



Changeling Press

I.G.O.

Sudden Snow

RaeLynn Blue

IGO 1: Sudden Snow

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Some secrets could change a galaxy -- if they don't get you killed.

Dr. Cricket Moore is running for her life. Her coworkers murdered and her research stolen, she has no one to turn to. When she's thrust into the hands of an Intergalactic Organization officer to be transported to headquarters for interrogation, her only hope is to trust her life to a stranger.

It should have been one more assignment. Escort the last remaining research scientist to headquarters for debriefing. Sergeant Darryl Snow takes every mission seriously, but this one seems pretty routine. Cricket doesn't look all that dangerous. But she's in more trouble than even she realizes. And the instant attraction he feels for the dark-skinned beauty doesn't make the situation any easier. How can he win her trust -- and her heart -- without compromising the mission?

Darryl will stop at nothing to protect Cricket from danger... even if the greatest danger he faces is losing himself in her.

Chapter 1

"I can't believe our luck," complained Mason Lars, brushing his stringy blond bangs from his eyes. He rubbed them as if they itched from fatigue and he swallowed a budding yawn before it blossomed to fruition. "It's three days out from leave and we ain't even on *The Discovery*. Who gives out freakin' missions this close to annual leave?"

"Capitan Reyes and the Intergalactic Organization, that's who," replied Sergeant Darryl Snow from the commander's slick ivory bucket chair. He ran his hand over his buzzed black hair and sighed. "Being tethered to *The Discovery* isn't always cheerful and relaxing, you know. Even during leave."

Darryl spied the stars zipping by the ship. Their parent ship, *The Discovery*, remained docked at Mars Outpost 1, prepping for the upcoming holiday and annual leave time. Theirs was the only team sent out this close to leave. There were four teams on board *The Discovery* spaceship. Alpha, Delta, Omega, and Sigma teams each had been assigned their own spacecraft, smaller vessels for the purposes of conducting independent, individualized missions that didn't require the entire mass of *The Discovery*.

Delta team was the scientific based team, a small group of about twenty-four people including Darryl. Many of their missions pertained to the purpose of science, which was how he found himself pulling the early morning shift command while trekking through the bogs on Europa's surface.

"My wife is doing what she can with our quarters, but, you know, those things are the size of shoeboxes on this spacecraft," continued Pilot Lars in a longsuffering

drawl. "What are we looking for again? Solo shuttlepods can't get through this on their own? They need us?"

"No, they can't. So we have to escort the scientists through this murky soup to get readings and the like."

Private Kovacs, the pudgy comms soldier, snorted behind them. "I could go for some soup -- black bean."

"Anyway, so why's it got to be us, huh?" Lars inquired, stifling a chuckle at Kovacs.

Darryl switched his active listening to off as Lars continued his bellyaching and Kovacs recited his food cravings. He never understood how a man who had a beautiful, kind wife, two children, and a great job as pilot could complain about how terrible his life had become.

Darryl grimaced in the lowlights of the bridge and longed to be held once again. To feel the warmth of a lover wrapped around him, whispering soft words of love, devotion and joy made life worth living -- exciting, thrilling.

Mentally swatting the urge back into the abyss, Darryl sighed, looking around the 'shoe.

The 'shoe, as it was affectionately called, was the command station for *The Inquiry*. It occupied the nose of the ship. Laid out in a horseshoe, the open ends contained both the pilot and navigation seats pointing toward the nose of the craft. At the rear curve was where security sat and the communications station rested. A lone chair overlooked the sunken commander's chair and pilots' seats. Security's console lacked a corresponding chair. Darryl didn't know why, though as chief of security he couldn't sit when in the middle of engaging some threat. The entire 'shoe was awash in the IGO red, white and green colors. Oval insignias were emblazoned all over the place as if the crew required constant reminding.

Four ten in the morning and only four hours more to go.

With such a tiny crew, they had only one senior commander and one junior commander. Teams like Alpha had one senior and three junior commanders or jc's.

Commander Taylor, the Delta team's leader, often referred to Darryl as his second jc, so the twenty-four hour day was broken into three eight-hour rotations to split between the commander, Darryl and the true junior commander, JC Lee.

No problem. Darryl didn't have anything -- or anyone -- to go bunk down with.

He glanced around to the usual suspects, Pilot Lars, Privates Kovacs and Henson Rojas. No one was at navigations. Commander Taylor had set those coordinates already.

"My wife broke our water conservatory last night. Can you believe it?" Lars rambled on.

At least you have a wife to tuck into a nice, soft bed and kiss beneath the cozy fireworks streaking by. Yeah, I could use the hologram and fake it, but that would be a waste of my energies and my time. Count yourself lucky, Lars.

"Don't complain about *The Inquiry*," Darryl said instead, without even really hearing what Lars' long-winded talk was about. Each shift they engaged in this boring dance of complaining about whatever met Lars' fancy. "Besides, this baby is as solid as they can be."

With his gloved hand, he stroked his chair's leather arm as affectionately as he would a woman, had he had one. Damn, he had a horrid case of *lonely* tonight.

"Yeah, uh-huh," Lars sniggered and pushed his bangs out of his dull sepia eyes once more as he gazed back to Darryl. "Anyway, I heard Commander Ashe is getting demoted to sergeant..."

Rojas laughed, a high-pitched chortle. "Yeah, whatever. No one can beat her record. She won't be demoted. Even after that crash at Titan, she still kept her rank. The poor pilot took the hit for it."

Tuning out Lars and Rojas once more, Darryl gazed down into the screen embedded into the chair's right arm. Shooting the feed from outside cameras, the murky muck of Europa's bogs held little relief from Darryl's latest bout of loneliness. Blame the holidays. Each year he spent his hour or two in the commons area on *The Discovery* before everyone retired with their families for more intimate celebrations.

Darryl would then return to an empty cabin. Sometimes he brought a pretty girl or an intensive simulation hologram to help fill the time, but none of it satisfied him. Initially, this life of commanding the early duty satisfied him, but holidays hastily deleted those feelings of contentment. It was like a ravaging hunger. The women only served a brief snack. Darryl longed for a more meaningful meal.

What woman would satisfy him on all levels -- would have the patience, beauty, and brains he wanted -- and, above all, love him?

He realized his finger was idly stroking the long, jagged scar across the bottom of his left eye where the blast from a laser gun had sliced open his cheek. The lower half of his torso had been marred when a mine exploded. The injury halted his climb up the IGO ladder, successfully earning him a transfer from Alpha to Delta team. One distraction of the female kind had nearly gotten him killed. So close to becoming a commander at the time of the attack, Darryl now remained lodged at sergeant. He'd been careless and it had cost him.

A squawking horn spooked Darryl out of his brooding.

Kovacs said, "Sorry, sergeant. There's an urgent comm from Io Outpost R and D. Won't tell me anything. Keep blaring for Commander Taylor." Kovacs shrugged.

Darryl nodded, waving to Kovacs to send the communication on through. "Send it."

He fumbled before finding the tiny green button on the armchair. The grayish fog on the screen cleared, and the bright emerald eyes of a stern looking outtie -- outpost security guard -- emerged. The outtie scowled. The starched navy blue uniform and bronze buttons glistened under the lights. His brunet hair, perfectly threaded with grey, didn't move as he pounded his fist on the desk.

Darryl pressed the scarlet oval on the commander's chair to activate the communications.

"I wish to speak to Commander Taylor," the outtie thundered before Darryl could announce himself.

I don't care about your wishes. Oy, this isn't any way to begin a conversation.

Darryl didn't say this, but instead blew his frustration out. Clearing his throat, he said, "This is Sergeant Snow of the IGO spacecraft *Inquiry*. Report your business."

"There is no time, nor am I required to discuss official IGO business with you! This is a matter of life and death. So, get Commander Taylor!"

"One moment," Darryl said tersely, feeling his stomach twist in annoyance. Outties lay low on the outpost management chain, but because they weren't official IGO soldiers -- they worked for civilian outfits across the solar system -- they acted superior to IGO personnel. Strange, this one contacting him on IGO business. Outties didn't rank high enough to handle items of importance beyond ordering outpost supplies and handling small-time crimes.

Sighing with mounting annoyance, Darryl pressed the small green button on his earpiece and waited.

A deep voice answered. "Taylor. Report."

"An outtie from Io demands, and I mean, sir, *demands* your attention. Seems to be in a panic. Think it might be about the scientist."

Earlier a situation had been reported from Europa about a missing scientist from a relatively obscure project around Io. Commander Taylor had said he didn't think it had anything to do with them, as it appeared to be an internal outpost issue. That didn't seem to be the case now.

"Put it through," Commander Taylor said kindly, but firm. Unreadable.

"Yes, sir," Darryl said with the same practiced response of those who'd said the same thing all the time. "Sending him through."

"Bastards are always barking at us," Kovacs remarked from his new position behind Darryl. "How come we're looking to babysit a scientist? Why can't Commander Ashe's team get it done? Aren't they Alpha team, the investigation branch of *The Discovery*?"

"I don't know about Alpha team's mission or workload. We're closer anyway," Darryl said breezily. "It's not up to us to dish out assignments, you know?"

"Alpha means first, right?" Lars asked, sarcasm turning his voice hard.

At this point the 'shoe's deck turbo lift opened and out stomped Commander Taylor. His eyes were amazingly clear, but weariness hovered around his mouth and shoulders. He reminded Darryl of a pair of well-worn boots. Taylor, older than Darryl by fifteen years, had kind eyes, watery blue, and a weathered smile that projected leadership and strength.

"Get us up and over to the Io Outpost," he said, with a fast glance at Darryl. "They have one of our scientists in custody. Let's get her and get back to *The Discovery* before Captain Reyes is done passing out the leave passes."

"Yes, sir!" Darryl shot up from the commander's chair, and hurried to the security station.

Rojas stepped over to navigations, sitting down in the chair parallel to Lars.

Kovacs continued to monitor the communications coming in and out of the space shuttle. While Darryl searched for anything nasty out in the waiting expanse of space, he suppressed the anxious itching up his spine. His stomach lunged as Lars took them up from the soup to the clearing brilliant glitter of space.

"We're going to house her here, sir?" asked Lars in a hushed squeakiness. "I mean, we're a research vessel, not an investigative extension."

Commander Taylor's blank face showed nothing. The barest nod confirmed Lars' comments.

"Set our course and dock in Bank 542, Section 12," Commander Taylor said, but nothing in his voice or face gave a hint to his thoughts. The commander didn't flinch as they transitioned from the atmosphere and out into space. He got up as if unable to remain seated and walked forward between Lars and Rojas. Staring out at the frontal visual screen, he remained stone-faced and silent.

Not his usual self. Something's up. I've been with him for over six years' worth of missions. Something's eating at him. He doesn't like this and neither do I.

"Aye, Commander," Lars said, not turning around, but his hands piloted the space shuttle as if on their own accord. "Can I ask you a question?"

Commander Taylor's blond hair had been harnessed into a tight ponytail and new growth had sprouted like a fungus over his jaw line. "Question? You've always got questions, Lars. Go ahead."

"About the scientist, sir," Lars said, suddenly unsure of himself. "Isn't it a lot to send us for just one person's return? They've never done this before when one of the soldiers are in trouble. Couldn't she take a transport vessel off to Europa and we pick her up there?"

Commander Taylor turned to face him fully. He easily stood a foot taller than Lars, but his boots set the balance. Lars was lean and athletic, a former soccer player for the IGO team. Nevertheless, the commander outweighed him by fifty pounds. "It is, pilot, *different*."

"Yes, sir." Lars abandoned his questions for the moment.

Darryl scanned the security computer data, but none of it produced any clear clues as to what was going on with the scientist. He hadn't even been given a name. In excellent operating condition, the ship sailed on without disruption or threat. Good.

Before long the docking clamps jolted the shuttle, forcing everyone to stumble a bit, but soon they steadied, anchored to the Io outpost. Darryl prepared to assume command as Commander Taylor and the junior commander, Lee, would be going aboard to collect the scientist. They handled all diplomatic missions.

"Snow, come with me. The rest of you stay put," Commander Taylor said as he headed to the lift. He pressed his earpiece and spoke softly before ending the conversation with a nod. His blue eyes met Darryl's and he said, "JC Lee, report to the bridge."

Startled, Darryl paused, his hands frozen over the console.

Commander Taylor nodded so slightly, Darryl grinned in spite of himself. He set the shuttle's security to high before joining his commander. Rojas returned to his former post at once.

As the lift doors hushed closed behind them, Commander Taylor looked over at him and said, "Shocked, Snow? You shouldn't be. Listen, I want you to take over this little outing. Go in and get the scientist, bring her back."

Something in his words snagged Darryl's attention and he frowned. "Sir?"

"Listen, due to the classified nature of this mission, I can't tell you the fine details, but..." He paused and checked the lift's zipping numbers as they sank lower into the belly of the spacecraft. "But, I want you to deal with the scientist. You've been through a lot in your rather short lifespan, and your presence may be of comfort to our new guest. You're a great officer, Darryl. I have every confidence you'll do fine."

Darryl snorted and caught himself. "Sorry, sir."

"You have great leadership abilities, and though I don't have an official third in command, you're it," Commander Taylor said, smiling at him. He clapped Darryl on the back and kept grinning at him.

"Thank you, sir," Darryl said, throat full of emotion.

Commander Taylor had never spoken to him like this and he pondered the purpose of the commander being so forthcoming. Not that he didn't trust his senior officer; he did.

Before Darryl could inquire further, the lift's doors opened upon the cargo area in the belly of *The Inquiry*. Above them the commons area which held the cafeteria and crew entertainment waited for occupation.

Darryl stepped out, but Commander Taylor remained. "Put her in one of the vacant quarters, report to me at once, and then get some shut eye."

"Yes, sir," Darryl said, a flood of confidence making him taller.

With Commander Taylor's words humming in his ears, Darryl marched through the cargo bay and approached the exit doors without hesitation. He'd be in and out in mere minutes. And although Commander Taylor hadn't said as much, his gut burned with suspicion. Stealth had been one of Darryl's strong suits on Alpha team and it was no doubt one of the reasons he'd been handpicked to snag the scientist.

The cargo doors opened to reveal an unsmiling and scowling outpost officer. "Commander Taylor," the outtie said briskly, face tight. "I'm Outpost Officer Higgins. We have your scientist, but we must move her quickly."

Having a name to put with the rough and barking voice from earlier didn't make Darryl like him better. He watched as Higgins' beady black eyes gave him the once over, observing him with thinly veiled trepidation.

"I'm not Commander Taylor," Darryl said. "I'm an envoy sent to escort her."

"That isn't what I agreed to with the IGO," Higgins snapped. "I was just expecting Taylor. Damn visuals aren't as good here."

"I'm not familiar with those terms. You can check with Commander Taylor. I'm Sergeant..."

"I don't want your name!" Higgins growled, searching frantically behind him. "Shut up."

Darryl chuckled at the rudeness. Higgins' venom didn't bother him, because he knew the outtie was offended that Commander Taylor had sent an underling to do this job.

He pinned his eyes back to Darryl's. "Follow me."

What in the name of Zeus is going on here? Higgins packed enough nerves to set off a stroke. Darryl scanned the docking bay. Empty. Vacant. No civilian transports. No outpost shuttlepods. Nothing. *Where is everyone?*

"You can observe the dock on your next vacation to Io. Let's go," Officer Higgins snapped and hurried through the doors and into the outpost's inner corridors.

Climbing through the catacombs of hallways, Darryl's mind whirled. They'd come to pick up a stranded scientist, so why the secrecy? Sure, Io housed the IGO's Research and Development section, but this?

In minutes, they stopped at the metallic doors with the words "Collection" in neon yellow above them. Officer Higgins halted with military precision that would be the envy of any IGO soldier. Higgins turned to Darryl with barely contained disgust.

Yeah, the feeling's mutual, pal.

"I can lose my post because of this," he said so softly, Darryl leaned in to make sure he heard it. "I -- I hope you tell..."

"Of course," Darryl agreed with professionalism. "Your contribution will be noted and included in my report to Commander Taylor. Proceed. Time is of the essence as you are well aware."

"Yes."

Higgins pressed his palm against the scanner, leaning in simultaneously for the retina scan. The doors slid open and they rushed in. Higgins bypassed the offices and continued to the rear, but that area, too, sat vacant and empty -- just like the dock.

"Where is everyone?" Darryl asked. "It's morning, right?"

Higgins sighed in fervent annoyance. "It's nearly four a.m. here. They're asleep, drunk, or knee-deep in their respective research. This isn't like Europa Outpost or even the Moon's. We're a research facility, not an entertainment spot."

They continued on through two more areas that looked identical to the first one before they reached a bank of cages. A dozen or more force field reinforced cells stretched out in two opposite directions. Dead on center in a square, blank-walled cube, seated on a sliver of azure foam attached to the wall, was a woman.

Darryl stopped in his tracks. *That's her? She's the scientist?*

As the noise of their approach reached the woman, she got to her feet and crossed her arms. Almond-shaped honey-brown eyes burned with what must've been fury, and her thick lips resembled a block of annoyance as if she were afraid to open them. Dressed in a gray ribbed turtleneck, jeans and black IGO issued combat/space boots, the woman looked nothing like a scientist, but more like a cargo loader.

Darryl couldn't help but take her in. The jeans skimmed voluptuous curves, and fed into a tapered waist with grace. As if taking cue from the jeans, the turtleneck also slipped over full breasts and long, slender arms. Smooth dark ebony skin peered out and captured the harsh lights' illumination with flawless skill.

She was stunning.

Tossing her hair over her shoulder, the woman shouted, "What now, Officer Higgins? I demand to be treated according to the Intergalactic Treaty of 2380."

Higgins huffed, but held his tongue. Sweeping his hand in Darryl's direction, he gave a mock bow and stepped back from the front of the cube.

It's all me, huh, Higgins?

Darryl stepped forward, forcing himself to be a soothing presence. He seemed to even coax Higgins down to a normal level. She'd done exactly as trained by invoking the treaty.

"I'm Sergeant Snow," he said. "I'm here on orders to take possession of your research and your person at this time. Please calm yourself."

She hesitated, her lips now a slash of doubt. "What is the current safe code?" she asked.

Darryl smiled. Smart. The safety code had been given to each IGO soldier, but it rotated every six months. They'd been unable to maintain constant contact with *The Discovery* since receiving the orders to get to the Io Outpost. So the code might be stale. Still all security codes in hostage situations were the same -- until the IGO changed them again. He had to try.

"The security code is Hera 2309841."

"Yes, okay," she said, visibly relaxing. "ID?"

He showed her his wrist, where beneath the skin rested the IGO brand.

"Great," Higgins said with sarcasm as heavy as molasses. "Open cell 1209, authorization HFPNT 2400. This is IGO Doctor Cricket Moore."

Dr. Moore.

The force field vanished, and Dr. Moore marched out with her backpack, searching the place as if committing it to memory before stalking to the exit. Once she crossed through the silver-toned doors and out into the outpost's hallway, she sighed. With a stern expression, she turned back to Darryl and said, "Please, can we go?"

"This way to the docking bay," Darryl said almost as a reflex. He'd been taking orders for most of his life, so he'd already taken a step before he realized he'd done it.

Commander Taylor had instructed him to bring her to the spacecraft, not the other way around. He was in charge, and he wasn't going to let her lead the way.

But once his eyes fell on the gentle sway of her round buttocks, his other head took over. Coughing through the lump in his throat, Darryl swore as he made a point of pinning his gaze to the back of her head. Obviously, Dr. Moore knew her way around the outpost. After all, she'd been stationed here for gods knew how long.

With his uniform shrinking below his waist, he adjusted the leg and tried to rid himself of the rather unprofessional thoughts swarming his cranium about the sensual scientist. Did they all look this good? He might consider a transfer to Io. How come none of the scientists on board *The Inquiry* looked as delightful as this one?

It seemed the corridors unraveled in miles upon miles of similar dark, sullen shadows of storefronts, libraries and cafes. But Darryl realized the walk back seemed so long because he couldn't stop staring at the good doctor's generous ass, and it troubled him. On *The Inquiry* a handful of women worked alongside him, and none of them stirred his long dormant desires like the surprising *un*-straight-laced woman in front of him.

She came to a halt at the entrance to docking bay 12. With an emerging coolness, she turned to him and said, "Are you going to tell me which ship is yours?"

He'd been so wrapped up in her unrestrained sexuality Darryl had been waiting behind her as if he'd been towed there. Shaking his head, he rubbed his buzzed hair and stepped forward, throwing his shoulders back as he marched ahead. "Of course," he said more sternly than he'd intended. "We're on *The Inquiry*."

He swept his hand in the direction where *The Inquiry* sat tethered to the docking bay. The cargo doors remained shut tight, and Darryl swore beneath his breath. He should've already contacted Commander Taylor. The scientist had him addled.

With a mental reprimand to be more diligent, Darryl pressed the button on his earpiece and said, "Commander Taylor. I've secured the package. Ready to deliver."

"Did you just refer to me as a package?" Dr. Moore asked, her eyes narrowing to slits. Her arms followed suit, crossing over her attractive breasts and covering them

from Darryl's view. Despite this, he spied those round globes rising and falling as the doctor's breathing increased. "I'll have you know that I am a person, not some errant misplaced item."

No, ma'am, you're most certainly not some misplaced item. You're much too sexy for such a lousy label. But I've got an item I'd like to lose inside of your velvety softness.

Darryl bit the inside of his cheeks to keep the words from coming out of his mouth. As he coughed out yet another clammy knot of awkwardness, the doors opened wide like a ravenous mouth -- its tongue stood erect in a smoke gray uniform, Commander Taylor.

With his arms casually by his sides, the commander smiled. "Dr. Cricket Moore," he said. "Welcome to *The Inquiry*. Please come aboard. We have to make haste. Unfortunately, Director Wang has activated the outpost's defense. He and I couldn't agree on terms."

He said it so calmly that Darryl thought he'd invited the doctor for tea, but once the words registered, he grabbed the woman's upper arm and dragged her inside the cargo bay.

"Let go of me!"

Darryl released her once, smacking his hand against the doors' release. As they closed behind him, he hastened his steps to the still waiting commander.

The commander grinned at Darryl as one would a son or younger sibling. "And I sent you to get her because of your calm manner."

"What? Oh, yes sir!" Darryl panted, his heart hammering in his chest. They had to get out of the bay and into space before Wang started firing at them. *The Inquiry* wasn't a combat vessel. "May I report to security and tactical? We must get going, sir."

With his eyes twinkling in amusement Darryl didn't quite understand, Commander Taylor answered, "Absolutely, Sergeant Snow. There's no other spot I'd rather you be."

"Thank you, sir!" Darryl rushed out in a mashed string of words as he raced to the lift. "Horseshoe!"

Even as he began to consider which defensive maneuvers to employ, in the back of his mind, a silhouette of the lovely Dr. Cricket Moore danced seductively and from time to time flashed into the smooth, cocoa flesh before his more immediate thoughts sent her back to shadow again.

Chapter 2

Cricket remained motionless a breath inside her new quarters, her heart continuing its swift gallop. Her attention was drawn to a three-foot wide plasma screen embedded inside the wall's surface. With a press of her fingers, she would gain easy access to databases, music, video and gaming -- in a word, entertainment both real and simulated. To the door's immediate left, a single bed and IGO standard-issue linens awaited her attention. Though sparse, the quarters met the expectations of a soldier who required moving at a moment's notice. A life she hadn't lived in five long years.

Not that she'd put down roots at Io. The sole difference between her quarters on the post and this new one was that her quarters had hardcopy volcanic images and her notes tacked all over the walls.

She dropped her backpack onto the bed and plopped down beside it. Cricket buried her face in her hands as the tide she'd held at bay since Director Wang's call rushed up from inside. A call from the director of an outpost instead of a comm from her project leader. None of this was IGO standard protocol. Wong had said it had come from an IGO officer. But who?

Classified rank 37 was only three levels below the IGO President's office. Something wasn't right. No one that high up cared about her little science experiment, Ganor, a simple investigation into the volcanoes on Europa.

Once her locked and compressed emotions were freed, she couldn't reel them in again. Before long, her huge guffaws melted into hysterical crying. Her life had been watered down to a sack full of things and a few portable drives. Mobile. Transitive.

Halting her tears, she shoved those emotions back to the locked section of her heart. Wiping her damp cheeks, she got up and went to the sliver of floor-to-ceiling elongated glass on either side of the central wall. Scattered stars lit up the surrounding dark like diamonds cast carelessly onto plush ebony velvet. She loved the view. Space comforted her and humbled her each time she took in its spectacular expanse. Dwarfed by its enormity, Cricket had discovered long ago that words were sorely inadequate to describe it or the feelings wrought from its beauty.

The outpost rotated slowly. Like a planet it deceived one into thinking it was stationary. A floating gray steel ballerina, frozen in a swirl, arms in a circle, spinning in the black sea of space, the outpost was very much active. It had been her home, if she could call it that. But no longer.

She couldn't even say she missed it. It was familiar, but not a place where her roots reached deep. To be honest, the post was more continuous office than home. When she thought of home, images of a housing container, complete with a husband, a pet, and maybe a well-manicured lawn came rushing forward. Not a seven-hundred-square-foot box onboard an IGO space station.

Things had changed so suddenly Cricket couldn't quite believe it. She had a hard time trying to wrap her head around it. Numb, she briskly rubbed her arms. What would happen to the other scientists? Ganor?

She sighed. Aggravated with the direction her thoughts had taken, Cricket abruptly changed her focus. Too long she'd been skimming on engaging her life to its fullest, and now her entire life had been cast into the fray. She'd been kicked off her project on Io and arrested. *Sergeant Snow could make me feel alive again. He's got a lightning rod packaged for me. I bet he'd set every single icy block in my belly to jelly.*

The roguish hunk pushed her long dormant buttons. She hadn't been struck by anyone like him in years. Several long years, if she allowed herself to think about it for more than a brief moment, had gone by without so much as a kiss.

At that moment, the spacecraft shuddered and she spilled to the floor. Bathed in the battle mode's scarlet warning blare, she struggled to her feet and held onto the bed's footboard for stability.

"Warning, battle red. Warning, battle red. Engage safety protocol Delta 5019-Zebra."

Cricket grimaced and went to the media center. At once she keyed in her IGO login and called up the outer visuals. Her fingers danced over the touch sensitive screen which, like a well choreographed partner, flickered accordingly. Displays dashed on and hastily vanished as she sped through the options. She managed to keep her balance as the spacecraft lurched ferociously. No doubt the pilot had engaged defensive maneuvers, and the commanding crew had it all under control.

Once she was logged in, the outside visual feed flickered once and the shower of fired laser blasts from the post lit up the sky. The streams whisked by as the spacecraft danced and tumbled, flipped and skidded by them. Poor imagery gave the feed a grainy distorted quality. She could barely make out the circular sphere of the outpost; its gray titanium flesh eerily bespeckled by static. It grew smaller as the distance increased between them. Static continued to rip through the video, bathing the screen in frosted white before winking back into feeble and fluttering imagery.

Staring at the streaming shots and the whirling maneuvering outside, Cricket shook her head in disbelief. Wang wanted her so badly that he risked his own men and those innocents onboard *The Inquiry*. Project Ganor hadn't been a large, commercial or economic item for the IGO. A small grant-funded project with a lofty, long-term goal, to be sure, but it was obtainable -- in fifty years. The research she had couldn't be worth this much effort and possible loss of human life.

As she thought about the commanding crew, her mind at once clicked on Sergeant Snow. It was most certain that the handsome officer had been staring at her. When making her way back to the docking bay, she had felt his hazel eyes on her back... lower back -- *ahem*, her ass -- and it had prickled a rush of heat across her body.

Her nipples remained tingling long after Sergeant Snow darted through the cargo bay to his station.

When he had grabbed her arm and dragged her into the cargo bay, she'd wanted his hands off of her at once. His touch had ignited something inside of her, something she didn't want to feel or even acknowledge. Each of his fingers had sent shivers through her very core, setting her entire libido into overdrive. Further contact would've led to inexcusable actions, like her stripping him from his uniform and sucking him into her being. She hadn't been touched by anyone with passion or emotion in years. Sim partners didn't qualify as actual human contact.

Get a grip, Cricket. He's an officer. All IGO males think they're the solar system's semen vessels for females. This Sergeant Snow isn't any different.

"Dr. Moore?" a voice erupted from her quarters' speakers.

"Yes," she answered, pulling herself from the budding fantasy starring the handsome Snow.

The slightly hoarse voice said, "This is Sergeant Snow. Are you safe?"

I wonder how he got the scar.

"Doctor?"

"Oh, yes, yes, I-I'm settling in. Thank you."

Silence.

"Please secure yourself and your belongings. Snow out."

Cricket frowned at the blinking green light as it switched to scarlet. He'd disconnected the comm.

Not a very forthcoming fellow, but perhaps he had a lot to do up front. What had Commander Taylor said? There's no place he'd rather have Sergeant Snow than at tactical and security. She nodded as if he could see her. Yes, he had other responsibilities than babysitting a discarded scientist.

She cringed at the label's accuracy.

As the spacecraft's ride smoothed out and settled down, she felt it leap forward as the pilot engaged the warp drive. Soaring across space, she knew they were out of Wang's reach for a while, though not forever.

Sighing as she set about getting the room at least livable, Cricket pondered who would've fired her from her project -- if anyone. What to believe? Her hands seemed to move of their own accord as they yanked scratchy ivory linen over the foam mattress. Idly, she fluffed up the pillow and removed her limited belongings from her backpack. A sonic toothbrush, civilian clothing, and another pair of boots. Back at the plasma screen, she clicked through the room décor files and settled on a waterfront theme. At once, holographic splashes of ocean, beach and sun covered the quarters, turning it into a seaside landscape complete with seagull calls and the strong smell of salt on the air piped in by hidden olfactory streams.

The mundane tasks failed to stem the rising thirst warming the triangle between her legs. She shoved the ever growing throbbing to the side, but ignoring the rousing sensations grew more difficult as the boring work dwindled. Giving in to her swelling hunger, Cricket made her way to the media center again. With each step, her desire threatened to explode into full-bodied lust, unlike anything she'd felt since her early twenties.

What in the name of Mars is wrong with me? He isn't even that handsome. But still that wretched scar beneath his eye and the stony visage of seriousness fail to mar his appeal.

Sure, said a voice from within. That tingling in your breasts and the dampness in your panties shouts something to the contrary.

"Shut up," she whispered aloud, throat dry at the raw honesty in those words.

Her inner voice wouldn't be silenced so easily. Acting in concert, her mind conjured reflections of Sergeant Snow, his brisk walk, the hint of musk and spice around his lean body, and the burning vigor which energized her when in close proximity to him. And the fire begged to be quenched. Cricket punched up simulation and holographic programs. The program presented her with a list of stress relievers, most of them exercise based. But there were some of a more erotic nature.

"Hologram program. Good enough to feed my need," she said.

She slid her finger across the cobalt strip and the console below the screen ejected softly out of its shelving. Gently, she guided a sleek jelly-like substance out of its protective sleeve. Shaped in thick phallic form, the jelly substance hardened in the warm air. She scrolled through the various entertainment programs. In seconds she'd found the many adult play themes.

She held the jelly substance with a deepening sadness. Surprisingly silent, her inner sexuality didn't offer up an opinion about her choice. Hologram programs could transform her diminutive quarters into wherever and whatever she could imagine. Moreover, when coupled with a sim program, it could create whomever she desired. A simulated version of the roguish Sergeant Snow would lack the electrical fire the real man commanded.

The funny thing was, she wanted the reality breathing fast and hot against her ear as he fed his length deep inside her. Moreover, she craved that electrical fire crackling across her, setting all points of her body at attention.

I've just met him. He -- he's a complete stranger. This is ridiculous.

"I, I can't..." With hands trembling, she guided the azure glob back into its sleeve.

The loss of the Ganor project, my purpose, has thrown me into an emotional meltdown. I -- I must rest, get some sleep. Tomorrow, I'll approach it with a clear mind. I'll even get Commander Taylor to tell me what the hell's going on with Bob and everyone else on the project. Something's not right.

Hugging herself, Cricket closed her eyes and swallowed the tears attempting to overpower her best defenses. Panic threatened to snatch her into its embrace. She couldn't lose control.

She opened her eyes and gripped the bed's coarse coverings. Feeling the walls closing in and hearing the bed beckon to her to come and fall in, to satisfy her cravings for the sergeant, Cricket gritted her teeth, pushing back the urge to scream in frustration.

I -- I just require some air.

Cricket marched right out of her quarters and into the spacecraft's chilly corridor.

Chapter 3

"Report!" Commander Taylor barked, the vein alongside his temple pulsating. "Life support? Security? Damage report, Snow!"

They'd managed to escape Io's attack, but how lucky were they? Darryl's pulse hadn't slowed since they'd cleared the outpost's blasters. He scanned the data scrolling across the screen and then reported, "Life support at eighty-eight percent. Shields holding at ninety-three percent, and..." He blinked repeatedly to clear the blurring as the numbers zipped by. "...and it appears we've escaped with minor damage, sir," he finished at last, giving a quick glance over to his commander.

Yes, they'd managed to outmaneuver the outpost's weaponry, but only because *The Inquiry* was fast and nimble. He doubted the civilian director of Io knew they had come for her. The outtie sneaking out Dr. Moore had definitely helped them get into the air. By the time the director discovered what had happened, he could barely contain himself. Had they been onboard *The Discovery*, Darryl knew there'd be more destruction both for the outpost and the ship. As it was, this spacecraft was hardly a battleship. Io was research and development, so they both lacked certain crucial arsenals to truly damage the other.

Suppressing a shiver, he grimaced in the low light of his security console. Oddly aware of the rainbow splashes of light against his face, Darryl rubbed his scar, feeling the mangled lump of twisted flesh against his fingertips. *Yeah, we were lucky.* Lucky, thanks to Lars. He could fly the pants off an elephant.

"Define minor," snapped Junior Commander Lee, his eyes mere slits against his olive skin and pockmarked face. His tone was switched to *bastard*. No doubt upset

Taylor had sent Darryl to retrieve the scientist and not him. JC Lee reeked of old sweat. Even from his stationary stance by the turbo lift, his odor infiltrated the entire bridge. "Sergeant Snow."

Each time Lee said Darryl's rank, he made it sound dirty and insignificant. *Fine. Whatever. If you get your rocks off thinking you've belittled me, go for it. But we all know who's the real man on the 'shoe, and Lee, it isn't you.*

"Doctor Krongkon reports only minor injuries, Junior Commander Lee. Specifically, Private Brock and Private Sams suffered small cuts from flying shards of glass cast by a fallen vase. It wasn't from the attack, but from another soldier's clumsiness. So, no one was badly injured. As for the shields, engineering has already repaired much of the damage. I repeat, *sir*, minor damages."

Swollen silence landed on the bridge. Everyone heard Lee's snide tone and Darryl's reply, which wasn't much better. Skimming the edge of insubordination, Darryl stood rigidly at attention. He kept his eyes locked on Lee as his upper lip crumbled into a frown, so furious Darryl thought his face would explode.

Smug bastard. Serves him right.

"Sergeant Snow, you've been on duty for over fifteen hours. Why not go catch some stars?" Commander Taylor suggested with an undercurrent of steel.

The tense pressure on the 'shoe cracked with a whoosh from the other soldiers.

Commander Taylor's expression warned him that he didn't approve of Darryl's antics with Lee. Darryl caught his unmoving eyes and stony visage. He'd pushed the commander too far. Darryl opened his mouth to explain but closed it with one final glance at Commander Taylor's face. His order wasn't negotiable.

"Yes, sir," he said at last and logged off his security clearance.

Lee puffed up, full of confidence, strolled over to the commander's chair and stood beside the senior commander, as if on the left hand of a god. He nodded when Darryl passed as if confirming he deserved to be kicked off and sent packing.

I could be reprimanded for acting like a brat. Why do I keep letting Lee get to me?

Grumpy but refusing to acknowledge it, Darryl stepped into the spacecraft's lift and jabbed the illuminated button for his floor, not waiting for the A.I. to inquire. No one entered the container with him. The turbo lift went so swiftly it didn't seem to be moving at all. He blew out a stream of air, hoping to relax his tense body. He closed his eyes and rotated his neck to relieve the tight bunch of tension at its base.

Before he knew it, he was growling and yelling. His fury bounced off the reinforced, soundproof walls. Each angry burst rebounded, slamming home the foolishness of the practice. Shouting at objects without ears wouldn't solve his problem. Nor cease the annoying awakening smoldering inside him. He realized though, as his eyes opened and the A.I. announced his floor, that some of his angst didn't come from the job, but rather from the attractive scientist in visitor quarters A3201. It spread, engulfing more and more of his consciousness. And he despised it.

Using his anger to douse the flames, he'd hoped to render the fire she conjured in him to ash. It only served to encourage his already raging fantasy. He could still smell her scent of sweet lavender and the bitter odor of IGO-issued soap. Hair like a thousand black cords, binding him to her bidding, slicing through his resistance with her saucy allure, Dr. Moore erected more than his imagination. The doctor couldn't get off his spacecraft soon enough.

The sooner I can put distance between me and her, the sooner I'll be able to breathe, get back to normal and stop behaving like a horny teenager. I could...

He stopped abruptly. What would he be doing if not thinking about the doctor?

The emptiness spoke volumes.

Work. If she wasn't here I'd still be posted at security. And in his downtime? Work extra hours since someone is almost always ill.

He shook his head and started again for his quarters. Sleep. Yes, if he got some sleep, he'd be better. Refreshed. As he passed another turbo lift, he caught a familiar scent. One that'd been haunting his memory too much in the last couple of hours.

With his throat closing in surprise, he turned around, twisting to catch a glimpse of her. He drew a greedy breath at the sight of her strolling from the parted doors, still

sporting those hip hugging jeans. His hands itched to glide over her voluptuous curves and his cock awoke at the mere sight of her.

She caught him looking at her and hesitated before heading in his direction. Hair loose, lips wet and slightly parted, and breasts bouncing, she set his hormones to sizzling fire.

Damn, she's gorgeous. He wiped his hands on his pants and focused on being professional. Setting a decade of IGO training to work, he summoned his cool and cleared his throat.

He waved, and felt the tug of an awkward smile on his face. *Mars, I'm blushing. Come on! She's a woman. Nothing more. A female like dozens of others.*

She trotted to catch up to him.

Coughing out the lump of lust in his throat, he turned fully around to face her. The direct impact stole his breath. *Fallen one, two, three, four...* He counted the IGO anthem's opening in his head.

"Oh! Oh, hello, Sergeant Snow," she said, cinnamon eyes wide and drinking in her surroundings with a ravaging intensity. No matter how long ago her IGO immersion training had occurred, she'd still engage those observation skills for they were habitual. The rawness she exuded hooked him. Most people on board had lost that hunger and raw curiosity for life.

"Are you getting around all right? Need anything?" he asked politely. *Want me to suck those lovely breasts?*

Her closeness to him hadn't gone unnoticed. She'd drifted to him as if he'd locked a tractor beam to her, from which neither of them would be allowed to be free. She seemed unable or unwilling to keep going past him and on down the hallway.

"I'm fine," she breathed, smiling. "Thank you."

A monsoon of heady quiet mushroomed between them. She fidgeted, and despite the harrowing events of the last few hours, she glowed in absolute wonderfulness. He longed to touch her, to feel the hope buoying inside her, and to

caress once more that feminine warmth he'd missed for years. It'd been so long since he'd been in the presence of anyone who radiated such strength.

Even he couldn't stop the return smile blossoming across his face. *What are you doing to me, Dr. Moore?*

"You want to grab a coffee?" he asked, hands locked in front of him, eyes on the somber gray rubber-based flooring. *That's it. Prolong the torment.*

The kind smile disappeared from Dr. Moore's smooth oval face. It reminded Darryl of the chill after the sun had set. He wanted her radiance to shine once more.

"I -- I'm pretty exhausted," she said with a lazy shrug. Her shoulders drooped and she rubbed her neck as if massaging the stress and tension from her body. He was more than willing to help her with that.

She folded her arms over those delicious breasts and the slow burn in Darryl's pants tempered down as if she'd poured a bucket of ice water into it. Desire smoldered nonetheless, still kindling a cozy warmth that could erupt into a full-bodied flame.

"Okay," he said. Though it felt nothing of the sort, he tried hard not to be disappointed. "Perhaps a bit of rest will do you good. Evening, Dr. Moore."

With his heart hammering against his ribcage in defeat, he pivoted on his heel and turned to go. *Great. That went smooth. Now I'm stuck with a hard-on coupled with embarrassment. I don't want this inconvenience anyway. Women.*

He heard her sigh from behind him.

Swell, Snow. She's relieved to be away from you. How could you think someone as smart and as beautiful as her would be interested in a busted up soldier?

"Sergeant Snow?" she called, a breath above a whisper.

He froze, unsure he'd heard her. The tempo of his heart increased. Discreetly, he wiped his damp hands onto his pants. Hard, hot, and horny, boy, did he make a great package.

Had she called him? With a glance over his shoulder, he decided she had. "Yes?"

"Yes, I -- I'm too wired for sleep, so..."

There. In the open was an invitation -- and an opportunity.

He turned away and blew out his breath. Nervous. He hadn't felt this way since -- since the ambush that had given him the scar. Almost instinctively, he ran his finger across it. *I can do this. It's only coffee. I'm not marrying her.*

Spinning, he faced her and his demons once more. He found her hovering, waiting for him to say something to her very innocent suggestion. "There's a small commons area on the lower level, above the cargo bay. You can burn off some steam. There are games, simulated modes, holo-ventures, and other sources of entertainment. The cafeteria has tasty burritos."

She nodded, the hint of a smile ghosting around her plump lips.

Heat rushed through him. Her grin infected him, like cocoa on a wintry day back on Earth Prime's arctic region. His home had been in the heart of the Canadian Yukon.

"Okay."

"Follow me, Dr. Moore," he said formally, aware of her proximity to him and his own lust rising with each step she took.

They headed to the turbo lift. Beside him, she radiated a calm sense of peace. Tranquility that he couldn't quite place. He knew nothing about her and he realized he wanted to know more. Mysterious and intriguing, Dr. Moore was more than the lustrous surface beauty. The woman was sharp, and engaging her in conversation might prove pleasurable.

He wanted to peel each article of clothing off, slowly, decisively, and drop kisses like petals onto her soft lush skin, feel her laugh, soft and lyrical against his chest. Feel her moist warmth clamp over his aching shaft.

That's one way to expel her tension. He'd have to see about helping Dr. Moore with that.

Chapter 4

What am I doing? Cricket inquired internally. I don't even know him! I never went for coffee with anyone on the post and I saw them every day for five years. One strong smile and I'm quaking in my boots. I've got to get it together.

The sleek doors closed, sealing her to the decision. Enveloped by a blast of cold air, Cricket stood in its center. She could feel his eyes make brisk swipes over her person. She returned his gaze, allowing her eyes to drift over him. His dull gray IGO uniform skimmed hardened thighs, pulling tight over the sizable lump in his crotch and on around to those delicious buttocks. A sigh slipped from her lips before she could stop herself.

"You say something?" he asked. He shifted and put his eyes on her. Blank. No, no, that wasn't quite right. His expression was hiding his thoughts.

What is the good sergeant looking for? What's he thinking behind that handsome face?

She knew what he saw -- a scientist tossed off a project for Newton knew what. A failure, a problem -- an inconvenience.

Yes, that's what he sees. Or worse -- a spy. He's head of security.

"Nothing," she said.

He peered at her as if he didn't believe her. His eyes narrowed. Almost instinctively, he rubbed a jagged, raised scar high on his cheekbone, beneath his eye. Stiffening as he caught himself, he turned his eyes back to the doors.

Mars, he's so sexy. But if he saw her as solely a hysterical female...

"Listen, I'm sorry..." she began, breaking the quiet at last. "This whole thing..."

But the gaze which met hers wasn't one of fierce scrutiny. So much savage, unrestrained fire rushed out of those hazel eyes, it stole the words from her lips.

Hmmm, there's something there. But what? Whatever it is, the sergeant is quite passionate about it. Aren't you, sergeant?

But in an instant it was gone.

Sergeant Snow stepped back until he touched the opposite wall. His eyes were once again flat and watchful. Idly, he rubbed the scar under his eye. "Sorry? For what?" he asked, coughing out a hoarseness in his voice.

Perhaps I imagined it. Or his mind was on his wife. She shrugged. It sounded silly now to apologize for the crappy assignment he'd been given. She wasn't in charge of the mess unfolding around her. "Nothing," she snapped, confusion making her annoyed.

An eyebrow rose at her tone but the zipped-up soldier didn't inquire further. He put his eyes on the doors as if begging to get out, willing it to open.

As if granting his unspoken wish, the A.I. announced, "Lower level recreation."

"That's generic for what is all down here," Sergeant Snow said. "We're a small crew and an equally small commons. So, follow me."

Anywhere. Instead, Cricket said, "Lead on."

Her libido was too revved up to go to her quarters. She wouldn't be able to concentrate on any task presented to her. Five years of forced celibacy worked well for keeping her focused on her project, data, and goals. Clarity came easily when not muddled with emotions. No distractions.

But Sergeant Snow's tight backside, delectable as a wedge of apple, was a serious distraction. Her body sang with carnal cravings, rumbling across her clit and her lower abdomen. She had to shove her hands into her pockets to stop herself from touching him. He didn't appear to be touchable, let alone sense the images sprouting in her mind. Straight-laced and rigid, Sergeant Snow came off as stern as a commander. It surprised Cricket that he wasn't a commander already.

The noise came before she saw the common's main entrance and snagged her attention. "See, you're not the only one in need of some unwinding," he said, slowing down so she nearly collided with him. "There's a good crew in there."

Cricket's stomach clutched hard enough for her to groan. She didn't want coffee. She wanted him, and in the worst way possible. Moreover, she didn't want to be in a loud, boisterous room with a lot of strangers. Dizziness rushed forward and she staggered to the wall and braced herself. Fear gripped her and she shook her head, trying to settle down. She wasn't interested in mingling with the crew. Tears burned in her eyes and she swallowed the tightness in her throat. *Mars, I can't do this.* "Sergeant Snow, I -- I'm sorry..."

He turned to her, puzzlement rippling across his face. His eyes narrowed in concern as he trotted over to her.

I've got to get some control over my emotions! I -- I want him, but my projects, my life...
A sob escaped her throat. *Too late!*

He reached for her, hesitated and then touched her arm. "Dr. Moore, are you all right?" he asked gently, a shock to Cricket. "Dr. Moore?"

His hazel eyes searched hers. He must've seen the unshed tears because he swiftly snatched her into his embrace, guiding her further into the corridor's shadows. She sobbed but refused to let any tears fall. She couldn't cry for her situation, though the thought of going into the commons area overwhelmed her already overwrought feelings. She couldn't confront any more changes.

Closing her eyes, she choked down another harsh sob. She buried her face into the hardened, chiseled chest of Sergeant Snow. *How could I lose control like this?*

"Shush. You've had a very long day," he said, his voice soothing against her ear. "The medic can dispense something to help you sleep."

Maybe it was his tone -- caring and kind -- or maybe it was her ragged feelings, Cricket didn't know. But he ignited her lonely wick and her hankering for him pushed forward, seizing control.

With his arms loosely around her torso, she leaned up on her toes and kissed him briefly on the mouth, slamming her lips against his a split second before her brain knew what she was doing. The scent of soap and musk flooded her nostrils. She slipped her arms around his neck, feeling the tight muscles there. Those lips felt as awesome as she

thought they would and she sighed as she pulled back, searching his face for a response. She didn't know what she expected.

Stunned, both eyebrows arched high above his honey-hazel eyes, Sergeant Snow was speechless. He searched her face, seeking an explanation.

Kiss me! Cricket mentally pleaded, and tried to convey it through her eyes.

"Dr. Moore," Sergeant Snow began, voice set to stern, his face funneling out the initial shock of her kiss and returning to neutral. He removed his arms and retreated to a spot out of her reach. "You aren't feeling well. Today has been quite a strain on you, physically and emotionally. Perhaps I should escort you back to the visitor's quarters and contact Dr. Krongkon."

She sucked in another round of courage and rushed up to him, kissing him again. Pressing her urgency and want against his full lips, she wrapped her arms around his neck, locking the position so he couldn't pull away. Cricket pressed her body to his, demanding he take notice. And he did.

There, yes! He kissed back! Moist lips parted. He pulled into the kiss's sweetness. Hungry, his tongue sought out hers. His strong hands snatched her closer to him. *This is heaven.* Cricket smiled, but all too soon, Sergeant Snow broke it off. Retreating once more, he panted a bit. "Dr. Moore..."

"Cricket..."

"What?" he frowned, gulping for air.

"Call me Cricket."

He dropped his head for a second, laughed, and then looked at her again. "I don't want..."

"Me?" Cricket asked. Horror turned her insides cold. *How can I be so shameful? I've got to get away. What possessed me to do that?*

Sergeant Snow barked out a laugh. "Are you kidding?" He smiled. "Dr. Moore..."

"Cricket."

He relaxed, his hands resting on his lean waist. With a shake of his head, he explained, "Cricket, there's nothing, nothing I'd rather do right now. Than, well, you, but, ah, I'm not going to take advantage of you. You're vulnerable and hurting, confused and fatigued."

Wait. He does want me. The burning lust he'd had in his eyes on the turbo lift ignited once more. That was for her, not a wife or the latest IGO-issued laser gun.

Her.

Still, she was losing him. He thought she was a whacked-out and distraught scientist. He didn't want sexual misconduct charges if tomorrow she regretted her actions or awoke with a clearer head. She couldn't let that happen. Not after she'd risked so much of herself by kissing him first. The rejection, no, she couldn't take that kind of rejection right now.

"Advantage? I kissed you first, remember?" she quipped, aware of how smoky her voice had become, how steady her person felt when close to him.

"Yes, I do," Sergeant Snow growled.

His hands glided over her thighs and he sighed as they inched closer to her waist. They settled there as if they were crafted for that position. He leaned down to her ear, nuzzling her lobe and the area behind it. Chills swept over her and turned instantly hot.

"Doctor, you're wounded," he whispered, his breath warm against her ear. "I'd never be able to get over it if I injured you further, or harmed you beyond what has already happened to you."

He barely knew her, but Cricket believed he was a good man. Someone else wouldn't have thought twice about taking her invitation and creating a party of his own pleasure -- her emotional state be damned. She shuddered against him and inched closer to his warmth. Aching to drink him in, she tilted her head up to his. He withdrew, his face tight with the struggle to remain professional.

"You're not taking advantage of me, Sergeant Snow," she croaked. "Kiss me. Now. Hold me close to you."

Cricket witnessed it as his emotions played out on his face. She glanced down at his crotch where his tormented cock pushed against his uniform's restraint. *He wasn't kidding. He does want me, in a big way.*

"Darryl," he said, at last, drawing her eyes back to his. They were at half-mast. She could hear him gulp and the ache in the tremors in his voice.

"What?"

"Call me Darryl," he breathed, husky and scorching against her flesh.

With that, what was left of his resolve melted as his lips clasped over hers once again. Unleashed, the raw lust of his longings raked over her. Those hands remained at her waist, but his body fell onto hers, pinning her against the wall. Engulfed by him and his scent, she let go of all logical thoughts. She closed her eyes, giving in to the tidal wave of her own unleashed passion as it swelled against his.

"We can't do this here," she whispered between Darryl's frequent kisses. They made her grin foolishly like a teen. With her cheeks enflamed, her desire damp, she gently put both hands on his chest, whimpering as her fingertips brushed stone hard muscle. IGO physical conditioning. Excellent.

"Did you hear me?" she groaned.

His eyes met hers and for a moment she thought he was going to be angry. Confusion flashed over his strong features, but was just as quickly gone. He smiled and it was filled with tenderness, something she hadn't experienced from another soul in a long, long while.

Chapter 5

"Yes, yes, you're right," Darryl said, drawing up to his full height. He searched the corridor as if he'd never seen it before. He yanked down his jacket, adjusted his pants and ran a hand across his black buzzed strands. "My apologies, Dr. Moore."

She returned his smile. "Cricket."

"Yes, Cricket," he added rather sheepishly.

Whoa, she is so stunning. I can't believe I let go long enough for her to suck me in. Her kisses were delightful, but is she really ready, stable enough to engage me? I -- I should be the bigger person here and walk away with only a bad case of blue balls.

At that moment several soldiers spilled out of the turbo lift, a cloud of gunmetal gray IGO uniforms in identical shades, ebony boots, and military shaved heads.

"Sergeant Snow, sir!" Private Rojas called, tossing up a stiff IGO salute, rapidly at attention.

Each one of the men delivered their salute in strict gestures and sharp turns. Afterward, they started again, falling out of the formality as easily as they'd commenced. They were headed toward the commons and probably to the cafeteria. As they passed, he saw them glance back. Noting the curiosity in those eyes, Darryl sobered at once. *What the hell am I doing? Necking with a stranger in a public corridor? I'm a sergeant. I've got to get back to my quarters and blow off this bout of errant judgment. Sim program angel47-9 should do the trick.*

"We really should go." Her words held the sharp blade of urgency.

He saw her watching the soldiers. "I'll show you to your quarters, Dr. Moore," he said, louder than necessary. "*The Inquiry* is a bit confusing to navigate your first time through."

"What?" she balked.

He saw her frown at the implication. He knew she wasn't an idiot, but he had to provide the men with some explanation for why they were both together in the corridor's shadows. He'd explain it to her later. He glanced at her once more and saw her cross her arms in a huff. Yeah, he was probably going to have to apologize too.

Laughs and sniggers from the soldiers didn't set his suspicions to rest.

She pushed off the wall, swatting at his hand, and he smirked at her sauciness.

"This way," he said. Hand on her back, he guided her toward the turbo lift.

"Thank you, sergeant," she said, forcing the pleasantness her face told him she didn't feel.

"My pleasure," he replied, and he heard his longing for her still.

The turbo lift zipped faster than he thought and soon enough, he stood outside visitor quarters A3201. *She kissed me. But why? Nervous breakdown?*

She spun toward him, those wonderful pools of honey eyes on him.

"Forgive me," he said, rubbing his cropped hair. "I was thinking on my feet down there. We needed a cover they would believe. You're new, so I went with it. For what it's worth, I don't think you're an idiot."

She gave him a *humph*. "Sure. Now they'll think I'm a moron."

He smiled, liking her feistiness. "They'd be mistaken."

She rewarded him with a kiss. He slipped his arms around her, pulling her fast against his body, noting how she made every inch of him swell. She smelled faintly of flowers and something spicy. Even through the dense fabric of his IGO suit, he could feel her sweltering heat and pebble-tipped nipples. He longed to place his lips over those dark chocolate peaks and bury his face into her flat stomach, nipping at her belly button.

"Darryl," she said, her voice damn close to breaking.

Her doe eyes were wide and glimmering with tears. They met his when he opened his eyes.

His heart sank down and iced the flames in his loins.

"I'm really sorry, but I think I ought to be alone right now," she said, turning from him and sniffing.

This woman is an emotional wreck. It would be stupid to get involved now. Better to extinguish the desire now than be up on charges later. Hell, one of us has to be professional -- and she can't be in this condition.

He couldn't believe he was saying this, but he wouldn't feel right if he didn't say it. Adding more pain to the fragile person in front of him wasn't going to allow him to sleep at night. "If this is uncomfortable for you, then, then, uh, we don't have to..."

"I'm so sorry to have led you on," she whispered through her tears.

He wanted to hug her tight to him, but thought better of it. "You didn't," he said, fighting to keep his disappointment from appearing on his face. Obviously she had enough on her plate, so he wasn't going to let her see his face and feel worried about that too.

This was probably for the best. It kept him from getting into trouble with her and her from making a mistake.

"I can send down a medic, or rather you can contact her. Use medic code to reach the medical assistants," he said, stepping away from her though he knew his heart had been firmly attached to her. Squashing the overwhelming desire to plaster her against his body, he clenched his fists.

"Thank you, Darryl. It means a lot to me. I -- I'm really sorry about, well, you know," she said. The anguish behind those eyes squeezed his heart.

"Sleep well, Cricket," he said, holding his hands in front of him to keep himself from touching her. He shot her a smile and received a waning one in return.

She sniffed, stifled another sob and vanished into the visitor quarters.

Darryl watched the doors close before heading down the corridor. The turbo lift was faster, but sometimes manual labor allowed more reflective time. His mind needed scouring, and walking did that for him. In an instant, Cricket had rubbed out his cautiousness and zipped between his defensive walls with one well-placed kiss. She managed to scrape away his icy indifference and ignite a furious blaze of lust in him.

Careful. I have to be really careful. She was very upset tonight, and tomorrow she may find she didn't quite fancy me as much as she thought, especially once she got to know me.

He sighed as he reached the fifth level and made a right. *I miss her already.*

He entered his quarters, stripping off his boots and uniform. Empty except for the usual standard-issue IGO furniture, the space felt gloomy. Darryl's mind continued to transmit pictures of her, replaying her smile and her sauciness from earlier today -- a video feed into his brain. The feel of her kiss across his lips and how wonderful she felt pressed against him plagued his body and he fell back onto his bed in torment.

Folding his arms behind his head, he knew he had to push thoughts of her aside if he ever hoped to get some sleep. With his shift beginning in only six hours, he wasn't going to get a full eight hours of rest. He hardly ever did.

After a good night's sleep, things would look different for both of them.

Chapter 6

Loud beeps forced Darryl to bolt out of his bed in a cold sweat. The covers lay scattered about the foam mattress, a physical representation of his chaotic slumber. His knuckles rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He caught the scarlet time on the plasma screen and groaned. It was time for his shift and he groggily stretched, easing the kinks and crooks. He snatched the earpiece from the ledge beside his bed and slung it over his ear. Waterproof, it would withstand his shower.

“Alarm off,” he croaked, cotton mouth causing his words to catch. Hearing the fatigue in his voice, Darryl sighed. He’d been asleep for over five hours. Couldn’t tell that by how sluggish his body behaved.

The only aspect of his body that seemed to be alert was his cock. It shot up from his nude body and the sprouts of ebony hair like a beacon. Slumber hadn’t banished his thoughts of Cricket, but instead placed her right up front and center. Distracting every logical, duty-oriented thought with that luscious body and whiplash-causing smile, his cock pulsed out its SOS. He closed his eyes as he wrapped his hand around his solid cock. Damn. Hard, rigid stone, his member grew taller beneath his hand, as his thoughts turned to Cricket.

As his hand slipped up and down his member, he shuddered. The silky head dripped a bit of dew beneath his palm, leaving a thin line of semen. God, he so wanted her -- to feel her tightness clamped around his cock. This manual stimulation wasn’t enough.

He stared at his cock, trying to make it lessen so he could move on with his day. But like a rigid, stubborn pole, it remained, begging him, no, forcing him to confront it and deal with it. "Shit."

He took his cock into his hand once more and, using his already damp masculine dew, began to stroke. Up and down, cupping his balls and up and over once again. In his mind, he conjured Cricket's lovely body, dancing before him seductively. Hips swinging to the music, something Martian and exotic, his mental Cricket met his gaze and was giving her all to him -- something the real Cricket wouldn't do.

Darryl let go, relinquishing his thoughts and his body to the fantasy of her. He closed his eyes, and his hands became hers. Her fingers brushed across his torso and pinched his right nipple, making his lower belly bunch in response. His cock thickened and bobbed up and down as if nodding that he couldn't wait to touch her. Using the water mixed with his precum moisture, the refreshing lubricant felt so good, warm and inviting, but he knew she would feel better, much better.

Tight her pussy would be. Like a vise, she'd hug his cock and those muscles would caress his cock until he shot his release. The fantasy Cricket nodded, confirming his thoughts. The tremble of pleasure bolted through him as he gently squeezed the head of his cock. Using his other hand, he cupped his balls and fingered them, shivering in absolute lust. He stroked, faster and faster, pumping harder and harder as his Cricket whispered for more.

Gimme that fat cock, Snow. More, more, make me come, Cricket whispered against his ear.

Again and again, over and over until the bright burst of gratification shot through him and out into the shower's warm spray. Heaven, he'd love for it to be her instead of the flat steel of his shower box.

Several long minutes later, showered and dressed in a fresh uniform, he checked his reflection, touching the scar beneath his eye.

As he strolled to the horseshoe, he thought of how she seemed to fit in his hands, his arms, and maybe she could even fit into his life like a tailor-made spacesuit --

nothing wasted or given over to fluff. Only essentials warranted a place in his heart, and he'd be lying to himself if he said Cricket didn't meet his essential criteria. Nevertheless, this realization shocked him. He barely knew her, but those brief minutes felt right to him. Inexplicable, his attraction to her couldn't be given over to loneliness alone. Something about her made him feel, well, worthy.

Even now as Cricket lay snuggled on her bed, soft ebony skin beneath the IGO issue blanket, he longed to be near her again. Next time maybe without clothes or distance. There was something intoxicating about her, those luminous eyes, puffy, full lips, and the killer curves of her made-for-a-spacesuit hips.

I can't. She isn't well. She may anchor herself to me only for stability and then be gone. I can't risk hurting her or myself. I've got to detox my mind.

He swallowed his groan as the doors to the turbo lift opened to reveal the early morning shift. Nearly two in the morning, Lars piloted the ship through inky black space and Rojas had taken up post at security. Kovacs was back at comms. Normally nothing criminal occurred on this vessel. Cricket's arrival managed to be the most excitement they'd had in a long while.

"Good morning, Lars," Darryl said, tossing up a wave as he fell into the commander's chair. "Rojas, Kovacs. Round robin report."

"Security is at maximum shields. No suspicious activity reported, sir," said Private Rojas. "Shields at 99%, engines at 98%, and all is well."

"On course for Earth Prime Space Station and then on to Mars Outpost 1," Lars added with a chortle. "Home, sweet home."

"Kovacs?"

"Nothing but more gossip and IGO detail reports on the comms," Kovacs replied sleepily from behind him.

Darryl spun around to him, and saw the hefty Kovacs slumped in his seat. Again. "Medic," Darryl said into his earpiece, finger on the round button. "Send up a caffeine shot for Kovacs."

Kovacs snored as if he agreed.

"At once, Sergeant Snow," the female responded.

Lars was chuckling into his slim, pale palm. "Late night for some."

"Probably ate too many carbs," Rojas said, laughing himself.

Darryl smiled. "All right, back to the tasks at hand."

"Yes, sir!" Lars said and pivoted around to the front view.

Rojas fell silent.

Darryl watched the empty ink of space unfold and noted how evening looked the same as morning. A blanket of ease fell over the 'shoe. Soon discussions rotated around to the upcoming IGO tournament soccer games and the expected leave time approaching. Darryl heard the conversations and weighed in with polite comments here and there. But his thoughts were locked on Cricket.

Would she awake and meet his eyes with regret, embarrassment, or shame? Or would she want to keep the spark between them lit? He didn't like complications, but he had to be honest with himself if no one else. For those delightful, intense minutes he'd spent with her, he'd been happy.

The turbo lift's doors slid back and a medic stepped out. Her uniform matched every other IGO-issued attire, except on the collar beside the red, white and green IGO insignia was a gigantic M. The medic, Dr. Krongkon, tossed him a brisk wave and headed for Kovacs. A waif of a woman, she exuded a steely strength common to experienced IGO doctors. They'd seen it all -- war, off-world colonization, and intergalactic life. She seemed youthful but was over half a century old.

Darryl checked the screen for the time. "I called for a medic an hour ago."

"Sorry, Sergeant. Two privates got into a rather stupid fight down in the commons. Broken bones that had to be healed at once, of course. JC Lee had to be called, as you were on duty. He was none too happy. Anyway, where's your fire?" she snapped, the hint of her Saturn lilt bouncing over her words. Consonants rough and unpolished met his ears.

He nodded in Kovacs' direction.

"Ah, snoozing again. This is the third time this week, Sergeant Snow."

As if he didn't know it.

She raised her umber eyes to the ceiling, before lifting Kovacs' chunky arm. The private awoke at once, fighting and disoriented. "Get off!"

Doctor Krongkon sidestepped his heavy-handed swats without so much as a ruffled hair. Her thick raven hair had been tied up in a bun. She adjusted her stance once Kovacs' flaying ceased. With a hard-eyed stare, she snatched up his arm once more. She scowled at him and, dutifully reprimanded, Kovacs grew still.

Kovacs wiped his face with his other hand and stared at Darryl gloomily. "Sergeant?" Kovacs asked, voice cracking at the end. "Don't give me the sleeper."

"Caffeine shot," Darryl explained, smiling. He didn't give anyone the sleeper. Who wanted to be in stasis for months at a time? You awoke stiff, muscles creaking and diminished from disuse, disoriented, memories scattered, space sickness -- uh, no. "Thank you, Dr. Krongkon," Darryl said.

In moments, the good doctor was gone and Kovacs returned to monitoring the comms with artificially induced gusto. Satisfied, Darryl relaxed and turned back to the window where space zipped by them. He wanted to think about Cricket. Seemed the irrepressible thoughts remained with him.

"Oy! Sergeant Snow," Kovacs groaned, breaking the supple, almost tangible vision of Cricket in Darryl's mind. "There's a comm. For you. Internal. Transferring."

Darryl shook his head to rid it of the cobwebs crafted by Cricket. Sure enough, the crimson light on his unit flickered. He mentally kicked himself before answering. "Sergeant Snow."

The unmistakable voice of Commander Taylor came through. "I'm sending Lee to relieve you."

My shift isn't over for another five hours. But Darryl held his tongue against the tide of questions burning for release. *Why?*

"Before you begin asking, don't," Commander Taylor ordered. "Meet me in Dr. Moore's quarters in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir." The feed was already disconnected.

Darryl stared out the front window. In three days, they would come to the Earth Prime Space Station, the EPSS, for fuel and supplies before pushing on toward Mars Outpost 1 and *The Discovery*. They hadn't expected the additional trip out to Io's Outpost. They didn't intend to return to Mars for some time and so they had to stop to replenish supplies.

Kovacs said, "Strange. The A.I. asked for you. Internal comms aren't usually like that. Sorry, sergeant, they might've contacted earlier, but I missed it. Uh, sleeping, sir."

"Who was it?" Lars asked, spinning around in his bucket seat, a wide-mouth yawn erupting across his face.

"No one," Darryl said.

Lars' mouth formed a question, but one glance at Darryl's stony face forced him to swallow it. "Easy, sergeant, easy," Lars said, barely audible, hands patting the air. "Easy." Lars spun back to the window, where stars streamed past in streaks of bluish silver-white.

Commander Taylor had hidden his voice for a reason. Why? And what was going on with Cricket? Now Darryl would unearth the truth about her hasty retreat from Io. Did he really want to know?

Chapter 7

Commander Taylor struck a powerful image inside the quarters' somber décor. His ivory IGO uniform seemed to almost glow like an angel of Earth Prime lore. The severe scowl across his face, however, kept it from being true. The light caught his two silver commander bars and reflected like a spotlight against the wall.

Dressed in civilian clothes of tan corduroy pants and an ebony turtleneck sweater, Cricket shuddered against the cold threatening to overtake her.

The A.I. had blasted her awake with a horrid siren and then in nonhuman cadence proceeded to tell her of the commander's imminent arrival in fifteen minutes. She'd hurried to shower and dress. In fact her hair was still yanked up in a ponytail, the ends damp. She had managed to terminate the beach simulation. Sterile, dull gray met the commander's somber expression.

She had hoped to have several long hours to reflect on her attraction to Darryl, but all too soon, he strolled into her quarters, trailing the commander. Confronted with his sexiness, she couldn't quite focus on what the commander was saying. His tone warned it wasn't good so she doubled her efforts to block out the sergeant's sexy allure.

"Sergeant Snow is here solely at my discretion," Commander Taylor began, voice like thunder rolling through the tiny space. He tried to seem relaxed, but his eyes gave it all away. "Dr. Moore, it has been discovered that several of your colleagues, both on Io and Europa Outposts, are currently missing or were found slain."

"No!" Cricket cried, shooting off her bed as if it were suddenly on fire. *Doctors Savage and Bajou? Dead? Missing? No, oh, no. What the hell is going on?* It all dawned on her. There wasn't any IGO slashed comm. Wang had lied.

Heart thundering in fear, Cricket remembered how she had hastily tried to message the other doctors and research assistants on Europa's Outpost and other locales. She couldn't reach any of them.

She looked to Darryl and found concern spoiling his handsome face. Even the gruesome scar couldn't derail his attractiveness, and those eyes offered sympathy but no answers. She slumped forward to the bed, sitting down once more. Grief crashed onto her shoulders like a sack of stones, each hypothetical boulder carrying the name of one of her fellow research scientists.

"How?" she managed to croak around the thick wad of emotion in her throat. She faltered, unable to form the horrible thought into words.

Commander Taylor's sternness receded a bit. Looking straight through her, he continued. "We strongly believe these are the direct actions of Kem Core Industries, a commercial outfit operating primarily from the moon's outpost. They also have a sister company which outsources the outties to the IGO. That jewel's head office is located on Io's Outpost." The commander went to the plasma screen and touched a series of boxes, calling up the pictures.

"Recognize him?" Darryl asked, nodding toward the screen.

"Wang," she said, her voice barely audible in the hum of the quarters' equipment. "Wang!"

Commander Taylor nodded. "Right now the Alpha Team has been deployed, along with Beta from *Destiny* to investigate."

He touched a few more arrows, leap-frogging over flashes of command windows. At last, he stood back, looking at an image of an Ioian volcano plume.

"There are the answers, the key to the investigation. Only you can locate and unlock its secrets. You're all that's left." Commander Taylor pointed at the screen, face in profile. "The vessel left right away."

"What vessel?" Cricket asked, hugging herself, staving off the tears with rising fury. How dare they take the lives of these innocent people! For what?

"*The Discovery*," Commander Taylor replied matter-of-factly, turning to face her. "None better. *Destiny's* Beta Team is nearly as good."

Cricket nodded in numb agreement. She'd only heard about *The Discovery's* Alpha Team's extraordinary abilities. At the time, she'd chalked it all up to gossip and grandstanding. Now she hoped she had been wrong.

The commander turned to Darryl. "Your job is to keep her safe until we reach Mars 1." And then to her, the commander said, "You're not alone, Dr. Moore. But, I'll be frank. *The Inquiry* isn't equipped for something of this magnitude. Darryl's the only one with real experience in live combat. Plus, he's my security chief and third in command. You'll be safe with him. Keep your eyes and ears open. Remain alert."

Cricket gave Darryl a weak smile and hugged herself tighter. *What have I done to be chosen to live when the others are gone? What is going on?*

All of these questions she wanted to ask, but Commander Taylor was already at the doorway. His lips twitched as he stared at the sergeant who met his gaze unwaveringly. Then his gaze swept over her. "For now, you're our case against Kem Core, and the nucleus of Ganor project. Once we get you to Mars, Alpha Team's going to want to talk to you," he said and then to Darryl. "Sergeant Snow. A word."

Darryl snapped to attention and followed him out to the quiet corridor.

Cricket watched him go and, once he cleared the doorway, fell back to her bed, hugged her pillow and cried. Searing, angry tears stung her eyes and slid down her cheeks. Someone wanted her dead, but why? The research? Her group wasn't anywhere close to any conclusive data they could use for commercial reasons. So, Wang wanted it for what? Weapons? Why did Kem Core want it so badly? Surely, they wouldn't snatch the lives of these scientists -- some only civilian, not even IGO trained -- on a hypothesis.

And was Darryl really good enough to protect her from the corporation's long reach?

* * *

Darryl followed Commander Taylor out into the dimly lit hallway, his thoughts echoing loudly through his head. The visitor quarters were reserved for research assistants, human test subjects and extra machinery. Cricket was the only human on this level.

"Darryl," Commander Taylor began.

Watching his face intensely, Darryl struggled to hold his gaze.

After a few moments, the commander clasped his huge weathered hand to Darryl's shoulder. "I know you're taken with her. It's lonely out here. Dr. Moore is an extremely beautiful woman, but..." He sighed. He added a second hand onto Darryl's other shoulder and shook him gently. Weariness seeped from him, and the minute wrinkles tightened around his eyes and mouth.

"Sir? Are you all right?" Darryl asked. In the last few hours, Commander Taylor's hair seemed to have sprouted scores of new grays and his leader's usually easygoing manner appeared strained. *This is riding hard on him, and he won't tell any of us how to help him manage it.*

"I'm fine, Darryl," he said, though he sounded anything but. "These murders and disappearances are not my forte. I was a scientist long before I became a soldier for the IGO. Now that Alpha Team is involved, I'll be able to withdraw from the forefront. There are still a few loose ends I need to inspect." He gave Darryl a fatigued grin. "But back to you, son. The doctor is very, very lovely, but I warn you not to neglect the danger around her. None of which is her fault -- as it stands now. Once Commander Ashe gets a hold of her, Ashe will come out of this with her hands filled with information. Make sure you continue using the head on your shoulders and not the other one."

"Yes, sir," Darryl said, his stomach turned over those coarse, but true words. "I..." *...won't let any harm befall her. I'm, I'm afraid I'm in love with her.* He closed his mouth, shutting the words inside him.

Commander Taylor laughed, temporarily transforming back to the leader of old. "On that note, I'm heading down for coffee. You?"

"No, thank you, sir," Darryl said evenly.

Darryl waited until the commander vanished into the lift before returning to Cricket. Balled up, she shook with grief. Immediately he crawled onto the bed, pulling her into his embrace, his logic and his warnings all thrown to the wind. He had to siphon off her anguish. They'd both have to be alert from here on out. Someone wanted her dead like the other scientists. Darryl wouldn't let that happen. He couldn't let it go down like that. Cricket was his assignment and he was going to cover her -- completely.

He sighed as she relaxed into him, quietly sobbing. "This isn't your fault. Some private company got a case of greed. They want your research for profit, no matter the lives. The cost will be written up as collateral damage."

He squeezed her closer, and she shifted over to face him. She buried her face into his chest. "This is horrid," she said, pressing her ear to his heart. "I've got to find out what Wang thinks we discovered and how he wants to use it."

"Alpha Team will handle the investigation. Commander Ashe is the best in the fleet," he said soothingly, rubbing her back. "They'll unearth Wang's motives and issue arrest decrees for those responsible."

She was shaking her head as she pushed herself to a sitting position. With quick swipes of the back of her hand, she erased the tears from her cheeks. He could hear her sniffing and then she looked down at him at last. Slightly swollen eyes met his, and he kissed her hand.

"Listen," she said, voice growing hard. "No offense, but none of your Alpha Team are scientists. A bunch of soldiers, yes, and I'm thankful for that. I don't doubt your Commander Ashe is as good as you say, but she won't be able to figure out Ganor's breakthrough. It took a team of specialists, Darryl, to handle this project. A small team, sure, but experts in their respective fields. No, I have to look at all the pieces and put this thing together."

Darryl watched her inner fire rage. He couldn't argue with her logic. He hadn't thought of it that way, but Cricket was right. Ganor was her project, and she knew it best.

Already, she was out of the bed and standing at the plasma screen, fingers skipping across the surface, hardly standing still long enough for him to see what she had selected. Text and images zipped by and her brow furrowed in concentration. Darryl put his booted feet on the floor. As he stood, his eyes drifted down her curvaceous silhouette. Desire drew him closer to her, but caution gave him pause. She seemed to have forgotten he was there, and part of him didn't want her to forget him.

That part of him urged him to scoop her up, drop her to the bed and slowly devour her, one succulent minute after another.

Witnessing her transformation from distraught woman to IGO soldier only made her more alluring. She stood out against the screen's illumination and Darryl decided he could get used to coming into his quarters and finding her there. He even envisioned himself slipping up behind her, dropping kisses across her neck and having her reach for him, welcoming him home.

A groan slipped between his lips before he could stop himself and she froze at the sound.

"Did you say something?" she asked, arm hovering in its bent V, fingers locked over the illuminated buttons.

"I -- I said, uh," he said, nerves rattling in his belly. "I'm glad you feel better."

She whirled around then, hands on her hips. "Feel better? I feel horrible, but I can't let Wang get away with this. Kem Core won't generate more money with the blood of my colleagues and friends. No."

"Well, I'll leave you to it then," he said, giving her a smile he hoped hid his thoughts from her. *I knew it! Yesterday was the overwrought emotions of a desperate woman playing out in flirtation. Her kiss meant nothing to her. It shouldn't to me. Not anymore. In time I'll be able to push this out of my life.*

He blew out his frustration. Yeah, if only it had been a bout of hot horniness. But as he reached the door, he felt an arm on him.

"Going someplace so soon?" she asked, spinning him around to face her.

"You've got work to do."

She reached up to him, arms locking around his neck. She smiled. He didn't pull away. "About yesterday, I came across wrong," she confided, her breath hot against his neck. "I'm sorry."

His desire was easily manipulated by her body, by her voice, hell, by *her*. With a long look, he leaned down but stopped short of kissing her. Inches from those full pillow plush lips, he held himself back. The pressure mounted as he waited. This had to be *her* choice. "Understandable," he said, reduced to answering one word at a time. His thoughts were clouded over by the roaring of his passion. He had to be sure.

"I want to thank you for being a stand-up guy," she said, pulling him closer to her juicy, moist lips. Her eyes were brimming with want, and Darryl wrestled with his craving to touch her, to snatch her against him, throw her to the ground and have her until they could stand it no more.

She kissed him so strongly, Darryl fell into her. His hands moved down to those gorgeous plump cheeks, clutching her to him. It was heaven to feel their weight in his hands at last. Her soft moans met his ears and he caressed her butt, stoking the growing heat coiled inside him. Darryl broke the kiss and whispered to her, "Are you sure this -- *I'm* what you want?"

"Yes," she breathed, and yanked him back down to her delicious mouth.

He halted her progress, staring at her as her eyes opened and locked onto his. He ran his thumb across her bottom lip and stared into her eyes.

"Yes, of course," she replied impatiently. "Kiss me. Touch me, Darryl."

He so wanted to obey that order, but he had to be sure. "Cricket, this isn't some ill-placed payment, or something you feel you owe me," he explained, diligently searching her face for the truth. He had to be convinced she wanted him because she *did*, and for no other reason.

"It isn't," she purred. Her hands glided over his torso, across his corded muscles. "I want you, right now. Right here. I wanted you yesterday, hell, the very moment you came into the Collection Unit."

Darryl's pulse leapt at those words and he relaxed. All the hunger he'd previously held back he released. Running a finger up and down the seam of her pants that parted her beautiful cheeks into lovely halves, he quivered. She moaned. Her ample ass fit his hands so right, and the softness of her skin made his cock spring to life.

"Ah, you like that," he whispered against her ear, allowing his finger to draw slow circles around her pants where he envisioned her sexual warmth to be. Watching her squirm against him, he added, "Yeah, you do."

Cricket tossed her head back and pushed her pelvis forward, gyrating into him. He hoisted her up by her ass, and she wrapped her legs around his waist at once. He carried her over to the bed and laid her gently down onto the foam mattress. He stood up, drinking her in.

Damn, she's so, so fantastic, and she doesn't even know it.

Her lovely curves, flawless chocolate skin, and sexy sensuality wrenched his cock up to new rigidity. It'd been years since he'd loved a woman -- a real live one. He crashed into her, and the two of them became a tangle of arms and legs, lips and licks. Never had he ever been so impulsive. His logical and reasonable self shot out reprimands, but his body gleefully ignored them.

She rubbed her breasts through her sweater, eyes at half mast. She leveled a straight look at him and moaned, low and luscious. Beneath the sweater's thick weaving, the tight peaks pointed at him as if saying they wanted him to come on over and nibble them.

"I know you want me," Cricket whispered, tweaking her nipples between her forefingers and thumbs. "I can see your desire."

"And I can see yours," he retorted.

He removed his boots and slowly untied hers before removing them as well. The boots made a *thud* as they crashed to the floor. He climbed onto the bed, straddling her thighs. His hands couldn't stop touching her, as if they had a mind of their own. She trembled in anxiousness but he didn't want to rush this, though the exquisite ache of his cock, pulsating in its need, threatened to send him into a frenzy.

As if a gift, her scrumptious breasts were unwrapped from her sweater before him. Clad in a scarlet bra, they begged to be free of the article and in his mouth.

"You have the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen," he said, his throat thick with passion. He couldn't help it. He rubbed his steel shaft through his uniform before leaning down to her once more.

With barely constrained hunger, he shoved the bra out of his way, impatience bleeding through. His lips pinched her nipples, making her arch toward him. He alternated between scraping them with his teeth and sucking them. Her very erect nipples made points against his tongue. She moaned so deep, so sexy, it was as if she'd stroked his cock with her voice. His cock strained against his pants, but he wanted to taste her.

"Yeah, lick me there," she cried, her hands clasped around his head, her lower body rubbing against his thigh. "Bite my nipple, oh, yeah, yeah, like that!"

Her voice and its coating of passion were a vise around his rod. Darryl went from one marvelous globe to the other. He kissed her pointed peaks, tugging the tight tips in between his teeth. *She's so hot!*

"Take this off," Cricket ordered into his ear and jerked on his uniform.

He unzipped his uniform's side zipper all the way down to his belly button. The low purring of his zipper matched her breathing. Standing over her, he smiled. Those warm, cinnamon eyes scanned his body, and he shuddered from the raw heat in them. Darryl pushed his uniform down to his ankles, kicked it off and threw it across the room. He snatched his undershirt over his head as well. Clothing rained down in different parts across the room.

Cricket's hands had been busy as well. She removed her own clothes, and before he could blink there she was in the nude -- except for her socks.

"You're a vision to behold," he croaked, falling to his knees opposite Cricket, who was on her knees on the bed. "Sweet, baby. You are so fuckin' hot."

Her pussy's incredible. Shaved, except for that single streak of dark ebony and glistening already with her desire. Wet and ready. Beautiful.

"You aren't so bad yourself," she said with a smile.

Her eyes trailed across his left shoulder and he stiffened. Yes, now she'd see him, the real him. For a moment, blinded by his passion, he'd forgotten about the rash of scars across his left torso. He flinched, but Cricket's fingers traced the bumps of scarred flesh flecked across his upper torso where shards of the blast had buried themselves into his body.

I'm not perfect, Cricket. Please understand that.

"You -- we don't have to, if you're not into me," he said, hardly believing the words coming from his mouth. He gestured to the scarred spray. "This can be a turn off, I understand."

He did understand, but he wished he didn't. He'd seen far too many women's repulsion over his shattered body.

"So much pain," she whispered, her eyes watering. She lowered her lips to them, and kissed each bubbled, twisted pebble of flesh. Her tongue swirled over them, sending lust through to his member. She nipped at some of them, pulling the damaged flesh in between those soft lips, making his balls tighten and his cock quiver.

"Darryl," she purred. "Fuck me, please."

He didn't ask her to repeat it.

He snatched her tight against him and slipped his fingers against her protruding clit. She moaned when he pulled it between his fingers. She reclined, managing not to dislodge his hand. He slipped into her wet core, and she bucked to meet his hand. He zipped in, out, and up to her knob of pleasure. She kneaded her breasts, turning him on even more. She twisted those yummy nipples, and she surged off the bed, shouting a jumble of words he couldn't decipher.

"Yeah! Come for me, for you. Let it all go." He watched her with mounting horniness. She was so incredibly sexy as she reached her precipice -- kicking, screaming, shouting his name. He increased his rhythm, focusing on her clit, giving it the attention of his thumb while his other fingers slipped into her honey pot.

“Come. Come for me. Say my name. Tell me how good it feels... Let me feel your thick cream all over my hand.”

And she did.

Chapter 8

Cricket couldn't believe the spasms rocking through her body. She saw Darryl above her, a wicked smile etched across his handsome face. He stared at her, stroking his cock in gentle slow caresses. His heavenly body, pale and perfect despite the scarring across his left shoulder, stood out in sharp contrast to her dark brown thighs on either side of him.

"You were magnificent," he breathed, his eyes closing at the rising rush of desire in him.

She smiled up at him. "Thank you."

"Do it again," he said, clutching her waist. He yanked her down toward him.

Before she could utter a response, he parted her legs farther. He rubbed the silky tip of his cock along the edges of her vagina. "Soooo wet, sooo damn good..." he moaned into the air.

Darryl's long cock worked slowly into her, and he groaned under his breath. The huge bulb of his shaft pushed through her, and she locked her legs around his chiseled waist. He worked his rigid rod into her moist tunnel, droplets of sweat sprouting across his face. Soft spasms shot through her.

"Mmmmm, yes, yes..."

"Like that?" he whispered as he bent down to kiss her neck. In and out, his tool smacked her G-spot with explosive pants. She answered every thrust with pleasurable sighs.

"Yes," she hissed, her nails digging into his chest, scraping his stiff nipples. "Yes!"

"Good, 'cause I've got more," he growled and shoved in hard, stealing her words. He latched his lips over hers, drowning her cry. Using his tongue, he roamed her mouth with the same urgency as he plunged into her core again and again.

They kissed forever. He leaned upward onto his knees and dug into the mattress. His driving force increased, much to Cricket's delight. Darryl's balls banged against her ass, and that too stirred up her fire. Her clit tingled and burned as his pelvis rotated against her; the pressure on her clit sent her flying. The whirling of her approaching release thrilled her and Darryl slammed into her with such rapidity she knew he was closing in on his own orgasm.

Feeling his cock pulsating inside her only served to turn her on further. She reached down and stroked her hardened clit, relishing the rush of the orgasm ripping through her and smiling as it transferred to him.

"Damn, damn, double damn," he gasped. The smacks of their bodies coming together drowned out his horny-hoarse voice. "I'm going to come! You feel so good! Ah! Oh! Shit! Yeah!"

"Do it," she breathed. "Give it to me."

The slaps resounded inside the tiny cabin, and Cricket squeezed her eyes tightly shut, overwhelmed by the sensations washing over her.

"Ooooooh!" she shouted, her body shooting off the bed to meet his and freezing as the wave of orgasm drowned her in its emotional vat. Her body no longer hers, she became a shower of stars.

Darryl raggedly cried, "That's my girl... Oh!"

His body went rigid as Cricket felt the spurting spasms of his orgasm spill through her inner core, turning her to jelly. Finally he collapsed onto her.

"Wow," she said, wrapping her arms around him. Their slick, sweaty bodies meshed together on the bed. She faced him, and his head rested against her heart, one of her nipples pressed against his lips. He lapped it occasionally. The triangle between her legs throbbed in response to each swipe of Darryl's fabulous tongue. She ran her fingers across his buzzed hair and she kissed his ear.

Darryl planted a light kiss against her navel. "This is a fabulous navel," Darryl said, breaking the quiet. "Deep and delicious. It's like its own core."

She smiled as she looked up at the ceiling -- it continued to wheel in circles above her. His tongue pierced her belly button, and slid out and in as if he were making love to it. Her body reacted at once, surging upward in desire. She breathed out and sighed in pleasure.

"How soon can we do that again?" he asked, his hand drifting over her lower abdomen before parting her slick, passion-puffed lips. "Damn it, Cricket, you turn me on. I want to be inside you."

Stiff and growing, his shaft pressed into her thigh. It seemed to stretch in the direction of her smoldering fires. Thank goodness she had taken her annual birth control shot.

"I'm insatiable when it comes to you," he said, sitting up, taking his somewhat limp tool into his hand. "I could stay buried inside of your wet warmth forever."

Oh, wow. He's getting hard again. I'm going to need a pain reliever shot after this.

"You're so gorgeous and sexy. Just watching you lying there makes me want to dive into you again," he said, parting her legs, eyes smoky with lust. "I want you to come again for me."

He bent down between her opened thighs and pressed his lips to her. With a slow lick, he swiped his tongue across her slick clit, making her lift her hips to his mouth, as if offering him a tasty treat. With those strong hands, he scooped them under her thighs, locked them over her and held her to the foam mattress. He nuzzled her, his nose bumping her clit as his mouth sampled the opening of her core.

"Darryl," she breathed, guiding his head deeper, closer to her clit. "Oh, Saturn!"

"Yeah, baby," Darryl whispered, breath hot as it brushed against her clit. He blew across her sizzling knob, sending fervent sensations across her body.

He dove into her again, slipping his finger into her tunnel as he sucked her love button. His fingers worked into her with such fervor, the way his soft lips locked over

her clit was so fierce, the orgasm caught her completely off guard, quietly but violently exploding across her. She shook against his hands.

Tears gathered in her eyes and spilled over. She was so overwrought and rocked by the multiple orgasms ricocheting through her she could only weep. She never thought sex could be better with a man than one of her simulation programs, but here it was.

Darryl's head shot up as he heard her sob. "Cricket?" he asked, licking his lips. He sat up, frowning. "What's the matter?" He lay beside her and pulled her tight to him. "Did I hurt you?"

She couldn't answer. So sweet. He was so kind and concerned and, and wonderful.

"I can feel your heart banging under my hand, Cricket. What's the matter?"

"I'm scared," she uttered through a hiccup.

"Of me?" he asked, surprise making his voice rise. "I wouldn't hurt you. Ever."

"No, not of you," she said, smiling. "You make me feel incredible and sexy. I, I've never been with anyone who did those things. It's a little scary."

"Yes, it is," he agreed with a laugh. The heat in his voice rose. He tilted her face up to him. "You're truly sexy, both inside and outside."

She heard the relief in his voice -- and the lust. He took her hand and placed it on his rock hard cock. She wrapped her hand around it and he trembled. A hiss slipped between his teeth. She ran her hand up the veined tool and touched the tip where already a droplet of masculine dew clung for mercy.

"Take me in your hot mouth. I want to feel those fantastic lips on me. Please, Cricket."

She did, tasting his salty musk on her tongue. Motionless, Darryl seemed to hold his breath when she took as much of his huge member as she could into her mouth, loving the taste of him. The groan tore from Darryl's throat. He shoved his hands into her hair and pleaded for her to make him release his passion. She stared up at his face and saw it twisted in pleasurable torment. "Ah, yes! Just like that! Damn, Cricket!"

She smiled around the mushroom tip of his cock.

His eyes glistened in steamy lust. "Make me yours," he demanded.

There was nothing else she'd rather do. Smiling up at his face, she wrapped her lips slowly around his purpling cock, tasting his salty seed on her tongue. He groaned and ran his fingers into her hair.

"Damn, that's good."

Encouraged by his moans, she rubbed his ass and raked her nails across his pale globes. Palming his balls, she watched the twisted pleasure flashing across his face. She wet a finger and glided it along the path between his balls and his anus, making his body tense.

She managed to hold his cock between her lips and she slowly sunk lower, and lower, taking as much of him as she could. He grunted from her efforts and raised his hips, moaning.

She took him in again and again, enjoying the taste of him. The ecstasy slipping from between his lips fueled her own fire and forced her pace to increase. She released his member and cupped his balls, slid her lips down his shaft, to her fingers and over his testicles. He shivered as she made her way back up to its bulbous tip, where she reclaimed his shaft and bobbed up and down on it.

She lost track of place, time, the Ganor project, everything. Nothing existed but him, and her, this time, this place, and this purpose. She wanted to taste him, all of him, and for the life of her, this thought turned her on more than any other. She moaned in pleasure at the feel of his hard cock inside her mouth, touching the back of her throat, filling her with his lust.

She ran her tongue just underneath the tip of his cock. His body jerked and his hands slipped down from her hair before gripping the bed instead. His breathing changed. "Damn, Cricket, damn, damn! You. Gonna. Make. Me. Come!"

She hummed in delight.

"Here I come!" he moaned. His seed shot fast into her throat. And she accepted him, all of him.

Chapter 9

Darryl smiled as he awoke to the dimly lit quarters. The rough texture of an IGO-issued blanket scratched his nude chest and his muscles tensed. He shoved it from his face and reached across the foam mattress to the supple warmth that had cushioned him and roused him throughout the night. Instead of the sensual curve of Cricket's hip, he found a vacant, cold spot.

Fear rushed him to the point he shot up to a sitting position, his hand searching in vain for his weapon. With wide eyes he investigated the quarters with a hasty sweep. Where the hell was she?

"Cricket?" he called, voice dangerously close to going into security chief mode. "Cricket!"

"Yes?" she called back, emerging from the dark shadows to the right of the plasma display. With her face a scowl, she stepped in front of the screen's illumination. Her hair fell free across naked shoulders. A sexy silhouette against the plasma screen's rays, she blocked a ton of text windows cluttering the surface.

"You gave me a start," he said, slowing his breathing. "I'm supposed to protect you."

"I know, I..." She faltered into silence. "There's so much data and so little time."

"Don't do that to me again," he said, irritation rippling across his person. "Ever."

"Oh, okay, sir," she whispered, crossing her arms over her chest -- which he saw was nude.

The quiver in her voice unnerved him. He didn't like the sadness reverberating through her words. And he wanted nothing more than to erase it from her being.

Darryl pushed the covers from his equally nude body, and he got out of the bed. The sight of her stirred him again, despite the numerous times he found himself buried balls deep inside her hot tunnel throughout the night. The sheer sight of her nakedness enthused him. He'd lost count of how often he awoke to find his cock still inside her as if reluctant to vacate her well.

Closing the distance between them in mere steps, he reached for her and tilted her head back. His lips met hers and he kissed her, long, deep and with cravings. She moaned from the back of her throat and he kissed her neck as if drinking from a well of spring water.

"When you make that sound, I want to take you back to the bed," he confessed against her ear. He licked the lobe and nibbled there. His hands glided up to her breasts. They closed over the full mounds and he kneaded them, feeling the tips turn to pointed stones. Guiding her, he spun her around to face the screen, and pressed his stony cock between her ass cheeks. He poked at her moist entrance, impatient to be inside her. His breathing lowered until it escaped in ragged wisps.

"Darryl," she groaned, pushing back against his hardness, making him suck in his breath. "I'm working."

"I know, but I can't help it," he answered, the tip of his tool slipping into her tunnel. "If you want to work, don't walk around without any clothes."

She spread her legs wider -- accepting his touch, and bent over, using the wall for support. Her eyes were closed and her head had been thrown back in growing arousal.

She smiled.

Darryl sighed. Damn, she was so fucking incredible when in the throes of desire. Instead of being concerned about his duty -- he had no idea what time it was -- all he wanted was to be nestled inside her warmth and feel her muscles clenching his shaft as she came over and over again. He loved to hear her shout his name as she gushed all over his member, and each naughty word she crooned drove his libido higher. Nothing could compare to her throaty voice begging him to take her. Nothing.

Being with her felt so right he had to seize this chance to be happy.

"Darryl," Cricket bemoaned, wiggling her generous ass. "Don't make me beg."

"Never," he panted and slipped his entire length into her again. At once he quivered at the sheer heat of her tunnel. Damn, she was driving him crazy. Her muscles massaged his stony tool. Unable to tear himself away, he began to slowly slip in and out of her with a rhythm so deliciously slow.

Cricket bit her lower lip. "Mmmmm," she moaned.

Unable to withstand the sweet torture, Darryl soon sped up. His cock couldn't wait, and apparently neither could Cricket's own desire. She stole his rhythm and pumped him harder, faster, plowing into him, her wonderful ass against his torso, making him growl in lust.

"Cricket..." He locked his hands around her waist. "If you keep... this... up... I... I..."

He peered down at her and she glanced over her smooth, supple shoulder with lust making her eyes smoky. She rotated her hips so deliciously deliberately his cock nearly spilled its load.

"Yes, I know," she said, shuddering. "Hmmm, you feel so good."

"Cricket," he coughed out and tried to slow her down. "Baby, if you don't... oh, shit..."

She giggled and it came deep from the back of her throat. "Give it to me! All of it!" she ordered, all aspects of humor gone. "I want to hear you scream *my* name."

Darryl rolled his eyes and groaned. She took over and he let her. He couldn't speak anything intelligible anyway. She pumped his cock mercilessly. He remembered the first time he spied her ass and how he couldn't wait to feel it pressed against his member. Now that it was, he squeezed his eyes shut at the threatening tide of pleasure growing from his lower abdomen. He could stand it no more.

Even though he knew he was close, the actual orgasm ripped through him, tearing the shout from his throat and out into the heated air. He descended to his knees,

taking Cricket with him to the floor. Waiting for the ceiling to stop spinning, Darryl curled around Cricket's softness. She dropped kisses along his arms and he sighed.

The room audio crackled with static before clearing. It shocked Darryl. He leaned up on his elbows, listening intently. His heartbeat increased to a gallop.

"Sergeant Snow, report to the 'shoe. Sergeant Snow, report to the 'shoe."

"That's your call," Cricket said warmly, unwrapping herself from him.

The moment she left his arms, the emptiness made him growl. He wanted her back. But duty called and he reluctantly got up. He reached for the bedside shelf and slung his earpiece over his ear. He pressed the green button. Taking a deep breath, Darryl awaited the verbal lashing Commander Taylor would no doubt pay him for his tardiness.

"Good morning, sergeant. You're on duty in ten minutes, sir. You're usually twenty minutes early, so, uh..."

"Thank you, Kovacs," Darryl rumbled. "I will report by zero two hundred hours. Snow out."

Darryl's eyes held Cricket's as he spoke. She tensed visibly, but it was gone as swiftly as it appeared. When he winked at her, she met his eyes with a soft smile on her face.

Cricket paused in the entranceway, her dreadlocks spilling over her shoulders, obscuring the view of her breasts. She blew him a kiss and tilted her head sideways. "You look so yummy in that uniform," she said, sighing like a little girl. "I can't decide if I like you more in or out of it."

"I like you both ways." Darryl smirked. He hurried about as he picked up his clothes, urgency flowing fast into his body. He pulled on articles as he moved. As he zipped the jacket, he sighed in defeat. He didn't want to leave her.

"Thank you," she replied. "Don't look at me like that, Darryl. It's too much. You'll never make it to your duty station."

He laughed, loving how she made him feel wanted and worthy. "You going to be all right?"

She shrugged. "I've got work to do too. I'll see you later?"

He stared at her, naked and delectable. All he could think about was stripping out of his uniform and following her into the shower, pressing her against the plastic and plunging into her core once more, plundering her succulent treasure until she stole his seed again. Darryl swallowed the ache rising in his throat. Damn, he didn't seem to be sated. All he wanted was to please her in every way he could.

"Yes," he replied, watching her physically relax. "This is no casual thing between us, Cricket."

"No," she managed. "It isn't."

He heard the sound of the shower going as he stepped through the exit doors. Smiling, he let his long strides carry him the length of the corridor in hurried time.

* * *

Cricket turned the knob to air dry and closed her eyes as the hot air blew through her wet hair and across her soaking body. No amount of forced heat could cool the dampness in her pussy. Like a tap which had been switched on, her libido poured out wave after wave of passion for the handsome sergeant. Even now, her well clenched with longing for him. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so soundly. Cricket stepped from the automated dryer with her mind settled firmly on Sergeant Snow.

Already the furnace at the juncture of her thighs burned for Darryl. But she'd indulged her wants long enough. She sighed as she pulled on a pair of jeans and an orange long-sleeved shirt. With a swoop of her rubber band, she secured her damp dreadlocks into a ponytail as she moved to the plasma screen. The room reeked of sex and of Darryl. Sighing in longing once more, she mentally struggled to focus on the text.

What had Wang seen in this mass of information that spoke to commercial application?

She rubbed her bleary eyes. Though Darryl had slept, she had been up for nearly three hours reading over the text. Doctor Savage's email from two days ago noted a

recent spike in one of Io's volcanoes she called V#23. The chemical compounds hadn't been dissimilar from the others, but the concentration had been tighter, heavier.

There lay the only difference in the data she'd combed through thus far. Nothing about those concentrations should or could be of interest to Wang. Cricket couldn't even fathom what he would use them for -- weapons? Anything could be used as a weapon, and she didn't think Kem Core Industries was interested in weaponry. The IGO wanted to harness the lava flow and eruptions to try to cull a power source for them and their spacecrafts. Still, the team had no clear-cut data that pointed to their success or their failure. It didn't make any sense.

Cricket gently put her head against the plasma screen. "What happened, Bob? Sandra? What happened that made this all fall to pieces?"

It sounded surprisingly like a prayer, but she didn't care. She needed all the help she could get.

Chapter 10

"Sergeant Snow, we're approaching the EPSS," Kovacs reported. Clear-eyed and well-rested, Kovacs sat rigidly in his chair.

It seemed the curfew Darryl had instituted for Kovacs had worked. It was either the curfew or an official red mark in his file. Captain Reyes, the leader of the entire unit to which *The Discovery* was dispatched, wouldn't be nearly as kind as issuing a curfew for the private. No, the captain would've sentenced the private to Mars Outpost duty and caused him to remain locked on the main spaceship, cleaning up the muck of others.

"Excellent," Darryl replied brisk and firm -- completely in command mode. "I'll let the commander know."

Darryl pressed the small green button on his earpiece and waited.

Commander Taylor's deep voice creaked through to his ear.

"We're here, sir," Darryl said.

"Coming," Commander Taylor said, strained and taut.

Energy flowed over him and Darryl realized he was squeezing the chair's armrest. He released it and watched as the Earth Prime Space Station grew larger in the window. Before long the docking clamps jostled the vessel, but Darryl's stomach was already choppy from the fact that this was the halfway point to the Mars Outpost Station 1 and *The Discovery*. Once on board, Cricket would be taken from his protection and into long interrogations with Alpha Team. He didn't know if he'd see her again. If the Alpha Team wasn't done before his team's next assignment, he'd be forced to leave her for Saturn knew how long. Something the last few days made harder for him to do.

The lift's doors slid back, and out he came. Commander Taylor's brow was furrowed. Darryl got up and went to the security console, sending Rojas to the navigation seat.

"Kovacs, let them know we're here to refuel and be on our way," Commander Taylor ordered, and then turned to Darryl. "The crew can scamper off to replenish whatever they need, if they have the funds."

Darryl nodded. He remained at the station, running a brief diagnostic of the security system. With a chance to go shopping, many of the crew would leave the vessel in favor of cashing in their credits. Sometimes pirates and thieves found a sparsely populated spacecraft was easy pickings for hijackings. Not on his watch. The system came back as operational and up to optimum performance. Good.

"Uh, Commander Taylor? Dr. Moore is requesting to go aboard the space station," Kovacs said, forcing the entire 'shoe's murmurings to fall into strained silence.

All eyes appeared to be on the commander, but his icy blue orbs were burrowing into Darryl's. His grim expression didn't make Darryl feel any better about the request. He was chief of security. Normal operations required him to stay on *The Inquiry*.

"Permission to escort the doctor," Rojas said, bolting from his seat and saluting the commander.

A flash of angst rushed through Darryl. For a moment, all he saw was shades of scarlet. Though he and Cricket hadn't discussed it, he felt Cricket was *his*. The thought of another man escorting her around the cramped space station's snug corridors with its sweeping views of Earth Prime and star glitz sky burned him. His fingers ached from gripping the console so hard that he had to remind himself to breathe, to relax.

When Darryl moved his eyes back to the commander, he found his superior staring at him. Embarrassed, he shifted his eyes back to his console and pretended to be reading the flashes of text scrolling across the monitor. Sweat coursed down his face, but he fought the urge to wipe it away.

Come on, Commander. You ordered me to protect her, let me do that. Rojas wouldn't last two minutes against anyone, hell, even her.

Darryl's skin crawled and he looked up to find the commander's gaze still focused on him. The corners of his mouth twitched, and Darryl realized his feelings must've been apparent on his face.

"That won't be necessary, Rojas," Commander Taylor said at last, looking away from Darryl. "Sergeant Snow, report to Dr. Moore's quarters and escort her aboard the EPSS. See to it that she is kept from harm."

"Yes, sir!" he barked, falling into a salute.

Rojas' face crumpled but swiftly shifted to the stony, blank visage soldiers used to hide their emotions. Darryl had witnessed the young private staring at Cricket when she ate in the commons area, or when she strolled through the observation deck. So consumed by his own feelings for her, Darryl only recognized now the mirror image of lust and want on Rojas' face.

He waited until Rojas joined him. Under the guise of instruction, Darryl said, "Seems you're biting off more than you can chew."

Rojas' black eyes sparkled, but his thick lips peeled back in a snarl. "Seems you might choke on what you can't have."

If anyone overheard their words, they wouldn't have known the bitter jealousy hidden in the pleasant, somewhat friendly forced tones.

"Already mine," Darryl said, stepping back and allowing Rojas to step into his place. "Don't be misled. You're out of your element, *Private*."

"Don't be so sure you're the only item on the menu," Rojas retorted, punching his fingers into the touch screen as if he meant to break the board.

Darryl turned and headed to the lift, seeing green. No one was getting close to Cricket. Not until he knew with certainty that no one around them would hurt her.

Still, his anger at Rojas wasn't like him. Normally, the two of them played soccer in the holographic room with vigorous competition. They weren't friends. Darryl had none. However, he hadn't ever been so close to taking off someone's head as he had just then. Why? Because Rojas dared to assume he could take Darryl's space beside Cricket.

Over my dead body.

As the lift's doors hushed closed behind him, Darryl released a huge sigh. He was letting himself get distracted. The last time a woman had distracted him he'd nearly lost his life. Without realizing it, he was rubbing the scar beneath his eye. He simply couldn't let that happen again. He had a job to do -- protect the only scientist left of the Ganor project -- that had to take precedence.

* * *

Cricket followed Darryl through illuminated exits into the EPSS with a gigantic smile slapped across her face. Though she'd spent days buried in her research, the answer to why her peers were slaughtered and what Wang found so appealing in Ganor eluded her.

As they passed through the plastic entranceway, she saw hundreds of people going about their business. The Earth Prime Space Station wasn't an outpost, so no outties were on the station. It also wasn't governed by the IGO, so it acted solely as an independent entity. The scientists who lived onboard the space station attempted to take a neutral stance when conflicts arose, similar to ancient Quakers on primitive Earth had done, which subjected the space station to frequent bouts of violence.

Clean, quiet, until one ship docks that contains the stupid, drunk, or depraved. I'm so hoping to have a nice walk and hot coffee with Darryl.

There wasn't a governing body, per se, but a few soldiers here and there. Cricket reached out for Darryl's hand and a rush of warmth spread through her. Instantly she felt safer.

Following the illuminated signs, Cricket and Darryl wound through what seemed like endless tunnels and entrance spheres until they burst through the end of a narrow hallway. After climbing through yet another circular tube, they emptied out into a commons area. All around panels with gravity boots lined the walls. The EPSS turned off gravity for fourteen hours a day to conserve energy and to perform maintenance.

"What time is it onboard the station?" Cricket asked, not wanting to spend any time in zero gravity. Unless Darryl could be wrapped around her.

"It's only noon. Why?" he asked, glancing at her over his shoulder. "It's dark often here, so I know it's difficult to tell."

"Just wondering if I needed a pair of anti-gravity boots," she replied.

Their conversations had been like this for days -- comfortable and totally about nothing of real importance. She knew he wanted to keep her from worrying. *Mars, I can't believe I'm falling for him.*

Her practical voice cooed, *You've already fallen, dear.*

"Where do you wanna go?" he asked, tugging her arm so she ended up closer to him.

"Observation deck for some coffee," she said, squeezing his arm to her torso.

"You could've done this onboard *The Inquiry*."

"Yes, but I had to get out of those stuffy small closets you call quarters. I need air," she said, and swept a hand toward the gigantic view. "And space."

"All right," he said, grinning down at her.

But his eyes, those beautiful, soulful eyes, were distant. Something had happened, but he hadn't spoken to her about it.

They walked through a tiny corridor. "Here's the place," Darryl said at last and he squeezed her hand. "Coffee, three sugars and two tablespoons of cream, right?"

"Yes," she said, pleased he remembered.

Cricket climbed the spiraling staircase up to the space station observation deck. Through one of the many large rectangular windows, she spied glimpses of space, stars, and ships. They drifted by in complete indifference to her plight. Below the deck, people sat in chairs, at tables, and lying about the carpeted floor. The recreation spot for the EPSS and its visitors, the observation deck held a lower section filled with pool tables, video games, virtual reality tubes, and treadmills. Noises filtered from these activities up to the upper sections of the deck where watching the stars took priority.

Cricket only wanted one thing -- answers. And Darryl. Okay, two things.

Cricket inhaled the rich aroma of coffee from the drinking booth, but the spectacular view held her fast. Searching the glittering darkness, she tried to puzzle out why Wang found Ganor so desirable.

"Here you are." Darryl's rumbling voice stroked her, caressing her body like smooth silk.

She twisted toward his direction and took the steaming java into her hands. Sipping and watching, she leaned over the railing and said, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course," he said, but it sounded forced. For once, he didn't meet her eyes.

"Darryl, look at me," she said.

He glanced down at her and said, "You're exposed here. I have to keep you safe. As lovely as you are, baby, I have to watch."

She understood that and nodded. Maybe coming on board wasn't such a great idea. She simply wanted to be out of the cramped spaces of her quarters and away from the unanswered questions and grief. Sipping more of her coffee, she didn't want to talk about that to Darryl. Already he spent his free time in her quarters, loving her, talking to her, acting as her sounding board. Three blissful days had swept by and now they had only two days until *The Inquiry* docked at Mars Outpost 1 and she went to be interrogated.

"Cricket," he called.

She spun from the view of the enormous space outside the station to him. "Yes?"

"You understand? I can't have anything happen to you," he confessed, eyes warm. "And not just because Commander Taylor said I had to keep you safe."

The air thickened around them, and she stepped closer to him, drawn like a thirsty man to water. She continued until his hand shot out to stop her.

"Stop." He tore his eyes from her and he guided her to a position behind him.

Below them a rustling grew louder from the low murmur of dozens of conversations.

"We've got trouble," he said, all hints of warmth and love gone.

At the commons entrance was a trio of men, dressed in ragtag outfits and scarves. Tattoos covered all visible flesh, including their faces. They weren't IGO officers or soldiers, nor were they scientists. These were bandits, outlaws, or worse, traders. Traders stole, plundered, and robbed, sometimes killing in the process. Those tattoos would tell anyone who saw them who and what they were.

How had they gotten on board the EPSS without some escort?

"Traders," Darryl said, frowning, lips a slash of irritation.

Cricket swallowed her terror to keep it from riding up from her sickened stomach.

Chapter 11

Darryl's face hardened into savageness so fierce Cricket stepped back a few paces from him. Not that he'd harm her. She knew he wouldn't. Didn't she?

He gave her a smile and a wink to try to put her at ease. But matters had to be dealt with and none of it was pleasant. He pressed the button on his earpiece and sent a comm to *The Inquiry*. JC Lee's whiny drawl crackled through.

Keeping his eyes on Cricket, Darryl sighed. "Where's Commander Taylor?" he asked, not liking the fact it was Lee on the other end of the comm. No, he didn't like it at all. Nor did his instincts. His stomach crawled as if hundreds of bugs scattered about at the irritated whine in Lee's voice.

"Taylor's busy."

The commander was never busy when Darryl and three-quarters of the crew were not on the ship. He always answered Darryl's comms -- asleep or awake, day or night. His and Commander Taylor's relationship surpassed professional. The man was his mentor and father figure. Kovacs and the rest of the crew except Rojas and Lee had come on to the EPSS. No doubt some had already returned to the ship, eager to partake of their recent purchases. So, where was the good commander?

"The commander said he'd stay behind. So where is he?" Darryl inquired, a warning covering every syllable.

Lee failed to heed it. "Maybe your chickenshit ass should've stayed onboard and then you'd know," barked Lee in return, a burst of fury from his end. Showing Darryl his uninhibited hatred only forced Darryl to clench his jaw tighter.

"Contact EPSS security. There's a problem in commons five," Darryl said, blowing his anger through his nostrils. "There's a big threat to Dr. Moore's safety here."

"A problem?" Lee questioned. "*You* are a threat, Snow. Screw off!"

"Lee! Listen to me!" Darryl snarled, voice dangerously close to venom. "The doctor is in trouble. Send security down to commons five. Now!"

"Too bad for you then," Lee replied coolly. "Once she's dead, you'll be demoted off my ship."

Bastard! He's more worried about his career than Cricket's life. Idiot! It wasn't Lee's ship, but Commander Taylor's. But if he was already laying claim to command, then...

"Lee! Don't do this!" he roared. Static erupted, drowning out his words. "Lee!" His fury spilled over his usual cool. "Damn it!"

Cricket's eyes were large pools of honey laced with fear when he faced her, hands in fists. "What happened? What did he say?" she asked so softly he didn't think he'd heard her at first. She caressed his arm as if trying to soothe the annoyance out of him.

He avoided her gaze, but almost instantly he relaxed. His hand unfolded like a flower -- slowly. He sought out her hand. Touching her flesh would force the tide of stress and angst to recede. Somehow he knew this, and yet when it happened, it surprised him still.

"The comm went dead," he said, opting to leave the details until later. "We need to get down from here and back to the ship. Without delay, Cricket. You understand?"

Worrying her wouldn't make this any easier. The throng of traders threaded their way through the area knocking over cups, people and chairs. The brood of bad guys resembled the other visitors on the EPSS, except they sported rugged, unclean beards, long stringy hair, tattoos, and cruel menacing expressions. They looked the way they were meant to -- evil, threatening. They wanted to provoke individuals until one pounced, and then all chaos would erupt, hiding the bandits' true purpose -- stealing. The credit cards would be plucked with cool calculated precision.

"Time to move," he whispered to Cricket.

She squeezed his hand in reply. "It sure is."

He led her down the steel winding staircase, not hesitating as he negotiated the narrow space. He wanted to have his hands free to defend her. But he also wanted to make sure she didn't get sucked up by the crowd. Even now, the tremors of her hands made him tighten his hold.

Shouts of violence snatched his attention. A civilian fell to the floor in a crash of falling chairs, cards and cans. The traders' guffaws echoed with boisterous vigor, but no one else's did. Several others helped up the portly man and hurried from the commons area with nervous looks backward. A thunderous shift of dozens of chairs ripped apart the heady silence following the incident. A mob rushed the exit doors.

"Cricket, I'm going to let go, but I need you to stay close to me."

"Got it."

Good.

They continued to descend the staircase, but already Darryl visually plotted a course for their escape. With luck, they'd circumvent the traders, but Darryl doubted it. The men had failed to rob anyone yet, and the strong feeling that they hadn't come for money resonated in Darryl's head.

No. They'd definitely come for Cricket.

* * *

Darryl's large loving hand dropped to his gun.

Cricket knew those hands incited love and sizzling desire in her body and heart, but she also understood that those same hands were capable of wielding terrible violence. She mentally flashed back to his beautiful but partially marred body. It bore evidence of true aggression. The flying debris must've sliced through his uniform and his undershirt. The uniform decreased some of the shards' momentum, but not all.

Cricket winced at the memory of his speckled torso and how she longed to reach out her palm and wipe off the hurt, the pain, the lingering effects of that attack from not only his flesh, but his mind. She loved him, but the impact of those painful reminders

remained for him. An urge to rush to him and hold him closer erupted, but she battled it back -- for now. The reality remained clear -- he was an IGO soldier.

I should hold him now. This outing may be our last. I don't know when circumstance will steal him from me. Darryl could become extremely physical. She was glad he was on her side. "Do what you gotta do," she said as he continued circling down the steps.

He glanced over that marred shoulder and nodded. "Always."

Once they reached the floor, the traders shoved through people creating a violent path which led directly to Darryl and Cricket.

The first trader's gaze followed them. Each time she checked their proximity to her, she found him meeting her eyes with unyielding intent. Leering, he blew her several kisses and a few winks. With her suspicion confirmed, Cricket bit her lip.

They're targeting me. Why?

Chapter 12

“Get back!” Darryl roared, his chest heaving against his rising fury. How dare they even attempt to come at him? No one was getting near Cricket. “She’s under IGO protection!”

The first of the three traders stepped forward, smirking with uncontrolled malice. Greasy black hair hung limp on either side of his square face. A jagged scar snaked from his mouth to his ear as if someone had taken a blade and tried to extend that cold grin literally from ear to ear. Glistening green eyes stuck out from the fall of untidy hair. His eyes fell on Darryl and the bastard’s grin broadened.

Darryl brandished his laser gun, its scarlet eye ready and bright, fully charged. The other men exchanged glances before displaying their own hardware with gusto. He was faintly aware of people shifting out of the commons area, fleeing for the exits. An exodus rippled with heady murmurs across the air. Their fear pushed against him, and his anger shoved it back.

No bags, packs, or other of the traders’ usual carrying devices were in evidence. Usually the traders carried one or all to stow their loot and ill gotten credits. These three had none of those.

They hadn’t come to pillage or steal from tourists and unsuspecting soldiers. They had come for *her*.

“Three to one. Your odds ain’t so great, soldier,” the dark-haired one spat. His drawl hinted of Earth Prime, not the educated speech of outposts. Earth was a pathetic little planet, and the siring ground for humanity. But the entire planet was a waste.

"Send over that sweet honeypot there and all will go well for you," the trader said. "Now."

Surely this scrap of poor DNA stock doesn't think I'll give her up that easily. "The penal colony on Titan isn't fun," Darryl warned, his finger twitching against the trigger.

Cricket set her fighting stance, ready to hop into the fray. She peered at them, and her eyebrows bent down. *Angry. That's my girl. Get pissed.* From experience he knew that rage blew fear out of the water. His own annoyance increased.

"Penal colony?" the dirty thief sniggered as if it was all a big joke. Scrawny and stupid -- a perfect combination for disaster.

His cronies joined in like back-up singers to a laugh track. They didn't know what Darryl would do to protect the woman he loved from harm. Too bad for them.

Wow. Yes, I haven't told her yet, but I do love her.

Darryl smiled to himself. Not only did he lust for her sizzling body, but he craved her love -- longed for it with every fiber of his being. The impulse to cradle that flame in his heart forever sometimes left him breathless.

Time to take care of this trash.

Before the idiots finished chuckling, Darryl fired three rapid shots, his hand a blur of pale flesh and black plastic. With surprise springing from face to face, the three would-be thieves collapsed to the floor.

"You didn't --" Cricket asked, her hand gripping his arm. "Darryl?"

"No. They're stunned."

He heard the relief in her voice and suppressed the urge to ask her for details. He was a soldier. At some point he was going to have to kill, maim, and wound in the course of IGO life. How would the woman he loved be able to handle that?

I can't think about that now. No distractions. "Come on," he said.

He adjusted his stance, relaxing his legs and arms before stepping over the pile of traders. He walked to the EPSS docking bay with Cricket in tow. No doubt the security guards were on their way. Laser gun fire initiated an emergency signal at the EPSS central hub.

Every muscle in his body tensed as his footfalls bounded ever closer to the doors. Outside the commons area a horde thrashed about, vying for spots to squeeze through the small circular exit tunnels. Judging from the noise, the guards brought their own hardware to the dance. Someone screamed and thunderous shouts of "Move!" and "Security coming through!" was met with hostile and loud disgruntlement.

"Three of them," Cricket said, her voice a rod of determination. "No more. They can't know my identity. I'm not sure how far Wang's reach extends."

"Got it," he said, before stowing his gun. He knew it.

The crowd created a safety nightmare. How best to keep her secure when smashed against scores of people? Any one of them could stab her, stun her, or snatch her from his loose hold on her hand.

Shunting those vile scenarios to the side, he walked quickly, putting distance between them and the stunned thieves. He and Cricket merged into the thicket of people, burrowing further into the fray. Crammed with the others in the corridor, Darryl tried to look as innocent and as panicked.

"You think those men saw us?" Cricket asked, her hands crossed over her chest. Her warmth washed over him, a tidal wave of bodily heat.

Hugging herself made her look like the scores of others huddled outside the commons area. But he knew she wasn't doing it to appear helpless, but to protect her upper body from possible attacks -- or groping. Visibly crying, some civilians were being comforted and others were fleeing through the corridor's sphere.

Who could he trust? None of *The Inquiry's* crewmembers or scientists stuck out from the horde of scared and sweaty faces. They must've headed to the market section to shop. Or they had already returned to the ship. This excursion wasn't supposed to last more than a few hours.

"I dunno," Darryl said with a sigh. He sorely wanted to lie, to spare her the terror he was certain was vibrating to her core, but he couldn't. She had to know the truth of how desperate the situation had become. Cricket would accept nothing else. "But, they could've caught it on video or watched it on surveillance."

She groaned. With a long look, Cricket let him pull her into his embrace. She needed holding and he *wanted* to hold her. Truth be known, he craved holding too. Who knew the next time he'd be able to do so.

He listened to the murmurings fall to nothing as the sound of footfalls came closer and stopped. At the end of one of the exit spheres, Darryl counted three guards popping through the circular entrance. Blocked up, no one had been able to leave via the other four exit spheres. They had been locked down once Darryl fired his laser gun. Now the guards had arrived. They would open the exits, but not before they'd gotten a handle on the situation.

"Sir," shouted one of the guards, a woman dressed in a beige one-piece. "Have you seen anything odd?"

Darryl could feel her eyes drift over his face, stopping at his scar. The guard gave him a long, steady look, fist gripping her electromagnetic baton. The other two security personnel headed toward the agonizing groans of the three hoodlums inside the commons area.

"Joanna! Over here!"

"Tyson, get the double halos," the female guard sternly replied, relinquishing her gaze from Darryl. She shot Darryl one more stern expression before darting off to join the others.

Darryl shoved ahead faster, trying to keep Cricket with him. The last thing he wanted was to be separated. Once those idiots regained consciousness and the nausea had been extinguished, they'd talk to the guards all about him and Cricket. Then again, maybe not if they really were hired as warm bodies for the Kem Core Corporation. Either way Darryl longed to be back on *The Inquiry* by then.

"Let's go," he ordered, slicing through the hordes and pulling her along with ease. They emptied out on the opposite side, along with a slew of others. "Hurry!"

He didn't wait. He pushed forward, still holding Cricket's hand tightly in his as he lurched through the throng.

"Darryl, slow down!" she shouted, huffing and puffing behind him.

“In a minute,” he said. “We’re two steps to the ship. Once onboard, we’ll be safe.”

His heart thundered in his chest and tunnel vision took over. All he could see was the docking bay and safety. Hopefully, he sounded more certain than he felt, and he winked at her.

Once he got her back on the ship, everything would be fine. Everything would be all right.

Chapter 13

Cricket's breath came in sharp pains to her waist, little daggers stabbing her side. So quickly had Darryl bowled through the EPSS's hallways, she was winded and crushed. With her hands on her hips, she greedily sucked in air as they crossed over into the cargo bay. The doors hushed close, slicing off the drone. And danger.

"Enough!" she gasped, clutching the stitch in her side. "Enough!"

Darryl began to punch the panel beside the cargo doors' release, keying in some sequences, his attention never deviating. It was as if he hadn't heard a single word she said.

Cricket's labored breathing slowed, and she walked in circles to keep the cramps at bay. Panic pushed at her throat. She longed to flee to her quarters and lock the doors, but she wanted Darryl to come with her.

One glance at his face told her he wasn't in the romantic mood. And the burning steel in his eyes warned he was in no mood for giving up either. Soldier shot out from his face -- all about the mission.

"Let's go up," she said, calming down, but a residue of uneasiness glazed her spirit. What had just gone down defied a positive explanation. Those traders wanted to kidnap her. Just how far did Wang's reach extend? To the upper echelons of the EPSS? Earth Prime's centralized president? How far?

"Something's wrong," he said, a severe scowl drifting over his face. He rubbed his scar with the back of his hand. "No one's answering in the 'shoe and security is offline."

"Maintenance?"

"No. This is different. Commander Taylor, Privates Rojas and Kovacs, even Lee aren't answering their comms. Something is very wrong here. Someone should be monitoring us, responding to us, and to my hails."

A dark look shadowed his face. The turbo lift's doors gaped between them -- Darryl on one side and Cricket the other. No one exited.

He started into the circular lift, removing his grimace in the process. His hand fell to his laser gun. Face stoic, he stopped before fully entering the fray and looked back at her. "Stay here," he ordered with a sweeping glance over his shoulder.

"Nuh uh," Cricket said, scampering to catch up with him.

No, he wasn't leaving her to the unknown. She trusted him, and if he died, she wanted to be with him, if only to ferry his soul home or to hold his hand as he crossed from this solar system to some alternate one.

"No," he thundered louder than before. It echoed across the vacant cargo bay.

Cricket flinched at his volume. "Um, yes," she retorted, and walked into him.

He barred her entrance with both arms stretched wide.

"I'm going with you," she said sternly, pinning him with her eyes. "We don't know what's up there and we don't know what's down here either. The danger be damned, because I'm going."

His face twisted in emotions as he sighed. Shoulders slumped in defeat. He opened his eyes to meet hers. She glimpsed sorrow and... and fear.

"I can't have you in harm's way," he said, his voice ragged with shame. "If this is bad or it goes wrong, I, I, won't... I can't... Cricket..."

Cricket leapt into his arms and with a kiss swallowed his worries and his fear for her well-being. *I love this man.*

At first, Darryl froze at her actions, but soon her hot love melted his icy terror. Cricket glowed inside as she felt his arms meld around her as if old hat. Succumbing to her intensity, he clutched her tight, and soon he took the lead, stealing her momentum as if this kiss were their last.

It ended as abruptly as it began.

His steely eyes locked on hers. "Stay behind me -- close," he ordered, his hand on her chin, holding her gaze. Then his face softened and he brushed her lips again with his, painting them with his desire. "I love you, Dr. Moore."

"And I you, Sergeant Snow," she breathed, her heart swelling at the sheer depth of his love pooling in his eyes.

He grinned, forcing his scar to bulge. Then it was gone as if she'd touched a screen -- the happy, in love Darryl blinked off. In the next, the IGO sergeant emerged.

Weapon first, Darryl entered the lift. The gun's long barrel sliced the manufactured air with clean strokes. Cricket followed him, but not too closely, as he stepped fully into the lift.

No one was inside. She scampered as far back from the doors as she could and then inched her way around the arc to her right. Darryl waited for the doors to close behind him before turning to his left.

Cricket watched in surprise as he transferred the gun to his left hand and he dug his fingers into the square panel above the screen. He ripped open the paneling, popping the plastic tacks keeping it hidden. With rapid snatches, the multi-colored wires sprawled out like bowels. He disconnected the video feed. She could make out the familiar raised blue vf cord. Darryl disabled and rerouted the vine-like cables with one hand.

"There. Now, they can't trace our heat signatures and I've disabled the video to all four turbo lift cameras."

"What are you expecting?" she asked quietly. "I mean, it could be nothing except routine maintenance, a glitch or some other common issue."

His beautiful back, clad in the standard, mundane IGO gray one piece uniform, mocked her calm question. With a sweeping glance over his shoulder, he sighed. "I'm the head of security. I know it better than anyone. This is -- is *off*. Those men were targeting us, you. Paid to do so, no doubt, to create a diversion. To kidnap you. Best to err on the side of caution. I'll not lose you now that I've found you."

Cricket nodded. She understood his concern. None of the situation was on par. *The Inquiry* was his home and it had been inundated with threats. If anyone understood displacement, she did. Having lost her home and security on Io's outpost, Cricket missed the familiarity of a "home." She'd been grossly violated when Wang expelled her from the outpost on Io. For Darryl, Cricket was certain the situation was worse. The very security he oversaw had been used against him.

The lift's doors slid back to reveal the commanding horseshoe flickering in shadows. Sparks shot out, casting temporary illumination onto three individuals before fading. "Rojas," he growled, immediately recognizing one of them.

"Lights!" Darryl barked, but instead of lights, he received streams of neon green laser fire. They zipped into the elevator, sending him windmilling backward to avoid being hit. The blasts shattered the air around them.

Cricket screamed as the event unfolded in both slow motion and rapid-fire speed. She saw Darryl curl his arm backward around her, and he pivoted out of harm's way, moving her along with him. It happened so fast. One second she was behind him, and the next one he pinned her against him, his back to her front -- her human shield. With the same fluid grace, Darryl fired back, gun in his right-hand fist so swiftly, Cricket couldn't believe it.

Three rapid beams lit up the gloom, and two howls of anguish and grunts of pain shot up in their wake as they bore into the targets.

"Snow!" snarled the whiny JC Lee. "What a surprise! You should be dead."

"That you, Lee?" Darryl asked, a wicked smile etched across his face. "Thought I smelled something foul. So glad I didn't disappoint."

In astonishment, Cricket watched him maneuver with finesse and skill.

"Lights!" Darryl shouted, but the A.I. failed to respond. "Offline."

Cricket swallowed the terror building in her throat.

Darryl peered out into gloom. "What have you done?" he bellowed to the sinister dark. "IGO regulations state this is an act of mutiny! Where are Commander Taylor, Lars, and Kovacs?"

"Give me the doctor!" Lee roared. "That's all I care about!"

Several more laser gun blasts plowed into the lift's container, punctuating Lee's demands.

Cricket plastered herself against the flat non-fabric section of the wall. Lee was one of the crew. What connection did he have to Wang? To her? She knew next to nothing about the junior commander. What did he want with her?

"You're finished, Lee. Dr. Moore stays with me!" Darryl warned. He turned to the control panel behind him and began keying in items, bypassing screens and receiving flashes of scarlet alerts.

"Finished? We've only started, Snow! The doctor for the commander."

Cricket smiled. "His dialogue is terrible."

Darryl looked at her in complete confusion before cracking a brief smile. "No kidding," he said, turning back to the screen. "There. Got it. The A.I. has been disabled by Lee's authorization code. He couldn't do that fully to the security modules without the commander's codes entered as well."

"Where *is* the commander?" Cricket asked, whispering too.

Darryl's face mashed in anger. "I don't know. But I will find him."

The wall opposite Cricket erupted in flames as a phase ball slammed its deep navy material. A gloved hand swung out of the gloom and grabbed Darryl's chest. With a fist full of his uniform, Private Rojas stumbled into the lift's revealing light. Cricket squealed out a scream as Rojas, forearm bloody, teeth clenched, punched Darryl in the face. In an instant, her lover transformed. Darryl maneuvered his body to the left, throwing his right shoulder forward, and swung his left leg between Rojas' legs.

Both men went sprawling to the floor -- Rojas on his back, smacked against the floor. Rojas' bronze face swiftly deepened from crimson to puce as Darryl's wide and often wonderful hands crushed his windpipe.

So intent on the rumble on the ground, Cricket didn't hear the *click* until a full second after the gun's safety was off. Ragged breathing reached her a split second before Lee appeared.

JC Lee pointed his weapon at the back of Darryl's head. With enraged eyes narrowed in hatred, Lee's flat nose wrinkled as if she and Darryl were the ones spreading the funkiness. Nope. That odor came from Lee himself. Cricket wondered if the man's soul was rotting.

"Freeze," Lee said, working hard to project a calm his face betrayed. "Let Rojas go."

Darryl laughed -- it was anything but kind. "Shoot me then," he retorted, eyes on Rojas. "I'm not letting go. He deserves to die for what he tried to do today. As do you."

Before Cricket thought about it, she kicked -- hard. The gun flew into the air and cracked against the wall out of Lee's reach. IGO conditioning took over. Rusty and out of practice, she swung a left, knowing as she threw it that it was too slow. To her surprise, it caught Lee clean on the jaw. The surprise of her disarming him froze him in place.

"Bastard!" she yelled, fury flowing out in volume. "Leave him alone!"

Lee gritted his teeth and dodged her next punch. He roared, holding his wrist, dodging her uppercut and her left punch. "Ow, fuck! You bitch!"

Cricket's anger flooded her system with savage adrenaline.

"Caught me off guard, doctor," he said, shaking his wrist and face as if he could toss away the pain. "Got a thing for the sergeant?"

"Oh, it's more than a thing," Cricket shot back and swung. "Slime like you couldn't understand."

Lee snagged her fist and bent her arm behind her, twisting it upward until she screamed. The pain flared up to her shoulders like wildfire.

"Let go of me!" she shouted.

Just then, Darryl whirled up, a rising tsunami of fists, jabs, punches, and grunts of fury so foreign she hardly knew it was him. It took Cricket a moment to realize Darryl was muttering curses. Lee released her -- he had no choice if he wanted to ward off Darryl. Fighting Darryl required two hands. Distorted by rage, Darryl's words

overshadowed Lee's groans. Lee responded in kind, but it was obvious he was losing the battle.

"Not... my... woman!" Darryl shouted in plain English. "If... you... ever... touch... her again..."

Cricket knew she couldn't stand here and wait around to see how it ended. With her heart thundering in her ears, she scooped up Lee's discarded weapon. She pointed it at the wrestling soldiers, the tangle of IGO gray uniforms, legs and arms, on the floor. Trying her best to ignore her trembling hand, she trained her eyes on Lee's sneering mouth.

"Stop!" she shouted. "Or I'll shoot!"

The tumbling continued until she fired into the ceiling, successfully damaging the stainless steel surface.

Darryl cast a glance from the corner of his eye. Lee yelped as Darryl threw one final punch and pushed himself off of Lee's now unconscious body. He yanked down his uniform and, breathing heavily, held his hand out for the gun. "Thank you, baby."

She passed it to him, all too aware of her relief to have it out of her hands. Fighting hadn't been her calling -- she was a scientist. Though she'd trained long enough to pass her soldier field tests, she hadn't ever been in live combat, not like this. Simulation, mock combat sessions and VR trials aside -- real blood and real damage had been inflicted here.

"Lee's out of it," she said, aware she was whispering. "Rojas is too."

"Not enough hours logged in combat training," Darryl said, running a punishing hand through his buzzed hair, smearing a streak of blood across his forehead. He searched around, evaluating the scene, still logged into security chief mode.

Sweat dripped from his face, and a slash had been added to his left cheek already littered with the downward edge of his scar. A bite mark also decorated his person, an inch below his right ear. His lower lip bled, and Cricket wanted to kiss it all away. The once pristine IGO uniform hadn't fared any better. Frayed, torn and in some places

darkened where blood, saliva and other liquids had soaked into the fabric, the uniform had been battered as well as the body beneath.

Darryl opened a small rectangular panel at the bottom right of the lift. He removed a dense plastic box and from it he took out two IGO gray squares, flat like gum but more durable. Cricket knew at once what they were, although she hadn't seen them used in ages -- since her time at the IGO institution on Earth Prime.

Darryl placed one on JC Lee's wrists and pressed the tiny button in the underbelly of each one's center. Two electronic circles erupted, vibrating in dark lavender, joining and locking Lee's wrists together. He wouldn't be able to break out of them, even if he could push the small button on each one. Once on, the ECS, electronic containment spheres, couldn't be disabled without the A.I., Darryl's or Commander Taylor's codes. Lee's codes would have to be discontinued. Cricket saw Darryl at the screen and its flat keypad. He entered codes of some sort.

Ruckus from the rear of the lift knocked Cricket out of her memory of the stale air and humid days on Earth Prime and back to the danger in the lift.

Rojas shoved himself to a standing position, using his legs to propel himself upward. His hand massaged his injured throat, but he was shaking his head *no*. The glare frosted over his somewhat handsome face and it was all for Darryl. If looks could kill, Darryl would be dead.

"Don't," Cricket said to Rojas, the alarm clear in that single word. He had to know she wouldn't tolerate him attacking Darryl. No longer a bystander, she'd fight him if he threatened. "Don't make him kill you. You're already injured."

The laser beam hole in his shoulder had plowed through skin, muscle and bone. Cricket could see the wound clearly as the hot beam had cauterized the injury so it wasn't still bleeding. Sweat poured from Rojas' face, and he puffed out each effort to breathe.

Rojas' black eyes slid over to her. Face crumbling when he didn't find her sympathetic, he made no attempt to disguise his disappointment at her words. He opened his mouth, and his lips moved. There wasn't any sound. He punched the wall

with a tight fist, and tried again. The noise drew Darryl's attention away from Lee, who lay sprawled beneath him.

Darryl rose up, standing and seeming to fill the doorway. "Don't get carried away, Rojas. She doesn't want anyone to die. You're in the soup, so spill it. How many on your side still in the 'shoe?" he asked, stepping over Lee and closing the distance between them.

Cricket crept out of his way. Darryl wouldn't hurt her, she knew that. But he did need room to work. She inched along the wall to the panel where Darryl had disabled the cameras. The urge to peer around the corner was overwhelming, but she didn't want to get new head decorations -- like a laser beam hole to the brain.

"Don't do this, Rojas," Darryl was saying as she turned to him. "Use your fingers. Two more? Three?"

Rojas put down his hand.

None or has he simply refused to answer?

"My patience wanes, Private," Darryl said.

Darryl was so near to breaking Rojas' face, Cricket had to look away.

"None. No more," Rojas croaked at last.

When Cricket dared to look again, she saw that Darryl, however, had relaxed the pressure only a bit. Rojas' eyes rolled over, showing whites, but Darryl smacked him across the cheek, drawing the angry pits back to him.

"There are no others? Are you sure?"

Rojas nodded.

Cricket didn't believe him. And for good reason.

Chapter 14

"So where is the commander?" Darryl asked again. His fingers burrowed deep into Rojas' tanned cheek. He could feel a thin layer of muscle and bone beneath Rojas' flesh. He locked the traitor's head against the wall. His heartbeat, revved up on adrenaline, threatened to bounce from his chest, and right out onto Rojas' uni. "Don't make me ask you again."

Rojas gave him a one-finger salute.

"Fine." Darryl punched Rojas so hard across the face spit flew out of his mouth. The impact sent the younger man tumbling backward to the ground like a discarded bag. "Have it your way."

In the same efficient manner, Darryl spun around to Cricket. "I'm going in. Stay. Please, Cricket, don't argue with me, baby. Stay here until I give the all clear."

Faint sounds of computers and life support cut through the shadows. A stillness blanketed everything. He allowed himself a swift look at her before stepping into the unknown abyss. With a deep inhale, he summoned his courage and ventured into the uncertainty. Only the illumination from the various consoles lit up small hunks of space. The spill from the lift's opened doors gave a bit more light, but not much. Crouched low to the ground, he took slow deliberate steps, gun at the ready. Though he didn't think anyone else remained on the 'shoe who was willing to shoot at him. They would've rushed him already.

No new shots or calls met his hearing. Every movement he made seemed too loud -- even his soft boots resounded against the flooring. It was plausible and possible

the mutiny was born and contained with Lee. Those traders were supposed to kill Darryl on the EPSS and take Cricket hostage or back to Wang.

Neither of those things had occurred.

Yeah, sure, I'm going to let that shit happen. Not her. Over my dead body.

Lee had planned badly, leaving Darryl's death to certainty when he should've worked on a contingency. No, Lee hadn't expected him to step off the turbo lift and he damn sure didn't expect Cricket to be with him.

"Commander?" moaned a mournful voice through the shadow-filled room.

Darryl's eyes adjusted to the somber dark. Using his familiarity coupled with his eyesight, he steered toward the slope of the 'shoe's lower level and upward to the communication console. The groan came from this area and Darryl hurried to the seat. Frantic, he groped the gloom until he brushed the mop of curls. "Kovacs!"

The motionless lump of Kovacs' body sprawled in front of his seat as if unexpectedly he'd collapsed from the chair. Darryl knelt down, putting his weapon on the ground, and eagerly sought out a pulse. Alive. Barely. The weak pulse beat feebly against his fingertips.

"Sir... Lee... shot..."

"Don't talk," Darryl advised, fury rising. "I've taken care of Lee."

Gritting his teeth, Darryl pressed his earpiece with his heart in his throat and fury spinning in his belly. *Please be there. Come on, come on...*

"Medic," he said, eyes returning to the lift where he spied Cricket hunched over the control panel. Crafty and smart, Cricket would get the lights back online. Darryl realized with relief that he wasn't alone up here with this mess. Static rose and washed through the comm, but just when Darryl was about to switch it off, Dr. Krongkon's voice shot through like steel through flesh.

"I -- is... that... you, Sergeant?"

"Yes! I'm on the 'shoe. Kovacs and Lars are injured. Send medics at once!" he roared. "I mean now!"

More white noise drowned out the comms before the doctor's steely voice punched through. "...only two are left. The primary lift is out of commission... tried..."

"Use the emergency stairs behind the central heating duct!" Darryl shouted, but the comm fell silent. Tension smoldered inside him.

Unsure if she'd heard him, he swept his gun into his hand and stood. Another traitor would've killed him by now if they were on the 'shoe. Hairs on his neck rose and the soft forced air caressed them, sending shivers down his spine. None of this would look better in the morning or when they returned to *The Discovery*. Reyes was going to eat his lunch -- and dinner too -- before this was all over and filed.

"Commander?" he questioned as he saw one of the shadows shift forward from the floor closest to the commander's chair. Groaning in ripe agony saturated the space, and he scanned the blanket of darkness. "Sir? Is that you?"

"Darryl?" a raspy voice inquired. A pale hand crept out of the gloom and into the air as if reaching for life, for him.

Hope buoyed inside him and Darryl sprinted to the spot, avoiding jutting chairs and rounded edges. Carefully, he peered down, afraid to look, but knowing he had to see for himself the carnage of Lee's jealousy.

The smooth gleam of the silver commander bars on his collar caught Darryl's eye. He groped around in the dark until he found the commander's thick, hairy wrist. With sluggish pats beneath Darryl's fingers, the commander's blood pumped against his two-finger pressure. Another one alive. Their casualties were light, only one dead -- Peterson, one of the security personnel.

At that moment, the lights flickered on and Darryl's gun was back in his fist faster than he could blink.

"Whoa! It's me," Cricket squeaked, hands up, palms out.

"Sorry, baby," he said, only slightly aware he had used her pet name. He wanted comfortableness and something real, solid. She gave him that.

She drifted to him, and she was an angel to behold. Her smile warmed him, settled his fear and confusion. "Got the lights back on," she said. "I bet he didn't expect us on the turbo lift."

Darryl nodded, not surprised that she'd reached the same conclusion he had. The urge to wrap her in his arms and hold her tight spread up something fierce. Cricket wielded her power to bring him to his knees. Never had a woman done this to him, but he liked it. Loved her actually. "Thank you," he managed.

They'd have to wait. He had other things to attend to at the moment. That didn't stop his eyes from following her jean-clad ass's sway as she walked away from him. Burning with mounting regret, he sighed.

Darryl dropped his eyes back to the man in front of him. His breath hitched in his chest at the battered body, and he knew he had to get him to a sitting position. He put his gun in its holster and took hold of the commander's forearms. He pulled him upright, and using both arms hoisted the commander to an unstable standing position. With slow guidance, Darryl let the commander's body weight direct him into his seat. Darryl shoved his hand under his armpits, and grunted at his superior's girth. The man was a full two inches taller than he.

"Damn, you're heavy," Darryl growled. "You've got to go on a diet, sir."

Cricket chortled softly, making Darryl smile.

Commander Taylor slumped back into the chair like a discarded doll, his face and torso splattered with dried blood. The commander's pale blue eyes creaked open. "Lee," he moaned against his swollen lip. He raised his head and it lolled as if on a broken neck. "Lee!" He tried to get up, surging with trembling effort to push himself off the chair.

"Whoa, sir!" Darryl gently pushed him back.

"Snow? Darryl? That you?"

"Yes, sir. It's me," he said, his fury burning in his gut. How could he have let Lee do this to his commander?

"Lee..." Commander Taylor slurred. "He..."

"I know, sir," Darryl said, stroking his superior's sweat-drenched hair. "I took care of him. You're safe. Rest."

Relieved, the older man closed his eyes once more.

Sickened, Darryl stood up. The commander resembled a poorly treated puppet. He intertwined his fingers to help rub out the pain from clocking Rojas and Lee. At that moment, a kind hand touched his elbow, and he looked into cinnamon pools of whirling emotions.

Cricket gave him a soft smile. "The comms are offline, too."

"I was able to get in touch with the medics," Darryl said, steering his anger into action. "It's probably just switched to off for the horseshoe's console. My comm is set to universal so I can contact and be contacted even off the craft. We must contact Captain Reyes. So, baby, I really need you to get the comms up and running."

With his eyes, he tried to convey the faith he held in her. She could do it. Sure, her training had been years ago, but the kind of conditioning the IGO gave only faded, it didn't disappear.

Cricket headed to the comms station. She touched the screen, poking through what appeared to be warning messages. The A.I. was still offline, but then Lee could've disabled it manually. There was still so much Darryl didn't know.

"I need the access code to override the lockout," she said, glancing over her shoulder, seducing him with a glance.

"Beta 670421," Darryl called.

At once Cricket replied, "I'm in."

Lee expected Darryl to be dead. So, he'd staged a mutiny, not anticipating Darryl's return to the craft. *I've got to live long enough to be in her arms again.* He sighed. *Focus! Think! Think! I'm the head of security.*

She reached down and removed Kovacs' earpiece. Slung over her delectable ear, the earpiece looked as if she'd used it all her life.

The side paneling to Cricket's right slid back on Dr. Krongkon's wiry frame. A group of medics, none in lab coats but in the white one-piece of IGO nurses, fanned out.

They began assisting the injured and taking out the four metallic beams for creating transportation stretchers.

Darryl's blood slowed as his adrenaline decreased. The threat had been neutralized. Allowing himself this small victory, he went to Cricket but stopped short of touching her. Engrossed in the scrolling text on the monitor, she hadn't noticed him. Or so he thought.

"I see you," she whispered, but didn't turn around. "The EPSS comms unit is going nuts. Says we were due out of port an hour ago. Give me a minute to work out the details."

"Sergeant Snow," cracked Dr. Krongkon from behind him.

"Yes?" he sighed, turning away from the enchanting view of Cricket's generous ass, with regret on his tongue

"We're going to have to transport Commander Taylor to the medical bay. He's lost a lot of blood."

She removed two metal rods from her oversized lab coat pockets. In sharp tugs, she extended them out until they stretched well over six feet. She held them up and clicked a button. Green beams connected the two rods and she laid them on the floor. A few others hurried over to them. They set it in front of the commander's chair and set to transferring Commander Taylor to the stretcher.

Darryl's stomach clutched hard and he winced. *Let him be all right. I should've stayed on board. Rojas and Lee played me like a fool. They knew I'd want to be with her. Anyone watching us the last three days would've been able to see my love for her. Those two had counted on my jealousy, my protectiveness for her.*

"Sergeant!"

"Yes," Darryl answered, blinking back to the room. "What is it?" He didn't care about his tone.

Dr. Krongkon eyed him wearily, her iron rod personality quivering for a brief second before solidifying. "Until the commander is better, you're in charge."

"What?" Darryl exclaimed, scowling. He hadn't heard her right. She couldn't have said what he thought she said. He gazed at Cricket who gave him a thumbs up sign. Her lips moved as she spoke into the earpiece, but he couldn't hear her over the roar of his blood racing through him. He commanded *The Inquiry*?

Dr. Krongkon had knelt beside the now moaning commander. Two nurses were gently rolling him onto the transportation stretcher. Several more nurses pooled in through the side panel entrance and began racing about looking for wounded. Three of them were in the turbo lift and anxiously attending to Lee and Rojas.

One of them shouted, "What happened here?"

Dr. Krongkon's sharp eyes moved to him. Erect and ancient against the buzz of activity, she said to the wide-eyed private, "Ask him." She nodded in his direction.

The fresh girl, for she was hardly older than nineteen, turned to him expectantly. "Sir?"

"Help the medics. You and you, hey, in the black! Secure those two in the lift and take them down to the brig!" Darryl ordered, falling effortlessly into the role he had performed part-time for years. "Administer their medication and see to their injuries there."

Cricket met his gaze and smiled. She pressed the audio button. Darryl heard the crackle of static ripple across the ship's intercom system. "Attention all *Inquiry* staff and personnel," her husky voice commanded, "until further notice, Sergeant Snow is commander of *The Inquiry* per IGO authorization code Sigma 701743." She ended the announcement and blew him a kiss.

The inexplicable feeling of happiness pounced and soaked him in its tight embrace.

Chapter 15

Four Days Later on Mars Outpost 1

Darryl's eyes were like wells, deep and sunken, circular vats of emotion so turbulent at times Cricket found it arduous to tread in them. Unlike those moments, those amber stained orbs calmly met hers and held her prisoner, like he'd done to her heart. His buzzed hair brushed the naked curve of her thigh as he reclined, his head in her lap. He stared up at her as they lay on his sizeable full foam mattress.

Around them the crash of waves smashed into a simulated sea and the olfactory sensors pumped manufactured scents of salt and fish into Darryl's quarters. They'd kept the bed but the rest of the space had been transformed to a naked strip of beach, complete with glaring sun and clear, crisp azure sky. The breezes tasted of salt and sun block, and the rays brushed across her nude arms with warmth and heated caresses.

"How did it go today?" Darryl asked, shifting his eyes from her and out to the picturesque sea.

"Commander Ashe is one tough cookie," Cricket confessed, staring out into the tranquil blue as if it could somehow steer her to clarity. "She's quick and determined. She managed to get Wang detained on Titan's Outpost until his actions can be investigated."

Suppressing a shudder, Cricket tried to still the quiver pressing into her spine. Ashe didn't so much frighten her. No, the senior commander simply loomed over her like an approaching thunderstorm cloud. Ashe suspected everyone of everything and she'd implied the mutiny onboard *The Inquiry* resulted from Cricket's arrival on the craft -- not before. As the catalyst, Cricket couldn't deny things spiraled out of control, but the seeds of jealousy, hatred, and greed were sown well before she came to them.

And long before she met Darryl.

"That's not it, is it?"

She sighed and looked down to him again. Amazing how well he knew her in such a short time. They'd been at the Mars Outpost for the last few days and between his debriefings, her hearings and interrogation, and then his interrogations, they'd barely had time to solidify what began on *The Inquiry*, but now, as the urgency lessened, they'd managed to wrestle this tiny slip of time.

His eyes locked onto hers and he smiled. "Ashe is seasoned, bitter and a bit anal about her cases," Darryl said, rubbing Cricket's calf.

He lay perpendicular to her. His head rested on her thigh, and her other leg was tossed over his torso, where he stroked it. Those tiny circles of pleasure spiraled lazily up and down as if making invisible crop circles on her flesh. Naked, his skin touching hers had once more ignited a fire she thought had fanned out after their last sweaty moments of lust. She wasn't even sure he knew the arousal his touch generated inside of her.

"...and Lee is court martialed. Commander Taylor notified me today of my promotion to junior commander."

"Yes!" she squeaked, then bent down and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "That's wonderful news!"

But Darryl wasn't smiling. His face had grown serious. Those beautiful eyes rolled out to the sea once more and he said, "We got our assignment today. In two days we're leaving for Saturn."

"Saturn?" she asked as if the planet's name was foreign. "Two days."

Too fast. Too soon. She had at least a week more of interrogations before they'd restore her to active duty. As a scientist, she could work from any location. Still, the absence of Darryl's presence in her everyday life would carve a hole which only time would be able to plug.

At that moment, Darryl's quarters announced a visitor. Darryl rolled upward to a sitting position. Cricket leapt up and tugged on a shirt and a pair of pants.

He gave her a quick sweep before saying, "Come."

The doors swished backward and in stalked none other than Commander Ashe.

Darryl rose sharply from the bed, locking his legs in IGO salute. "Commander Ashe, ma'am."

Cricket didn't move. Her heart slammed in her chest as if beating out the warning of nerves. What did the good commander want? Why hadn't she sent a comm before just showing up at his quarters?

The blonde bombshell nodded in Darryl's direction. "Congratulations on your advancement, JC Snow," she said.

Her voice was like crushed ice. True to form, Cricket shivered at the sound of it grating against the soft, calm waves of the sea.

"I am not here for you, Snow, but rather your good scientist, Dr. Moore," Commander Ashe said, her green eyes reflecting the holographic sunlight. She moved across the sand and walked past Darryl.

Instinctively, he pivoted, keeping himself between the commander and Cricket.

The eyebrow above Commander Ashe's right eye lifted. "I mean her no harm, Snow. Stand down."

Darryl hesitated before stepping aside. His antics hadn't gone unnoticed. She shot him a small smile, one of cold daring. With a brief nod, she met Cricket's eyes once more. "Listen," she said, and folded her arms over her chest. "I am here unofficially. I understand JC Snow is set to leave port along with the rest of the crew for *The Inquiry* in a few days."

Cricket nodded, her throat dry like the desert on the surface beneath the outpost on Mars. She couldn't form words to verbally answer the beautiful commander.

"Yes, well, you are not scheduled to go along with him," Commander Ashe said, the strips of her voice wavering down to something dewy and soft. "I, I understand the, the hardships distance can have on a relationship."

Cricket met the other woman's eyes, because beneath the crisp, rigid IGO uniform and the silver bars marking her as a senior commander, the tough as nails Ashe

was a woman. "I -- is your lover gone?" Cricket whispered, meeting the shimmering eyes of the commander.

Ashe gave the slightest nod before harshly clearing her throat. With the wave of her arm, she wiped the moment away and returned to the solid senior commander. "So, it is with pleasure that I have successfully concluded the investigation into what happened to the Ganor project. My report will be forthcoming; however, I have asked Captain Reyes to assign you to *The Inquiry* to continue your project. The IGO Research and Development director, Alma Krom, has agreed and sent clearance papers to your email. Check it at once. I wanted to tell you in person before you left."

"You wanted her to know it was you who pushed it through," Darryl growled from behind her.

Commander Ashe grinned -- again this one could freeze the ice in Cricket's body. "Yes, JC Snow, of course I did."

With that, she shoved by him and stalked out of the quarters. Just as the doors hushed closed, she tossed icily over her shoulder, "Nice beach."

Darryl's stare burrowed through the spot where the commander had vanished. "I don't trust her," he said, almost as much to himself as to Cricket.

Cricket shrugged and quickly swept the trousers to the floor. Without waiting, she hopped back onto the foam bed and beckoned to him with air kisses.

Unable to stop himself, Darryl grinned and fell into the bed beside her, resuming their former position. Cricket's fingers rubbed his hair and she kissed his lips. "I owe her nevertheless," he managed to confess. "She will one day come to us to punch that ticket."

"She is a woman, Darryl. And she misses her lover as I would no doubt miss you. We don't owe her," Cricket replied, hugging him tightly to her. "Though we should make sure to thank her so she won't feel like we owe her."

"Enough of her. I wanna thank you," he said, sitting up and removing his outer jacket. "Properly."

With Cricket's laugh lighting the quarters' shiny space, Darryl reached for her and snatched her to him with all the fervor and hunger of one man denied for too long.

And Cricket wanted to spend forever feeding her love until both were filled.

Darryl keyed in the code to lock the doors to their quarters. She sat up on the bed; the ocean crashed into the shore behind her. The heat in his eyes turned her on too. His sparked desire easily ignited her wick. The fast flicker of heat raced through her. She removed her shirt, lifting it over her head and tossing it carelessly on the simulated beach front. With that simmering heat in his eyes, Darryl unzipped his pants and shoved them down to his bare feet, joining his other clothes.

She licked her lips at his chest. Even the scars couldn't distract from his overall beauty. He inched closer to her and slipped his fingers into her hair. Tightening them in her hair, he gently steered her head back and slanted his mouth across hers. She moaned in delight and touched his torso. Her fingertips skipped across his pebbled nipples.

"I love you," he whispered, before kissing her again.

His hands felt so good in her hair. Calming and arousing all at once. Her entire being swept up with his lips. She got to her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him into her embrace like air to breathe. He tasted like mint and Earl Grey tea.

When he broke his kiss, she croaked through her rising lust, "I love you too."

"I'm going to show you, remember?" he said, mischievousness turning his already handsome face even more so.

"Yes," she said with a short laugh.

He took her by the shoulders and pushed her back onto the bed. He swatted her ass and she lifted up. His scorching mouth blazed a trail of fire from her chest, down her torso, to her belly, and to the apex of her desire. His breath tickled her clit and she spread her legs wider to feel him.

"So fucking beautiful," he whispered.

She jumped as his hand slapped her shaved mound. Shivers of raw lust shot through her. Her nipples tightened at the next slap on her pussy and her inner muscles clutched in desperate attempts to hold onto the cock she so wanted to have inside her.

"Darryl..." A long, drawn out moan escaped her mouth. "I want you."

He answered her by running his tongue across her love button. She closed her eyes and the sounds of the ocean splashed across her. Just as her breathing hitched, his wonderful lips tugged at her clit.

"Oh, God!" she panted.

He wouldn't relent. His tongue flicked her already sensitive spot. The boiling knot of passion coiled inside her, building and tightening with each swipe of his tongue. Before she knew it, she bucked against his face. Her legs slid over his shoulders and around his neck. The current shooting through her made every fiber, every nerve stand on end. The pinnacle awaited and Darryl's pressure increased.

Drenched in sweat, her fingers curved into the bed sheets. Her thighs squeezed Darryl's face, but he increased his speed. His tongue slid down to her wet canal and he slipped his tongue into her. He proceeded to use his mouth to pleasure her, his tongue darting in and out of her well. Her hips thrust up to meet his mouth, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

"Darryl!" she shrieked. She couldn't say more. Her voice faded into moans and whimpers, panting and pleading. She wanted his cock and she wanted him now.

She opened her eyes and through half-mast slits watched as he removed her legs from his shoulders. He stood, his cock jutting out in ready need. He swiped the gleam of precum from the tip and used it to glide over his cock.

"I want you so bad," he said, stroking his cock, his thick hand rubbing up and over that beautiful member. "You ready?"

"Yes," she croaked, rubbing her hands over her breasts and pinching the hardened tips between her fingers and thumbs. "Oh God, yes!"

He stole her breath as he pushed all of his rigid steel into her hot well. She inhaled in deep gulps and met his slow, but demanding thrusts. She smelled the salt-

stained air and the maleness of him. His groans sent her higher still. Time faded around its edges until all she heard was the new music of her lover's pleasure, and the smash of the simulated waves. This was where she wanted to be and this was how she wanted to spend each night. Darryl filled her senses, her body, and her heart.

The tension threatened to burst and she met his rapid thrusts harder and harder. Sweat drenched, he said, "Look at me, baby."

She opened her eyes and met his eyes.

"Come with me," he said and his tone stripped down to the animalistic fervor of a man on the brink of losing complete control.

She couldn't speak or trust herself to words because the pressure threatened to rend and spill all over them.

"Come on, baby," Darryl said, pistoning his hips faster and faster until she peaked.

"Yes!" she shrieked, and the blue sky and puffy white clouds of his walls winked out and whirled. She shut her eyes as the orgasm rocked through her.

"Cricket!" Darryl muttered through clenched teeth a split second later as he reached his summit.

His hot seed erupted inside her and she locked her legs around his waist. She refused to let him go. Darryl's head was thrown back in the throes of pleasure, his body rigid while the orgasm rode through him. Moments passed before he slumped forward, using his arms to keep from crushing her. Hair drenched, face flushed, he panted out a "love you," before climbing onto the bed with her. He moved her legs with him, scooting her without disturbing her too much.

"Don't you leave me," he said, spooning against her as they faced the sunset.

"Never," she said, and nestled closer to him. "Never."

RaeLynn Blue

RaeLynn Blue is the author of numerous tales of erotic interracial romance and speculative romance. With an imagination that's varied and diverse, her tales explore love in all its many shades, situations and scenarios. She fell into romance stories at the ripe age of eleven and has been writing stories ever since. A humble scribbler of tales, RaeLynn is actively writing another story of lust, love, and romance.

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