrugged as if he could care less. "They exist for my entertainment."

In that one statement, Jai summed up the prevailing attitude of the Hezman ruling class toward all women. The oppression was so ingrained Laleh wondered if it would ever be broken. Was there any hope for women on her home planet?

"What does Dari want with me?" Laleh changed the subject, knowing she'd get nowhere discussing women's rights with him. "I sent the damn letter."

"This isn't about our father."

She stared blankly. "Then what is it about?"

"I need the jewelry."

"You?" She frowned. "Why do you care about the wedding jewelry Dari gave my mother?"

"Because I bought the damned stuff!"

Laleh's mind worked quickly. "You're the one with ties to the Scourge." She couldn't squash the smirk spreading across her lips. "And you know if Dari finds out he'll have you strung up so quick your head will spin."

"That's a fair assessment of the situation," Jai allowed.

"Why did you do it?" Laleh couldn't fathom why he'd have risked his cushy life on something so stupid. "You couldn't have been—what—sixteen at the time Dari married my mother."

Jai nodded. "I was young and hungry. I wanted more, deserved more. Our father ruled with too light a hand. Our people need to be led in the same way one leads a whore—with a gentle fist."

"So what? You made a deal with the Scourge?"

"They showed me what real domination was," Jai said. "They would crush and annihilate at will. They promised to prop me up when the time came in exchange for safe haven in our system as they prepared for war."

Laleh's eyes widened. "You were going to kill Dari."

"He's far passed his expiration date." He seemed amused by his own crassness. Then his expression turned grim. "Unfortunately, the Scourge weren't nearly as lethal as they'd bragged to be. Ultimately, they were no match for Spacefleet." He turned his sneer on her. "For your starman."

Laleh's chin lifted proudly. "I've never met anyone to match Pike."

Jai's nose wrinkled. "Spare me the sappy romantic fluff." He reached behind his back and produced a weapon from the waistband of his leather pants. It was a handgun, the kind of gun that had been outlawed in Federation territory centuries earlier. It fired bullets, not paralyzing pulses, and was lethal. "We'll see if he's a match for this."

Laleh went cold with dread. *Oh, god, not Pike. Please, not Pike.*

* * * *

That old ripple of adrenaline surged through Pike's veins as the rear of Jai's cruiser came into view. He hadn't felt it since the Faltador Campaign. Though it would have pained him to admit it to anyone else, Pike realized he'd missed the excitement of the unknown, the fear of heading into battle. He glanced at Quinn and saw the same tension

in his face. "All right?"

Quinn nodded and sat forward in his chair. "You'll have to let me out soon. I'll make the jump between our ships on the port side of his cruiser. That model only has visibility out the front windshield. I'll stick close to the underside of our ship."

"How do you plan to board?"

"There's an access panel on the belly of that model. It leads into the ventilation system. I should drop out in the engine room. They're likely in the control deck. The other spaces on that ship are tiny, a galley and a bathroom as far I remember."

"Good to know." Pike grudgingly admitted to himself he couldn't have chosen a better wingman than Quinn. The man was a consummate professional and the best Omega in the entire Spacefleet.

Pike steered their *borrowed* vessel toward the left side of Jai's ship. He slowed their approach speed to give Quinn enough time to hop into his space suit. As they drew closer, Pike noticed the smoke spewing from the starboard side of Jai's ship. "Looks like he's broken down."

Quinn looked up as he hopped and zipped himself into the pressurized suit. "You know what that means."

"He's going to need this ship to escape." His worst fears confirmed, Pike swiveled in his captain's chair to stare at Quinn. "You and I haven't been on the best of terms, but I know you're the only person whose concern for Laleh mirrors mine."

"I do care about her, Grayson, but I do realize I crossed a line." Quinn smiled wryly. "I also realize she'll never look at me the way she does you."

Pike found the other man's statement oddly comforting. He was glad to have their somewhat rocky history behind them before they plunged into the unknown together. "Whatever happens on that ship, I need you to promise me you'll get her off alive."

Quinn set his jaw. Pike expected him to protest but he simply nodded. "I will."

"Thank you." Pike cleared his throat and turned back to the controls. He slid an earbud into his ear canal. "Ready?"

Quinn pulled on his helmet and moved to the drop hatch. He sealed himself in the pressurized tube. Quinn's voice filtered through the earbud. "Ready."

Pike's hand hovered over the release button. "Three, two, one." He pushed the button and glanced over his shoulder. With a loud hiss, the hatch floor slid away and Quinn dropped into open space. Pike's stomach tightened as he waited for any reply.

A thump sounded over the earbud. "I'm hooked into place. We're good to go."

"Hang tight." Pike increased their approach speed. With the finesse of a veteran pilot, he sidled up next to Jai's clunker. Pike set the break and left the vessel idling. If they needed to escape in a hurry, he couldn't waste time firing up the engines. He released the boarding tunnel and watched the accorded walkway attach to Jai's ship. When the seal was properly in place, a green light lit up on the dashboard.

"I'm heading in," Quinn announced. "Good luck, Grayson."

"Good luck, Quinn." Out of habit, Pike checked the controls one last time before rising from his seat. He slid the stunner into the back of his jeans. He inhaled a steadying breath and strode to the boarding tunnel. Unease coiled low in his belly. The thought of walking into a trap made him nervous, but there was no other way. Laleh needed him. He'd do whatever it took to get her to safety.

Pike cautiously crossed the boarding tunnel and stepped onto Jai's ship. Immediately,

the suffocating heat hit him in the face. He grimaced. Laleh would likely require some kind of medical attention after spending so much time in this kind of extreme heat. Pike could only hope Jai was affected by the heat, too. Perhaps he wouldn't put up too much of a fight.

Eyes peeled and ears perked, Pike proceeded down a narrow corridor. He noticed the engine room off to his right and a galley on his left. Quinn's hard breathing filled his right ear. The man said nothing as he worked his way through the ventilation system.

Up ahead, Pike spotted the control deck. He heard the unmistakable fall of pacing boots. His pulse stuttered as a shot of adrenaline filtered through his veins. His entire body hummed with defensive energy, his limbs ready to move at a second's notice. Pike approached the arched doorway and guardedly entered the deck.

"Stop right there." Jai stepped out of the shadows on his left. He pointed an antique gun at Pike's head. "Hands up."

As Pike obeyed the commands, he quickly scanned the room for Laleh. He found her on the floor, her limbs chained. The perspiration soaked pink silk of her robe clung to her naked curves. Wet strands of dark hair stuck to her face. Relief flooded his system when he saw no outward signs of injury. For the past nine hours, he'd been imagining the absolute worst. At least she'd been spared that much.

Laleh lifted her head and smiled sweetly. She mouthed the words, "I love you" and then "I'm sorry." He made a small motion with his hand, telling her not to worry.

"Where's the jewelry?" Jai demanded, the gun trembling slightly.

Face twitching at the sight of the scars and piercings on Jai's body, Pike took note of the man's slick flushed skin. He looked dehydrated and exhausted. Pike cast a wary gaze at the gun. He'd seen one before, years ago as a cadet, and knew they were bad news. "You realize if you miss me, you're going to blow a hole in this piece of shit ship of yours. I don't need to tell you how quickly this vessel is going to decompress and crush us all."

"Then I guess you'd better do as I ask," Jai snapped back. "Where is the jewelry?"

"I'm in the engine room," Quinn said softly. "You need to move out of the doorway. Distract him."

Pike slowly moved toward Laleh, drawing Jai's attention far away from the corridor behind Pike. He made sure to stand directly in front of Laleh, blocking her body completely with his own. He patted the front pocket of his jeans. "Give me Laleh and I'll give you the jewelry."

Jai shook his head and moved forward. His back remained to the corridor. Pike prayed Quinn would move with extreme stealth.

"Give me the jewelry," Jai countered, "and I'll give you the key." He held up the small silver key to the chains.

Pike knew exactly how that would play out and held his ground. "Get rid of the gun first."

Jai scoffed. "You don't seem to realize who has the upper hand here, starman." He gestured to the gun. "I'm giving you a chance to walk out of here alive."

As Pike stared down Jai, he felt Laleh's fingers touching the back of his jeans. She moved so quietly and so slowly Pike thought he'd imagined it at first. Out of the corner of his eye, Pike spotted Quinn. His partner had discarded his helmet and held his stunner at the ready. Pike needed to buy a little more time. "You and I both know that's a lie. Your

ship is dead."

"Yes, but I was planning to be charitable and leave you two on this one. I'm sure an SOS would be answered eventually." Jai shrugged and cocked the weapon. "If you'd rather, I'll just kill you both now."

Before Pike could speak, Quinn popped into the control deck. He fired his stunner, but Jai was too quick. He managed to escape the paralyzing blast. Jai pulled the trigger on the gun. Pike flinched as the gun exploded loudly and shot out a bullet. Jai's aim was no better than Quinn's and hit a control panel. Sparks flew and Quinn darted out of the way.

Pike felt a tug on the back of his jeans. Suddenly Laleh had thrown herself between his legs. She wasted no time taking aim with his stunner and hitting her brother right in the chest. Jai jerked at the unexpected impact and dropped to the ground, his limbs shuddering wildly against the floor. Laleh dropped the stunner and scooted back. Quinn's shocked expression morphed into a broad grin. "Way to go, Laleh!"

As Quinn raced to Jai and kicked aside the gun, Pike spun around and dropped to his knees. He gathered Laleh in his arms and nearly squeezed the life out of her. She buried her face in his neck and shuddered with obvious relief. Pike pulled back and wiped the sweaty strands from her eyes and cheeks. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Just hot and really thirsty."

"I'll take care of you once we get back on our ship." Hugging her tight, he smashed his lips to hers again. "I love you, Laleh."

She smiled and returned his kiss. "I know."

Their exuberance was short-lived. The fire alarms sounded. Pike's gaze moved to the smoking panel. His gut clenched. Fire aboard a ship was always lethal. They had to move and fast.

Pike turned to Quinn. "Where's the key?"

Quinn stepped around Jai's unconscious body and searched for the key. "Shit!"

Dread pierced his belly. "What?"

Quinn hastily stripped off his gloves and knelt down. "It's fallen through the grate here." He shoved his fingers through the thin slats and tried to reach it. "Fuck!"

Pike turned back to Laleh and studied the chains. They were bolted into the ship's floor. Quinn skidded to a halt next to Pike and unzipped the tool pouch on his suit. He rifled through the various tools in search of something useful.

"These are after-market modifications," Quinn muttered. "There's nothing in this suit's tool kit that will work. I should have stolen an Omega suit."

By now smoke filled the chamber. Pike hovered on the edge of panic as he grabbed one of the chains and placed his feet against the wall behind Laleh. He tugged mightily, the veins in his arms and necks threatening to burst. Quinn joined him, throwing his considerable strength into the mix. They growled and grunted but it was no use.

"Hold tight." Quinn jumped up and ran away. "There has to be something in the engine room we can use."

As Quinn disappeared, Pike picked up the tool pouch and tried the various sockets on the bolts. If they ever made it back to Virgo, he was going to mandate the suit kits on all ships be replaced with the same tools used by the elite teams. No more of this low bid bullshit.

Laleh's hand settled on his wrist. Tears dripped down her face. "Just go, Pike. Take Quinn and go."

His stomach dropped. He forcefully shook his head. "I'm not leaving you here, Laleh."

"You have to," she insisted. "You can't stay here."

Pike clasped her face. "I fucking love you, Laleh, and if this is it, then we're going out together."

She gulped and shuddered as she sobbed. He could see her trying to be brave, fighting the panic that must have been threatening to overtake her body.

"No one is dying here today," Quinn stated as he rushed back into the room. Pike realized he'd heard everything through their earbuds. "Here."

Pike accepted the crowbar Quinn thrust into his hands. He wasted no time shoving it under the metal slab Jai had attached to the floor to hold his chains. As they worked the crowbars up and down, desperately trying to loosen the metal, Pike coughed and tried to breathe. His eyes watered from the acrid smoke swirling around them. He could feel the heat intensifying. They were running out of time.

With a screeching groan, the metal slab popped loose on one side. Pike and Quinn hurried to pry the other sides free. They threw aside the crowbars and lifted the entire slab, Laleh and all, from the ground. Pike met Quinn's gaze. "Run!"

Quinn needed no further instruction. Looking over his shoulder, Quinn hurried across the control deck. The smoke was so thick now Pike could barely see his partner across the short distance. Laleh sputtered atop the slab, her hands gripping the edges as she tried to keep upright and not rock her weight. They rushed down the corridor toward the boarding tunnel. The fit through the tunnel was tight. They tilted the slab just enough to scoot through. Pike's arms burned from the strain, but he didn't care. To save Laleh he'd risk permanent injury.

They reached their vessel and lowered Laleh to the ground. Pike wiped the sweat from his face. Panting, he caught Quinn's gaze and laughed. It was one of his quirks. Any time he escaped near death, Pike was gripped by the unavoidable urge to laugh.

"PIKE!" Laleh's shriek stopped his heart.

As if in slow motion, Pike looked down at his wife. She reached for him, her face twisted with terror. Before he could figure out what was wrong, Quinn slammed into him and threw him against the far wall. Vaguely, Pike heard a gunshot. Quinn fell just inside the doorway.

Pike snapped his gaze to the boarding tunnel. Jai stood halfway down the walkway. Acting quickly, Pike slammed his hand against the door lock. It fell immediately. As the door hissed and locked, Pike hit the emergency release button for the tunnel. Jai's bloodcurdling scream was cut off after a second.

Rushing to Quinn's aid, Pike rolled him onto his back and assessed the injury. He'd taken a bullet to the upper right shoulder. It wasn't life threatening, but there was a great deal of blood. He ran to the first aid cabinet and jerked out the case.

"No!" Laleh shouted, shaking her head. "Bring him close to me. I'll patch him up. You've got to get us out of here before that ship explodes."

Laleh's clearheaded instructions brought Pike back into the moment. Nodding he handed her the case and dragged Quinn next to Laleh. She tested the reach of her chains before waving him off. Pike darted into the captain's chair and slapped at the various buttons. They'd barely cleared Jai's ship when the shockwaves of the explosion rocked their small vessel. Pike braced himself against the dashboard with a boot heel but kept the

ship flying straight.

He exhaled a shaky breath as they hit clear space. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Laleh caressing Quinn's cheek. She smiled warmly down at him. Any other time, Pike would have boiled with jealousy but not today. He understood the depth of friendship the pair shared. More than that, Pike owed Quinn his life. The man had taken a bullet for him.

"Is he okay?" Pike's voice betrayed his concern.

Quinn lifted a hand in a thumbs-up gesture. "You're not getting rid of me that easily, Grayson."

Pike chuckled and returned to his piloting. "Glad to hear it, Quinn."

Chapter Twenty-One

Legs curled to the side, Laleh sat in a wide chair at Quinn's bedside. He'd come out of surgery hours earlier, but the effects of his sedation had yet to wear off. Dr. Karp and various members of the medical staff came and went a few times. For all of them, treating a bullet wound was a once in a lifetime event. Laleh's gaze traveled to the bedside table where the bullet now sat in a clear tube as a souvenir. Apparently Quinn had asked Dr. Karp to keep it before being rushed into surgery.

Laleh shook her head and frowned. *Men!*

Her thoughts turned to Pike. She glanced at her silent transmitter. He'd sent a message hours ago but nothing since. She looked at the clock on the opposite wall. It was nearly ten in the evening. They'd been back on board Virgo since a little before noon. She cringed at the thought of the ass chewing Pike was now suffering.

Pike had broken so many regulations. Out of morbid curiosity, Laleh had scanned through the Spacefleet Code of Conduct while waiting for Quinn to come out of surgery. She'd stopped after the first dozen infractions. Guilt soured her stomach. Yet again she'd put Pike in the worst of positions. If he lost his career over this, she'd never forgive herself.

Quinn made a soft noise and stirred. Laleh sat forward and touched his forearm. His eyes flew open at her touch. Confusion filtered across his face as he took in his surroundings. He reached up and touched his wounded shoulder. "Ow."

His voice sounded scratchy, so she reached for the small water pitcher on the table and poured a glass. She sat on the edge of his bed and gently tipped his chin as she held the cup to his lips. "Drink."

Quinn smiled gratefully and sipped at the cold water. "Thanks."

Laleh set aside the cup and held his hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore but okay. You?"

"I'm fine. A little shaken up earlier but I'm better now."

Quinn quirked a smile. "And your old man?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "After they wheeled you into surgery, Pike was requested in the situation room."

"Shit," Quinn swore. He started to throw off the thin blanket and made to get out of bed.

"What are you doing?"

"I can't let him take all the heat for this."

Laleh put a hand against his chest and gently pressed him back to the bed. "You just came out of surgery. You're not going anywhere. And since when do you care so much about Pike?"

Quinn reluctantly sat back. "We came to an understanding."

Laleh smiled with amusement. "I have to admit I never expected to see the two of you riding to my rescue, working together."

"Beggars can't be choosers."

At the sound of Pike's voice, Laleh turned toward the doorway. Pike leaned against the jamb. Like Laleh, he'd showered and changed clothes, she into jeans and a tee, he into

his uniform. He looked as if he'd been through the wringer. His haggard gaze moved to Quinn. "You all right?"

"I'll live, sir."

Laleh noted Quinn's return to official address now that they were back on Virgo.

"Good to hear, Petty Officer."

Laleh sensed he needed her. She patted Quinn's hand and slipped off the bed. "I'll check in on you tomorrow. Good night."

"Night."

Laleh skirted the edge of the bed and took Pike's outstretched hand. She cast one final glance at Quinn before shutting the door behind them and heading out of the infirmary. Pike pulled her close to his side, his arm curving around her waist, his fingers spanning her hip. She ignored the curious stares and gossipy whispers as they made their way through Virgo to their quarters.

Once inside, Pike slumped onto the center of the couch. Laleh straddled his hips and cradled his face in her hands. She nuzzled her nose against his before kissing him tenderly. "Tell me."

Pike sighed and leaned back, his head resting atop the cushion. Laleh snuggled against his chest. He stroked her nape as he spoke. "The Admiralty called me on the carpet. I was honest with them, told them about Jai and the beating he gave you in Houston and the kidnapping. They sympathized, but commandeering a Spacefleet vessel and an Omega crossed the line into court martial territory."

Laleh's body stiffened. Pike's arms tightened around her. "Shh," he whispered. "It didn't go that far."

"What happened?"

"I showed them the jewelry and repeated what Jai had told you. They were stunned, to say the least. Bearing in mind the intelligence I'd gathered, they chose to wipe the slate clean. I'll be docked three months pay and won't be allowed any leave for the next twelve months. All in all, it's not too bad a deal. Oh, and they expect you to testify sometime in the coming week."

"Of course," Laleh said. "I'll do whatever they ask."

"Quinn will be happy to know he's been promoted to Chief Petty Officer."

"Really? That's great!"

"He was already on the short list for promotion. I just made sure the Admiralty understood exactly what kind of a soldier he is."

Laleh pecked his chin. "You're so sweet."

Pike chuckled and shook his head. "If you say so."

"I do." She sat up and unzipped his jacket. He seemed pensive as she pushed the jacket off his shoulders and down his arms. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"Dari lodged a murder charge against me as soon as he heard Jai was dead."

Laleh stilled as fear washed cold down her body. "You're not serious."

Pike's mouth settled into a grim line. "I am."

"But Jai tried to kill us."

"Yes, he did."

"Can he do that? I mean, ask the Federation to charge you with murder?"

"He can, but he didn't get very far with his complaint. Arrival and departure logs and cameras at *Hedonisma* showed Jai dragging your unconscious body through the corridors

and onto his ship. Add to that the latest information about the Scourge and Jai. Dari withdrew the complaint about an hour ago."

Laleh sagged with relief. "So that's that."

Pike nodded. "That's that."

"It really is over now," she said, disbelief coloring her voice.

Pike grasped her waist. "It's really over."

Laleh couldn't stop the tears that gushed forth. After all this time, to know she was finally truly free was simply overwhelming. Pike hugged her close as she sobbed, his lips ghosting over her forehead, his hand stroking her arm. When she quieted, he lifted her and stood from the couch. Laleh's thighs tightened around his waist as he carried her through their quarters and into the bedroom. He placed her on the bed and crawled atop her, his weight familiar and comforting as he hovered over her body. He took his time making love to her mouth, his kisses sensual and unhurried. Laleh clutched at his sides. The reality of their brush with death fueled her desire.

Pike stripped away her clothing. She lay naked atop the comforter and raked her hungry gaze over his sexy form as he removed his clothing and threw it aside. In a second, he was over her again, his knees on either side of her waist. His fingertips grazed her cheeks. Something powerful burned in his gaze. "I love you, Laleh. I think I'd die without you."

She trembled beneath his loving stare. She wished she could think of something more eloquent to say but let the words slip from her lips anyway. "Me, too."

Pike claimed her mouth. His hand slid down her shoulder and over to her breast. He cupped her, his thumb moving over her nipple before he bent down and sucked it between his lips. He moved from breast to breast, licking and suckling and teething until Laleh writhed underneath him. Her pussy pulsed as her cream flowed from her core. She yearned to have Pike inside her, but he had other plans.

Laleh sighed in bliss as Pike kissed and nipped his way down to her body. His tongue dipped into her navel and traveled lower, leaving a cool stripe of wetness. He grasped her thighs and parted them wide. Laleh whimpered as he nuzzled his nose between her folds. His tongue flicked against her clit and then slid lower, gliding between her lips and prodding her entrance. "Mmmm," he hummed. "I just love the taste of your cunt."

"Pike!" It thrilled her when he talked like that. He made a hungry noise and delved into her sex. She held tight to his head as he traced her lips with his flattened tongue. When his mouth settled over her clit, she bucked against him. He rolled the nub between lips and circled his tongue over it again and again. Laleh's hips pumped in rhythm with his tonguing. Her belly vibrated with white hot heat.

"Make me come, Pike." As she begged him for release, Laleh ground her pussy against his mouth. His grip tightened as he lapped eagerly at her clit. Laleh shuddered and sucked in shallow breaths. Her thighs quivered as she chased her climax. She pinched her own nipples as she hovered on the edge. Pike sucked hard on her clit and she came, shoulders arching, hips snapping. He kept licking at her until she pleaded for him to stop. The sensations were too intense.

Pike abandoned her clit, but kept his tongue on her sex. He stabbed his pointed tongue into her slick hole, lapping at her cream like a kitten. Laleh moaned as he continued his sensual assault. Eventually, he licked her labia and placed a soft kiss on her

clit. He crawled over her and brushed his lips against hers. Laleh ran her fingers through his hair as she swirled her tongue around his.

Desperate to taste him, she pushed on his shoulders until he rolled on his back. She flicked her tongue against his nipples and grazed her teeth down his torso. She followed the line of dark hair leading right down to his erect cock with her lips. Moving between his legs, she rested on her belly and cupped his balls. She licked the seam there before sucking his sac into her mouth.

Pike groaned low and loud as she laved at his sensitive pouch. When she licked from the bottom of his shaft to the tip of his cock, Pike's hips rose off the bed. She allowed saliva to pool on her tongue and drip onto his flushed skin. Her lips wrapped around his cock. She swallowed him inch by delicious inch until her nose bumped the thatch of crisp hairs.

Ever so slowly, Laleh dragged her slick lips back up his cock and then plunged down again. She clasped his shaft, working him with tight strokes as she bobbed on his penis. Her other hand fondled his sac. Pike issued little groans and grunts of appreciation. He caressed her face and threaded his fingers through her locks. Every now and then, he lifted his shoulders and watched her sucking him off.

"Stop," Pike said with a strangled groan. He pulled out of her mouth. His eyes burned with arousal. "Come here."

Laleh did as he asked. Pike clutched her to his chest and rolled her onto her back. With one smooth thrust, he buried his cock inside her slick pussy. His jaw ticked and eyes closed. Laleh held onto his waist as he rocked against her. His strokes were deliberate and leisurely. There was no race to come, no frantic urge to finish. Tonight, they enjoyed the intimacy of their joined bodies.

Grasping his shoulders, she licked and sucked at his neck. He shivered and thrust deeply into her wet depths. She rose up to meet his plunging cock. Her nipples grazed his chest hair, the sensation heightening her excitement. Pike's teeth grazed her collarbone. He moved to her mouth and flicked his tongue between her lips.

Heat blossomed in Laleh's lower belly. Her clit throbbed as tendrils of pleasure invaded her cunt. Pike's cock stroked just the right spot over and over again. His thrusts grew more forceful, his pace quickening a bit. She clutched at his shoulders. "Touch me."

Pike groaned against her neck. His hands rode the curve of her belly and glided between her slippery folds. He rubbed his thumb over her clit. She bucked against his hand and cried out. Pike's lips settled over hers. His tongue darted into her mouth as he fucked her harder. "Come with me," he whispered against her lips. "Come with me, Laleh."

She squeezed her pussy around his thrusting cock. Pleasure rippled through her core. Her heels pressed into Pike's backside, urging him closer, deeper. The fingers of his other hand rested against her forehead. Their noses barely touched, their panted breaths mingling, lips sometimes brushing together. They rocked in unison, their bodies united in a shared cause.

Laleh inhaled a shaky breath as the first panicky wave of orgasm bloomed in her belly. "I'm coming!"

Pike swallowed her moans of ecstasy as he drove into her again and again. He strummed her clit, drawing out her orgasm as he plunged into her one final time. Body rigid, he jerked roughly and spilled his seed. She clenched him in her arms, her hips

swiveling to wrench every last ounce of pleasure available.

With a groan, Pike collapsed against her chest. He placed his head on her breast, his ear just over her heart. She stroked his hair and reveled in the tenderness of the moment. She realized in that moment her love for Pike knew no bounds. She ached for him and couldn't imagine ever being parted from him again.

As she cradled him in her arms, Pike spoke, his voice thick from their tryst. "Do you think we'll ever be happier than we are right now?"

Laleh smiled and touched his cheek. "Maybe."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Pike paced impatiently outside the greenhouse on Virgo's science deck. He'd pulled a lot of strings to reserve the lush garden space this evening and couldn't wait to see Laleh's face. He checked his watch for the millionth time. He wondered if she'd been kept late at work. He knew her latest project, an exhibit on the mishmash of cultures aboard Virgo, took up a great deal of her time. Like everything else, Laleh approached her exhibit with tenacity.

Since that fateful day four weeks ago, life had calmed down considerably. Laleh had testified before the Federation panel. An investigation into who exactly knew about Jai's dealings with the Scourge and when they'd learned of it was currently underway. The Hezman Empire remained under intense scrutiny, and it looked as if there might be some small changes coming in the way women were viewed and treated. Dari couldn't afford to piss off the few people still willing to invest in his planet. They were demanding changes to avoid bad publicity within the Federation. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Pike had thrown himself into his duties, making sure to do things by the book. He knew he'd been cut some slack because of his exemplary record. He doubted he'd receive the same treatment again if he dared stray outside protocols. From now on, Pike lived on the straight and narrow.

Laleh rounded the corner. A grey herringbone dress skimmed her curvaceous figure. Black heels tapped the polished floor, punctuating the swing to her saucy hips. Pike's fingers itched to peel away the dress so he could get his hands on her skin. As soon as he got her inside, the clip holding her hair in a loose coil would be snatched away. He wanted her hair around her shoulders and free for tangling his fingers.

As Laleh drew near, Pike noticed the preoccupied expression on her face. "Something wrong?"

Laleh shook her head and rose up to kiss him. "Just some unexpected news."

"Oh?" Pike's hands found their natural place on her hips.

She waved dismissively. "I'll tell you later. Right now I want to know why you asked me to join you at the greenhouse."

Pike grinned, excitement and nervousness bubbling through him. He slid his arm around her waist and gestured toward the double doors. "Just a little surprise."

"Surprise?" Laleh's eyebrows arched. She gave a giddy little laugh. "Can't wait!"

Chuckling, Pike led her into the greenhouse. The balmy interior was a stark contrast to the dry coolness of Virgo's usual temperature. Heady scents of exotic plants mixed with the refreshing, bright smells of grasses and trees. Pale blue lights lit up the winding pathways. Soft overhead lighting mimicked the night sky, the ceiling dotted with twinkling star-like spots.

Up ahead, the weeping cherry tree came into view. It stood tall, its branches draping toward the manicured lawn. Delicate white and pink blossoms dripped from the branches. Pike knew nothing of trees, but the moment he'd spotted it he'd known that was the tree for tonight.

Beside him, Laleh inhaled sharply as she spotted the red checkered blanket, picnic basket, and lounging pillows he'd placed under the tree. She squeezed his hand and

beamed up at him. "Pike, this is amazing!"

He kissed her temple. "I'm glad you like it."

"What's the occasion?" Laleh raised a hand to touch the branches. White blossoms showered around her fingertips.

"We've been so busy these last weeks and I thought it would be nice to do something special."

Laleh wrapped her arms around his waist and gazed into his eyes. "You're such a romantic."

"Don't tell anyone." He whispered against her lips.

"They wouldn't believe me," Laleh teased and slipped from his arms. She sank down onto the blanket and kicked off her pumps. Pike settled down next to her. He unpacked the picnic basket, placing the various cold dishes and desserts onto the blanket. He handed out the plates, utensils and cloth napkins before twisting the cap on her favorite iced green tea and pouring it into a glass.

"Thank you." Laleh accepted the tea and took a sip. "This must have taken some planning." She motioned to the selection of food and then their surroundings.

He shrugged casually. "You're worth it."

Laleh seemed to glow at his comment. She sat forward and investigated the food containers. She heaped portions of the pasta salad and chicken and veggies onto their plates. She leaned back against the big, comfy pillows and dug into her dinner. "So how was work?"

"Same old, same old." Pike tasted the grilled chicken. The light sauce's flavors, a hint of lime and something spicy, exploded on his tongue. "This is good."

Laleh nodded in agreement. "We should have this again."

"Definitely. And you? How was your day?"

"Busy." She balanced her plate on her outstretched legs. "I'm trying to layout the exhibit space, but it's difficult to focus when I have people running in and out of my office all day wanting me to translate this or consult on that." She kneaded the back of her neck. "It's tiring."

Pike studied her carefully. She did look tired—had looked tired for a while now. She'd been heading to bed a bit earlier than usual, too. "Maybe you should take a three day weekend, Laleh. Spend Monday resting or hit one of the spas. You look like you could use a few days of relaxation."

"Tempting," she said, lifting her glass to her lips. After she swallowed her tea, she shook her head. "I just have two more weeks until the exhibit. I'll take a few sick days to celebrate."

"Do that." Pike made a mental note to encourage her to take some me-time after the exhibit's debut. "I saw Quinn today."

"Oh?"

"He came by my office for his new orders."

"What kind of orders?"

Pike smiled apologetically. "I can't, Laleh. It's classified."

She frowned and issued a little humph. "I never get to hear anything juicy."

Pike laughed and rolled his eyes. "Please, Laleh. You work in the diplomatic service. I can only imagine what kind of things you hear day in and day out."

"Fair point."

"Quinn asked after you, said he'd tried to reach you a few days ago."

"I completely forgot to return his message." Laleh seemed aggravated with her forgetfulness. "I hope it wasn't important."

"He just wanted to get together to go bowling. I told him I'd send along the message. If you're going to get together, it will have to be within the next two weeks," he added, knowing Quinn deployed soon.

"Thanks for the heads up. I'll see if he wants to grab lunch tomorrow. Want to join us?"

Pike shook his head. "That's all right. You two get rather rowdy in public. I'd be in uniform and—well—you know."

"I understand."

"And anyways. I always feel like the third wheel with you two."

"Really?" Laleh looked surprised. "Does it bother you?"

"Not anymore," Pike admitted. "I get the dynamic now. I'm not at all threatened by it like I used to be."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Let's compromise. Why don't we have him over for dinner before he deploys?"

"Sounds great," Laleh said.

They polished off their dinner and started in on the desserts, two slices of decadent carrot cake and vanilla ice cream. It was the perfect rich end to a light meal. Pike's stomach clenched at the sight of Laleh scooping her finger through a dollop of frosting and licking it clean. Always a coquette, she gathered more frosting on her finger and brought it to his lips. He held her gaze as he sucked the digit between his lips.

Laleh leaned forward and kissed him deeply. When she pulled back, uncertainty colored her face. He cupped her cheek and brushed his lips across hers. "What is it?"

She swallowed hard. "I'm pregnant."

Of all the things he'd expected to hear, that wasn't among them. After the initial shock passed, a thrill of elation seized his chest. A baby, his baby! Until Laleh, he'd all but given up on the possibility of ever being a father. A dam of emotion deep within him broke open, spilling its stream of emotions into his blood. He could see himself with their child, a little boy or girl with Laleh's eyes and smile and his sandy hair. Suddenly he wondered if he'd ever be able to convey to Laleh how grateful he was for this chance.

Pike threw his arms around her, crushing her in a loving embrace as he claimed her lips. Laleh clung to him, her hands fisting his jacket as they kissed madly, passionately. When they broke apart, he could see the relief on her face. "Did you think I wouldn't be happy?"

"I didn't know what to expect," she confessed. "We never talked about children."

"Are you happy?" He needed to know the truth, even if she was upset.

Tears glistened in her eyes. "I'm thrilled. I mean, I was stunned when Dr. Karp gave me the diagnosis. I realized I'd missed two doses of my contraception, one when I was at Leo and another when we were at Heondisma. I suspected that's why I'd been so tired and a bit nauseated in the afternoons, but I'd had a light period so I wasn't sure. Dr. Karp explained it was likely implantation spotting."

Pike had no idea what she was talking about but nodded intelligently. "That makes sense." He couldn't stop grinning. "A baby." Awe filled his voice.

Laleh took his hand and placed it against her still flat tummy. "Our baby."

As they stared into one another's eyes, Pike's watch chirped. He jumped to his feet and offered his hands. She grasped them and allowed him to pull her into a standing position. Holding her hand, he led her out from under the tree's protective canopy. He gathered her close as if meaning to slow dance.

A confused expression played upon her face. The first touch of raindrops to her skin startled her. "It's raining!"

Pike nodded and smiled indulgently. "I promised I'd kiss you in the rain."

Laleh's lower lip wobbled. "Oh, Pike..."

He took his time capturing her lips, drawing out the moment until Laleh lifted on tiptoes in impatience. As the raindrops fell, splashing their faces and rustling the leaves of the tree, they shared a touching, intimate kiss. It made his knees weak and his toes tingle. Laleh's tongue darted into his mouth, the tip sliding against his before she nibbled his lip. Heat rolled through his belly. His groin tightened. Her hand slid down his chest and torso. She gripped his erection through his trousers.

"Laleh," he said warningly. It took every ounce of his self-control to deny her what they both craved desperately. "We can't. Not here. The cameras."

"Then I'd suggest you pack up quickly."

The sassy swing of her hips as she walked away made him groan with need. He rushed to gather their picnic and raced to catch up with her. When he stepped up beside his wife, Pike playfully popped her backside with the side of the leather pumps he held in his hand. She yelped and giggled then swatted at him. "You left these behind Cinderella."

Laleh narrowed her eyes and took the shoes from him. "Better watch it, Pike. You'll give me ideas."

He barked with laughter at the idea of Laleh turning him over her knee for a little loving discipline. As they left the greenhouse, she snuggled close to his side, winding her arm around his waist. Pike kissed the top of her head. He couldn't help but grin. He'd made some impulsive decisions in his life but offering a young woman he'd hardly known a chance for refuge topped them all. It could have bitten him in the ass in the worst possible way, but it hadn't. He now had everything he'd always wanted and more.

The End

About the Author:

While browsing bookstore shelves as a teenager, Lo discovered the erotic writings of Anaïs Nin and A.N. Roquelaure. Certain her mother would not approve, Lo smuggled the books home and squirreled them away in the most likely of places: under her bed. Late at night, she delved into the sensual worlds both writers created.

As a co-ed studying biochemistry and genetics at Texas A&M University, Lo dabbled in creating naughty tales to entertain her friends. Study for a midterm or pen a deliciously dirty story to delight her small band of fans? Not surprisingly, Lo is now on an extended sabbatical from college.

Luckily, Lo stumbled onto the world of erotic romance publishers. She realized there were other readers and writers who loved and craved breathtaking romance with the spiciest of love scenes. She took a chance and submitted her first novella. The rest is

history.

Lo lives in Texas with her family and beloved Great Dane, Bosley.

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